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«BESTRE»'S EYE-PLAY — PARODY AND KITSCH IN THE AVANT-GARDE GROTESQUE

Wyndham Lewis was a prominent and polemical figure of the early 20th century art milieu in Britain. Having probably achieved a wider recognition as a visual artist, he was also pamphleteer, essayist, short-story writer, playwright and novelist. As the founder and programmatic leader of the English Avant-garde movement, Vorticism, Lewis's early literary production, between the years 1908-1928 is deeply marked by the stigma of experimentation and provocation to the aesthetic canons of his time. His representation of social reification, both through the visual and the narrative form, incorporates and reproduces that very reification and fragmentation in a disquieting and challenging discourse.

The writing of the *The Wild Body*, a collection of stories many of which first appeared in various reviews between the years 1909-1917, only to be published as an anthology in 1927, marks the beginning of Lewis's career as a satirist and creates a style which Lewis was to develop in his subsequent literary output. As he wrote in his 1950 memoir, *Rude Assignment*, the writing of *The Wild Body* helped to «drag (himself) out of the abstractist cul-de-sac» (1950:128).

1. Lewis on Satire

In the collection of essays *Men Without Art*, Lewis defends the theory of a non-moral satire, which concerns «the outside» of the world and privileges a visual treatment of reality, as opposed to the method that allows the reader to «enter into the minds of the characters» and «see the play of their thoughts» (1964:115).

Comparably Lewis relates his painting and his writing to his perception of the two as indissoluble, primarily linked to the same root, *the eye*. He does not, he declares, mean the «mind eye» of the «overt doctrinaires of a disembodied, a non-corporeal artistic expression», or the «time-eye» which «looks out equally upon the past and present but perceives the actual scene a little dimly, or at the best peeps out upon the contemporary scene» (1964:145). Lewis draws on the «eye» as an instrument of pure satire, «satire for its own sake», non-ethical and cold, upon which the «external approach to things» can rely. When trying to explain the function of «non-ethical satire,» Lewis says that the satirist should rely on the evidence and wisdom of the eye rather than on the more emotional organs of the senses. «Satire is cold, and that is good!» he exclaims (1964:121).

On the whole, he writes, satire is a combination of «wit and humour»; it is not a «polite, soft parody,» but a «critical vehicle of ideas» (1964:139). Satire's «healthy and attractive companion,» the grotesque, «stiffens» art, and enables the representation of the non-human outlook in the human, «beneath the fluff and pulp which is all that is seen by the majority and corrects our self conceit» (*ibid.*). He adds sarcastically that this unemotional, grotesque satire will only appear as a distortion to those who prefer to see the world «through spectacles couleur de rose» (*ibid.*).

Lewis defines the satirist's laughter as an «anti-toxin,» a «healthy clatter,» that is at the same time non-personal, non-moral, inhuman, but infinitely «serious», that is to say, a «tragic laughter». Therefore men, like characters in a satire, are ultimately stagnated creatures and machines governed by routine:

Men are sometimes so palpably machines, their machination is so transparent, that they are *comic*, as we say. And all we mean by that, is that our consciousness is pitched up to the very moderate altitude of relative independence at which we live — at which level we have the illusion of being autonomous and free. But if one of us exposes too much his «works» and we start seeing him as a «thing,» then (...) we are astonished and shocked, and we bark at him — we laugh — in order to relieve our emotion (1964:116).

However, in spite of Lewis's defence of a cold satire and a detached, non-moralist satirist, or his vehement attacks on those who regard the world from the «Dark Within» of consciousness, he also declares that he wants to avoid at all costs «a graceful diletantism» and a fall into an «intellectual dressmaker's hobby». He wants to prevent his satire and laughter from «degenerating into a cultivated and snobbish game».

The analysis of Lewis's satirical work, and particularly *The Wild Body*, with its grotesque world peopled by men-machines, clowns and puppets, presupposes the understanding of the meaning and nature of that dehumanization. In fact, Lewis's cynical outlook on the world was not just the result of the indifference of a «poseur», but rather a genuine gesture translating a philosophic strategy.

Freedom is certainly our human goal, in the sense that all effort is directed to that end: and it is a dictate of nature that we should laugh, and laugh loudly, at those who have fallen into slavery, and still more, those who batten on it (1964:116).

2. The «Tyros»

In April 1921 Lewis held an exhibition at the Leicester Galleries entitled «Tyros and Portraits». In the «Foreword» to the catalogue of this exhibition, Lewis defined the «Tyros» as «partly religious explosions of laughing Elementals at once satires, pictures and stories» (WB, p. 354). The «Tyros» show Lewis's effort to work both fronts simultaneously and they are still a hangover from the war.

The «Tyros» seem to have taken shape after the revision of «Bestre», one of the early *Wild Body* tales written in 1909 under the title «Some Innkeepers and Bestre». The «Tyros», which Lewis claimed to be «a medium of getting at people by paint» since they seemed to have become «impervious to logic,» were the visual, pictorial face of their literary counterpart published in 1927 as *The Wild Body*.

A «Tyro» is defined in his «naïveté» as a child or a Harlequin/ Punchinello and in his «vacuity» as a mould that one can use as the bearer of satirical observations. «Tyros» are masks of human beings, animated puppets miming human laughter, human tears. Their rawness and purposelessness can be at times malignant, but all they will ever show is a gnashing of teeth. In the end, as Lewis says, they are bound to prefigure «death-masks» (WB, p. 359).

The action of a Tyro is necessarily very restricted; about that of a puppet worked with deft fingers, with a screaming voice underneath (*ibid.*, p. 354).

Lewis's «Tyro» phase produced a few impressive designs and played an important role towards the rewriting of his early works, «both reactivating the old urge and permitting a clearer perception of the underlying absurdity which determined it from the start» (WB, p. 352). This phase was only to be completed in 1927 with the writing of «The Meaning of the Wild Body».

The secret cornerstone of this philosophy is self-knowledge, which leads to the creation in *The Wild Body* of a self-mocking hero, an anti-hero, half Quixote, half Sancho Panza:

My sense of humour in its mature phase has arisen in this very acute consciousness of what is «me» in playing that off against another hostile «me» that does not like the smell of mine, probably finds my large teeth, height and so forth abominable. I am in a sense working off my alarm at myself. So I move on a more primitive level than most men, I expose my essential «me» quite coolly, and all men shy a little (WB, p. 18).

3. The Wild Body

The Wild Body is a world of puppets/machines, a kind of reified expression of human beings, moved by the strings of a clown who calls himself a «Soldier of Humour». The latter maintains a double function through the narrator's voice: on the one hand he participates in the events as one of the actors, while on the other he is an external observer. In fact, this dichotomy is similar to that discussed in the essay «The Meaning of The Wild Body,» a dichotomy between «mind» and «body»:

the one watching and passive, the other enjoying its activity, (...) that is of course, the laughing observer, and the other is the Wild Body (WB, p. 157).

The one that is referred to as the narrator's voice, Ker-Orr, who bears slight autobiographical traces is described as «a fanciful wandering figure (...) the showman

to whom the antics and solemn gambols of these wild children are to be a source of strange delight» (*ibid.*, p. 149).

But, at the same time that he is the showman, he is a clown himself, a «Soldier of Humour»:

My body is large, white and savage. But all the fierceness has become transformed into laughter (*ibid.*, p. 17).

In fact, these two categories remain together and flow through the relaxed cohesiveness of this set of stories. Comedy and tragedy are not antagonistic here, nor are aggressiveness and naïveté.

The title of the first story, also intended as a kind of preface to the collection, is illuminating: «A Soldier of Humour.» Such is the teller of the stories, who does not set himself aside from his tales, though he keeps his distance, his cool eye always on guard. The trace of his presence in the tales is more easily to be found in the echo of his laughter than in the action he develops as a character. Lewis comments on this fact:

A primitive unity is there, to which, with my laughter, I am appealing. Freud explains everything by sex, I explain everything by laughter (*ibid.*, p. 18).

Kerr-Orr cynically maintains the ambiguity put forward, as clown/ showman/ fighting-machine; the effect is clever, but disquieting as well:

It still looks like a visigothic fighting-machine, but it is in reality a laughing machine. As I have remarked, when I laugh I gnash my teeth, which is another brutal survival and a thing laughter has taken over from war. Everywhere where formerly I would fly at throats, I now howl with laughter. That is me (WB, p. 17).

The split between observer and observed, «I expose my essential *me* quite coolly», is thus translated in terms of the narrative in the split between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciated, voice and body:

This forked, strange scented, blond skinned gutbag, with its two bright rolling marbles... is my stalking horse. (...) I hang somewhere in its midst operating it with detachment (WB, p. 18).

However, the kind of detachment the narrator enunciates does not mean that he will not have an active role in the narrative. It just means that the status of the «cool» observer will be kept safe, while his wild body «with his barbarianism and laughter» will be acting among the other characters, in a kind of carnivalesque «communal performance». The latter, as Bakhtin writes in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, challenges all authority and allows the provisional establishment of a new and non-alienated order, i.e., the establishment of Carnival's «joyful relativity and ambivalence», which is «general, universal and contains a whole outlook on the world» (1984a: 127-128).

The narrator of these stories is a self-mocking character to whom it is difficult to assign an identity or impute a very definite role. He never totally coincides with the author/ narrator, neither with any of the characters of the stories, nor with the reader/ audience. He saves his autonomy by being part of his own narratives and at the same time exterior to them. Thus, he mixes the omniscience of the classical narrator with a detached position, allowing each character to present himself and build his own personality in the course of action, without the narrator's help to unveil him and reveal parts of his life which are not part of the diegesis. It is interesting to notice that this technique became popular with the «Nouveau-Roman», and has therefore attracted the attention of the post-structuralist critique to Lewis's narrative technique¹.

The ambiguity of Kerr-Orr's narrative level (in a sense comparable to the level of compromise of Scheherazade in *One Thousand and One Nights* — committed to her tales to the point that her life depended on her ability as narrator, and simultaneously narrating them as «voyeur» of an alter-ego), is mainly sustained by the dialogic relation between himself as analyst and himself as the analysed subject.

This process of establishing a dialogue between author and narrator, as well as characters and narrator, creates a dialogic text, or «texte pluriel» which allows the interplay of voices, implying ruptures, oppositions, repetitions, double or second meanings, i.e., a non-homogeneity of languages and styles, and ultimately of signification.

Since the narrator is giving priority to an external focalization, he can afford a more rigorous insight and give the reader the opportunity of also approaching the narrative from the exterior, without passion or identification. In fact, the narrator attempts a kind of «V-Effekt» in this carnivalesque representation of a reified world. This narrative technique is symbolically illustrated by the tale «The Cornac and his Wife», which ends in a complete reversal of roles between the showman and the public, creating a form of carnivalesque «upside-down-world». The public, recognizing the masks of the clowns as its own masks, joins the performance, ultimately laughing at itself: «'The Public', as there constituted fell to pieces,» writes the narrator (WB, p. 104). The narrative style of *The Wild Body* gains form in a simultaneous process of deconstruction of reality and construction of its partial expression, without aiming at any homogeneity. The reader finds himself in a symbiosis of involvement and detachment from the narrative, not only because of the bizarre nature of the plots, but mainly according to his adherence to or repulsion from this «masqueraded» world. Having said this, I do not mean that Lewis was consciously and overtly «unmasking the establishment», but that his constant and obsessive animation of machines and puppets and the consequent dehumanization of humans², their excessive perversity and grotesqueness, is not, as he himself says, «a pure dilettante game». As such, this text resists closure and leaves the reader with an amount of «anarchic» data (eccentric situations, inappropriate behaviours, profanations of the hierarchy, blasphemies, parodies of customs and traditions, erratic language,

obscenities, etc.), reaching a level of polyphony that challenges the «status quo» to the extent that any carnivalized form of literature does.

4. The carnivalized language of «The Wild Body»

To clarify this point it will be useful to reflect on the cornerstone of Lewis's philosophy — the *use of laughter and the meaning of the comic* — which are condensed in two major essays of *The Wild Body*: «Inferior Religions» and «The Meaning of The Wild Body».

«Inferior Religions» wants first of all to be the presentation of laughter as «the Wild Body's song of triumph,» «the brain-body's snort of exultation» which «expresses its wild sensation of power and speed» (WB, pp. 151-152).

We recognize in this tone of buffoonery and aggressiveness the spirit of the time, and the intimate connection of this text with Vorticism and Futurism, which explains why Pound praised «Inferior Religions» so highly.

Defining as the subject of *The Wild Body* «the fascinating imbecility of the creaking men machines,» Lewis reveals at the same time the position of the teller of these tales as one who merely «photographs» and «fixes» these «frigidballs, soapysnowmen, arctic carnival masks». Thus, through the eyes and the imagination of this «master of humour» the characters we see apparently moving and breathing are totally devoid of rational life and immobilized by his snapshots, like puppets whose strings have been cut.

The «Wild Body» as a «supreme survival» is aware of laughter's «uselessness and impersonality»; he knows that laughter is an «anarchist emotion»:

it is all that remains physical in the flash of thought, its friction; or it may be a defiance flung at the hurrying fates (WB, p. 152).

The hero of the play Lewis fantasizes about, a carnivalesque figure of corruption and vice, is the arch-phantom that substantializes all the particular vices and vulgarities of each of the minor figures of this «feast». Out of him comes the most mysterious and profound of the body's spasms, laughter — the structure of meaning that unifies the whole text.

Hence, as one can see, Lewis carries on in «Inferior Religions» the language of inversions and the dialogue of opposites that he started in the creation of «A Soldier of Humor», the ambivalent image of a wandering clown whose fearsome weapon is *laughter*. He very aptly summed it up in the following words:

In this objective play-world, corresponding to our social consciousness, as opposed to our solitude, no final issue is decided (*ibid.*, p. 153).

The world of the *Wild Body* is a «world of becoming»; it continually emphasizes, whether in the essays or in the stories, the duality of the body and the incompleteness of the world, where death engenders renewal, praise abuse, stupidity wisdom, crowning decrowning, i.e., a world of «carnivalistic mésalliances,» which

excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single polar extreme of life or of thought, to be absolutized (Bakhtin 1984a: 165).

The grotesque clown that Lewis describes as his hero has the wisdom of folly which is a signal of carnivalesque ambivalence. It is an «inverted wisdom», a debasing, a destruction, but also renewal and truth. As Bakhtin says, it is

gay festive wisdom, free from all laws and restrictions, as well as from preoccupations and seriousness (1984b: 260)³.

The hero of *The Wild Body* has a dual body, he is the *King of Play* and also the *Skeleton at the Feast* (WB, p. 153):

the soul lives in a cadaverous activity; its dramatic corruption thumps us like a racing engine in the body of a car. The finest humour is the great play-shapes blown up or given off by the tragic corpse of life underneath the world of the camera. This futile, grotesque and sometimes pretty spawn, is what in this book is snapshotted by the imagination (WB, p. 152).

His Pierrot costume is only a «uniform» to mask the bitterness and grotesqueness underneath; laughter is the Wild Body's survival weapon. It is in itself also dual, «that archcomplexity that is really as simple as bread»:

Laughter is the representative of tragedy, when tragedy is away. Laughter is the emotion of tragic delight. Laughter is the female of tragedy (...) Laughter is the mind sneezing (WB, p. 151).

The «fierceness» of this «visi-gothic fighting-machine» has become transformed into laughter; barbarism and laughter, defiance and a scornful optimism produced this new Don Quixote:

Mystical and humorous, astonished at everything at bottom (...) he inclines to worship and deride, to pursue like a riotous moth the comic and unconscious luminary he discovers; to make war on it and to cherish it like a lover, at once (WB, p. 20).

The carnivalesque ambivalence of Lewis's outlook on the world, his emphasis on the grotesque and the regenerative power of laughter, is close to the spirit that Bakhtin finds in the Renaissance folk carnival tradition which permitted a new outlook on the world, without nihilism, and positively emphasizing «change and becoming».

In Bakhtin's words, popular culture and carnival consciousness were a challenge to the official medieval culture belief in: «a static unchanging world order and in the eternal nature of all existence» (*ibid.*).

In relation to Lewis's *Wild Body* one could say something similar: ambivalent laughter and the consciousness of the grotesque inform these stories and essays,

rendering *The Wild Body* a bitter but lucid social satire, which challenges the existing order undogmatically, and urging change and renewal.

The Wild Body's Carnival is not only a source of laughter: it is more the realm of the absurd, a generalized madness represented by a world where machines, puppets and clowns perform the routine roles of men and women. In a sense, the absurd situation in which they live displays the consciousness of their alienation. The ambiguity of the status of these Harlequins and Punchinellos, laughing whilst shedding an occasional tear for themselves, should be put in the context of the meaning of comedy for Lewis: comedy as a victory over tragedy, which implies a move beyond the plain burlesque. Moreover, as Lewis wrote in «a Soldier of Humour»:

I admit that I am disposed to forget that people are real—that they are, that is, not subjective patterns belonging specifically to me, in the course of this joke-life, which indeed has for its very principle the denial of the accepted actual (WB, p. 17).

5. «Bestre»

It is likely that, as Lafourcade argues (WB, p. 76), «the graphic Tyros were the epigones of the early literary Wild Bodies» since, in fact, the publication of «The Tyros» in 1921 seems to have been intimately connected with the revision of «Bestre».

The 1909 Breton tale «Bestre» is introduced by an essay, «Some Innkeepers» (which remained unrevised and was never republished), a detailed sociological analysis of the inns of «fiction and history», particularly focussed on the «provincial French innkeeper». The style is pervaded by the typical Lewisian humour and love of the grotesque, e.g.:

I once knew a landlord who placed all his hopes in his wooden leg, in its at once laughable and friendly effect, and would not have his old leg back again if he could (WB, p. 223).

The revision of «Bestre» after the war increased its aggressiveness and violence, and transformed the «pugnacity» of Bestre's «eye», the main motif of the story, into a real weapon, although it maintained as Bestre's «raison d'être», «his degeneracy — the irritable caricature of a war-like original» (WB, p. 233).

Bestre is like a Tyro, «raw» and undeveloped; its vitality is immense, but purposeless, and hence sometimes malignant (WB, p. 359). These epithets already apply to the «Bestre» of 1909, but in the later version his malignancy is increased out of all measure. In the latter, Bestre has lost part of his childish naïveté, assuming the proportions of a monster. His previous «weird dumb-passive method», (*ibid.*, p. 231), even in the course of violent actions, his absent-mindedness, has already something of the Tyro's vacuity; his bestiality bears traces of the Tyro's death mask. Although

Lewis was not particularly interested in exploring sexual deviances, it seems undeniable that «the eye» has simultaneous connotations of sex and violence.

Bestre looks at reality with a «professional liar's eye», and his gaze at women is that amazing compound of passion and violence which Lewis, in a melodramatic allusion to Cupid's arrows, calls the «spanish mirada». Here, more as caricaturist than as satirist, he invokes the Spanish caballero's confidence in the ability of his glance to either «daunt a rival» or to «coerce a wavering adherent,» and the magnetism of the «spanish oellade».

The 1927 «Bestre» has fully developed the grotesque, animal-like, ambivalent gender of its hero. The story has expanded into a longer, detailed description of Bestre's physique in a language of exaggeration, hyperbole and excess. A new and strong sexual element in relation to Bestre's «strategy» has been added to his previous image, i.e., the emphasis on his «libido», which, as Lafourcade writes, suggests «fresh acquaintance with Freudian theory» (WB, p. 220). There is also a new emphasis on the «unsupported female side of Bestre» (*ibid.*, p. 83), his «feminine vein» (*ibid.*, p. 80):

He offered himself, sometimes wincing coquettishly, occasionally rolling his eyes a little, as the lion might do to remind you of your natural dread and heighten the luxurious privilege (*ibid.*, p. 81).

Bestre's «eye-play», now invested with a sexual power, is directed as a «weapon» to his enemies. The victim at one time was Mme Rivière, the wife of a «pretentious peppery Paris Salon artist» (WB, p. 84) who had installed himself with his family in the neighbourhood. The cause of the bellicose incident, was, so the narrator tells us, the deep antipathy between Bestre and the painter for which «the most insignificant pretext was absent» (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, war was in the air and Bestre «swelled and swelled» (*ibid.*) for the painter. Finally, Mme Rivière initiates it: she passes by Bestre's kitchen and gazes glassily at Bestre's old sister, producing such a depressive effect on her that «it reduced her vitality considerably, and in the end brought on diarrhoea» (WB, p. 85). One day, as Mme Rivière is passing by and as usual looking into the room, Bestre is there, expecting her gaze. What happens then between the two is only hinted at, but the narrator leaves us no room to doubt that the nature of the incident is sexual:

What superlative shaft, with deadly aim, did he direct against her vitals? (...) He had brought her down with a stupendous rush (...) The eye was his chosen weapon. Had he any theory, however, that certain occasions warranted, or required, the auxiliary offices of some unit of the otherwise subordinated mass? Can the sex of his assailant give us a clue? (...) I am certain that he struck the death-blow with another engine than the eye (WB, p. 85).

On the other hand, as I indicated earlier, the 1909 version is confined to the impression that Bestre's outsized physique and particularly his intense and silent gaze has on Mme Rivière:

(...) there stood Bestre himself, alone, quite motionless, looking at *her*; 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, that had he suddenly laid bare his entrails she could not have felt more revolted (WB, p. 230).

Apart from these stylistic variations between the earlier and the 1927 version of «Bestre», the latter also enhances the carnivalesque dimension of Bestre's grotesque «bodily lower stratum».

As Bakhtin argues in *Rabelais and his World*, the combination of human and animal is one of the most ancient forms. The grotesque body seeks to go out beyond the body's confines («to outgrow its own self, transgressing its own body» (1984b): 317). It is a dual body, a body in the state of becoming:

It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world (*ibid.*).

The bowels and the phallus are the parts of the body that play the leading role, since they can detach themselves from the body, outgrow it and engender a new body. Mouth and anus are also privileged, as orifices through which the world enters, is swallowed up and expelled; they are at the confines of the body and the outer world, symbolically tied to the beginning and end of life. The mouth is a «gaping mouth», enhancing the comic image of these «gay monsters», mocking and abusing the world. It is the «open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld» (Bakhtin, 1984b: 325). The eyes are protruding, exaggerated, manifesting bodily tension again, as if seeking to outgrow the body's confines. The nose is fundamental, since it is in itself already a «growth». As Bakhtin says, «the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss» (1984b: 317).

The acts of drinking, eating, defecating, as well as pregnancy, mating, dismemberment are favoured in this sphere, because they tighten the relation between the body and the world. If one now follows the description of Bestre's body in its 1927 version, one will find a similar typification of the grotesque being, the emphasized bodily features being precisely the same ones, enhancing an inhuman and androgynous duality, resulting in malignancy and pugnacity:

With a flexible imbrication reminiscent of a shutter-lipped ape, a bud of tongue still showing, he shot the latch of his upper lip down in front of the nether one, and depressed the interior extremities of his eyebrows sharply from the quizzing perch — only this monkey-on-a-stick mechanical pull — down the face's centre. (...) his arms still folded like bulky lizards (...) not a hair or muscle moving (WB, p. 78). (...) Sunburnt, with large yellow-white moustache, little eyes protruding with the cute strenuousness already noticed, when he meets any one for the first time his mouth stops open, a cigarette end adhering to the lower lip (*ibid.*, p. 81).

Bestre's «Eye» is capitalized and described in greater detail than in the 1909 version, enhancing its animalesque properties and transforming it into an almost autonomous entity. Its symbolic closeness to the «netherworld» of instincts, bodily functions and excrement is suggested through a chain of almost surreal metaphors and metonymies:

His very large eyeballs, the small saffron oscillation in their center, the tiny spot through which the light entered the obese wildness of his body; his bronzed bovine arms, swollen handles for a variety of indolent little ingenuities; (...) with every tart and biting condiment that eye-fluid, flaunting of fatness (the well-filled), the insult of the comic, implications of indecency, could provide (WB, p. 78). (...) The Eye was really Bestre's weapon: the ammunition with which he loaded was drawn from all the most skunk-like provender, the most ugly mucins, fungoid glands of his physique. Excrement as well as sputum would be shot from this luminous hole, with the same certainty in its unsavoury appulsion (*ibid.*, p. 83).

Bestre's grotesque body bears the «insult of the comic» and assumes «implications of indecency»:

His tongue stuck out, his lips eructated with the incredible indecorum that appears to be the true monopoly of liquids, his brown arms were for the moment genitals, snakes in one massive twist beneath his mamillary slabs, gently riding on a pancreatic swell, each hair on his oil-bearing skin contributing its message of porcine affront (WB, pp. 78-79).

His relationship with the narrator also assumes sexual connotations and conveys the ambivalence of Bestre's gender:

We were the best of friends: he thought I slapped him because contact with his fat gladdened me, and to establish contact with the feminine vein in his brown-coated ducts and muscles. (...) He offered himself, sometimes wincing coquettishly, occasionally rolling his eyes a little, as the lion might do to remind you of your natural dread, and heighten the luxurious privilege (*ibid.*, pp. 80-81).

Among all the corporeal details of Bestre's image, the eye protrudes as a metaphor of violence, as a true weapon. The large descriptive section on Bestre's Spanish ancestry which only existed in a very reduced form in the first version relating his murderous glance to the Spanish «mirada», is the best example of Lewis's mastery of the language of humour, falling close to the anarchic irreverence of a narrative form of Kitsch:

The Spanish beauty imprisoned behind her casement can only roll her eyes at her lover in the street below. The result of these and similar Eastern restraint develops the eye almost out of recognition. (...) Eyes, eyes: for defiance, for

shrivelling subordinates, for courtesy, for love. A «spanish eye» might be used as we say, «Toledo blade» (*ibid.*, p. 83).

Bestre is thus not only an accomplished example of Lewis's grotesque realism, but as an extended metonymy, a fascinating «story of the eye». Bestre's «eye-play» is simultaneously the instrument of a cool, non-emotional satire, «the function of the eye», as Lewis claims⁴, and a surreal parody of parody itself which develops in an heterogeneous mixture of registers, from the detective story, to the travelogue, the bucolic and even the pornographic. This irreverent profusion of styles and registers brings thus the story close to a sort of Kitsch version of the masquerade genre, explored by Lewis in different manners in *The Wild Body*. The hallucinatory and, I would even say, hysterical collage of images from different referential contexts, such as one finds in «Bestre», produces a false grandeur, a grotesque epic mode, which, borrowing Matei Calinescu's phrase, bears the «strategic advantage of Kitsch to lend itself to irony»⁵.

Finally, this issue brings us close to the following controversy: whether the ends of avant-garde's nonconformity, irreverence or anarchic transgressions converge with the roots of postmodernism's «pastiche», and «simulacra».

As Fredric Jameson argues⁶, «Modernism was an experience of nascent commodification that fought reification by means of reification, in terms of reification. It was itself a gigantic process of reification internalized as a homeopathic way of seizing on this force, mastering it, and opposing the result to reifications passively submitted to in external reality». Similarly, Jameson encourages a critique of postmodernism in a sort of homeopathic way: «to work at dissolving the pastiche by using the instruments of pastiche itself». To go through and beyond, pushing the positive features of postmodernism to its limits, as the so-called oppositional arts, such as punk writing, or ethnic writing or feminist writing are doing. (*Vide* Angela Carter, Christa Wolf, or Salman Rushdie).

On the other hand, the polyphonic mode that informs the carnivalized world of most avant-garde and some modernist literature is responsible for the dialogical ambivalence and disrespectful nature of this very writing, and constitutes a challenge to the «status quo» and the official culture. Thus, avant-garde's «anteriority», its historical and aesthetical «negative radicalism» assumes its true subversive potential, proposing a new form of realism based on language awareness and the exploration of a new system of representation.

Similarly, as Brian McHale remarks⁷ postmodernist fiction uses the strategy of «injecting» a specialized register of language, or even an anti-language, (the language of a deviant social group), into a homogeneous discourse-world, as a means of inducing polyphony. Thus, McHale argues, is created an «anti-world-view», a counterreality of its own that is dialectically related to «straight» or «official» reality.

This view goes against the current trend of postmodernism's lack of historical perspective and complicity with the establishment. As Linda Hutcheon argues⁸

«today's postmodernism is both interrogative in mode and de-doxifying in intent». Hutcheon acknowledges, however, postmodernism's «complicity with the very values upon which it seeks to comment». In all its doubleness, she argues, «postmodernism paradoxically manages to legitimize culture (high and mass) even as it subverts it».

Finally, in relation to the claimed elitism of the historical avant-garde's «ready-mades» versus the popularity and anti-elitism of the post-modern «already-mades», quoting Matei Calinescu, «popularity is equivalent to accepting if not the 'System', then its most direct manifestation, the Market»⁹.

Notes

¹ As Lafourcade writes in «L'Actualité du Vorticisme» in *Cahiers du Centre George Pompidou*, 10/82: «La volonté d'externalité alliée à une structure spatialisante et au refus de l'univoque, permet, par exemple, de rapprocher Lewis du Nouveau-Roman, peu importe ce que lui-même en aurait bien pu penser.»

² It is interesting to note that between the 1910's and the 1920's Lewis's drawings and portraits show the same obsession with the non-human element in humans. Whether in his series of War pictures, as in the «Guns» exhibition (1918) or in portraits of friends such as Ezra Pound (1919) or Nancy Cunard (1922), one can find the same mechanical tension and potential energy or the same sense of absence of life and artificiality.

³ The definition Bakhtin gives of the concept of «folly» in the Carnavalesque tradition. The «Feast of Fools» was a medieval feast which allowed the free expression of what was considered to be «our second nature», which was opposed to «pietousness and fear of God», and once a year permitted people to see the world with «foolish eyes» (1984b: 260).

⁴ W. Lewis on Art (1969: 214).

⁵ Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity, Avant-garde, decadence and kitsch* (1987: 230).

⁶ Fredric Jameson, «Regarding Postmodernism — a conversation with Andreas Stephanson», in *Universal Abandon, The politics of Postmodernism*, ed. Andrew Ross (1988: 17-18).

⁷ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987: 167-168).

⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989: 10-15).

⁹ Matei Calinescu, *Op. cit.*, p. 144.

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