

# Wyndham Lewis's Vorticist Metaphysic

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*Enemy of the Stars* is Wyndham Lewis's first full-length literary work.<sup>1</sup> It first appeared in 1914 in the Vorticist journal *Blast* as perhaps the most enigmatic in a collection of intentionally polemical and explosive position pieces. Lewis later revised and published it in book form in 1932. In 1914, the original version was overlooked as a mere Vorticist *jeu d'esprit*, while in 1932 the more accessible revised version appeared in the midst of three other controversial Lewis books,<sup>2</sup> and long after the Vorticist inspiration of the play could make a claim on public attention. Nor has *Enemy of the Stars* fared better among the relatively small circle of Lewis devotees and critics.<sup>3</sup> But, in a recent study by Reed Way Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*, *Enemy of the Stars* is accorded a central place as a crucial Vorticist, and therefore, he argues, an important modernist, literary document: "If the Vorticist movement is not exactly the vortex of modernism, it is its seedbed or laboratory" (150), Dasenbrock claims. "*Enemy of the Stars*, with its paratactic concatenation of phrases anticipated the subsequent stylistic direction of Pound, Eliot, and Joyce," and announced "a central theme in modernism" (135).

I will not argue here, since I have addressed it elsewhere (Foshay), the larger question as to whether Vorticism, and Lewis's work in particular, are better understood as modernist or avant-garde. Preliminary to such questions is a reading of Lewis's early work that does justice to its challenge and complexity. I will demonstrate that *Enemy of the Stars*, far from a mere stylistic or "gestural" *tour de force* (Dasenbrock 135), is a work of formidable thematic substance, and further that the thematic content of the play is a shaping force behind the experimental form of the text.

*Enemy of the Stars* is an unjustly neglected work central to an understanding both of Lewis's development and of the brief but intriguing pyrotechnics of Vorticism. But the focus here is on *Enemy of the Stars* and its place in Lewis's career, rather than on Vorticism as a movement. I will discuss two central passages in the play and go on to a reading of Lewis's essay "Physics of the Not-Self," which accompanied the 1932 text and which describes itself as "in the nature of metaphysical commentary upon the ideas suggested by the action of *Enemy of the Stars*" (195). The relation between the play and its "metaphysical commentary" is problematical, and, because of it, all the more illuminating about *Enemy of the Stars* and Lewis's development as a writer.

## I

As a consciously Vorticist work, *Enemy of the Stars* revolves, literally, figuratively, and conceptually, around the central character, Arghol. The image of the vortex is meant to convey the tension between dynamism and stasis, between rapid circular motion and its fixed centre. As Lewis defines him in *Blast*, the "vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest." The image includes not only energy in space but also in time: "The new vortex plunges to the heart of the present" (147, 148). Arghol is the still point and focus of all action and attention in *Enemy*. The play is said by the narrator to be his "agon," and he a "Foredoomed Prometheus," a propitiatory sacrifice to the forces both human (historical, temporal) and cosmic (eternal, spatial) that are ranged against him. The narrator describes the beginning of the action:

THE RED WALLS OF THE UNIVERSE NOW SHUT [POSTERITY] IN, WITH THIS FOREDOOMED PROMETHEUS. THEY BREATHE IN CLOSE ATMOSPHERE OF TERROR AND NECESSITY, UNTIL THE EXECUTION IS OVER AND THE RED WALLS RECEDE—THE DESTINY OF ARGHOL CONSUMMATED, THE UNIVERSE SATISFIED! (145)

Before this, after introducing the characters and setting, the narrator turns to his audience, anticipating objections:

[*'Yet you and me!' I hear you—What of you and me? 'Why not from the english metropolis?' But in this mad marriage of false minds, is not this a*

*sort of honeymoon? We go abroad. Such a strange thing as our coming together requires a strange place too for the initial stages of our intimate ceremonious acquaintance. It is our 'agon' too. Remember that it is our destiny!]* (143)

In this narratorial aside, Lewis conveys that Arghol is a type of modern humanity, that his struggle and inevitable propitiatory sacrifice typify our own, that his *agon* is our *agon* too. As an experimental attempt at Vorticist literature, *Enemy of the Stars* reconstructs spatial and temporal coordinates to evoke in the audience awareness of a crisis, of a dramatic physical and spiritual challenge or *agon* at the heart of modernity.

In fact, *Enemy of the Stars* is not a play at all, but a kind of novel (Flory 93), a narrative about a play set in a surreal universe, in a time dimension called the "Thirtieth Centuries," in which the audience comprises the whole of humanity. Called simply "Posterity," it includes representatives of all generations. The visionary nature of the setting extends to scenes, properties, and costumes, which change and shift of their own accord. There is a necessarily heavy dependence on the narrator, who describes and extensively interprets characters, action, and fantastic setting.

There is a series of parallels in the work with classical tragedy: the action is an *agon*; Arghol is a Prometheus figure; the characters, as in classical drama, wear masks designed to amplify their voices: "THE MASKS FITTED WITH TRUMPETS OF ANTIQUE THEATRE—WITH EFFECT OF CHILDREN BLOWING AT EACH OTHER WITH TOYINSTRUMENTS OF METAL" (144). At a significant point early in the principal section of the narrative, the action stops and the focus of attention becomes the masked face of Arghol:

*[The aloof master of this arc-lit vortex is Arghol. His mask has been designed to represent the magical function. . . . But abruptly everything flicks out. . . . In the momentary blank a close-up of the chief player's head is conveyed, in a breathless upward rush, to the distant watchers. . . . then the fact stands out for all to see—a pallid mask. . . . All gaze upon it as upon a spectacle of awe.]* (160-61)

Arghol's mask is foregrounded as the still point of the "arc-lit vortex"; "snatched up to be scrutinized by the busybodies in the

remotest galleries of Time" (161), it is the locus where the dynamics of space and time meet.

Etymologically, our word "person" is derived from the Latin *persona*, "a mask, especially as worn by actors in Greek and Roman drama," and, by extension, the "role, part, character, person represented by an actor" (Simpson). The problem of personality, of self and of identity, is the central theme of the long dialogue between Arghol and his companion, Hanp, who represents the sensuous body and who identifies with the collective mind of modern humanity. Arghol at one point declares:

When mankind are unable to overcome a personality, they have an immemorial way out of the difficulty. They become it. They imitate and assimilate that Ego until it is no longer one—that is what is called success. As between Personality and the Group, it is forever a question of dog and cat. These two are diametrically opposed species. Self is the ancient race, the rest are the new one. Self is the race that lost. (155)

The formal centrality of Arghol's mask, then, points to and reinforces the thematic priority of the play, the problem of human identity, represented by Arghol and Hanp. Arghol is the Self, "the ancient race," "the race that lost" to the likes of Hanp, whose "bourgeois aspirations undermine that virtuosity of self." Hanp is "a violent underdog . . . put at the service of Unknown Humanity, our King." The "new race" of mankind is the headless mob, "Unknown Humanity, our King," whose "boundless royal aversion for the great Protagonist . . . finds expression in the words and expressions of this humble locum tenens [Hanp]" (143).

The allusions suggest that Arghol, as the "foredoomed Prometheus," has stolen his figurative fire, not from the gods for humanity, but from humanity, in an attempt to assert a godlike sovereign identity, a Self. The classical allusions in *Enemy* function as pointers to the inversion of values that has taken place in the modern displacement of the classical world view. Within modernity, the battle is not the attempt of humanity to capture an heroic, godlike identity from the transcendental realm. It is, rather, the need to deny the very existence of a world beyond nature and any necessity to assert an heroic identity independent

of the material conditions of life. Arghol is an inverse Prometheus; his "*persona*" is not heroic; instead, the masks give the ludicrous effect of "two children blowing at each other with toy instruments of metal." We are told that the set for the main scene is "SUGGESTED BY CHARACTERS TAKING UP THEIR POSITION AT THE OPENING OF THE SHAFT LEADING DOWN INTO MIME'S QUARTERS." Arghol and Hanp, "GIDDILY MOUNTING IN [the] OPENING" formed from the mime's stage entrance, as if from "THE UNDERGROUND" (144), are mimicked or parodied by the setting, which associates them not with the Olympian but with the subterranean, chthonic spirits of the underworld. They become parodies of the heroes of Attic tragedy, and, as two employees of a provincial wheelwright, are the farthest thing from Aristotle's aristocratic tragic heroes (*Poetics* 1453a, 10).

*Enemy of the Stars*, in addition to its syntactic experimentation, is conceived on the formal level as a Vorticist universe operating under its own laws of space and time. But, more fundamentally, the formal Vorticist design of the play is explicitly enlisted as support and emphasis in the unfolding of a fully developed, indeed, a determining, thematic content. As already mentioned, *Enemy* is an unperformable play; it is the *story* of a surrealistic drama that takes place within a fantastic spatio-temporal realm. The formal, Vorticist structure of this universe finds its physical axis in Arghol, literally in his face, that is, his mask or *persona*. (Hanp later partially decapitates Arghol, a further physical correlative of the mind/body conflict taking place between himself and Arghol and within Arghol himself.) Just as the formal (spatial) structure of the play incarnates the theme of Arghol's sacrifice, so the temporal, *narrative* structure of the work is more than simply a medium, possessing an added reflexive dimension.

As a narrative of a play, it has itself a thematic content. The lack of an objective, ontological polarity between human beings and a transcendental realm against which they struggle to define themselves robs the theme of the essential ingredients of drama, at least in the classical terms against which Lewis is defining Vorticist humanity. The *agon* of modernity is not an objective contest, humans measuring themselves against the ideal of the gods in a

struggle full of the *pathos*, the pity and fear, of tragic human limitations. It is, rather, an internecine warfare of humans with themselves represented in the confrontation between Arghol and Hanp, between individualism and collectivism. Hanp is the man of the people, of purely material and pragmatic concerns, who mocks Arghol's preoccupation with Self, with a higher identity and purpose which leads to his excepting himself from commonsense expectations. Hanp is the man of the body, Arghol the man of the mind. The "plot" of *Enemy* is Arghol's gradual discovery that his conflict with Hanp is really a conflict internal to himself, between his own mind and body. It is Lewis's attempt to point to the source of the modern *agon* as a dividedness of humans from themselves, within themselves, which reduces them to the *bathos* of a pure self-involvement, a state of confusion incapable of action either positive or negative. As Arghol says: "To make it worthwhile to destroy myself there is not enough there to do it with and that's a fact!" (169).<sup>4</sup>

By rendering *Enemy* as the narrative of an unperformable play, Lewis is pointing his readers in on themselves in the privacy of their reading: "*It is our 'agon' too. Remember that it is our destiny!*" By breaking up the syntactic continuity and flow of his sentences, Lewis tries to bring about a formal vision of a static world, which will presumably serve the recognition by his readers of the Vorticist condition of modern life. We have also seen how the Vorticist formal design of *Enemy*, in focussing on Arghol's mask, tries to fix the reader's attention on the graphic representation of the thematic axis of the work (the "stage directions" stop the action with a close-up on the mask). Along with its status as a narrative of a play, we can see that all the formal elements of *Enemy of the Stars* are consciously designed to contribute to the thematic content of the work, and are motivated and informed by Lewis's vision of the modern *agon*. A second passage of the work reveals what Lewis sees as the source of the problem.

## II

The long dialogue that forms the centrepiece of *Enemy of the Stars* results in Arghol's realization that the basis of his con-

flictual relationship with Hanp is a projection of himself onto Hanp:

That's it! I find I wished to make of you . . . The animal to me! . . . I wished—I've just found out—to make you myself you see. But every man who wishes that—to make out of another an inferior Self—is lost. He's after a mate for his detached ailment—we say self, but mean something else. For without others—the Not-Self—there would be no self. (175-76)

Arghol, having realized he was merely using Hanp as an antidote to his own inner contradictions, attempts to banish Hanp. Hanp will not be dismissed so peremptorily; a fight ensues and afterwards both collapse into unconsciousness. The narrative follows Arghol as "he rolls heavily into sleep. Now a dark dream begins valuing, with its tentative symbols, the foregoing events" (180).

Arghol dreams that he has returned to Berlin, and to the room he had occupied there as a student before he abandoned the city. He picks up an open book, Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum*:

Stirner. Well! That bad offshoot of the master of Marx in his prime. That constipated philosopher of action.

One of the seven arrows of his martyr mind!

Poof! he flings it out of the window. (181)

Moments later, someone arrives at the door, having retrieved the book from where it had fallen amidst a funeral procession. The figure at the door is first seen as "an undergraduate," but then, in dream-like fashion, is transformed, first into Hanp, then into Stirner himself, and finally into "a middle-aged man . . . evidently a philosopher. Self-possessed, loose, free. . . . Stirner, in fact, as he had first imagined him" (182).

At the beginning of *Enemy of the Stars*, Arghol is presented as being "in immense collapse of chronic philosophy" (143). The action of the narrative has reached a climax in Arghol's recognition of his exploitation of Hanp and Hanp's retaliation at being rejected. The post-pugilistic dream, "valuing, with its tentative symbols, the foregoing events," is Arghol's unconscious, instinctual narration of the events leading up to the traumatic fight with Hanp, a fight that will shortly lead to Hanp's cutting Arghol's throat while the latter snores in exhaustion. That is to say, the

reader, so far given Arghol's intellectual commentary on what the narrator describes as his "immense collapse of chronic philosophy," is now presented with the commentary of Arghol's unconscious perceptions of his experience. However "tentative" and "symbolic" the dream version is, it is also more direct, more concrete. It is the commentary by his "Hanpness," "the Animal" in Arghol, of the physical and finite side of his experience, with which he has been unable to come to terms.

The dream reveals that Arghol's philosophical collapse is typified in his reading of Stirner's book. The book left open (i.e., being actively read), Arghol's attempt to rid himself of Stirner is foiled by a figure which is transformed from Hanp, into Stirner himself, into the mature, "free," and "self-possessed" ideal philosopher of Arghol's imagination, a figure he had once identified with Stirner ("Stirner, in fact, as he had first imagined him"). First translated into English in 1907 as *The Ego and his Own*,<sup>5</sup> Stirner's single major work presents his Neo-Hegelian supreme egoism. In opposition both to Christianity and to Hegel's transcendental Absolute Mind, into which all mere individuality must eventually pass, Stirnerian egoism champions the absolute, uncategorizable uniqueness of the individual self:

God and mankind have concerned themselves for nothing, for nothing but themselves. Let me likewise concern myself for *myself*, who am equally with God the nothing of all others, who am my all, who am the unique one. (41)

The universality of spiritual and philosophical absolutes, in Stirner's view, eclipses the particularity of individual existence. Identity lacks all specificity from a Christian or Hegelian point of view, and is therefore a "nothing," empty of any explicable significance. Stirner turns the tables on the tradition, drawing out the logical corollary that, from his own point of view, all else but his specificity and uniqueness is a nothing.<sup>6</sup>

The Stirnerian ego is *sui generis*:

To be a man is not to realize the ideal of *Man*, but to present oneself, the individual. It is not how I realize the *generally human* that needs to be my task, but how I satisfy myself. *I* am my species, am without norm, without law, without model, and the like. (55)

It is hardly surprising that Stirner did not write another book of comparable force or originality. Where can thought go from the principle of its own *uncategorizable* uniqueness? Equally explicable is Arghol's philosophical collapse following on his apprenticeship to Stirner. More to the point, however, is the dream's revelation of Arghol's virtual identification with Stirner as philosopher and of the philosopher as such with Stirner. That is to say, Arghol's dream reveals that the philosophical collapse into solipsism that had been unfolded in the dialogue with Hanp is internally inconsistent. Stirner's doctrine of individual uniqueness is still a doctrine; it is the universalized *model* of specificity. As a disciple of Stirner, Arghol not only had embraced solipsism, but in the very act of doing so had undermined the apparent logic of egoistic self-sufficiency in becoming the follower of a doctrine which itself rejects the notion of any ego patterning itself after another. Where can Arghol go when he is barred even from entering a *cul-de-sac*?

The attempt to explain such a condition to his erstwhile disciple issues in Arghol's "enlightenment," his realization that all action, from his passivistic return to his rural home and submission to the physical abuse of his employer-uncle, even to his mere attempt to explain himself to Hanp, is pre-empted by this nihilistic quandary: "[W]e say self but mean something else. For without others—the Not-Self—there would be no self." The very ground of supposed uniqueness and authenticity is an illusion, and the "self" is merely the locus of an aporia, a contradiction in terms. It is a self that, in its dependence upon others as "Not-Self," is equally a self and a not-self; or rather neither in any absolute sense.

Arghol's unconscious "valuation" of his fight with Hanp, with its "tentative symbols," is capable of a precision that Arghol's discursive explanation to Hanp of his post-philosophical condition is not. Just as the Vorticist formal structure of the narrative finds its symbolic axis in the foregrounding of Arghol's mask, so the thematic content achieves symbolic form in his dreamt return to his Stirner apprenticeship. The figure that returns *The Ego and his Own* in the dream appears first as Hanp, then as Stirner, then as Arghol's own ideal philosopher. Arghol's actual

experience had been in reverse order, from a philosophical ideal, to Stirner, to Hanp. That his discipleship to Stirner should lead him to annex to himself in turn such a quotidian disciple as Hanp is one of the problems around which *Enemy of the Stars* revolves (so to speak). The narrative motivation is provided by Hanp's need to push Arghol for an explanation of his behaviour (which will in turn provide Hanp with an understanding of his own role), an explanation that, in the very effort to provide it, disabuses Arghol of his need for Hanp's companionship. Because of the internal inconsistency of Stirnerian solipsism (the *principle* of egoistic uniqueness), Arghol's immense philosophical collapse has put him beyond the capacity to provide a rationale for either his condition or its consequences. Arghol has become an embodiment of self-contradiction, something in itself offensive to the pragmatic consciousness of Hanp, driving him to rid nature of the Argholian anomaly. Hanp murders the sleeping Arghol, and so "THE DESTINY OF ARGHOL [is] CONSUMMATED, THE UNIVERSE SATISFIED!"

After the "something distant, terrible, and eccentric" that Arghol embodies has been "forever banished from Matter" (190), "a galloping blackness of mood overtakes the lonely figure" of Hanp, and he quickly jumps in the canal: "He sinks like a plummet . . . heavy with hatred and nothing left to work it off on—so quite certain to go to the bottom and stop there" (191). Having expelled the representative of Personality, of self, there is nothing against which Hanp can define himself as not-self. He merges himself with undifferentiated Matter, then there is nothing:

A black cloud enters and occupies the whole arena, immediately everything is blotted out. . . . Then there is no sound in particular and only the blackness of a moonless and unstarlit night. (191)

Stirner is the thematic axis of *Enemy of the Stars* in the way that Arghol's mask is its formal axis.<sup>7</sup> As philosophical model, Stirner embodies the discrepancy that on the formal level is revealed between *persona*, with its origin in dramatic character (i.e., imaginative construct), and (via Christianity) its modern, romantic transfiguration into identity, self-present completeness, that is to say, into Stirnerian uniqueness. *Enemy of the Stars*, then, is

perfectly coherent on both formal and thematic levels as a representation of the crisis of solipsism that Lewis presents as characterizing modernity. *Enemy of the Stars* can be seen primarily as a radical philosophical vision, which in its urgency and extremity required a sufficiently striking and revolutionary form and style.

### III

I have argued that the narrative motivation of *Enemy of the Stars* is controlled by a preoccupation with the very preconditions of coherent identity and experience, and therefore of dramatic representation of its action, and that an appreciation of these priorities in the construction of the text is crucial to a sympathetic reading. But a crack in Lewis's own disposition in relation to *Enemy of the Stars* emerges in the hiatus between the 1914 and 1932 texts.

The 1914 and 1932 texts are punctuated by an essay, "Physics of the Not-Self," first published separately in 1925,<sup>8</sup> but included (slightly revised) in the 1932 edition of the play. Like *Enemy of the Stars* itself, the essay has never been accorded more than the most cursory analysis, and this despite the striking declaration of its opening lines:

This essay is in the nature of a metaphysical commentary upon the ideas suggested by the action of *Enemy of the Stars*. Briefly, it is intended to show the human mind in its traditional role of the enemy of life, as an oddity outside the machine. (195)

But "Physics" is as difficult to follow on first reading as is *Enemy of the Stars* itself, conducting a very oblique argument on mind as "enemy of life" and never commenting on how it is to be seen as functioning in the play itself. Despite the explicit announcement of his intention, Lewis is ill-inclined to make the commentary easy for his readers.

"Ethics of the Not-Self" might be a more appropriate title, since the essay focusses on the question of "goodness" in the light of the problematic of the self at work in *Enemy of the Stars*. The argument has two phases. First, Lewis looks at the problem of "truth" inherent in the self/not-self opposition and the ethical notions implicated in it. Second, he turns to what he calls "the old status of 'goodness'" (199), to what he claims is a more

objective tradition of morality, which he identifies with the Greeks and particularly with Socrates. The essay is a polemical manipulation of the dialectic of truth and goodness as implicated in that of self and not-self. The truth of self (called by Lewis "catonic," presumably after the pragmatism of Cato the Younger) is the truth which immediately serves the practical ends of the man of action, the "man of his word," who knows what he, and life, are about. In contrast is the truth of the philosopher, who is chronically uncertain about what is genuinely true: "His scruples brand him as a liar from the start," his affirmations "so beset with reservations that [they remain] a particularly offensive sort of lie for those who prefer the will's truth to that of the intellect" (196).

The truth of the self, of the man of action, the "will's truth," is what serves his interests. The truth of the intellect is, in contrast, so uncertain as to disabuse its devotees of all easy certainty, even of the knowledge of who they themselves are: "The *not-self* established in the centre of the intellect betrays at every moment its transient human associate" (196). Because it brings with it this uncertainty, this dedication to the objective, and counting of oneself as naught, philosophic truth is greeted by pragmatists as an anti-social principle. The philosopher is the "enemy," "in league with the diabolical principle of the *not-self*" (198). Such a "giver" cannot be trusted: "A gift that *expects no return* is not a human gift. . . . If you are respectable, then you can only accept things from a person who evidently benefits more than you do as a consequence of his bounty" (199). The irony is palpable, Lewis appearing to feel justified in his counter-polemical by the inherent bias of conventional utilitarianism.

In the second part of the essay, Lewis turns from polemics to rational argument, presenting a serious ethics of the not-self rooted in the Greek notion of "goodness." Relying on the historian of philosophy John Burnet, Lewis argues that the term used by Socrates to designate the highest philosophical and artistic attainments was *arete*, of which "'goodness' in its modern sense is, as a translation, misleading." After Burnet, he maintains that goodness as *arete* "had no ethical significance. . . . 'it was, in fact, what we call efficiency.'" Lewis cites Liddell and Scott on *arete*:

“goodness, excellence of any kind; excellence in any art” (200). His argument, then, is for the non-ethical significance of the Greek notion of “goodness,” and he goes on to bolster this by identifying the Greek and Hindu notions of goodness as knowledge of the eternal (*episteme* as opposed to *doxa*, belief): “This epistemological absolute is much the same as Brahman; and the inferior knowledge of the world of temporal experience is much the same as the upanishadic *avidya* [ignorance, delusion]” (201).

Lewis pushes this line of argument further, invoking Socrates in support of a strict mind/body dualism (to the extent of assimilating the monism of Socrates to the dualism of the Manichees). He again invokes Burnet, emphasizing Socrates’s Pythagorean sympathies, attributing his originality to “the introduction of ethical and aesthetic forms upon a footing of equality with the mathematical” (202). Lewis concludes that the highest philosophical and artistic excellence is therefore a Stoic *apatheia*, a rising above all interest, whether in emotional involvement or power: “Love, too, is in this category. . . . You cannot, logically, ‘love’ or admire, either, if you *fully* understand” (203). This supreme detachment makes of Lewis’s philosopher/artist “an indifferent god” (202).

Lewis concludes by quoting Alcibiades on Socrates in the Symposium, to the effect that Socrates’s apparent desire for intimacy with beautiful young men is an affectation. He “despises more than anyone can imagine all external possessions, whether it be beauty or wealth, or glory . . . and lives among men, making all objects of their admiration the playthings of his irony” (204). Lewis ends the essay abruptly on this consideration of Socratic irony, that the detachment called for by a single-minded pursuit of excellence issues in an ironic stance towards the world and towards all who take it seriously. The unavoidable implication, of course, is that Lewis identifies himself, respecting *Enemy of the Stars*, as such a Socratic ironist.<sup>9</sup>

The sum of Lewis’s argument in “Physics” is that with Socrates “ethics is only introduced to be disposed of; for the *skill-cum-knowledge-goodness* of Socrates . . . are very mathematical conceptions, when compared with those of more emotional ethics” (202). As a “metaphysical commentary” on *Enemy of the Stars*,

“Physics” champions a non-ethical objectivism, a purely intellectual virtue. Indeed, the polemical thrust of the essay leads Lewis to stigmatize emotion itself and to advocate an impersonalist not-self that is indistinguishable from depersonalization. This ambiguity in his position is clearly reflected in the inconsistency of his treatment of “love” in the essay. In the polemical phase of the argument, when he is ironically contrasting the pragmatist and the philosopher, Lewis says of the objective stance of the intellect: “Since, again, by its very nature it awakens love, that is not in its favour either. Love being the thing that is most prized by men, the individual who (in league with the diabolical principle of the *not-self*) appears to be attempting to obtain it by unlawful means is at once without the pale” (198). Yet, as we have already seen, in the Socratic definition of not-self as pure, disinterested knowing, “no emotional idea of ‘power,’ even, must be attached to the highest knowledge. . . . Love, too, is in this category” (203). Though an argument can be made for a meaningful difference between passive “awakening” of love and active “attachment” to it as a form of desire, in practice Lewis fails to make such a distinction good.

In his exploitation of the passage on Socratic irony, in which Alcibiades emphasizes Socrates’s rejection of “all external *possessions*” (emphasis added), Lewis makes of it a critical treatment of *persons*:

What [Alcibiades] says, in short, is that Socrates is pulling the leg of the Greek *exoletus*, whom he caressed. . . . [W]as not the language of love the cynical gilding of the pill? We cannot be surprised that this peculiar and very rare sense of fun should have brought him at last to a violent end—or, at least, an abrupt and involuntary one. (204)

Lewis cannot have his cake and eat it. The not-self cannot “by its very nature awaken love,” and, as in the case of Socrates, bring upon one the violent hostility of the community. Being “without the pale,” as he says in the first instance, is not the same as being an “enemy principle,” perceived as an active threat to the *status quo*. As already mentioned, Lewis assimilates Socratic monism to Manichean dualism, that is, a higher unification of virtue and knowledge as *arete* is seen by him as equivalent to the antagonism of the Dark and Light in the teaching of Mani (202). We can

trace Lewis's ambivalence on the question of emotion, love, and personality, then, to a philosophical confusion, or, at the least, a lack of clarity at the core of his "metaphysical commentary" on *Enemy*.

"Physics of the Not-Self" demonstrates that Lewis is unclear, when engaged in philosophical discourse, about the idealist and transcendental implications of his position. The very existence of "Physics" as a "metaphysical commentary" is a manifestation of Lewis's ambivalence. As our discussion of *Enemy of the Stars* has shown, Lewis demonstrates a very clear grasp, in the context of his art practice, of the self-contradictory status of philosophical discourse in post-Hegelian, anti-transcendentalist philosophy, as represented in the play by Stirner. He clearly sees in *Enemy* that the rejection of transcendentalist solutions in post-romantic philosophy creates the "CLOSE ATMOSPHERE OF TERROR AND NECESSITY" (145) characteristic of modernity. Yet, no doubt in response to the blank perplexity elicited by the play, Lewis abandons this clarity and invokes classical precedent in explanation of his work. Lewis can perhaps be accused of a merely strategic criticism, an attempt to exploit the ambiguities in critical discourse that he explores with conscience and conviction in his art: "Similarly, was not the language of [metaphysical commentary] the cynical gilding of the pill?" ("Physics" 204).

#### IV

"Physics of the Not-Self" demonstrates that Lewis was fully aware of the ethical implications of his chief Vorticist work. "Physics" argues, as we have seen, for an "ethics of the not-self," but his valuation of the "still point" of the not-self is *arete*, the "skill-cum-knowledge-goodness of Socrates." Lewis calls, in fact, for a Nietzschean "transvaluation of values," an attempt to go "beyond good and evil," to the stability of an "epistemological absolute." In its specific contradiction of the deeper insights of the art work on which it is a commentary, "Physics" is a commentary indeed on the crisis of discourse and representation which *Enemy of the Stars* addresses, a crisis in which Lewis himself is deeply implicated and in relation to which he is far from achieving his own ethic of *arete*, of an intellectual and logical *apatheia*, that would make of him as

an artist the "indifferent god" in dispassionate contemplation of the world.

The invocation of Nietzsche here is not without purpose. He is the silent antagonist and foundational intellectual influence on Lewis's early career.<sup>10</sup> The argument for a non-ethical, intellectual ideal in "Physics," in its appeal to Socrates as model, is an attempt to turn Nietzsche's call for a "revaluation of values" against him. Socrates was himself the antagonist of much of Nietzsche's thought, but particularly so in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he is cast as the villain, "the type of the *theoretical man*" (1028), and source of "the profound *illusion*" of a victory of reason over intuition: "This illusion consists in the imperturbable belief that, with the clue of logic, thinking can reach to the nethermost depths of being" (1029). It is this Apollonian belief in logic that Nietzsche sees as undermining the "tragic perception" which achieved its highest realization in the Dionysian art of Aeschylus. In choosing Socrates as model in "Physics," Lewis champions an Apollonian, logical transvaluation of values, in contrast to Nietzsche's Dionysian apotheosis of the self as will to power.<sup>11</sup> The preoccupation with classical dramatic motifs in *Enemy* itself now appears less arbitrary and recondite. *Enemy of the Stars* is Lewis's Apollonian answer to Nietzsche's call for a renewed Dionysian tragic art.<sup>12</sup> In fixing on Stirner, Lewis goes directly to the precondition for Nietzsche's own analysis of the crisis of nihilism,<sup>13</sup> in an attempt clearly to extrapolate and represent its ramifications for a genuinely modern art. Lewis's contention in *Enemy* that "drama," particularly tragic drama, is inappropriate to modernity is perhaps an attempt to push nihilism to even more radical conclusions than Nietzsche. The conclusion of *Enemy of the Stars* is that discourse is in itself a compromise with temporality and with pragmatic nescience (Hanpness). Language can no longer be the vehicle of a logical "thought content," a pure signified, but must be a performative act, a symbolic gesture, a verbal dance in which signification is a function of the total work of art, rather than of any "truth" which it may be said to contain.

A thematic, formal, and stylistic unity and seriousness in *Enemy of the Stars* derive from its attempt to represent bathos. Lewis's

ambivalence is the ambivalence of modernity, so vividly announced by Nietzsche, a questioning of the very grounds and possibility of both truth and goodness in a post-classical world. Lewis was caught on the horns of ambivalence, in a dualistic response to Nietzsche's invocation of Dionysian tragedy and will to power that took the form of the Apollonian *Enemy of the Stars* and its "metaphysical commentary," "Physics of the Not-Self." We can be critical of Lewis for not sustaining the virtue which he himself enunciated in "Physics," the excellence of intellect, which he is himself offending in attempting a "metaphysical commentary" that is demonstrated in *Enemy of the Stars* itself as no longer appropriate to modernity.

Lewis effectively embodies, if he does not successfully resolve, the ambivalence of the modern era, challenged as it is in particular by Hegel's declaration of the end of the essential usefulness of art: our thought has changed the world and therefore the conditions of our art; it is somehow only within art that we can grasp the full conditions of our thought. Lewis addresses the first problem in *Enemy of the Stars*, and then falls victim to the second in "Physics of the Not-Self." The fuller implications of Lewis's development as artist and critic centre on his relation to Nietzsche, his attempt to answer and to circumvent him, a relation which sets him within the wider context of European modernism, and which through him can bring to our appreciation of English modernism an added understanding of its place in the larger modernist movement.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 It was preceded by a handful of short stories published in the *English Review* and later revised and collected in *The Wild Body*, an unpublished, intentionally "potboiling" novel, appearing posthumously as *Mrs. Dukes' Million*, and some juvenile poetry (see *Rude Assignment* 123-24).
- 2 *Filibusters in Barbary*, *The Doom of Youth*, and *Snooty Baronet*. The present discussion will depend on the 1932 text, since, as Wendy Flory observes in "Enemy of the Stars" (in Meyers), its "changes do not correct the earlier version so much as amplify it, making clear that after eighteen years his concern was not to modify or qualify what he originally wrote, but to present the same characters and the same basic ideas as forcefully, dramatically and accessibly as possible" (92). Further references will be to the reprint in Munton and are given parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Kenner, Wagner, Chapman, and Materer (1976 and 1979) give it short shrift, while Jameson fails to mention it. Kush is concerned largely with the visual/

- literary relations. Flory makes the best contribution to our understanding of the play.
- 4 Martin Esslin remarks, in "Modernity and Drama" (in Chefdor *et al.*), on the crisis in modern drama in the light of attempts different from Lewis's to overcome alienation: "Have we not reached the limits, the point at which even the definition of what drama, what theater, *is* has been almost totally dissolved by the tearing down of the distinction between actor and spectator, audience and participant-in-the-action?" (64).
  - 5 Max Stirner, *The Ego and his Own*, trans. S. T. Byington (New York, 1907; London, 1912). This translation forms the basis of John Carroll's edition, used here.
  - 6 Karl Lowith observes: "Stirner's book . . . has usually been considered the anarchic product of an eccentric, but it is in reality the logical consequence of Hegel's historical system, which—allegorically displaced—it reproduces exactly" (103).
  - 7 Arghol's designation as "enemy of the stars" is the descriptive equivalent of his formal designation as a mask. It is a comment on "Max Stirner," the pseudonym of Johann Caspar Schmidt. As John Carroll observes: "His unusually high forehead gained him the nickname of *Stirner* at school, and, with his individualistic fancy tickled and his romantic ambitions stirred by the allusion to the stars (*Stim*=forehead, *Gestim*=star), the plebeian name of Schmidt was abandoned" (18). Arghol is "enemy" of the stars as symbols both of Stirner himself and of what he represents, the ego as the last refuge of transcendentalist aspirations.
  - 8 "The Physics of the Not-Self," *The Chapbook* 40 (1925): 68-77.
  - 9 The character Sfox appears mysteriously and briefly at the end of *Enemy*, with "a faceless helm, of a mask of inexpressive clay" (191). Sfox is Lewis as the Socrates whose "critics called him 'sly,' using a word (*iron*), which is properly applied to foxes" (Burnet 132). Sfox's mask without features no doubt refers to the authorial indifference and impersonality which Lewis advocates in "Physics."
  - 10 "Nietzsche was, I believe, the paramount influence, as was the case with so many people prior to world war 1" (*Rude Assignment* 128). For an overview of Nietzsche's ongoing influence in Lewis's thought, see Edwards.
  - 11 In a subtle aside in "Physics," Lewis identifies Nietzsche's "we truthful ones" as representatives of the "truth of the will" (196).
  - 12 Arghol, as a Prometheus figure, is a response to Nietzsche's casting of Aeschylus's Prometheus in the role of Archetypal Dionysian tragic figure: "The story of Prometheus is an original possession of the entire Aryan race, and is documentary evidence of its capacity for the profoundly tragic" (997).
  - 13 Though Nietzsche never mentions Stirner in his work, he is the product of the same intellectual milieu: "And so, historically considered, the coincidence that Stirner's book appeared in the year of Nietzsche's birth seems as necessary as the connection between Nietzsche's attempt at a new beginning and the Nothing which is reached in Stirner" (Lowith 176). John Carroll observes: "Overbeck's final conclusion . . . was that Nietzsche had read Stirner, was impressed, and worried that he should be confused with him" (25); he cites the Polish Marxist Leszek Kolakowski's comment: "Stirner's grounds are irrefutable . . . Even Nietzsche seems inconsequential in comparison to him" (15).
  - 14 I would like to acknowledge the support of the Calgary Institute for the Humanities at the University of Calgary during the preparation of this paper.

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