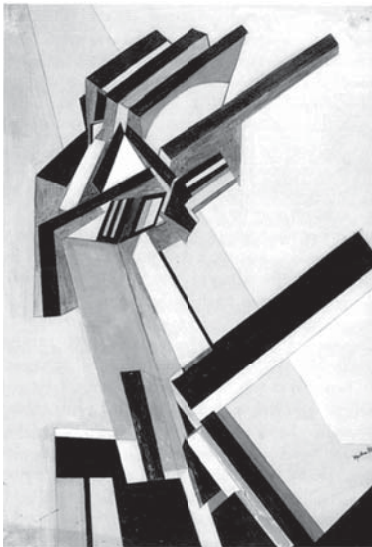


‘A Dark Insect Swarming’: Wyndham Lewis and Nature

Paul EDWARDS

I would like to thank the organisers very much for their kind invitation to address this symposium. I have been asked to speak about the British modernist painter Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957). I'm not sure how well known Lewis's work is in Japan, but I do know that it is not really very well-known in England, even though he is generally recognized as an important member of the Avant-garde during the period of around 1910 to 1919. He is especially well known as a pioneer of geometrical abstraction in England [Fig.1: *Portrait of an Englishwoman*] related to Cubism, Expressionism and Futurism, which was given the name 'Vorticism' by his friend and associate, the American poet Ezra Pound. As can be seen from this drawing, *Portrait of an Englishwoman*, there is a relationship between this form of abstraction and the forms of Russian Constructivism and Suprematism. Lewis edited the magazine of the Vorticists, *Blast* [Fig.2: *Blast* cover] in 1914, and copies – in which *Portrait of an Englishwoman* was reproduced – reached Russia that year, which perhaps explains these formal similarities. It is this phase of Lewis's work that is best known in England and the U.S., but other, later phases of his work are scarcely known.



1. Wyndham Lewis, *Portrait of an Englishwoman*, 1914 Pencil, ink and watercolour, 56 x 38 cm, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. The Ella Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection



2. *Blast* cover



3. Comparing between *Praxitella* and Yoritomo
Wyndham Lewis, *Praxitella*, 1921, oil on canvas, Leeds City Art Gallery;
Portrait of Minamoto no Yoritomo, Kamakura period, 13th century, colour
painting on silk, 143.0 × 112.8cm, Jingoji-temple, Kyoto

Like Pound, Lewis was profoundly influenced by Eastern art, initially through the work of H. A. Giles and Laurence Binyon, the keeper of Chinese art at the British Museum. Lewis not only read Binyon's book, *The Flight of the Dragon*, but knew him personally. He always considered that the West took a wrong direction in visual art when the Greeks followed the path of scientific, vitalist naturalism. The affinities of Lewis's own work with Eastern art are easy to see in such pictures as *Praxitella* [Fig.3: *Praxitella* and Yoritomo], where there are clear similarities to the well-known portrait of Minamoto no Yoritomo by Takanobu (though there are obvious and clear differences, too: this is not just a Western attempt at Japanese painting). Another example, a drawing produced in 1921 of a sitter named Bella Medlar, [Fig.4: *Bella Medlar*] shows an ambition to emulate some of the linear effects of an artist like Utamaro (or so it seems to me). Lewis was also doubtful about the traditional hierarchy of medium and genre in European art, preferring to work on paper with pencil, ink and wash rather than in oil on canvas. [Fig.5, *Mr Tut*]. Within traditional hierarchies, a drawing like this, of his wife's pet dog, is a minor work, but it is a clear homage to Chinese art of the Sung period, which Lewis considered one of the pinnacles of artistic achievement. Of course, it implies an attitude to nature, but not the attitude that is usually dominant in his work.

Before proceeding to an exposition of that dominant attitude, its variations and contradictions, I should point out that even if Wyndham Lewis had never painted a picture, he would still be a figure of immense cultural importance as a writer and intellectual. This is so much the case, indeed, that there is a flourishing critical literature on his writing that virtually ignores his painting except as something that needs to be acknowledged as the source of an aesthetic bias in his thought. It is



4. Wyndham Lewis, *Bella Medlar*, 1921, pencil on paper, 41.5 x 23.5 cm, private Collection, London



5. Wyndham Lewis, *Mr Tut*, 1931, pencil, charcoal and wash on paper, 28 x 24 cm, private collection

possible to do this because Lewis kept the practice of his two arts quite separate, rather than, like William Blake, marrying the two. So Lewis is an important modernist writer of fiction, an important writer about philosophy and culture, and a controversial writer about politics and political theory – notoriously for his qualified endorsement of Hitler in 1931, which he only abandoned towards the end of 1937. Lewis's paintings speak for themselves and were not provided with textual supplements, but our understanding of them can certainly be helped by a knowledge of the views he expressed and philosophical problems he addressed in his writing. And he was the author of over 40 books, besides editing three magazines and producing a great many essays.

The first thing that needs to be said about these views and their mode of expression is that in everything, Lewis was always pulled in two directions: the antinomies of thought were real to him, and if he makes forceful choices of a position regarding 'nature' or reason versus intuition (and there are few writers more forceful than Lewis at his most polemical), he never does so without being aware of the pull exerted by the opposing position. As he says, maybe a little too optimistically, in one of his most important books (*Time and Western Man*, 1927), 'This natural matching of opposites within saves a person so constituted from dogmatism and conceit. If I may say so, it places him at the centre of the balance.'¹) It seems doubtful that Lewis believed that anything but partial truths could ever be reached by philosophical argument – or indeed that anything but partial truths were available to us at all. As I have suggested also, he did not seek to resolve antinomies (for example by a version of Hegelian dialectic and synthesis). Thus one truth did not necessarily eliminate its contradiction or opposite, and we shall find this in his attitudes to

nature. This did not, as I have said, stop him arguing forcefully for whatever 'truth' he felt needed recognition at any particular moment.

He believed that philosophy began in wonder, and it is doubtful whether he thought that the purpose of philosophy was to dissipate wonder, but rather to prolong it. He proposed in an essay in 1922 that some of the functions of philosophy (which he then saw as undergoing fundamental change) would be taken on by the visual arts, and no doubt the function of perpetuating and deepening this sense of wonder was one of the functions he had in mind.²⁾ It should always be remembered, then, that for Lewis visual images had a direct philosophical component, and were partly meditations on the relationship between being and becoming.

Lewis spent his intellectually formative years in Paris (roughly 1904 to 1908), absorbing the anti-positivist and anti-rational thought of such thinkers as Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche. His case for abstraction in art was thus partly that our common sense perception of the world did not actually correspond with its truth or 'essence': 'The essence of an object is beyond and often in contradiction to, its simple truth: and literal rendering in the fundamental matter of arrangement and logic will never hit the emotion intended by unintelligent imitation.'³⁾ But the artist still needs to deal with *this world* (Lewis is critical of Kandinsky's abandonment of the real world for what he takes to be a world of spirit),⁴⁾ and the artist's job is therefore not so much to *copy* nature as to become it, and create in its manner: 'The finest artists – and this is what Art means– are those men who are so trained and sensitized that they have a perpetually renewed power of DOING WHAT NATURE DOES, only doing it with all the beauty of accident, without the certain futility that accident implies.'⁵⁾

The commitment is not so much to nature as to something that lies behind nature, and it is possible to read Lewis's theory of abstraction as one that takes its cue from Henri Bergson (whom Lewis studied while in Paris but later rejected). To abstract is to suggest the operation of the force underlying nature: but paradoxically those forces are only visible through the particulars of nature: the surface. So Lewis writes in *Blast* 1 that 'the finest art is not pure abstraction, nor is it unorganized life', and in *Blast* 2,

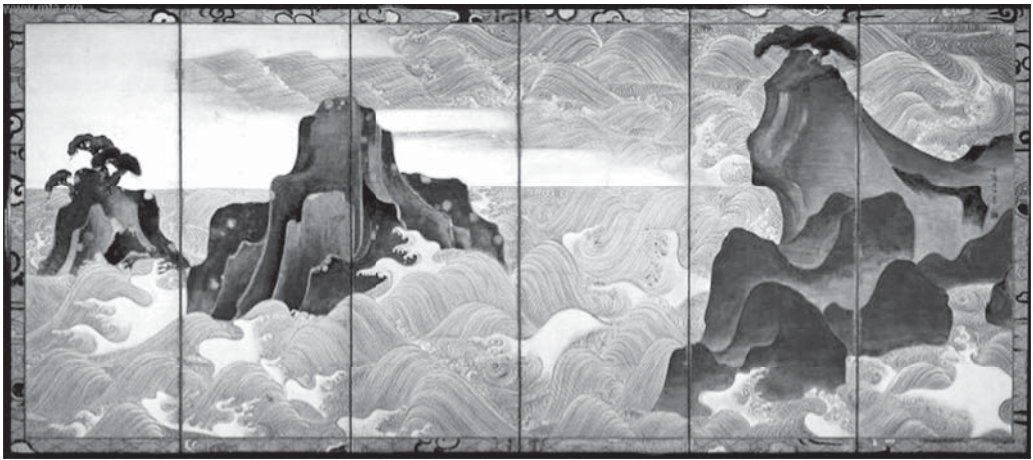
Fine and god-like lines are not for us but, rather, a powerful but remote suggestion of finality, or a momentary organization of a dark insect swarming, like the passing of a cloud's shadow or the path of a wind.

The moment the Plastic is impoverished for the Idea, we get out of contact these intuitive waves of power, that only play on the rich surfaces where life is crowded and abundant.

We must constantly strive to ENRICH abstraction till it almost plain life, or rather to get deeply enough immersed in material life to experience the shaping power among its vibrations.⁶⁾

This talk of waves, clouds and winds that play on the surface brings to mind the great

Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', in which the transcendent power behind nature is figured as the wind, whose presence is itself only visible through the surface effects on waves, clouds, and so on. To those with some knowledge of Japanese art it may bring to mind the clouds and waves of screens by Sotatsu and Korin, and it is possible that Lewis had Korin's screen in mind when he wrote this passage.⁷⁾ [Fig.6: Korin] Possibly Sotatsu's 'wind god' is also suggested. There seems to be no thought of criticising this power or its transient but recurrent effects (such as the swarming of insects) in these early comments on nature. What seems to have precipitated a change is Lewis's experience of the First World War, in which he served first as a gunner, and later as a War Artist.



6. Ogata Korin, *Waves around Matsushima*, Edo period, 18th century, six-panel folding screen; ink, colour, and gold on paper; 150.18 x 367.79 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Korin's screen, *Waves around Matsushima* (known to Lewis from reproduction in Ernest Fenollosa's *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* and exhibited in London in 1918) is a major source for Lewis's large war painting, *A Battery Shelled* (1919, Imperial War Museum). (It even echoes some of the vertical divisions made by the borders of the sections in the screen.) [Fig.7] It shows a group of heavy guns being shelled by the enemy (the attackers attacked), and its way of depicting the scurrying soldiers like matchstick men or insects has frequently been commented on. Korin's convention of representing the striations of the rocks that project from the sea is clearly echoed in the ridged furrows of churned-up mud in Lewis's painting. Where Korin insinuates a shared rhythmical energy shaping the forms of wave, cloud and rock in his scene, Lewis's conventions assert continuity among tree-stumps, clothing, corrugated iron and the billowing smoke of destruction. *A Battery Shelled* is a complex painting, with many layers of meaning (and references to Western art), but perhaps its most savage irony is in its turning of what might be called the nature-mysticism of Korin's screen to depict the mechanical destructive energies with which the West has replaced nature. We see an association of insects, Korin's wave screen and the heavy guns



7. Wyndham Lewis, *A Battery Shelled*, 1919, oil on canvas, 182.8 x 317.5cm, Imperial War Museum

of the First World War in a passage in Lewis's 1919 pamphlet, *The Caliph's Design*, even if his ostensible argument there is that such subject-matter is transformed when it enters the aesthetic realm of painting: such a gun

is of exactly the same importance, and in exactly the same category, as a wave on a screen by Korin ... [or] a beetle of a sculptor of the XVIII dynasty [of Egypt].⁸⁾

A Battery Shelled is one of the few pictures by Lewis that might be described as a landscape, and it fittingly shows nature 'humanised' in the most horrific way.

But of course the 'human' is part of nature itself. Lewis was deeply affected by the pessimism of Schopenhauer as well as by the Darwinian picture of nature. While it would be possible, therefore, to see *A Battery Shelled* as a revelation of the *perversion* of nature by man's destructive mechanisms, it is also possible to read it as a revelation of what nature is actually like. There is plenty in Lewis's work during the First World War to make us choose this second reading. For example, his pastoral travesties of Matisse and Gauguin such as *Moonlight* (1914 Victoria and Albert Museum). It has its equivalent in the short story 'Cantelman's Spring-Mate', written while Lewis was training to be an artilleryman in the heart of Thomas Hardy's Wessex. Hardy was himself influenced by the pessimism of Schopenhauer, and his 'nature' is only benign up to a certain point, though Hardy's representations of it usually remain on the benign side of this point, in the realm of appearances. Lewis's protagonist, Cantelman, sees through these appearances, however:

The miraculous camouflage of Nature did not deceive this observer. He saw everywhere the gun-pits and the "nests of death". Each puff of green leaves he knew was in some way as

harmful as the burst of a shell. ⁹⁾

From this point of view, we could say that, just as 'Cantelman's Spring-Mate' strips away the camouflage of Thomas Hardy's nature, *A Battery Shelled* strips away the camouflage of Ogata Korin's. (I ought to add that this way of putting it is mine, not Lewis's, and that Lewis expressed the highest admiration for Korin; I make the interpretation to bring out the extent to which we can see an 'anti-nature' extreme in Lewis's work.) We should remember, also, the argument of Wilhelm Worringer in *Abstraction and Empathy*, that geometrification and abstraction are fundamentally anti-nature, or are occasioned by a fear and retreat from it. Whatever the truth of that analysis, it was one that Lewis himself was aware of when he produced his own geometrical abstractions.

Returning briefly to *A Battery Shelled*, one of the major contrasts with Korin's screen is the presence of human figures in it. These, too, are 'part of nature' in the way I have suggested, and as is conveyed by their formal treatment; but they reveal a potential opening out of the steel trap of nature, at least in the ways in which humanity may participate in it. These little machines are actually carefully carrying a wounded comrade into a dugout, under the direction of an officer. It is open to us to attribute to them something more than the mechanism which the painting's convention consigns them to, therefore. It depends on point of view. Secondly, the figure that catches our eye (precisely by evading our gaze), is one who simply refuses to look at the scene we are forced to contemplate, and apparently therefore has no point of view. We can speculate on the nature of this withdrawal and what it says about his position in the machinery of war and nature.

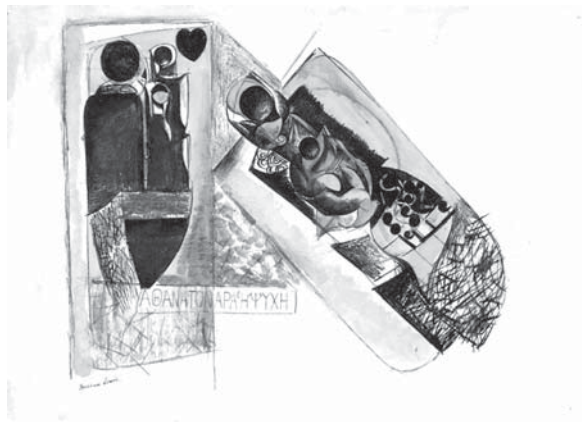
In 1927 Wyndham Lewis published a book of cultural and philosophical criticism called *Time and Western Man*. It is a complex book, and not a well-organised one, so that it does not so much develop an argument as gradually reveal a point of view that is supported by fragments of argument that the reader himself must put together. I started by quoting from this book on Lewis's treatment of antinomies: he felt attraction to both of the contradictory terms in any opposed pair. But in *Time and Western Man* he allows himself to be pulled almost exclusively in the anti-nature direction that I have identified with his war paintings. There are hints of an opposing view in the book, however, and I shall come back to them. Lewis's philosophical argument opposes philosophers such as Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead whom he considers wish to undermine Cartesian dualism and locate the privileges of mind back into the processes of nature. He seems to have completely abandoned his earlier Bergsonism, so that he now sees the human intellect (as he says elsewhere) 'in its traditional role of the enemy of life, as an oddity outside the machine.'¹⁰⁾ Note the use of life and 'machine' as virtually synonymous; he might well have permitted the substitution of 'nature' for either of these words also.

Marshall McLuhan, in a review of a book on Lewis by Hugh Kenner, calls Lewis's views Buddhist or Neo-Platonist. He maintains that Western science and technology in the Twentieth Century have overlaid nature with their mechanism and brought about precisely the version of 'nature' that this 'Buddhist' philosophy anathematizes. It is this that Lewis shows in books like *Time*

and Western Man.¹¹⁾ The philosophy of Bergson is supposed to provide a route out of mechanism into an unlimited field of spirit and creation, and thus redeem nature, but in a draft chapter of *Time and Western Man* held over for a later (unwritten) book, Lewis points out that Bergson's image of divine creation simply confirms the dominance of technocratic versions of nature, since it is an analogy based on a leaking boiler in a steam locomotive:

Let us imagine a vessel full of steam at high pressure, and here and there, in its sides, a crack through which the steam is escaping in a jet. The steam thrown off into the air is nearly all condensed into little drops which fall back ... But a small part of the jet of steam subsists, uncondensed, for some seconds; it is making an effort to raise the drops which are falling; it succeeds at most in retarding their fall. So, from an immense reservoir of life, jets must be gushing out unceasingly, of which each falling back is a world.¹²⁾

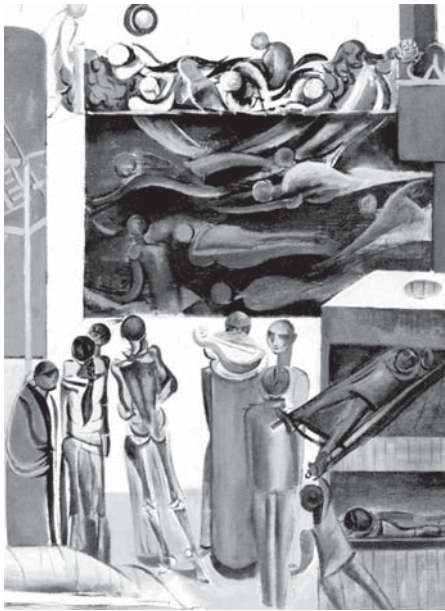
Much of Lewis's visual work is aimed not at showing a spiritual alienation from the world of nature and mechanism in which we live (which Bergson misleadingly, in Lewis's view, claimed to transcend), but at intimating that there is another world that is beyond reach but may be more truly our home. Like the modernist Irish poet W. B. Yeats, he was concerned with the position of the soul 'out[side] of nature'¹³⁾: as in this 1927 work, *Athanaton*, or 'The Immortality of the Soul'. [Fig.8: *Athanaton*] In the panel on the left, a figure (a woman with her child?) seems to confront their reflections from another world. Lewis was an admirer of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, and liked to use the idea of reflection as a symbolic bridge to another, mystical condition beyond nature. Like Carroll also, Lewis playfully uses the idea of the playing card to suggest this as well; this is a version of the Queen of Hearts, hearts evoking also a world of love, where even the mother-child relationship is redeemed. It needs redemption, for if nature is a mechanism, then the mother-child relationship of generation is the engine of its



8. Wyndham Lewis. *Athanaton*, 1927, watercolour, pencil, and pen and ink on paper, 25.4 x 35.6 cm, the Metropolitan Museum of Art

continuance, and Lewis is far from positive about it. Indeed, his occasional misogyny is centred on the natural reproductive function of women (as with most such misogyny, the fact that it takes two, a man and a woman, to make a baby, tends to be overlooked.) But there is no misogyny in this picture. The vertical panel on the left has a strong sense of stability. Diagonals suggest dynamism in Lewis's work, so we may take the diagonal panel to the right as moving towards the stability of the other world represented at the left. Like the other panel, it can also be read as a female figure, clasping a smaller infant figure in front of her, but Lewis uses cubist techniques to complicate any simple reading. The sense of integrity my reading relies on actually falls apart when you look more closely: there are free-floating globes and structures a bit like sprouting seeds outlined in black against the pink section towards the bottom of the figure. Such forms in Lewis's later work are used as symbols of natural creation.

I suppose we could turn Lewis's criticism of Kandinsky against him, for turning from *this world* to another. But Lewis was always concerned with borders and transitions – particularly, in his painting – with that border between the physical and the metaphysical. The metaphysical could only be symbolised, of course, or conveyed by suggesting somehow that it lies behind appearances. *This* world, anyway, was for him an odd place. His sense of its oddness, and of our insecure and contingent place in it, was reinforced during the 1930s by serious illness necessitating a series of major operations. It was a time, also, when Lewis had decided he wished to establish his reputation as a painter a little more solidly according to the conventional hierarchies of Western pictorial art. He was by now better known as a writer than a painter, and those paintings that he produced in the intervals of his writing tended to be (like *Athanaton*), works on paper. So he now produced a series of oil paintings, some of which seem to address this contingent position of the human soul in nature. One is *The Tank in the Clinic* (1937) [Fig.9: *Tank in Clinic*]. It is emblematic of our desirable imprisonment in nature and matter. Water has in the West always been a symbol of that, and Lewis depicts the turbulent motion of the swimmers as they plunge under the surface and out of it, reimmersing themselves in life. This place of healing is however also a place of death. The two figures to the right of the smaller figure in a red dressing gown are little more than draped skeletons (as the figure in the dressing gown himself may be). And at the bottom right the dead are stacked on stretchers, ready to be disposed of. Three figures surround a large plinth on which a stringed musical instrument (or possibly a sculpture by a modern sculptor like Naum Gabo or Barbara Hepworth). This is the only hint in the painting of another, more permanent world outside of nature, symbolised, as in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, by music and the aesthetic. The figure on the left, by his position, appears to be a witness to the whole scene: he should be compared to the figure looking out of *A Battery Shelled*, who refuses to witness. The red dressing gown indicates that this figure is Lewis himself; not only does he witness, but is himself part of the scene depicted. It is worth comparing the 'tank' in this painting with one of Lewis's last works (from 1949 – the last year that he was able to paint with much competence, owing to badly deteriorating eyesight): the watercolour, *What the Sea is like at Night*. [Fig.10: *What the Sea...*] Lewis wrote of



9. Wyndham Lewis, *The Tank in the Clinic*, 1937, oil on canvas, 68.5 x 51 cm, Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust, London



10. Wyndham Lewis, *What the Sea is like at Night*, 1949, pen, ink, and gouache on paper, 56 x 37.5 cm, private collection

this picture, 'In [the] greatly stylized ocean, semi-human animals plunge and obtrude themselves, as if they had found their way into this from another dimension ...'¹⁴⁾ These creatures, semi-animal and semi human, do not entirely belong in nature but are beings truly from another dimension.

It is time to glance, however, at the obverse of this predominantly negative view of nature, and there are traces of it even in *Time and Western Man* and some of its drafts, as I suggested earlier. For Lewis intimates that this amalgamated nature-machine is not so much a given and inevitable absolute as an emanation of a peculiarly Western frame of mind:

Nature we attempt to control; but, regarding ourselves as an impulsive, non-automatic, rational being, a nature that issues from us, in the form of machinery, is of course above criticism or control. [I should interject that Lewis is here being ironic: it should *not* be above criticism or control, is what he means: otherwise it leads to war.] So it is that we get the good and the bad in natural science, our new "nature," merged in one confusing mass.¹⁵⁾

In a long passage deleted from his proofs, Lewis states that 'Western science is all that Europe has to boast of. Always weak in mystery – with no sacred books or mastery in religion – weak in art, positive science alone redeems the picture.' Through positive science, he suggests, the West began to 'attempt to reach the same heaven as the Asiatic did on other roads', but this has been unsuccessful and culminated instead in the 'nature' of the First World war and the mechanized

culture that followed it.¹⁶⁾ So he looks back to an earlier European tradition, dating from before natural science, to the 'natural magic', or benevolent nature of the Celts. It is capitalism, and what it has done with science, that is our enemy, he says: 'It is not Nature, but they [the capitalist hierophants of the Moloch of Modern Ideas] that is our enemy. Nature is indeed our friend. . . We worship, if we worship, still the virgin-goddess, the stars on the ocean, the break-of-day: the natural magic that inspired our earliest beliefs.'¹⁷⁾

These passages are only found in the manuscripts and proofs of *Time and Western Man*. Lewis probably excluded them mainly because they diluted the polemical force of his book against the ideology of technologised nature, but we do not find elsewhere in his work – even his painting – the kind of mystical celebration of visionary nature that they might make us expect. The closest to it seems to be the late watercolour I showed before, *What the Sea is like at Night*, where the 'mystery' of nature is hinted at. As this suggests, it was mainly in his late work that Lewis was prepared to go some way towards actually celebrating our being and our becoming in nature. The clearest example, probably, is the delicate watercolour, *Homage to Etty* (1942). [Fig.11: *Homage to Etty*]. William Etty was a Victorian painter of very fleshy nudes indeed, and one of Lewis's Canadian patrons had a collection of his work. Here is a typical Etty. [Fig.12: *Musidora: The Bather 'At the Doubtful Breeze Alarmed'*] Lewis's bathers are also somewhat tentative about their immersion in the water. It is worth making a contrast with the representation of nature in 'Cantelman's Spring-Mate', which I mentioned earlier. Nature there is a mechanical, explosive force: here too the tree behind the bathers seems to be the uprush and proliferation of some such explosive force, but given a benign connotation in the 'puff of green leaves'. The pastoral mode which Lewis repudiated so strongly in his youth is here allowed uncomplicated and uncritical expression. In *Bathing Women* (1941–2) [Fig.13: *Bathing Women*] Lewis emphasises the fleshiness and muscularity of the women's engagement in the fluid medium of the sea (here metonymically evoked and made total



11. Wyndham Lewis, *Homage to Etty*, 1942, pen and black ink with watercolour and gouache over graphite on wove paper, 25.3 x 36.6 cm, National Gallery of Canada



12. William Etty, *Musidora: The Bather 'At the Doubtful Breeze Alarmed'*, 1846?, oil on canvas, 65.1 x 50.2 cm, Tate



13. Wyndham Lewis, *Bathing Women*, 1941-2, pastel on blue paper, Wyndham, Lewis Memorial Trust

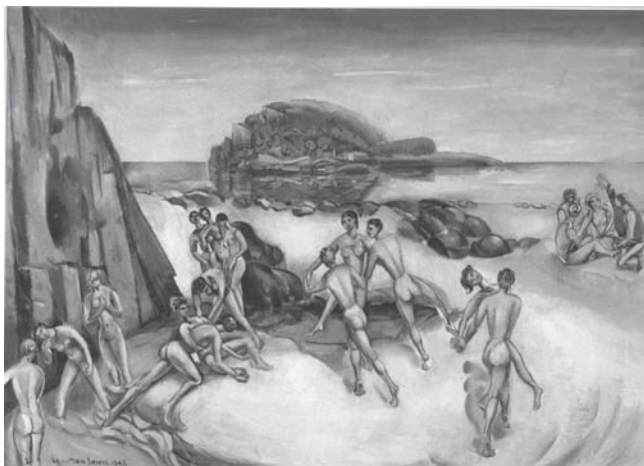
by the blue ground supplied by the sheet upon which the pastel is applied).

What happened during the 1940s, when Lewis was living in Canada and the United States (during the whole of the Second World War) was that he suddenly allowed for the claims of the European Romantic tradition and its valuation of Nature, more or less rejected since his experience in the previous war. The early admiration of Korin's Matsushima screen showed that this had always been possible for Lewis. *Allégresse Aquatique* (1941) is another, fairly playful exploration of this theme [Fig.14: *Alegresse Aquatique*], but here the pull of the 'other world' outside the stream of nature, is also recognised. Again we have a figure looking away (the woman at the right), and



14. Wyndham Lewis, *Allégresse Aquatique*, 1941, Graphite, pen and ink, watercolour and gouache on wove paper, 31.8 x 44.5 cm Collection Art Gallery of Ontario

beside her a taller, perhaps male, figure, who desists from participation. This series of bathers (and there are several others) culminates in Lewis's final large imaginative composition in oils, *The Island* (1942) [Fig.15: *The Island*]. It is set at the seashore, the site, in William Wordsworth's great *Immortality Ode*, of the border between the temporal and the eternal. Though weakened, sadly, by Lewis's already fading eyesight and a consequent inability to provide natural form (as opposed to the invented form of his more abstract work) with much significance beyond the emblematic, this painting is fully in the European Romantic tradition. Again it celebrates the body's delight in matter and nature – as always, symbolised by immersion in water – here, the stream that forms a blue pool and falls incongruously on the sandy beach. The title, however, draws our attention to the wooded island on the horizon, with its red building, its cliffs and its woods – woods that to the left seem to consist of cypress trees. This island alludes to the one in Arnold Böcklin's famous painting – well known to Lewis (and derided by him in his youth) – *Toteninsel* ('The Island of the Dead'). [Fig.16: *The Island of the Dead*]. The high rocks encircling the island contain tomb-like openings, to receive the bodies of the dead (industrial versions of these were seen in Lewis's *Tank in the Clinic*). Yet in Lewis's painting this feature has been transferred to the mainland, to the left of the stream and bathers – in that dark patch on the cliff is a suggestion of one of these openings. For the realm of becoming symbolised by the stream is also that of death, though the doom that impends is not actually troubling in this scene. And by contrast with Böcklin's rather gloomy island, Lewis's is an attractive and verdant place. We notice that, as in *Alégresse Aquatique*, a group of figures are not participating. Robert Stacey, in a full and illuminating essay on the painting, draws attention to their similarity to the group of picnickers in Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. [comparative Fig.17]¹⁸) In Lewis's group, the gesturing, 'philosophical' figure appears to be drawing the attention of his listeners to the island: it is a symbol, it seems to me, of that 'other' world that lies beyond nature, of which the aesthetic and the stasis of death are



15. Wyndham Lewis, *The Island*, 1942, oil on canvas, 69.9 x 91.4 cm, Santa Barbara Museum of Art



16. Arnold Böcklin, *Toteninsel* ('The Island of the Dead'), 1883, oil on panel, 80 × 150 cm, Alte Nationalgalerie: Berlin



17. Comparing between detail of *The Island* and Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, Édouard Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, oil on canvas, 203 x 265cm, Musée d'Orsay

always symbols for Lewis. Here, for perhaps the first time in his work, the two realms are given equality, and Lewis uses the vocabulary of European Romanticism to give expression to both sides of his contradictory ideas about nature and transcendence.

What of the non-European, Eastern-influenced mode of Lewis's visual art, however? The title of one of his 1941 works on paper, *The Sage Meditating on the Life of Flesh and Blood* [Fig.18, *The Sage*], by its inclusion of the words 'sage meditating' can only refer to a figure of a wise or holy man from the East, even though the image is not of some meditating monk or grizzled hermit in his mountain retreat. The image represents, instead, the meditation itself, without the meditating sage himself. The palette is virtually confined to the complementary colours green and red, enforcing by their stark contrast a fundamental dualism in this image of life. Walter Michel, the greatest authority on Lewis's painting, comments on the 'floating' effect of the egg-like green form in the lower part of the picture, which appears to contain a foetal shape of a figure or figures. If *Athanaton* was a meditation on the passage out of nature into the 'other' world, this surely meditates on the



18. Wyndham Lewis, *The Sage Meditating on the Life of Flesh and Blood*, 1941, pencil, pen and ink, watercolour and gouache on paper, 33.5 x 40 cm, Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust (Courtauld)

passage of the soul *into* this world of nature. And this vision of life may be considered to be more ultimate than the comparatively benign *The Island*, though chronologically it precedes *The Island*. I am reminded of a passage in Lewis's 1937 novel, *The Revenge for Love*, where the heroine, Margot, is humiliated by a dwarf who pretends to a crowd of laughing onlookers that she is his neglectful mother. It is not literally true, of course, but Margot nevertheless feels his claims as being as real as any others, and concludes,

There was no escape, she must play her part. There was no use pretending she did not belong to this system of roaring and spluttering bestial life of flesh and blood.¹⁹⁾

Walter Michel suggests that 'the brilliant vermilion swirls' surrounding the egg form are 'suggestive of Japanese demons', and I suppose there is some resemblance, for instance, to this demon painted by Kawanabe Kyosai [Fig.19]. In some respects the 'face' of Lewis's demon – if that what it is – is closer to the green face of Sotatsu's 'Wind God'.

Michel also links *The Sage* to another watercolour by Lewis from the same year, known variously as *Jupiter Tonans* and *Jehovah the Thunderer* [Fig.20: *Jehovah*], which he believes was directly inspired by the *Wind God* of Sotatsu [Fig.21: *Wind God*]. He says that the 'sword-like jet of blue bursting from the generating centre toward the upper left' of Lewis's picture might have been inspired by the shape of the bag of winds that the wind god carries over his head. The terms Michel uses to describe this picture of the Old Testament God of Justice are telling:



19. Detail of the Demon face, Kawanabe Kyosai, *Oni no Nembutsu*, large sized Nishiki-e, the 19th Century



20. Wyndham Lewis, *Jupiter Tonans and Jehovah the Thunderer*, 1941, pencil, ink and watercolour on paper, 37 x 25.5 cm, Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust (Courtauld)



21. the *Wind God of Sotatsu*
Tawaraya Sôtatsu, *Picture of Wind and Thunder Gods*, Early Edo period, first half of the 17th century, Pair of two-fold screens, color on gold-foiled paper, 154.5 x 169.8 cm, National Treasure, Kyoto National Museum

This apparition stands in significant contrast to Lewis's geometric and machine abstractions of twenty-five years earlier; in a vortex of abstract *organic* forms, *denying* mechanism, it asserts a divine power of unfathomable functioning.²⁰⁾

I am not so sure. The 'sword-like jet' may be inspired partly by Sotatsu's figure, but I think it also harks back to that 'jet of steam' sent out by a leaking machine (a steam boiler) that Bergson used as a metaphor for creation. It will be recalled that, for Lewis, Bergson's metaphor showed the link between the organic and the mechanical and thereby provided a clue to Lewis's rejection of the optimism of Bergson's theory. Bergson's God is for Lewis a Time-God, submitting us to the tyranny of natural processes while pretending to emancipate us. This is the God depicted in this picture: the creator of the material world, the Demiurge, not the God of love associated with the New Testament, and the true nature of his creation becomes most evident in wartime.

But fortunately, fortunately for Lewis, at any rate, there were times when he was able to see this world as something other than an inhuman and loveless machine from which escape was impossible, and value it in a more Romantic and mystical light. And fortunately for us, too, since this duality gives his art a contradictory depth and play of meanings that make it endlessly fascinating.

The pictures are 'By permission, the Wyndham Lewis Memorial Trust (a registered charity)'.

Notes

- 1) Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (1927) rpt., ed. P. Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1992), p. 133.
- 2) See 'Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in our Time' (1922) rpt. *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, ed. Walter Michel and C. J. Fox (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp. 201–02.
- 3) 'A Review of Contemporary Art', *Blast 2* (1915), rpt. *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 74.
- 4) See *ibid.*: 'Kandinsky's spiritual values and musical analogies seem to be undesirable, even if feasible: just as, although believing in the existence of the supernatural, you may regard it as redundant and nothing to do with life. The art of painting, further, is for a living man, and the art most attached to life.' (72.)
- 5) *Ibid.*, 75.
- 6) *Ibid.*, 62
- 7) The mention of insects seems at first anomalous in this connection, but actually strengthens the association when we read Lewis's comments on Korin in 'Inferior Religions', published in *The Little Review* in 1917 but probably written around the same time as 'A Review of Contemporary Art': 'Korin found in the symmetrical gushing of water, in waves like huge vegetable insects, traced and worked finely, on a golden p \hat{a} te, his business.' *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), p. 319.
- 8) Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?* (1919) rpt. ed. P. Edwards (Santa Barbara, 1986), p. 57.
- 9) Wyndham Lewis, 'Candleman's Spring-Mate,' *Unlucky for Pringle: Unpublished and Other Stories*, ed. C.J. Fox and Robert T. Chapman (London: Vision), p. 82.
- 10) 'Physics of the Not-Self, (1925), rpt *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. A. Munton (Manchester: Carcanet,

- 1979), p. 195.
- 11) H. Marshall McLuhan, 'Nihilism Exposed', *Renascence* 8.2 (1955): 97-99.
 - 12) Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, qu. *Time and Western Man* p. 542.
 - 13) The phrase comes from Yeats's poem, 'Sailing to Byzantium', published in the same year as *Athanaton*: 'Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing'. The whole poem shows many similarities with Lewis's symbolic expression of a transcendent world beyond nature.
 - 14) *Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. W. K. Rose (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 505.
 - 15) *Time and Western Man*, p. 119.
 - 16) Proofs of 'The Revolutionary Simpleton', in *Time and Western Man*, p. 519. The connection to the First World War is not made by Lewis, but is my inference.
 - 17) Ms of *Time and Western Man*, see p. 527.
 - 18) Robert Stacey, ' "Magical Presences in a Magic Place": From *Homage to Etty* to *The Island*, *The Talented Intruder: Wyndham Lewis in Canada 1939-1945*, exhibition catalogue (Windsor Ontario: Art Gallery of Windsor, 1992), pp. 107-154.
 - 19) Wyndham Lewis, *The Revenge for Love* (1937), rpt. (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 299.
 - 20) This and previous Michel quotations all from Walter Michel, *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p. 140.