The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies

Volume 11 Article 2

12-1-2023

Editorial

Louise Kane
University of Central Florida, louise.kane@ucf.edu

Gareth Mills
University of London, gareth_mills@outlook.com

Michael Shallcross
michael.shallcross3@googlemail.com

Editorial

Louise Kane
Gareth Mills
Michael Shallcross

It is with a sense of inevitability that we open this number of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* for 2022-23 with a mention of the centennial aspect. 2022 was, of course, one hundred years post *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, one hundred years after modernism's oft-cited apex, and one hundred years after Wyndham Lewis found himself issuing the second number of *The Tyro*. But what happens when we move away from the centenary of 1922 and into a new year: 2023? And what can we say about its centennial counterpart: 1923? By comparison to the previous year, 1923 has been framed as relatively unnoteworthy for modernism, a year that represents a supposed slowing down of momentum, one which passes by with a whimper, rather than with the 'bang' of the previous year.

Of course, we know that this is an inaccurate picture; in reality, most modernists, Lewis included, had little awareness of 1922 as a year particularly different to any others they had lived through. By 1923, Lewis had started his portrait of Edith Sitwell and was concentrating increasingly on developing his painting. The point is that time went on, life went on; just as we have moved from 2022 and into 2023 with little thought for the passing of another year, so too did Lewis move from 1922 into 1923.

The topics covered in this issue of the journal are also suitably free from time labels and the illusion of a false divide between Lewis's early experiments and later works. The first essay, Cooper Casale's "Strong Shapes: The Case for Black Vorticism," draws Lewis's Vorticism into dialogue with a surprising counterpart: the Vorticism of W. E. B. DuBois, the Pan-Africanist civil rights activist, and founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). Vorticism, Casale argues, is a movement defined by strong shapes, and Du Bois's vortex, which "visualizes an upwardly mobile Black community in the American south"—is a strong shape that "predates Lewis' Vorticism." In its wide-ranging comparative analysis of the dialogic nature of Lewis's and DuBois's movements, Casale's essay reminds us of the need to move away from scholarly considerations of modernism as composed of "atomized communities of avant-gardes."

The next essay—"Individuality and Mass-Production: *The Revenge for Love* (1937) and the Grotesque Commodified Body" by David Cruickshank—offers another re-reading of the avant-garde, particularly in terms of the relationships

between mass production, art, politics, and the individual. Cruickshank argues that Lewis's principal concern is with "the commodification of the individual (artist) by the capitalist system, and the difficulty, if not impossibility, of resisting or overthrowing such systems." By considering Lewis in relation to a concrete political reality that he stands against, rather than potential alternative systems that he equivocally espouses or rejects, Cruickshank challenges the persistent, reductive framing of *The Revenge for Love* as a right-wing anti-Communist polemic. For Cruickshank, Lewis's purpose is to illustrate the powerlessness of the individual to "self-govern" when "dehumanized and rendered mechanical" by the "external, mechanical forces [... of] capitalist society".

Scott Klein's "Trigger Warnings: Rape, Responsibility, and Narrative Affect in Tarr" jumps back to the 1910s in its probing discussion of one of *Tarr's* most controversial and debated scenes. Like Cruickshank's essay before it, Klein explores Lewis's depictions of the female human body and frames his inquiry with a fascinating set of questions:

> What if one's experience of the work of fiction is negative? That negativity can be aesthetic. One can be disappointed in the quality of the book. But there is a more complex kind of negativity possible in the reading experience. What if one objectively considers the work one has read to be of high aesthetic merit, yet one leaves the fiction dismayed, even shaken or horrified?

Ultimately, Klein's conclusion that "the contexts I have described allow us to consider the rape as a crisis of narrative and of interpretive paradox" is one that leaves another question in its place that is as difficult to answer as those listed above: "Where, then, does this leave the reader of Tarr, in terms of the affect of the text and the potentially triggering aspects of the scene of rape?"

The final essay, Nathan Waddell's "Elements are VERY GLIB: Challenging the Convenience of Metaphor in the Critical Reception of BLAST," offers a similar close focus on the reading experience wrought by another of Lewis's 1910s publications: *BLAST* magazine. What follows is an insightful reading of the various atmospheric metaphors relating to the elements—a condition Waddell describes as "elementality"—and the ways they impact this reading experience. Crucially, Waddell cautions against using the metaphors to impose a false unity onto the jarring reading experience that *BLAST* provokes. To read the metaphors as part of a cohesive strand of the magazine would be "to misrepresent the supposed 'unity' of BLAST" and to "muddy the extent to which the magazine can or should be aligned with the ideas and attitudes of Lewis, its blaster-in-chief."

This issue is also distinguished by a veritable banquet of book reviews: eight in total. These extend from monographs entirely dedicated to Lewis - *Wyndham Lewis's Cultural Criticism*, by Nathan O'Donnell – to more sweeping cultural

surveys in which he plays a key walk-on part – *Russomania: Russian Culture and the Creation of British Modernism, 1881-1922*, by Rebecca Beasley. Between the two poles, our reviewers tackle a range of monographs and edited collections in which widely varying aspects of Lewis's work - automatism, obscenity, print culture, parody, insect life – are explored via dedicated chapters. This eclectic profusion of new scholarly material suggests that Lewis's writing is once more proving a stimulating prism through which to scrutinise the broader concerns of his age.

As we hope you will agree, the contents of this issue highlight the diversity of Lewis's polymedial, polyvocal *oeuvre,* without attempting to impose the false sense of unity to which Waddell's essay alludes. As we know, reading Lewis is rarely a unified experience, but the essays contained in this number of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* offer ways of bringing his complex and sometimes contradictory outputs from the 1910s, '20s, and '30s, into dialogue with one another and, crucially, into dialogue with you, our modern-day readers.

The Editors