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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Wyndham Lewis by Jeffrey Meyers and Roy Campbell

Review by: Rowland Smith

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“*ad hominem* grilling” (133) from the formidable Mrs. Q. D. Leavis (considered by many her husband’s equal as well as his partner in their journal *Scrutiny* and indeed in the whole of his critical enterprise), it was F. R. Leavis himself who came to Jacobson’s defense. But this was only to restrain his wife’s ferocity; his intervention was in the realm of manners rather than of substance.

Jacobson is understandably grateful for such personal amiability, but the incident as reported in this essay—especially his unwillingness to realize the force of the Leavisian attack on him—spotlights a certain weakness in his art. By his own admission, the talk at Downing College on the plight of the “colonial” writer came out as a “catalogue of lacks and deficiencies” (133), and Mrs. Leavis was quick to seize on this:

The sum of her questioning amounted to her asking me what I proposed doing about those lacks and deficiencies. There was no point in my coming to Cambridge to talk to *them* on the subject. Why didn’t I go back to South Africa and talk about it there, or emigrate to New Zealand and talk to the New Zealanders about it? Or was I merely pretending to be concerned about the problem? (133)

Unpleasant as this deluge of criticism must have been to Jacobson, he might be expected, particularly with the healing passage of time, to have taken her criticism more to heart. Had he done so, he might perhaps be a writer less limited by the accident of his place of birth and upbringing. For one cannot help thinking, when contemplating the range of this volume—and indeed the scope of Jacobson’s entire corpus of novels and stories—that he has too easily allowed the “lacks and deficiencies” of the colonial writer’s situation to fence him in. But, despite his failure to rise above the conditions imposed upon him by his background and upbringing, Jacobson has undoubtedly succeeded in polishing to a very high degree the small ivory on which he has chosen to work his art. As a purveyor of the South African Jewish experience as he knows it—and, more important, as he has ruminated on it and reinterpreted it in various forms through the decades of his exile—he has no peer.

Martin Rubin

Jeffrey Meyers, ed. *Wyndham Lewis*. By Roy Campbell. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1985. 73 pages. Paper.

The appearance of Roy Campbell’s lost “book” on Wyndham Lewis is of considerable historical interest. Originally scheduled to appear in 1932 as number 14 in the series of Dolphin Books published by Chatto & Windus, it was announced on the dust jackets of earlier books in the series. Page proofs were printed in April 1932, but the study was withdrawn before publication in June 1932.

Until the 1980s it was thought that no copy survived. The editor of the re-surfaced edition could not locate one when he was working on Lewis’s biography, published in 1980. Lewis himself had no copy. On 16 March 1951 he wrote to

W. K. Rose, the editor of his letters: "Roy Campbell did write a book about me. He was commissioned to do so by Chatto & Windus. The book was set up in type, and the publication about to be proceeded with, when Chatto's became violently angry with me. They informed Campbell they would not proceed with the book. Roy Campbell, I know, has no copy of it; has several times asked me if I possessed one. I do not" (quoted in Meyers's introduction, xiii).

In the early 1980s John Martin, of Black Sparrow Press, bought the page proofs (with corrections by Lewis) from a London dealer. Those proofs have now been sold to the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin and were used to print the study in Black Sparrow's *Blast 3* in September 1984. That version is the first printing of the complete Campbell *Wyndham Lewis*. The present edition draws on two other sets of page proofs which also appeared in the 1980s. One copy of the proofs, with editorial corrections, was sent by Mary Campbell to Michael Chapman of the University of Natal, one of the editors working on the new four-volume edition of Campbell's *Collected Works*. At about the same time the National Literary Museum in Grahamstown, South Africa, bought the manuscript of *Wyndham Lewis* and a third set of Campbell-corrected page proofs from an American dealer.

This annotated edition is published by the University of Natal Press (Campbell was born in Natal in 1901) to mark the university's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1985. It is published by agreement with Ad. Donker, the publishers of the new *Collected Works of Roy Campbell*.

After such knowledge what revelations? Disappointingly little.

Because several books by Wyndham Lewis were affected by threats of libel action in the early 1930s, there was a general expectation among Lewis and Campbell scholars that Campbell's study of his master Enemy had been too risky to publish. Campbell's positive review of Lewis's massive satirical novel, *The Apes of God*, had been suppressed by the *New Statesman* in 1930. His own verse satire attacking Bloomsbury circles and established literary figures, *The Georgiad*, had appeared in 1931 and caused some discomfort with its ribald personal attack on what are now the well-discussed sexual values of Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West. Lewis's *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932), *The Doom of Youth* (1932), *Snooty Baronet* (1932), and *The Roaring Queen* (1936) had all variously been suppressed before publication, withdrawn from circulation or marketed unenthusiastically after complaints from individuals that they could be identified (to their own embarrassment) with characters in the books. *Snooty Baronet* was virtually boycotted by Boots' and Smith's circulating libraries because it contained comic descriptions of sexual appetite that were deemed offensive by the Readers for Boots' and Smith's.

With such a combination of author and subject, it was generally assumed that Campbell's *Wyndham Lewis* had been too spicy and that the publisher had withdrawn it after the page proofs had been corrected for fear of another legal-libel tangle connected with Lewis, the Enemy. Meyers states that Chatto feared the book might be libelous (xiii). He could, however, find nothing about it in the files of Chatto, Cape, or Bodley Head (who had acquired the firm of Boriswood). After Chatto refused to publish *Wyndham Lewis*, Campbell had offered it, without success, to both Boriswood and Cape.

The probable reason for the withdrawal of Campbell's study is the row that developed in 1932 between Lewis and Chatto. Although Chatto had published Lewis's work since 1919, a rift developed over what he thought was an inadequate offer for *The Apes of God* in 1930. As a result, he brought the book out himself under the imprint of the Arthur Press and offered subsequent works to other publishers in the early 1930s although still under contract with Chatto. Chatto published *The Doom of Youth* in 1932 and withdrew it in the same year after libel action. All this made Lewis less the favored son than he had been in 1931, when C. H. Prentice of Chatto agreed to commission a study of their prominent author. In November 1932 the firm sued Lewis over the nonappearance of the remaining second and third volumes of *The Childermass*, for which he had already received advance fees. The deteriorating relations between Lewis and Chatto & Windus were probably sufficient to cause the book's cancellation, as Lewis himself suggested in 1951 to W. K. Rose.

When the National English Literary Museum in South Africa bought the *Wyndham Lewis* manuscript, they also purchased a letter dated 4 March 1955 from Piers Raymond, a director of Chatto, to B. Harding-Edgar of Charles Rare Books. The letter, which is in reply to a query concerning *Wyndham Lewis*, is vague about the history of Campbell's manuscript, stating that the publishers asked the author to alter some passages, that the author refused and himself withdrew the book.

This view does not coincide with Lewis's own version of events in his letter to W. K. Rose and really does seem odd, given the rambling, rather dull quality of the study that has now surfaced. Any reader turning to *Wyndham Lewis* with the expectation of finding juicy vituperation or caricature or parody is likely to be disappointed.

In a letter written in September 1932, after the book had been abandoned by Chatto, Campbell tells Lewis that he is sending his study to Boriswood, Campbell's own publisher and that he is "doing a preface, on the intimidation of publishers, but hitting Chatto hard too" (Campbell to Lewis, Cornell Lewis Collection, n.d. [1932]). Parenthetically the poet mentions that he is not half as ill or drunk as when Lewis was last in Martigues (probably March 1932). That comment offers a human footnote to the rambling quality of Campbell's *Wyndham Lewis*. He was living a hard-drinking life in Martigues while writing the book, and in an earlier letter to Lewis written after the publication of *The Georgiad* in November 1931, Campbell discusses his work on the Lewis monograph and describes his recent successes in local bull-fighting corridas (in October) caused "entirely through making up my mind to stop boozing and loafing. This has had a very good effect on my morale—you will find me much more alert, and ready for anything, than when you last came here. I was tired and vacillating then. It was a sort of 'period' which lasted a year . . . but I feel quite different now" (Campbell to Lewis, Cornell Lewis Collection, n.d. [early 1932]). A similar note enters a later letter from Campbell to Lewis which bears the annotation "Received Dec. 2." After asking for suggestions of any other publisher who might be interested in *Wyndham Lewis*, Campbell tells Lewis that he had received a letter from Sacheverell Sitwell, praising his *Taurine Provence*, which was published in 1932. Campbell jokes that he will keep the letter as a curiosity, since Sitwell

mentions his prose style. As Lewis knows, Campbell writes, "Taurine Provence [sic] is a bloody pot-boiler. . . . I had to get drunk to write it, and it is written like a Baedeker and copied out of a few French newspapers" (Campbell to Lewis, Cornell Lewis Collection, n.d. [November 1932], quoted in Peter Alexander, *Roy Campbell: A Critical Biography*, 121).

It was during the same period discussed in these letters that Campbell wrote *Wyndham Lewis* as well as some of his finest lyrics that were to appear in his *Flowering Reeds* collection in 1933. Although his superb lyric gift was unaffected—at this stage of his life—by either his insistent hostility toward the English literary coteries whom he regarded as his enemies or his hedonistic life at Martigues, the critical study he produced in Provence is undisciplined, amorphous, and uninteresting.

In the first section (eighteen of fifty-four pages), he leaps into a lengthy exposition of the intellectual position Lewis occupied in 1932. After this unfocused apology for Lewis's attack on contemporary intellectual fads, Campbell turns briefly to Lewis's books themselves and discusses them roughly in the order in which they were written. His method here is less opaque than in the first, general part of the study but just as woolly. At times he simply quotes chunks of Lewis, as in his description of *The Wild Body*, and at others he makes curiously prim and imperceptive comments as in these sentences about *Tarr*:

The main theme of the book is concerned with Tarr's efforts to find a foothold in the shifting sands of his disintegrating society. His love affair with Bertha is told with consummate skill: the gradual unwinding of the hero's perplexities into a sane, sincere, and satisfactory solution of the warring claims of his personal pride, his devotion to his art, and his normally sexed human nature, is worked out with wisdom and humour. (19)

No reader unfamiliar with Lewis's work could derive much insight from Campbell's study. Here are his concluding remarks on *The Apes of God* (the third of three paragraphs devoted to the book):

Lewis, in this colossal novel of 650 pages, excels all his previous performances. The changing scenes follow one another with the harsh electric brilliance of the best comedies of Jonson: but the stage is vaster and the action more varied. We are reminded of Petronius more than any one else. *The Apes* is a human encyclopedia besides being a social drama and a great poem; and it places Lewis as the first, if not the only, genius writing in England at the present day. (154)

A fascinating footnote of literary history is revealed in Campbell's *Wyndham Lewis*. The study by the wild man from Provence, who saw himself as the scourge of Bloomsbury, is pedantic. A typical sally is an exercise in name dropping rather than a pointed (or damaging) comment:

We have in Lewis a writer who compares to our best naturalistic novelists as

Henri Fabre would to such [salon] painters: as Swift would compare to Ambrose Philips, or Jonson to Shirley.

Modern English fiction is by far the most dully photographic of all the arts: it remains in the same state as English painting was at the time of Millais. We have at least five hundred first-rate *copiers* from Life. The number of people of whom it could be said quite truthfully by MacCarthy, Nicolson, Gould, Walpole, Priestley, and others in their weekly writings, "he is one of the most brilliant of our younger novelists," etc., runs well into three if not four figures (50)

Although the newly found study will do little to elucidate the power and energy of Lewis's writing up to 1932, it will probably do Campbell's own reputation some harm. Concentrating as he does on Lewis's intellectual position rather than on the peculiarly compelling brilliance of his best prose, Campbell asserts the value of attitudes which Lewis himself was to regret. And Campbell's own prose has none of the subtlety of his subject's. When dealing with substantial works such as *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man*, Campbell makes Lewis appear more rigid and authoritarian than he was. When he turns to a disastrous book like *Hitler* (1931), his endorsement and simplification of some of Lewis's most misguided views appear smugly disconcerting over fifty years after they were written.

Campbell asserts that "we have seen" what Lewis described as the natural reaction of the best contemporary statesmanship "in Russia and Italy where the inevitable chaos resulting from years of mystical and liberal drifting has been so swiftly and triumphantly organised" (22). In the mid-1930s both Lewis and Campbell were to attack left-wing plots and cliques, but here the Soviet Union and fascist Italy are linked—because of their authoritarian systems—by the curiously inept compliment of both having "triumphantly organised" "chaos." Campbell is more coherent in the next paragraph, but his point is the same one: "The dictatorial rule of a vigorous and intelligent minority is the only possible ultimate answer to the ever-growing chaos consequent upon liberal-democratic reform" (23). And when he turns to *Hitler*, Campbell's bland comment will confirm the darkest suspicions of his right-wing views: "Lewis shows us that the racial solution indicated in Hitlerism is not entirely to be despised (if not necessarily to be swallowed whole)" (30). He is not giving unqualified approval to Hitler's "racial solution," but his guarded interest is unlikely to win him new friends.

Roy Campbell's *Wyndham Lewis* is a nicely printed little book with fifty-four pages of text, five pages of notes, and fourteen pages of introduction. For those familiar with the literary feuds of the 1930s, it is revealing to see what the lost book contains and fascinating to think that so slight a study should have been the object of both speculation and scholarly detective work. It is important that we now have it in the public domain, but its intrinsic value is negligible.

Acknowledgment

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Rowland Smith