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Wyndham Lewis and Lawrence

William H. Pritchard

Who has forgotten F. R. Leavis's famous pronouncement in *D. H. Lawrence: Novelist*: "if you took Joyce for a major creative writer, then, like Mr. Eliot, you had no use for Lawrence, and if you judged Lawrence a great writer, then you could hardly take a sustained interest in Joyce." Somehow, happily enough, one managed to forget it in practice: but if the name of Wyndham Lewis were substituted for Joyce—and Leavis might permit the substitution—the suggestion might not seem as immediately outrageous. Historically the only significant comparisons of Lawrence with Lewis were made over thirty years ago by two critics with the sharpest of axes to grind—T. S. Eliot, and Leavis in response to him. The terms were as follows: in *After Strange Gods* Eliot had pointed to a "ridiculous" element in Lawrence: his lack of a sense of humour, his possession of a "certain snobbery" and, in a highly inflammatory phrase, his "incapacity for what we ordinarily call thinking." At this point Eliot cited the "brilliant exposure by Wyndham Lewis in *Paleface* as a conclusive criticism of this incapacity." Leavis, concerned to insist that Lawrence on the contrary had a supreme intelligence, rich sense of humour and all other admirable qualities, leaped at the chance to expose the man whom Eliot had chosen as exposé: while not denying Wyndham Lewis talent, Leavis managed to make it look suspect—"he [Lewis] is capable of making 'brilliant' connections" (as if they weren't really brilliant at all, or as if to make a 'brilliant' connection were a bit flashy and reprehensible). But it is really Lewis who is incapable of thinking, the air of solid argument in his books is just bluff, and the only side of Lawrence he exposes is the primitivistic yearning which Lawrence was capable of detecting and analyzing in himself, without outside help. And since Lewis's treatment of sex "is hard-boiled, cynical and external" he is a poor witness to call as alternative to Lawrence's supposed "sexual morbidity"—which Eliot had stressed. Best of all Leavis could turn the tables on Eliot by allowing Lawrence himself to expose Lewis with some words written in a review of Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs*:

Wyndham Lewis gives a display of the utterly repulsive effect people have on him, but he retreats into the intellect to make his display. It is a question of manners and manners. The effect is the same. It is the same exclamation: They stink! My God, they stink!

This placing of Lewis by Lawrence was sufficient, in Leavis's mind, to establish his favorite writer as "the representative of health and sanity" while Lewis

took his place—along with countless other modern writers—with those who do dirt upon life, as the by now familiar phrase has it.

I am convinced that this account travesties both writers, smoothing out every Lawrentian kink in the interests of clear-eyed affirmation of life, while it takes a part of Lewis, unjustly magnifies it into the whole and makes him sound like a ludicrous and nastily fastidious aesthete (“My God, they stink!”). As any reader goes deeply into Lawrence or Lewis he will see the unsatisfactoriness of Leavis’s account; what he may also see, and what I should like to point the way towards briefly, are some ways of taking the two writers together as voices who, despite their remarks about one another, had profound things in common as critics and as novelists. They were born within three years of each other and neither of them to the English manner. The earliest work of each (short stories by Lewis, poems by DHL) appeared in *The English Review* under the eye of Ford Madox Hueffer. Pound’s championing of Lewis is well-known but Lawrence didn’t escape him either as can be noted from his immortal tag: “Detestable person but needs watching.” It turned out rather soon that both Lawrence and Lewis needed watching; further that they were willing to turn themselves into fair enough specimens of detestable persons if it was necessary in order to get across a message about England. The message was that English Humour, as expressed through the beloved English grin, was no longer enough, was bad equipment for life in the twentieth century. Lewis made it explicit in the epilogue to his first novel *Tarr* where the second in a list of points proposed “That the Englishman should become ashamed of his Grin as he is at present ashamed of solemnity. That he should cease to be ashamed of his ‘feelings’: then he would automatically become less proud of his Grin.” If it looked in *Tarr* as if the author himself were grinning, readers were advised to look closer and “perceive that it is a very logical and deliberate grimace.” The deliberate grimace became more noticeable during the 1920’s as Lewis cast himself into a series of increasingly antagonistic and histrionic roles (that of the Enemy being the most striking one) when it transpired that the grinner was without a self and could be manipulated as a puppet for revolutionary purposes. As for Lawrence, his whole career must be seen as a protest on behalf of the feelings—of the “passional self”—against whatever form of cultural or personal repression (the “Grin” being one of them) the modern Englishman suffered under. And though an Enemy-like self with its own distinctive grimace frequently appears in his essays and reviews, it speaks out most powerfully through the characters of Rupert Birkin in *Women in Love* and Richard Lovat Somers in *Kangaroo*.

It would not have done for these self-styled detestable persons merely to adopt a gloomy and cavilling tone as they responded to English traits, since complacency—“the grin”—could be truly subverted only by a really revolutionary laughter, a harsher and wilder kind of play. Leavis, reviewing *Phoenix*, singles out this play as one of Lawrence’s distinctive virtues as a critic:

His critical poise is manifested in . . . a lively ironic humour—a humour that for all its clear-sighted and mocking vivacity is quite without animus.

And Leavis finds the ironic humour “free from egotism” as well. Certainly if egotism and animus are taken to be disfiguring qualities for a critic to possess rather than lively additions to the stew, then the Lawrence of *Studies in Classic American Literature* and the occasional essays and reviews in *Phoenix* didn’t possess them. But it’s arguable that the best modern critics of literature and society, particularly when they engaged in defending or attacking some aspect of the contemporary scene, were all equipped with enough egotism and animus to keep them going in a vibrant manner: think of Leavis himself on Bloomsbury, Auden-Spender, Christian Discrimination; or think of Pound, Eliot, Lawrence or Wyndham Lewis on one of their own favorite stalking-horses. All these writers are notable for their ironic humour and mocking vivacity; and it could be maintained that of the five, Lewis’s particular thrusts and sallies are most thoroughly and consistently amusing.

Two examples from his criticism of Lawrence may suggest what I mean: the first occurs in *Paleface* where Lewis is busying himself (in a section titled “Love? What Ho! Smelling Strangeness”) with the strangeness smelled and admired by Lawrence in *Mornings in Mexico*. The subject is Lawrence’s notion of “virtue” in woman:

What is *virtue* in woman? Mr. Lawrence becomes very Western at once, under the shadow of a kind of suffragist-chivalry, at the mere thought of ‘Woman.’

‘In woman [virtue] is the putting forth of all herself in a delicate, marvelous, sensitiveness, which draws forth the wonder to herself, etc.’ (To ‘draw the wonder to herself’ is to be a witch, surely? So virtue and wickedness would get a little mixed up.)

What would the Indian think if he heard his squaw being written about in that strain?—‘delicate, marvelous sensitiveness.’ He would probably say ‘Chuck it, Archie!’ in Hopi. At least he would be considerably surprised and probably squint very hard, under his ‘dark’ brows, at Mr. Lawrence.

The brilliance of comic creation lies not only in Lewis’s pretense that, really, we must look at this matter from the redskin’s point of view, but in the rich aptness of the phrase provided him to express that view—“Chuck it, Archie!” (in Hopi, of course). The point is not that Lawrence has been triumphantly exposed for all time and the falsity of his primitivistic yearning demonstrated, simply that it is good to imagine the squaw’s mate answering back in such resplendent terms. Lewis’s own “critical poise” is manifested in the independent comic life taken on by his creation—as it is in the following anecdote, again directed at Lawrentian doctrine:

Only a few years ago (1940) in New York an English writer of my acquaintance went about for a while with an American woman-intellectual. He told me how one day ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover’ had been mentioned. He expressed contempt or indifference for it. There-

upon his lovely friend burst into tears. It was almost as if he had spoken disparagingly of her person; or had high-hatted the sexual impulse, while visiting the Venusberg.

This was the kind of atmosphere heavy with emotion one had to contend with from the start. When lecturing at Oxford once I ventured a few criticisms of Lawrence's 'dark unconscious.' Immediately I became aware of the presence of a 'dark unconscious.' Indeed the room was full of them. At the end of my address I was darkly heckled for half-an-hour by woman after woman.

The moral of this cautionary tale seems to be that you had better not high-hat and mock the dark unconscious or it will rise up and darkly heckle you or worse. Who is mainly exposed here, Lawrence or Lewis? The question isn't relevant to the detached pleasure we take in a deadpan comic creation that is also "criticism." It is exactly the kind of thing Lawrence did so well, if not as coolly, with regard to Ben Franklin or Whitman in the *Studies* book, or in his reviews of H. G. Wells or Galsworthy.

Further than this, as a critic of Lawrence's work, Lewis was unable to go. At one moment he will refer to him as "that novelist of genius"; at another, and in the same book, *Rude Assignment*, he confesses to being sick of Lawrence's "invalid dreams," his "arty voodooism." *Paleface* as well as quoting and commenting on passages from *Mornings in Mexico* refers briefly to *Sons and Lovers* and to *Women in Love* but only to describe the first as "an eloquent wallowing mass of Mother-love and Sex-idolatry" and the latter as "again the same thick, sentimental, luscious stew." The language is inflammatory rather than helpful. In 1931 Lewis reviewed Middleton Murry's *Son of Woman*, and describing Murry's literary criticism as "a sort of sickly and blasphemous clowning" spent most of the review laying out the book's thesis. But Lewis made it clear that he preferred Lawrence the poet to Lawrence the prophet—even as he calls him "except in patches, a very bad writer." As for Lawrence's remark about Lewis, the question of from exactly what reading "They stink. My God, they stink!" came is not easy to answer. Lawrence had perhaps read *Tarr* and the Wild Body stories, although they seem rather too genial work to display "the utterly repulsive effect" people had on Lewis. On the other hand, that sort of display is often found in *The Childermass* and especially in *The Apes of God*, the latter published the year Lawrence died—though he may well have seen the section from it Eliot published in *The Criterion*. The important point is of course that Lawrence made a very acute remark and a prophetic one, insofar as Lewis went on in the next twenty-five years to write his finest novels, most of which deal fully and intensely with the satirist's sense of other people, with the relation of the intellect to "life."

As novelists, even more than as critics, what holds the two writers together is a violence of thought, a persistent effort to imagine themselves (through the protagonists of their novels) as lonely heroes: embattled figures out of step with fashion and its wares. And since, in a phrase of Lewis's, woman is "eternally the enemy of the Absolute" it is appropriate that Lawrentian and Lewisian heroes come up hard against women who won't quite yield to their heroic male

versions of themselves. For example, there is a moment in *Kangaroo* where Richard Lovat Somers tells his wife how he wants to haul down the flag of "perfect love" from their marriage-ship and put in its place "this crowned phoenix rising from the nest in flames. I want to set fire to our bark *Harriet and Lovat*, and out of the ashes construct the frigate, *Hermes*, which name still contains the same reference, *her* and *me*, but which has a higher total significance." To which long speech Harriet simply replies "You're mad!" and leaves Somers holding the flag, or the bird. Lewis's most memorable treatment of an analogous situation occurs in the late novel *Self Condemned* where the refusal of his perfectionist hero, René Harding, to climb down from his commitment to life in Momaco (Canada) as against England eventually results in his wife Hester throwing herself under a truck. After her death René entertains the following reflection:

It had been a fearful estrangement between them when she made a return to England a supreme issue, a life or death issue. She still, in death, spoke of England. But all he spoke to her about was forgiveness. Could he ever be forgiven? No, forgiveness was of course impossible. . . .

Both *Kangaroo* and *Self Condemned* are books about an exile, filled with despair—and alternate enthusiasm—about the land to which exile has taken the hero, while they look back on England with a mixture of loathing and nostalgia. They are also books about the modern century, about history, about an old imperfect Europe-England put behind for temporary immersion in some raw new world; they convey as well their authors' dissatisfaction with more ordinary styles of novel-writing, or at least with certain contemporary "well-made" styles. Neither Lewis nor Lawrence manages or even seeks to avoid a constant, sometimes lurching and awkward, often poignant but always unmistakable appeal to the reader over the head of whatever "story" the novel is getting on with: so Lewis lectures us on how badly the modern state is run, or on how invigorating was American radio comedy during World War II, while Lawrence talks on about what marriage should or shouldn't be, or recalls (in the "Nightmare" chapter) the personal indignities he suffered in England during World War I.

Nothing of course is "proved" by juxtaposing two novels written thirty years apart. And *Kangaroo* is very far from Lawrence's best work—perhaps *Women in Love*, with its perfectionist hero Rupert Birkin—would be a better choice for comparison. But this matters less than the fact that coming away from the experience of reading Lewis or Lawrence, of dealing with the intense, complicated, nagging, ironic presence of, in each case, an author not the least shy of putting in personal appearances in his pages, makes us see how partial, how far from the last word were the words each writer used to type and simplify the other. Lawrence, we are assured, is a partisan of the body, of the dark unconscious: yet *Kangaroo* and *Women in Love* are filled with argument, hesitations, qualifications, but always talk and more talk about matters said to be beyond language. Lewis, we are as confidently assured, is the clever wordy satirist who retreats into his intellect from which point he can peer out and assure us of the

repulsiveness of other people: yet *Self Condemned* (or it might be *The Revenge for Love*, or *The Vulgar Streak*) sounds like this at the moment when René confronts the body of his dead wife:

The Hester he saw at present was a living and moving one, one that he had loved, a witty, at times malicious one: but one who had become as much part of his physical being as if they had been born twins . . . Once or twice he thought he must get back to England, and if he should ask her forgiveness *there*, then the sweet face would smile as if to say, 'You have returned! We could not *both* return! But you found your way back. That proves that there really was love in you and me.'

Perhaps no comment is needed beyond uttering once more Lawrence's dictum about trusting the tale rather than the artist, especially when one artist must have perceived in the other a presence alien and disquieting.

Not for a moment would one want to have unsaid what they said about each other. We are the richer even for moments as trivially amusing as this one in a letter written by Lewis to Naomi Mitchison while he was on holiday in Morocco:

"as you see I am here still, upon the edge of the Spanish Sahara, baked by breaths from the Sudan, chilled by winds from the Atlantic luckily, too, and gathering much material for an essay on Barbary—as you know, I expect, *Berberig* is probably just *Barbary*, and I am amazed that Lawrence (D.H.—not the Colonel) did not find it out. I have been to places, and broken bread with people, calculated to lay him out in a foaming ecstasy . . ."

But by this time—it was 1931—Lawrence was beyond reach of the thrust; and in the same year, reviewing Murry's book, Lewis insisted that he had no inclination to judge, "so near to the death of Mr. Lawrence, at a time when many people must be mourning sincerely the vanishing of such a gifted, and, it would seem, attractive man." It would seem, though undoubtedly it never quite seemed so to Lewis. But the gesture was a decent one. Now, almost forty years later, with the atmosphere cleared of recriminations—Leavisian or Eliotic—we need and should insist on having both Lawrence and Lewis, one against the other, yes, but also together against others: as invaluable critics of literature and society, and as the two most significant English novelists of our century. To rewrite the sentence then: if one reads either of them, one would naturally and necessarily take the most sustained interest in the other.