

Obsequy with teeth

Michael Ayrton

WHEN Wyndham Lewis died the event received ample space in *The Times*, a respectable tribute from Mr. T. S. Eliot in *The Sunday Times* and a passionate one from Mr. Geoffrey Grigson in *The Observer*. Then, and the irony of this would have greatly amused him, *The Listener* and *The New Statesman and Nation* chose as their representative Mark Antonys, two of the most improbable funeral orators that ever buried a Caesar. Casca could have stood in for one, Cassius for the other. *The Listener*, for whom Lewis had honourably discharged his blindness, chose Mr. William Roberts, whose ungenerous little essay "Wyndham Lewis the Vorticist" appeared some few days before the most recent of his privately printed pamphlets attacking Lewis for laying claim to being the major Vorticist. Upon this literary wreath the laurels of apparently dispassionate

reminiscence were speckled with little globules of bile which glistened prettily among the memories. *The New Statesman* for reasons no less obscure than those governing *The Listener's* choice of William Roberts, caused Sir Herbert Read to write "under pressure" some inconsequential recollections of meetings with Lewis scarcely less barbed beneath their trimmings. This "pressure," bursting outwards, gave vent in Sir Herbert to a mild sigh of relief that Lewis could no longer menace Sir Herbert and all that Sir Herbert stands for. The sigh breathed its last paragraph in terms so tasteless that I quote them: "When I first met him he was a bombardier and I as an infantryman in the trenches had recently suffered more from our own guns than from the enemy's. Our relative positions did not change in civil life and I had always the uneasy feeling that

any day I might be shot in the back."

To no one except Wyndham Lewis could this savourless and uneasy brace of "tributes" have been vouchsafed within the formal traditions of British obituary writing. Only Lewis, a blind man of seventy-two, now safely dead, could expect to receive such pricks among the devout puffs which are the just reward of the recently deceased in art and letters. True Mr. Eliot's tribute had had that unemotional courtesy about it proper to the occasion, and others younger and less gravely precise had written with vigour in praise of the fallen bombardier: but two leading weeklies handed Mr. Lewis the partially frozen mitt before his funeral was over. He would have been furiously, delightedly angry. I can see him now dip his pen in the iron-gall ink and send a note back from that forward area which he so acridly reported in the *Childermass* and *Monstre Gai*. That Lewis the iron-clad should have caused Sir Herbert Read to feel the threat of a *shot in the back*; that would have given Lewis pause. He would have been amazed to have had this suggestion foisted upon him when Sir Herbert presents such an easy target in any elevation. All of which is simply intended to remark that few men of such artistic and literary eminence and so well on in years as Lewis could have earned, if earned is the right word, this pair of obsequies coldly to lie among the funeral baked meats, across the table from Mr. Eliot's categorical statement that with the death of Wyndham Lewis, a great intellect was gone and a great modern writer was dead.

The shrug and the silence

For the most glaring omission from the essays of Mr. Roberts and Sir Herbert Read was any reference to the man's stature either as artist or as writer. Furthermore Lewis had not been on speaking terms with either of these persons for thirty years and more.

These two essays are of interest because whilst neither of them attacks Lewis directly—that would be too improper a post mortem—both are detractions and as such are fairly typical of the two forms of detraction to which Lewis was usually subject. Elsewhere Roberts has been openly and vigorously opposed to Lewis and has been indulging in old-fashioned pamphleteering provoked by the treatment he considers he received at the hands of the Director of the Tate Gallery in the matter of the Lewis retrospective exhibition this year, which included a selection of works by the other Vorticists. What he has said on this subject may or may not have justice but Lewis himself had nothing to do with the selection of that exhibition. However, Lewis claimed in the introduction to the catalogue that Vorticism had been what he, Lewis, had thought and done at a particular time, thereby irritating Roberts, whose feeling for the Vorticists as a group was outraged by this proposition.

Pamphlets resulted and Lewis, well used to this form of paper warfare, would doubtless have retorted had it not been too late. There is nothing discreditable in Roberts' method of airing his grievance, but it was curious in him to have undertaken *The Listener* article in the circumstances. Sir Herbert on the other hand belongs to a larger section of society whose opposition to Lewis goes back to the days of "the Bloomsburys", and whose weapons have long been the shrug and the silence. The deprecatory, unwilling, reticent, little article in *The New Statesman* is the nearest thing to not mentioning Lewis that Sir Herbert could manage "under pressure" and his contribution is

really the result of the editor of that august journal knowing nothing whatever about the matter with which he was dealing, an ignorance which apparently he shared with the editor of *The Listener*.

Lewis as "The Enemy"

Now all this art-politics would be of no great general interest were it not that as a coda to Lewis's life, it was so absolutely suitable. Lewis called himself "The Enemy" at one time and he was in conflict most of his life, and his opponents have numbered among them persons not all of whom were entirely deserving of the treatment they received at his hands. His intellectual forces were powerful both in polemic and in sheer fire-power of vituperation but his vulnerability lay in his being a prey to suspicion, his tendency to bigotry and most of all in the unrelenting state of *armed preparedness* for attack to which his suspicions, often justifiable, gave rise. He represents allegorically a very sound reason for not testing or being possessed of the hydrogen bomb. He did as satirist and polemicist possess just such a weapon and like a nation so armed, he was perfectly clear that his stockpile of missiles was intended for defence, for he saw himself continually subject to unprovoked aggression. He was invariably impatient of that cultural U.N.O. which fashion draws together to justify the avant-garde. Their triviality, their susceptibility, their pleasure in sensation as opposed to thought, their emotionalism, all of these were to Lewis in the nature of an attack not so much upon him personally as on the sanity of which he saw himself the guardian. Defending the standards of intelligence, clarity of structure in painting "the ossature" rather than "the intestinal" of creativity, he was constantly in "a state of armed conflict". And recently in this, as it has transpired, guerilla campaign I have found myself rather improbably his A.D.C. without sharing in their entirety his convictions or perhaps to be more precise without having *au fond* that ability to see matters in those severe divisions of black and white without which he could not have been either the trenchant satirist he was, nor produced in his best drawing and painting the triumphantly metallic images which will, I am convinced, eventually place him among the most important artists of his time.

A classical artist

Wyndham Lewis was the Enemy and in both arts and letters there is at all times a necessity for such a figure as indisputable as Voltaire's conception of the necessity for inventing God. In the visual arts this necessity is more readily discernible as, at the mid-century, the triumph of belly over mind sweeps the Western World, dripping with *tachism* like a leaky faucet of the spirit and dominated by an intelligentsia whose desire to relinquish the discipline of intelligence is paramount. The "haptic" joys of excretion which are thus vociferously encouraged are not without their place in the psyche of the artist, today or at any time, but dysentery is a disease which left unattended weakens the body of the art. Wyndham Lewis was powerfully costive and that alone, in an age of dionysiac laxatives, was of the highest value, for it is one of the vital functions of the classical tendency in art to control the aesthetic bowel movement.

Lewis was fundamentally a genuine classical artist. His pronounced preference for what he described as "externals",

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his love of that rigid carapace into which he disciplined his forms, the generalised nature of those forms and above all his amazing capacity for taking the fabulous and strange and establishing as he did in "the Human Age" a condition of *normality* to which even the wildest imaginative flight is subject, are consistent with the classical artistic intelligence. It is no wonder that he found himself in opposition to the increasingly romantic trend of 20th century aesthetics. It is equally not surprising that he achieved the finest portraits of his age for objectivity remains an unavoidable concomitant of portrait painting and classical art has objectivity at its centre.

If it were possible to examine aesthetics without recourse to personal taste then the intelligent man would presumably respond to intelligence in the arts as readily as he responds to intelligence displayed in the sciences, in politics or in any other field wherein the mind is supposedly the controlling factor. But it is not possible, at least not wholly possible, and clearly with the mind subject to the stresses of our time, the temptation is open to the intelligent man to leave his brains in the cloakroom when entering an art gallery or put them aside when taking up a volume of imaginative fiction. He seeks relaxation by those means, and who shall blame him, in the unfettered release of his ability to respond emotively, to suspend judgment, to allow free play of associations. Minor art frequently has no other *raison d'être* and great painting can usually perform the function of sensory stimulant without further implications if that is all that is required of it. Great fiction can be read as simple fable and the popularity of *Gulliver's Travels* as a tale for children is a case in point, for *Gulliver's Travels* can be appreciated at this level. But in certain cases a work of art denies itself entirely to the spectator or the reader who suspends his intelligence. It is in this category that the work of Lewis must be placed and it explains why his work is unsympathetic to many and in consequence will never be fashionable, for fashion allows of no intellectual exercise. You cannot "taste" Lewis, you must engage with him and every faculty you possess must be on the alert.

This is of course the total way to come at great art but it is not the only way, for great art offers different rewards at different levels, whereas the art of Wyndham Lewis makes no such concessions. It cannot be approached without involving the intellect. His astringency, the rigid organisation of forms, the relentlessly logical assembly of his images as a painter and the cogent, often unpalatable argument which thrusts up reeflike from his novels, all of these discomforts motivate against pleasure, all require effort on the part of the recipient. Only in his works of criticism do these qualities appear acceptable, for in works

of criticism these are the things which the reader expects. They may give rise to disagreement but they are appropriate.

The extraordinary thing about Lewis is that his critical talent was so potent that he transformed it from comment into creative art and this ability is of course the necessity of the satirist, but Lewis could equally achieve this critical-creative synthesis in painting which has no satirical intention, for his portraits have nothing of Goya's sardonic regard—the very quality one might have expected—but, held in equilibrium by his classical restraint, the best of his portraits exist in an order, possessed of an inherent logic, which defies the element of the grotesque necessary to satire.

I do not mean to imply that he made no satirical paintings but rather that the mechanism by which he produced both satire and objective classicism was the same. The beam of his searchlight simply illuminated the facts and the visual criticism could be satirical or dispassionate depending upon the cause and nature of the image. What was to him grotesque he showed to be: what was not, was not.

The classical clarity of his vision at its best is most notable in his drawings of the early 1920s. With an absolute economy he was capable of erecting images with a structure of the most uncompromising kind. No hesitation is in evidence anywhere and his admiration of a trouser leg is as total as his realisation of a human head. He pleased neither himself nor the spectator by intent but with the most austere pictorial logic remarked the relationship of forms as if he himself had nothing to do with the matter. These drawings are impersonal (not unindividual, for they could not be confused with those of anyone else) because the necessity for their execution was not connected with personal expression but with a visual recognition of the logical order of forms.

To Lewis, the idea was the stimulus to passion, the criticism was dispassionate. This does not mean that Lewis was cold, he was not, but his disciplines imposed such classical dispassion, that the vehicle of his thought was frequently unsympathetic in its serene refutation of all emotional evocation. The product was crystalline, metallic, superficially inhuman, and this again is in the very nature of the classical artist. Only the very greatest, a Piero della Francesca, can so transmute this nature as to cause dispassion to make its appeal in simply human terms. This supreme alchemy was generally denied to Lewis.

But whether or not his art is enjoyable, and often it is not, is should not be underrated, as it has always been by people who know what they like. The supposition that a work of art exists only in terms of liking or not liking, whilst it is the copper currency of criticism, is not finally the standard of judgment which can be applied to Lewis or to any significant work, for it is not an intelligent standard but an emotional one.

It is not, I believe, possible to sustain an art without a Wyndham Lewis. He must exist to maintain the balance upon which the probity and the stability of the arts rests even if to the superficial understanding he seems spikily undesirable.

How long it will be possible to do without a replacement for Lewis I do not know, but one must come. And when this next great critic-creator dies, he in his turn will perhaps receive honour from the greatest living poet, and disregard from the most eminent practising art critic. That paradox is quite appropriate.

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Wyndham Lewis

Girl looking
down
(sketch of
Mary Webb)
1919



Wyndham Lewis

The
Armada
1937