

FROM MARGIN TO MODERNITY: WYNDHAM LEWIS, 1909–1914*

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1.

‘Vorticism’, the short-lived London avant-garde movement led by Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound, has often been seen as a failure, and is certainly hard to evaluate.¹ The official organ of the movement, *Blast* (two issues, 1914–5) had Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), Rebecca West and T. S. Eliot as its contributors, and it seems likely that it would have become a converging point for English high-modernism had not the Great War set an insurmountable impediment in its course. Rather than a complete failure, we might well consider it an unfulfilled potential.

This paper sets out to examine the ‘failure’ of Vorticism from the angle of Wyndham Lewis’s activities during the pre-war years. I shall particularly concentrate on the early turn of his career from travel writer to avant-garde impresario in London, a turn that Lewis might see as one from margin to modernity. The relevance of this turn to Vorticist strategy has not been fully explored so far in the critical literature on Lewis. Malcolm Bradbury has suggested that “[m]odernism found its natural habitat in cities — cities which themselves in turn became cosmopolitan centres”;² but with Lewis this axiom does not easily fit. Lewis’s earliest writings, published near the end of the Edwardian period, concern marginal villages around Brittany. If his subsequent career (at least up to his wartime frontline activities) is

* I am grateful to Professor George E. H. Hughes for his extensive help, and Professor Sheila Hones for her insightful comments on this paper.

¹ Some contemporary hostile reviews on Vorticism are collected and can be read in Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elite and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998), 38; Geoffrey Gilbert, “Shellshock, anti-Semitism, and the agency of the avant-garde” in *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 82.

² “A Geography of Modernism” in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (London: Penguin, 1976, 1991), 95. Cf. Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989).

wholly metropolitan, his move to the city was a matter of deliberate choice and a development on earlier concerns, not an easy drift towards a “natural habitat”. Far from disavowing his early travel writings in his turn to the metropolis, Lewis kept them as his “primordial literary background”.³ I wish to suggest that these writings on marginal villages equipped Lewis with a specific perspective on the problem of urban modernity, and that they helped him construct his avant-garde strategy, based on a recognition of the ambivalent potential of the metropolis. I hope to show that only after the history of Lewis’s turn from margin to modernity has been fully recovered is it possible to have a proper understanding of the Vorticists’ setback in the Great War, the moment when Lewis’s recognition of modernity finally turns out to be a misrecognition.

Vorticism has been described by Hugh Kenner largely in the light of Ezra Pound’s career, and it has been examined by Michael Levenson in terms of “general individualizing tendencies” in English culture from the late 19th century on.⁴ But here, I wish to return the focus particularly to Wyndham Lewis, and to consider his practice of Vorticism firmly within the context of the age that led to the Great War. In what follows, I first examine the early travel writings as an indirect commentary on modernity at large, and then turn to the Vorticist rhetoric of individuation in *Blast*. In doing so, I shall try to unearth a set of socio-spatial assumptions that directed Wyndham Lewis’s decision to stage his avant-garde individualism inside the capital of England, then the arch-modern metropolis. After clarifying this, I move to a short analysis of Lewis’s only truly Vorticist work, *Enemy of the Stars* (1914), contrasting its protagonist, Arghol, with Lewis himself. I wish to underline thereby the degree of Lewis’s self-consciousness as to his own turn from margin to modernity.

2.

After several years of artistic-bohemian life in Paris, Wyndham Lewis

³ Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Forshay (1950. Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow P, 1984), 124. Henceforth abbreviated to *RA*.

⁴ See respectively, Hugh Kenner, *Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1971), 145–62, 232–48; Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 15, 103–64. A correction to Kenner is provided by Timothy Materer in his *Vortex, Pound, Eliot and Lewis* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1979).

travelled around Brittany in 1908, before crossing the English Channel to go to London. This loitering around marginal villages was the subject of several travel short stories, subsequently published in magazines such as the *English Review*, the *New Age*, and the *Tramp*. Lewis thus began his literary career as a travel writer not dissimilar to those writers that Paul Peppis finds to have been then fashionable in the contemporary reaction against the ‘enervation’ of ‘healthy’ English culture. Peppis points out that Edwardians such as W.H. Hudson and Edward Thomas were interested in the survival of idyllic places uncorrupted by loathsome urbanization in the English countryside, while foreign villages like those in Brittany were popular among art students emulating Gauguin-like exoticism.⁵ Lewis in his last years, candid in acknowledging the naïveté of his juvenilia, recalls that he was at that time dazed by the “Atlantic air, the raw rich visual food of the barbaric environment, the squealing of the pipes, the crashing of the ocean”, in short, by less ‘civilized’ lives in local seaside villages. Such fascination with the “barbaric” was after all “militantly vitalist” (*RA*. 125), and whether Bergsonian or Nietzschean, it was a reaction against “the snobbishness . . . of the English middleclass, their cold philistinism, perpetual silly sport” (124), that is, against urban lethargy. The contrast between the marginal and the metropolitan was underscored by Lewis’s preference for the “barbaric”.

However, this vitalist preference is not the entire story, nor is there a ‘romantic’ quest for dream communities uncontaminated by industrialization in Lewis’s earliest writings. “Lewis’s Breton countryside”, as Ian Duncan comments, “. . . could not be further from a pre-industrial landscape; it is a clearly perceived post-industrial landscape, economically emarginated and stagnant”.⁶ In this phase at least, Lewis has little concern with ‘authentic’ communities, as may be perceived in the deliberate inconsequence of these travel writings.

To those inns scattered up and down through fiction and history all men have taken either their dreams, their indigestions, their passions, or the

⁵ Paul Peppis, *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire, 1901–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 20–52. On the influence of Gauguin’s Breton paintings on Lewis, see Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2000), 11–4.

⁶ “Towards a Modernist Poetic: Wyndham Lewis’s Early Fiction” in *Wyndham Lewis: Letteratura/Pittura* ed. Giovanni Ciani (Palermo: Sellerio, 1982), 77.

thread of their stories . . . and chiefly concerned with using them as a trysting-place of alarms, surprises, misadventures, brawls, and flight. In fact, they used the inn as a mere convenience, . . . a place where they would conduct their characters when the story was flagging, and there set the plot going again in a whirl of adventures of the high-road.⁷

“Some Innkeepers and Bestre” (1909) starts in this way by casting off romantic plot structures (“their dreams, their indigestions . . .”). Kenner cites the passage as Lewis’s “protest against the conventional plot that makes use of inns to set a flagging action going again ‘in a whirl of adventures of the high-road’”.⁸ Lewis’s narrator, however, pays attention to the inns themselves, “with the result that even the most visionary of customers — the knight of La Mancha himself — could not be more so than many a provincial French innkeeper that I have met with” (*CWB*. 221). The early travel writings are case studies of momentary encounters with such innkeepers, landlords and barmen, whose undiluted egotism, imposing bodies and boorish manners bring Lewis’s descriptions very close to comedy.

Deliberately inconsequential, these narratives are often cut off before fully realizing the potential of such chance encounters to make up a ‘grand’ narrative. “Crossing the Frontier” (1908) observes a Spaniard who is impassive and proud. “But his vitality is even greater, and behind this silent mask, and this solitary word, entire speeches of cataclysmic violence are clamouring and surging for utterance” (205). The narrator is contented only with the surface, and the mysterious “cataclysmic violence” remains “clamouring and surging” underneath, it never erupts. Such a detached narrative gaze qualifies the vitalist celebration of the “barbaric”, at the same time as suggesting its author’s reservations. Neither achieving close intimacy nor bumping into dangerous vitality, the narrator stays essentially external to ‘their’ world. In “A Breton Innkeeper” (1910), the innkeeper Roland (formerly a servant) is said to possess “bellowing, menacing force” (269). If “Roland was beneath the roof of a great and responsible official”, the narrator jocularly muses, “he carries anarchy and chaos anywhere he goes outside his own walls”. But ultimately Roland is judged to be incon-

⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Laforcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow P, 1982), 221. Henceforth abbreviated to *CWB*.

⁸ Hugh Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk, Connecticut: New Directions, 1954), 9.

sequential: “[e]conomy of energy by a constant output of mere mechanical and empty force” (271). The “bellowing, menacing force” appears to be mastered by forceful irony, and rendered “mere mechanical and empty force”.

The typical narrator of Wyndham Lewis’s early travel writings, who does not specify his own ground, is thus an external observer. While Lewis certainly feels the glamour of untamed vital forces such as “cataclysmic violence” and “menacing force”, he is not without reservations about them. The narrator compares his external stance to a child’s liking for thrills, “assured the while that no harm will ensue” (270). The externality guarantees for this narrator a childlike immunity from the dangerous fascination of the vital. But we may wonder whether it is really so effective. Such childlike immunity might only be make-believe (Sigmund Freud argues in another context that “His Majesty the Baby” is actually always sustained by parental support).⁹ The defensive external stance is a symptom of the ambivalence of Lewis’s vitalism, and doomed to be unstable, oscillating between various positions. It becomes, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, a besetting problem for Lewis after the War.¹⁰

In the pre-war period that we are considering here, given Lewis’s ambivalent vitalism, the simple dichotomy between the ‘vital’ margin and the ‘lethargic’ modern metropolis is actually much more complex. The first clue to this complexity is provided in Lewis’s essay, “Our Wild Body” (1910), which introduces a comparison between English and French cultures. The piece is a rather awkward polemic on the ‘English’ fitness cult as the loss of “frankness and imagination” (*CWB*. 253), or vital instinct (namely the “Wild Body”), which Lewis thinks ‘Latin’ culture still preserves. Lewis obviously prefers ‘French’ vital culture to what he sees as ‘English’ lethargy.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction” (1914) in *On Metapsychology* (the Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11, 1984), 85: “The Child shall have a better time than his parents. . . . Illness, death, renunciation of enjoyment, restrictions on his own will, shall not touch him; the laws of nature and of society shall be abrogated in his favour; he shall once more really be *the centre and core of creation* — “*His Majesty the Baby*”, as we once fancied ourselves” (emphasis mine). We have good reason to believe that Wyndham Lewis himself was conscious of this fanciful nature of childlike omnipotence. See, for instance, “Anatomy of Perfections” in *Modernism/modernity* 1998, vol. 4, No. 2, 165–9.

¹⁰ See, Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: U of California P, 1979), 16–7.

A similar contrast between vitalism and lethargy is more subtly figured, or fictionalised, as an imaginary dialogue between an Englishman and a Frenchman in the first part of “Some Innkeepers and Bestre”. The central topic of their talk is the psychological consequences of modernization. Both observe that modernized society brings about a psychic split in their minds, but their diagnosis is significantly different in some details. It is in the following speech of the Frenchman (which is clearly better-written than that of the Englishman) that we can recognize Wyndham Lewis’s own idea of the modern vicissitudes of vitality:

So man has developed a kind of abstract factor in his mind and self, a social nature that is the equivalent of money, a kind of conventional, nondescript, and mongrel energy. . . . Because the front that a gentleman of our day shows to the world is conventionalised and uniform, people do not usually recognise that a high state of civilisation and social development is also that of individualism *par excellence*. The characterless, subtle, protean social self of the modern man, his wit, his sympathies, are the moneys of the mind. When the barter of herds, tools, and clothing gave place to coinage this sort of fellow began to exist. And this artificial and characterless go-between, this common energy, keeps the man’s individual nature all the more inviolable and unmodified (223–4).

The self-splitting of the modern mentality is seen here as part of a long-term historical process: the switch from barter to monetary economy has loosened cohesive regional communities, and caused socio-economic depersonalisation. Consequently, emotional attachments are no longer bound to narrow areas, but have turned into free-floating energy, “[t]he characterless, subtle, protean social self”, which functions as a “go-between” to open some private interstices in social communication. It is there that “individual nature” can be preserved, even nourished.

With such a narrative of diachronic change, the Frenchman presents a version of the psychic split between “social” and “individual” selves. He then presumes a primordial violent struggle with others, and suggests that the modern “social self” functions to evade such dangerous direct collisions: “Those of the ancients that were not moderns, their personality not having become a medium of this sort, could not realise it in others, since it could not be assimilated raw; their way was to subdue and tyrannise over others, and in the mere power of destruction and of subjecting find self-realisation” (224). But once society is modernized, people manage to evade

such violent conflicts by keeping their “individual nature” intact behind the mutual exchange of their “social self”.

The vitalist theme that we have already seen in the “Wild Body” thus reappears here in a different guise: the violent conflicts of “self-realisation” are now attributed to the awkward, one-dimensional “ancients”, only to be later happily done without by modern split selves. But there is a further twist. The Frenchman reveals that modern “individual nature” is actually untamed vitality: “it has become more savage than the bushman’s naked spirit. . . . Civilisation has resulted in the modern man becoming, in his inaccessibility, more savage than his ancestors of the Stone Age” (224). It turns out that the violence of ancient conflicts has not been fully exorcized; it has been preserved as an inherent idiosyncrasy in the deep private recesses of the modern mentality. Such conflicts are usually untouched by the working of social selves, but they may burst out whenever normal social intercourse is disrupted. Such a modern “individual nature”, possibly either vital or violent, is at once fascinating and fearful for the early vitalist Lewis.

Lewis understands that modern psychic splitting follows the process of economic modernization, and that modern split selves tend to draw aggressive vitality away from social intercourse and hide themselves in private mental recesses. We can now see how these speculations internally motivate his comparison between the English and French cultures. Writing at the heyday of English commercial imperialism, Wyndham Lewis seems to think that the English are more advanced in commerce than the French (“when [the French] approach this subject they lose their Latin precision” (222), the Englishman says). But Lewis’s fascination with French “vital” culture is also obvious, as in “Our Wild Body”. Then, the difference between the English and the French cultures can be understood, in the final analysis, to express the gap in their respective economic modernization — though the over-advanced (the English) are not necessarily more desirable than the less advanced (the French) in terms of their social vitality. The Englishman’s speech, which follows that of the Frenchman, makes this point clear. He complains that the English split their selves into “a business self and a private self” too rigidly, and consequently render themselves deceptive and lethargic. The French also split their selves through modernization, but not to the extent of the English. On the one hand, it is precisely this rigid distinction that makes it difficult for the

English to exploit their stored individual (or private) vitality; on the other hand, the incomplete, porous splitting of the French selves between the “social” and the “individual” makes them appear outwardly more “vital”, less phlegmatic than the English.

Bearing these thoughts in mind, we can now look back at the early travel writings on Brittany again. Detesting ‘English’ urban lethargy, Wyndham Lewis has set out to search marginal villages for a refreshing vitality, only to find it also (but hidden deep as “individual” idiosyncrasies) behind the “social” façade of modern split selves. Simultaneously, the margin was revealed not to be a happy outside of, and a retreat from, the relentless process of general modernization. Being marginal France, Brittany was regarded only as an underdeveloped periphery *within* the realm of modernity. By seeing the place in this way, Lewis has decisively negated the Edwardian delusions of romantic pastoral. There is no retreat from modernity for him, and the margin, however vital it may appear at first sight, is only a trap showing a kind of ‘deterioration’, that Lewis manages to escape. His turn from margin to modernity can be, therefore, understood as a kind of gamble to try his luck elsewhere in finding hidden individual vitality in modern split selves.

3.

We might ask, then, how these thoughts are reflected in the characterization of Breton villagers by Lewis. Through the detached gaze of the narrator, these early travel writings are rendered half bitter, half risible object lessons in the maladjustment of their ‘blind’ vitality to modern socio-economic conditions. Though not strictly “the ancients”, Lewis’s Bretons are seen to be nearly one-dimensional as ‘tyros’ in modernity. The innkeepers are wrapt in self-referential fancies, and hardly show the characteristics of the modern “artificial, characterless go-between”: their bare, coercive vitality is applied to commercial hospitality. Their conduct with customers is inevitably frictional, a risible simulacrum of the ancients’ violent conflicts. Roland, in “A Breton Innkeeper”, forcibly tries to lodge some reluctant travellers, “with the true impatience of the idealist, treating them as cyphers of his imagination and ruling passions”. An absurd struggle ensues, between “[Roland] prevented in the pursuance of his master idea, and [the travellers] with the indignation and brutality of men

that the dreamer has attempted to incorporate in his dream” (271). The detached gaze of the external narrator interposes, between the narrative and their obstinate, self-referential selves, another reality of which the Bretons themselves are often unaware.

Of course, such a lack of a “go-between”, or incessant abrasion with others, is potentially harmful. The risible comedy of undiluted egotisms, which the Bretons inhabit, can turn into grotesque disaster at any moment.¹¹ Such is the case in the story of “Brobdingnag” (1910). The bar-master Brobdingnag fabricates his self-image around his cruel habit of beating his wife. But one day she is badly injured by a cart accident while he is away at sea. “He is assailed with a sudden incapacity to think of injuries in his wife’s case”, the narrator observes, “except as caused by a human hand; he is astonished by the thought that he himself had not been there to be the sufficient cause of anything that might have happened” (*CWB*. 295). This sudden rushing in of another reality that he has hitherto misrecognised breaks his masterful self-image, and leads to “the complete ruin of his ancient self” (296). The opposite case is found with the innkeeper Bestre in “Some Innkeepers and Bestre”. Bestre manages to evade ruin while being constantly egotistic and, even if only in imagination, masterful. “He always has in his moments of most violent action something of his dumb-passivity — he never seems quite entering into reality, but observing it” (232). Merely by staring at others, Bestre provokes irritation and defeats others without a direct collision; “looking with such a nauseating intensity of what seemed meaning, but in truth was nothing more than, by a tremendous effort of concentration, the transference to features and glance of all the unclean contents of his mind” (230). In his “features and glance”, we can see the prototype of what David Trotter calls Lewis’s “anti-pathos”, the abjection of the physical suddenly purged of any sense and sentiment, both of oneself and others.¹²

Lewis represents the Bretons’ outward vitality as simply wasted through

¹¹ Timothy Materer presents a similar observation on the revised versions of these early writings. See *Wyndham Lewis the Novelist* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1976), 45.

¹² On the exact definition and periodization of “anti-pathos”, see David Trotter, *Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1984), esp. chapter 5 “Spirit of Anti-Pathos”, 70–81. Trotter has recently extended this notion of “anti-pathos” in *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 284–95.

these everyday social abrasions. Having developed modern psychic duality only a little, they cannot possess any private mental recesses to store their surplus energies. Such a lack of “individual nature” makes them especially susceptible to the allure of collective moments of outlet, like the local festivals described in “A Breton Journal” (1908). “These fetes are essentially *orgy*,” the writer muses, “It is the renunciation and dissipation at stated times, of everything that a peasant has of disorder’d, exalted, that in us that will not be contain’d in ordinary life; all that there is left of rebellion against life, fate, routine in the peasant” (194). The carnival time is a moment for the purging of surplus energies, and thus functions as a communal constraint that hinders villagers from taking flight independently. But those surplus energies are, the narrator says, “something born to the ideal” which could have been used to create a life that would be more worthwhile than the present. The artist, for Lewis, must ‘feed off’ the waste products of routine life that are usually discarded in collective intoxication. “The artist, in his defiance of Fate, has always remain’d a recluse, and the enemy of such orgiac [sic] participation of life, and often lives without knowing this emotion felt in the midst of its wastefulness” (194–5). The artist must exclude himself from the communal festival like “a recluse”, cast an ironic gaze on the sphere of “renunciation” and desire the ideal through critical individuation. This must be another reason for Wyndham Lewis to turn from margin to modernity.

4.

The Bretons’ surface vitality is after all collectively contained, and the externality of the narrator is not passively assigned, but actively desired. The implications of being in such a position are, however, not particularly happy, and are brought home to Lewis when he observes a troupe from a travelling circus performing a farce, in “Les Saltimbanque” (1909). Here, he finally finds fit figures for individual rebellion and collective containment. As Vincent Sherry argues, Lewisian comedy can be thought of as a mixture of Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud. While Freud’s laughter is “an unleashing of forbidden energies”,¹³ Bergson regards comedy as a

¹³ Vincent Sherry, “Anatomy of Folly: Wyndham Lewis, the Body Politic, and Comedy” in *Modernism/modernity* 1998, vol. 4, No. 2, 122. See also Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the*

communal regulatory mechanism. “The comic will come into being,” Bergson says, “. . . whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number” to rectify, through violently laughing away, some individual aberrancies which threaten the group continuity.¹⁴

In the Breton circus audience, Lewis sees a crowd purging themselves of surplus energies in response to the stage performers: “The people (or the people that I chiefly know, these Bretons) are spiritually herded to their amusements as prisoners are served out their daily soup, and weekly square inch of tobacco. . . . Their laughter is forced and meant to be wounding. . . .” (*CWB*. 245–6). The melancholic narrator is, however, unexpectedly astonished by a boy whose aberrant jeering at a circus performer sounds fiercely aggressive, uncommon and solitary. “His oracular vehemence suggested a sudden awakening, as though the comedy of existence had burst in upon his active young brain without warning. . . . He would no doubt have met death with the exultation of a martyr” (247). An almost sublime intensity distinguishes his vehement laughter from that of the rest of the audience. The narrator vicariously feels the boy’s vehemence, and the ironic distance is quickly replaced with a compulsive jolt. Such “anti-pathetic” laughter is a form of individual rebellion against the collective comedy of containment; it leads to an aesthetic of bitter, uncomfortable and solitary laughter — one that would come incessantly to preoccupy Wyndham Lewis beyond the realm of his early writings.

5.

Wyndham Lewis thus returns to London (*the* metropolis) in 1909 from a Brittany that has been deeply observed, and found to be seriously lacking. He is not taken in by the Edwardian idyllic vision, and he wants to create modern art in the metropolitan world. His subsequent painterly activities up to Vorticism in 1914 are almost deliberate in their incessant stirring up

Unconscious (1905, the Penguin Freud Library, vol. 6, 1976), 199: “We should say that laughter arises if a quota of psychical energy which has earlier been used for the cathexis of particular psychical paths has become unusable, so that it can find free discharge”.

¹⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter in Comedy* ed. Wylie Sypher (1900, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1956), 64–5. I suggest that Lewis’s view of ‘comedy’ is much more gloomy even in his early years than Alan Munton argues: see his “Wyndham Lewis: The Transformation of Carnival” *Wyndham Lewis: Letteratura/Pittura* ed. Giovanni Ciani (Palermo: Sellerio, 1982), 141–157.

of notorieties (e.g. his momentary association and rapid schism with Bloomsbury aesthetes like Roger Fry and Clive Bell, and his heated controversy with Marinetti over Italian Futurist proselytizing).¹⁵ No longer a meditative “recluse” on the margin, Lewis makes himself a metropolitan “verbal pugilist”¹⁶ who dares to tread the realm of extravagance and outrage like a man he had observed in Brittany:

The practical joker is a degenerate, who is exasperated by the uniformity of life. Or he is one who mystifies people, because only when suddenly perplexed or surprised do they become wildly and startlingly natural. He is a primitive soul, trying to get back to his element. Or it is the sign of a tremendous joy in people, and delight in seeing them put forth their vitality, and in practical joking of a physical nature a joy in the grotesqueness of the human form. Or it is the sadness of the outcast, the spirit outside of life because his nature is fit only for solitude . . . (216).

Lewis’s former liking for external observation of such practical jokers seems to be now replaced by his own performance of their disturbing role inside the central space of modernity. There is a clear discrepancy between the precedent recognition of such a role and its embodied performance, which strictly corresponds to the difference between his observations on the margin and his actions in the metropolis.

Wyndham Lewis filled the Vorticists’ official organ, *Blast* 1, with aggressive manifestos; showy typography, abusive art criticism and theorizing essays, both as its editor and as a contributor. Most pronounced are its oppositional gestures of assault, especially on the immediate past of England, or “BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS”.¹⁷ Levenson suggests that “[t]he polemical violence of the avant-garde is only understandable

¹⁵ See, Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 39–54; Paul O’Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 129–38. For a comparison between Futurism and Vorticism, see Reed Way Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis: Towards a Condition of Painting* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985), 13–28; Hal Forster, “Prosthetic God” in *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 4, No. 2, 5–38; Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elite and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1998), 10–41.

¹⁶ Richard Cork’s expression in his “What Was Vorticism?” in *Wyndham Lewis* ed. Jane Harrington (London: Lund Humphries, 1980), 23.

¹⁷ *Blast* 1: *Review of the Great English Vortex*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (1914. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1997), 18. Henceforth abbreviated to *B*.

when linked to a vision of the larger social whole, a vision of that whole as moribund, decadent and stifling to creative endeavour".¹⁸ Certainly, contrary to the Italian Futurists' (or Marinetti's) 'modanolatry', Lewis's concern with the modern metropolis tends to be critical. He describes the city as the "enormous, jangling, journalistic, fairy desert of modern life" and "chaos of imperfection, discord, etc.," (*B.* 33), and claims, "Life to = day is giddily frank, and the fool is everywhere serene and blatant. Human insanity has never flowered so colossally" (145). As far as the new everyday machinery which characterized early 20th century European cities is concerned, Lewis at best tries dispassionately to take it "as a matter of course: just as we take trees, hills, rivers, coal deposits, oil-wells, as a matter of course". He offers it "a stoical embrace" different from both the Edwardian 'escapist' nostalgia for nature and the Futurist mania for technology.¹⁹ With reference to social conditions, Lewis writes, "[t]o make the rich of the community shed their education skin, to destroy politeness, standardization and academic, that is civilized, is the task we have set ourselves" (*B.* 8). Certainly the metropolitan world that the avant-garde confronted is delineated here as "moribund, decadent and stifling", though strangely not "to creative endeavour".

If we inspect *Blast* more closely, Lewis's stance again turns out to be more complex than it seemed at first sight. He argues that "creative endeavour" is possible strictly because the conditions of modernity are unfavourable: "Adverse climatic conditions — drastic Russian winters, for example — account for much thought and profundity. . . . England is just as unkind and inimical to Art as the Arctic zone is to Life. This is the Siberia of the mind". He confusingly continues, "If you grant this, you will at once see the source and reason of my very genuine optimism" (146). His logic appears to be curiously perverse: adverse conditions provoke, and even enable artists to seek out "the new possibilities of expression in

¹⁸ *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), 138.

¹⁹ According to Lewis's later recollection in "The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks" in *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913–1956*, ed. Walter Michel and C. J. Fox. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1956), 341. This "stoical embrace" is best understood in contrast with Italian Futurist fascination with the machine, which Lewis called "automobilism". See "Automobilism" in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914–1956*, ed. Paul Edwards. (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1989), 33–4.

present life” (41).²⁰

Lewis develops a similar argument concerning metropolitan decorative arts. “The surfaces of cheap manufactured goods, woods, steel, glass, etc., already appreciated for themselves and their possibilities realized”, he suggests, “have finished the days of fine paint”. Once commercial designs appropriate aesthetic pleasure that has hitherto been the exclusive attribute of “fine” art, artists must try to break the conventional criterion of beauty. This “breaking up of the values of beauty”, or “attack against traditional harmony”, allows artists to exploit elements previously excluded from paintings, i.e. “all the elements of discord and ‘ugliness’” (142). As a counter to the quasi-aesthetic (and anaesthetic) pleasure of the metropolis, Lewis desires to differentiate his project by the deliberate use of discordance and grotesqueness: “A man could make just as fine an art in discords, and with nothing but ‘ugly’ trivial and terrible materials, as any classic artist did with only ‘beautiful’ and pleasant means” (145).

Such is his assertion, and his project. But what about his practice in reality? To a certain extent, his artworks do appear consistent with his programmatic statements. Lewis’s Vorticist paintings do consist of a discordant, vertiginous arranging of angular shapes and metallic colours, with distant reference to metropolitan skyscrapers, which deliberately provoke discomfort in viewers who cannot easily fix the stable focal point of their gaze. Such an aesthetic experience would previously have been difficult to encounter (at least up to Picasso’s Cubist experiments several years before), so it might legitimately be called ‘almost’ new. Then, we might ask whether Wyndham Lewis’s project now does provide a way of turning metropolitan adversities into an artistic blessing. Or is his reaction to the metropolis wholly negative, as Levenson claims? I shall argue that Lewis does not merely react to the modern metropolis negatively, but manages to diagnose it in its deepest ambivalence through (implicitly) contrasting it with the marginal villages that we have already seen. It is by grasping such ambivalence that he constructs an avant-garde strategy to exploit the metropolitan potential.

²⁰ But once Lewis encountered the serious actual adversity of the war, he confesses that the metropolis could have been also a supportive condition: “The art of today is a result of the life to-day, of the appearance and vivacity of that life” in *Blast 2: The War Number*, ed. Wyndham Lewis (1915. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1981), 24. Henceforth abbreviated to *B2*.

6.

Lewis's understanding of such metropolitan ambivalence can be most clearly read in the following passage from an essay on psychic conditions in the field of the city, "The New Egos":

... the modern town = dweller of our civilization sees everywhere fraternal moulds for his spirit, and interstices of a human world. He also sees multitude, and infinite variety of means of life, a world and elements he controls. Impersonality becomes a disease with him. Socially, in a parallel manner, his egotism takes a different form. Society is sufficiently organised for his ego to walk abroad. Life is really no more secure, or his egotism less acute, but the frontier's [sic] interpenetrate, individual demarcations are confused and interests dispersed. ... We all to = day (possibly with a coldness reminiscent of the insect = world) are in each other's vitals — overlap, intersect, and are Siamese to any extent. ... All clean, clear cut emotions depend on the element of strangeness, and surprise and primitive detachment. Dehumanization is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World (141).

Lewis mentions the ease and comforts provided by modern social organization and technological devices, but, paradoxically, in Lewis's view, as a result of such social convenience, the "individual demarcations" of modern mentality have become blurred and suffer from 'dispersal' and 'interpenetration'.

We can compare Lewis's view here with those we find in a contemporary essay by Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (1903). Simmel expresses his wonder at the tremendous depersonalising forces in modern cities, embodied by new mechanical forms of transport, wonderful ornaments and buildings, and stable institutions like those of the State. But all this is not of a kind of euphoria; for Simmel's concern is an "attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society". His/her possibility of individual survival in the metropolis is, for Simmel, neither wholly promising nor totally hopeless; it is ambivalent. "From one angle life is infinitely more easy in the sense that stimulations, interests, and the taking up of time and attention, present themselves from all sides and carry it in a stream which scarcely requires any individual efforts for its ongoing. But from another angle, life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress

peculiar personal interests and incompatibilities".²¹

The similarity between Lewis and Simmel is here striking. Both notice the unprecedented comforts of modern life conditioned by objective means in the modern metropolis. "Society is", in Wyndham Lewis's words, "sufficiently organised for his ego to walk abroad". In Simmel's essay, individual life is carried "in a stream which scarcely requires any individual efforts for his ongoing". But herein lies a paradox. Such a fascinating perception of individual freedom is modified by the disquieting reality of the "Impersonality" of modern systems, which threatens individual, separate existence. In Lewis's words, "Impersonality becomes a disease" with moderns. Simmel claims, "life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values", and in effect, individual peculiarities are on the edge of 'dispersal' and 'interpenetration'. Simmel laments, in a vitalist fashion, the exclusion of instinctive forces by increasing social rationalization, which situation Wyndham Lewis alludes to as "a coldness . . . of the insect = world".

But after all, Georg Simmel, in the early 20th century, also firmly grasps the inadequacy of the alternative, the retreat into a narrow conception of a traditional community. He assumes a long-term perspective to describe modern conditions in terms of a transition from ancient small communal forms. In the case of a small group, he says, it has to protect itself from both external threats and internal disorder by closing on itself. As the group grows numerically and spatially, it gradually loosens its inner unity and its defence against others. It is only in this transition that Simmel finds a potential: "the individual gains a freedom of movement far beyond the first jealous delimitation, and gains also a peculiarity and individuality to which the division of labor in groups, which have become larger, gives both occasion and necessity".²² There is a precarious potential in a modern enlarged community, whose impersonality at once helps and threatens individual mental existence.

If we find Lewis and Simmel analogous in their diagnosis of the problems of the metropolis, we may well trace this similarity to the contrast they both make between the ancient and the modern, and their concomitant perspective on the potential of individuality. In Lewis's case the

²¹ Georg Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life" in *Georg Simmel on Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald M. Levine (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1971), 324, 337.

²² Ibid. 337.

contrast is that articulated between the margin and the modern metropolis, and it is the one we have already seen contained in his early travel writings, especially “Some Inkeepers and Bestre”. However vital the Bretons’ life appears, their subjection to communal norms did produce a more immediate limitation of their freedom. The modern monetary economy, and the modern splitting of selves has enabled modern town-dwellers to cultivate their “individual nature” in some private interstices. Therefore he can conclude, “a high state of civilization and social development is also that of individualism *par excellence*” (CWB. 223). Lewis repeats this judgement even a decade later: “In a village . . . you get a complete natural *socialization*, far superior to any socialization of the factory. But there is little freedom of action or opinion — both are curtailed and held down by public opinion, more effectively than any police force could do it. *Freedom only exists in the heart of the anonymous crowd*”.²³

We can thus grasp Lewis’s project of Vorticism in its fullest implications at this point. His turn from margin to modernity is a pragmatic judgement on social forms with reference to individuality. Even though town-dwellers are threatened by standardization and increasing organization, he sees a potential for individual freedom that is found only in the city, and that has been barely available in the surface vitality of marginalized villagers. Thus he vehemently insists:

Blast will be popular, essentially. It will not appeal to any particular class, but to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people, TO THE INDIVIDUAL. The moment a man feels or realizes himself as an artist, he ceased to belong to any milieu or time. *Blast* is created for this timeless, fundamental Artist that exists in everybody. . . . We want to make in England not a popular art, not a revival of lost folk art, or a romantic fostering of such unactual conditions, but to make individuals, wherever found (B. 8–9).

This passage tells us two things. First, that the desire for individuation is a fundamental and commonly shared instinct. Second, that artistic expression can provide the means to enhance the desire for conscious individuation from communal norms. Lewis the Vorticist attempts to make use of the ambivalent potential of modernity as a springboard to further indepen-

²³ The second emphasis mine. *The Art of Being Ruled*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (1926. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1989), 307.

dent freedom and individual peculiarity.

To exploit such a potential fully, standardization must, Lewis suggests, be strongly opposed. Against the tendency of 'dispersal' and 'interpenetration', "individual demarcations" must be firmly restored. "All clean, clear cut emotions depend on the element of strangeness, and surprise and primitive detachment". As Lewis says of the practical joker, "he is one who mystifies people, because only when suddenly perplexed or surprised do they become wildly and startlingly natural". So Vorticists take on such a role inside the metropolis, to surprise town-dwellers and excite their discordant "individual natures" underneath their harmonious "social selves". "We set Humour at Humour's throat. Stir up Civil War among peaceful apes. We only want Humour if it has fought like Tragedy" (31). This strategic aggressivity is designed to provoke a bitter, "anti-pathetic" laughter, which might crack social conformity and isolate and individuate people in the shock of a compulsive jolt. In order that the comforts of modernity do not trap individual natures into the "insect"-like phlegm of rationalization, the sudden shock of avant-garde defiance should momentarily (like spasmodic laughter) disrupt the too effective functioning of "the social self" as "go-between".

7.

I have so far tried to show that the metropolis is for Vorticism not "its natural habitat" (as Bradbury claims), but a denaturalised place of ambivalent potential, as Lewis recognized through the contrast he could make with the world of marginal villages. His project of artistic individuation inside the metropolis turns out, however, to be a failure when it confronts the outbreak of the Great War; but after all, the deliberate aggressivity of the avant-garde was always, by its nature, a kind of gamble. The metropolis being half adversity and half prosperity (i.e. impersonalization and individuation), the possibilities of failure were from the beginning concomitant with those of success. The figure of the practical joker, used by Vorticists, could be either that of an individual rebel, or like the stage performers in "Les Saltimbanque", that of the deadly efficient conductor of Bergsonian group laughter, and consequently of collective containment.²⁴ Or perhaps

²⁴ At least, this is how Lewis himself bitterly sees the matter later: "... Vorticism was replete with

even worse, the excited energy of the stored “individual nature” would not be easily contained, nor conveniently utilized for artistic individuation: it might turn out to be simply the resurgence of violent ancient conflicts. “The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest. The Vorticist is not the Slave of Commotion, but it’s [sic] Master” (*B.* 30), Lewis asserts. Rather than being an elaborate master of excited energy, the artist may be carried away, and conversely mastered by anarchic disorganization; that is, “the Vorticist” can be reduced to “the Slave of Commotion”.

Nevertheless, for Wyndham Lewis, the turn that has been made from margin to modernity was an irreversible passage, however disastrous the consequence may have turned out to be. And we can see Lewis justifying this turn when we look at *Enemy of the Stars*, an experimental ‘play’ published in the pages of *Blast* 1. In this play, Lewis represents an alternative to his own progress — a reversal from modernity to margin — and shows it as a fatally mistaken move leading to a catastrophe.

Enemy of the Stars has a peculiar style and destroys any coherent narrative sequence. Sentences in the play often lack grammatical links, and the consequent concatenation of angular images uncomfortably jars with each other in the perpetual, frozen intensity of an irreducible disharmony. It is in a sense a parable of the failure of absolute individualism. The plot is simple: the protagonist, Arghol, once a scholar in a big city exasperated by the modern split selves he sees around him, has secluded himself in a wheelwright’s yard situated on the margin of the city. Here he preaches a doctrine of ascetic transcendence of ‘mere life’, which he claims to be practising by himself, with his disciple-workmate, Hanp. After lengthy dialogue in a boiling, hostile universe, Hanp, disgusted by Arghol’s hubris and jealous of his metropolitan experience, discharges his resentment and kills Arghol while he is sleeping, then commits suicide.

“*Enemy of the Stars* is therefore a narrative about failure”, as Scott W. Klein observes, of the absolute individualism which is not far from that of Wyndham Lewis himself in his Vorticist doctrine.²⁵ Although there are

humour, of course; it was acclaimed the best joke ever. . . . ‘Kill John Bull with Art!’ I shouted. And John and Mrs. Bull leapt for joy, in a cynical convulsion. For they felt as safe as houses. So did I”. *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937. London: John Calder, 1982), 36.

²⁵ Scott W. Klein, *The Fictions of James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis: Monsters of Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 54.

some similarities between Arghol and Lewis in their thought, however, we should also recognize the differences. Desiring absolute individuation, Arghol has retreated from modernity to margin — he has made the opposite of the strategic turn we have seen Wyndham Lewis take from margin to modernity.

Arghol in the city was beleaguered by the insincere identity of modern split selves “that the baffling requirements of society had made” (*B.* 78), and his retreat to the margin was an attempt at purifying himself from the odious duality he found and at constructing an authentic unity through dismissing any others in society (including Hanp). “He had ventured in his solitude and failed. Arghol he had imagined left in the city. — Suddenly he had discovered Arghol who had followed him, in Hanp. Always à deux!” (80). The final recognition by Arghol is of the irreducibility of modern split selves, and of the vanity of an escapist retreat from modernity. Arghol achieves this before he himself is ultimately extinguished by Hanp, as vengeance for his much-detested duality.

With this parable of mutual destruction, Lewis, even in the pre-war years, represents the inadequacy of a retreat from modernity to margin, and justifies his own gamble over urban modernity. The representation of Arghol’s ruin is thus an act of distancing of Wyndham Lewis himself from the danger of such a retreat. But after all, it might also be an imaginary solution in the light of the actual difficulties Lewis consciously has to confront in the modern metropolis. *Blast* 1 seems to be prepared to take some risks. But self-awareness alone could not secure Lewis, regrettably, from the ultimate setback that Vorticism was to encounter in the Great War.

8.

When England decided to intervene in the military struggle on the European continent and declared war on Germany on August 4th, 1914, the showy aggressive performance of her avant-garde artists came to seem an irrelevance. Vorticism suffered a rapid decline in public interest, and the publication of *Blast* was discontinued after a much-debased second number in 1915. Critics and artists — like T.E. Hulme, Ford Madox Hueffer and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska — went to the front, some never returned. Although “the Death of Vorticism” was ironically announced by Ezra Pound

on the pages of the *Little Review* in 1919,²⁶ *Blast* 2 had already abandoned its pre-war pose of oppositional individualism by choosing to “try and brave the waves of blood, for the serious mission it has on the other side of World-War” (*B* 2.5). By such a naïvely nationalist endorsement of the War at its early stage, Lewis exposed his own political naïveté — a naïveté that he took long to acknowledge. Despite his own service as an artillery officer and war artist at the front, Wyndham Lewis was to outlive both the War and Vorticism, but he was to spend his later life as a Modernist-Satirist engaged in bitter polemics and politics over the ‘corrupting’ world between the two World Wars.

This process of increasing involvement in the difficulties of his time is, I would suggest, typical of British high-modernists. And in order to estimate the depth of these post-war difficulties, we need fully to understand how Vorticism has failed. Wyndham Lewis’s aggressive avant-garde project represents a strategic individualism inside the metropolis, a venture that confronts the ambivalent potential of urban modernity. The surface vitality of marginal villages might once have fascinated Lewis, but as we have seen, he has turned from margin to modernity, desiring a vital individuation against increasing standardization. Both the deadly violence of ancient conflicts and the collective lethargy of the modern metropolis were things that he felt had to be shunned for meaningful artistic ‘creation’ to be undertaken by the avant-garde. But Lewis, who once claimed that “a high state of civilization and social development is also that of individualism *par excellence*”, was neither aware of, nor on guard against the collective violence of mechanized warfare, which can unfortunately be claimed as another face of modernity. While Lewis in the pre-war years designed to disrupt aggressively the lethargic standardization of modern social organizations, and to celebrate the potential of individuality, he found in the War that the work of the artist himself was conversely disrupted by efficient “huge organizations” (*B* 2.15) that drove a vast international death struggle. After all, Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism failed in what they set out to do, i.e. to produce individuation in modernity.

“[T]he Individual, the single object, and the isolated, is, you will admit, an absurdity” (91), Lewis candidly writes in *Blast* 2. The disillusionment of the Great War makes him recognize his own past misrecognition of the

²⁶ Ezra Pound, “The Death of Vorticism” in the *Little Review* (February–March 1919): 45–48

modern potential for individuation to this extent. But even after the War, what he desperately looks for in his later career is, after all, those conscious individuals who might be able to struggle independently against the numerous illusions of modernity.²⁷ Throughout his career, Lewis never disavowed his early travel writings; rather, he continuously returned to them, through several revisions and rewritings, at least up to the publication of the collection, *The Wild Body* in 1928. The persistence of a residual fascination with the margin reminds Lewis again and again of the untenability of any nostalgic retreat, as he himself had shown in *Enemy of the Stars*. Lewis was perpetually forced to seek a space for individual survival in modernity even after the revelation of the Great War. It is in this obsessive concern with modernity, and this specific writhing under its no-way-out situation, above all, that we can find Wyndham Lewis's peculiar worth.

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Received June 10, 2002

²⁷ Such is his project, and requirement for his readers in *Time and Western Man* (1927. Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow P, 1993); especially see its "Author's Preface".