

Towards a Canadian Vorticism: Wyndham Lewis in Canadian Literature

George Steiner, in *The Guardian*, writes:

“Who, today, reads Wyndham Lewis? Who derives enrichment or recognition from the paintings and drawings in half a dozen media? [...] What successor has he had...”

The project that I am currently working on addresses various schools, movements, and manifestations of avant-garde writing in Canada. Avant-gardism presupposes artists working at the edge of societal norms, breaking new ground, and in its most revolutionary and idealistic articulations, leading society forward. Canadian avant-gardes before the 1960s, however, typically worked in the wake of European schools and movements. Therefore, one immediate paradox in studying the Canadian avant-garde is that our cutting-edge and radical art is often reactive and, even worse, imitative of work and aesthetics developed in Europe. The idea of a behind-the-curve avant-garde has been enough of a semantic conundrum to generally truncate discussion. There are exceptions, of course, such as Christian Bök’s work on Canadian “pataphysics, Barbara Godard’s work on Canadian radical feminism, and Ray Ellenwood’s work on Canadian Surrealism. My talk today, which functions as a kind of précis of my chapter-in-progress on Vorticism and Futurism in Canadian literature, explores three specific examples of Wyndham Lewis’s influence on Canadian authors and begins the process of proposing a Canadian Vorticism.

Studying groups and movements in the context of Canadian literature has many potential pitfalls – especially in the temptation to overinflate a particular author’s participation or identification with a group – but has the advantage of acknowledging the wider, and sympathetic, context in which an author’s work was produced. This is especially useful with experimental

Canadian authors who exist on the outside of an already marginal cultural community and can easily find themselves entirely cut off from their contextual society. Lewis, who was cut off from his society, rejected literary groups as a refuge for bad writers. Still, group aesthetics have become a prominent component of theories of the avant-garde and are more useful in identifying the networks of influence at play in movements like Vorticism than traditional models of paternalistic, anxiety-inducing influence or postmodern models of intertextuality.

The concepts of schools and movements both articulate different strategies through which the aesthetics of a diverse group of authors might be unified. This attempt to unify and bring together artists seems to be the nature of C.J. Fox's discussion of the parallels between Lewis and E.J. Pratt – two authors whom Fox believes “should have come together” (1) but of whom he is forced to admit were never acquaintances, never discussed each other's work in print, and possibly never even read each other (2). Fox connects them through the rewarding comparison of the shared “general themes” in their work and the convergence of their “visions of the modern world” (3). Renato Poggioli characterises such biographically intangible yet perfectly relevant associations between artists through the German concept of the *Weltanschauung*, the world view of a group. He uses the concept of the *Weltanschauung* to distinguish between schools and movements, which differ in that schools centre around static traditions with presupposed masters determining their course, while movements, in contrast, are “essentially dynamic,” leaderless centres of activity and energy (20). Pratt was not a follower of Lewis, nor did he subscribe to a pattern of static aesthetics. Rather, Fox's characterization of the Pratt-Lewis convergence suggests their common participation in a general movement – in their case, one defined not so much by the spirit of the times as by a shared antagonism to the *Zeitgeist*. In contrast, Canadian

novelist John Reid's *Horses With Blindfolds* presents a rather flat attempt to imitate Lewis' *Tarr* and suggests a Vorticist *school* for its devotion to a central master.

The theorist Peter Bürger notes that the social revolutionary ambition of avant-gardism works against distinct categories of *production* and *reception* (53). The intention of the avant-garde is to enable a "liberating art praxis" that blurs the border between artist and audience and in fact negates the category of art altogether (54). He acknowledges, however, that even in the avant-garde a distance remains between art and life and so these would-be defunct categories are still functional if only to highlight the extent of the failure to fulfill revolutionary ambitions. Similarly, even though Lewis's definition of Vorticism embraced activity over passivity and imitation, and thus also shatters the division between production and reception, there were yet artists who imitated the Vorticist style. Lewis was hostile to such acolytes, and hostile to John Reid in particular, but when I refer to Canadian Vorticism I keep in mind both the schools and the movements, the imitators and collaborators, through which Lewis is implicated. Vorticism is perhaps the wrong word for such a movement, and certainly runs slipshod over Lewis's own description of the movement as a disastrous "disease" of extremism (*Demon* 3). Still, the primary problem Lewis had with Vorticism as a particular movement, as Toby Foshay points out, was its inability to revolutionize the institutional barriers of life. When Lewis asks, "Architects! Where is your vortex?" *after* the dissolution of the Vorticist movement, he affirms his commitment to the revolutionary avant-gardism that inspired the historical movement. It is from this more general, ahistorical sense of Vorticism, of Lewis' particular challenge to the function of art in bourgeois society, that I turn to Canadian writing in search of its impact here.

Throughout Lewis' lifetime, from Robert Ross and Lord Beaverbrook in the beginning to his many friends amongst the maligned colonials towards the end, many Canadians have

prodigiously and thanklessly tried to serve him. There have been book-length considerations from Hugh Kenner, Walter Wees, and Toby Foshay, various editions from the likes of C.J. Fox and Frank Davey, and over a dozen doctoral dissertations at schools across the country. Canadians were instrumental in two collections of scholarly essays, including *Wyndham Lewis in Canada* and *Wyndham Lewis: A Reevaluation*. It is possible to explain some of the Canadian interest through nepotism: born in Amherst, Nova Scotia, Lewis kept a Canadian passport throughout his life and even renewed it in 1950, raising speculations that he wanted to return. In contrast, Sheila Watson argues that his Canadian connections inspired his greater vitriol. He served with the Canadian military as a painter-soldier during the First World War, and famously lived in Canada for five miserable years during the Second World War. Despite Lewis's best efforts to obfuscate his past, it has been uncovered that these links were less than the coincidence generally imagined; Lewis' family, on both his mother and father's side, had extensive Canadian connections (Dilworth 17). In fact, Lewis' great Uncle Charles Edward Romain was a prominent and wealthy patron of the arts in Toronto in the mid nineteenth century (18), and his grandmother was French Canadian – perhaps explaining why Lewis was baptized in Montreal. Lewis planned to explore and exploit this heritage in an unwritten novel called *Hill 100* that would have addressed Quebecois trappers, the mining life in Timmins, and “the social structure of the city of Toronto, which is in fact a vast mining camp” (19). As Prof. Fox has documented, Lewis on at least one occasion teased his audience with the possibility that he had First Nations blood and ancestry (20). And for the Canadianists, the life of one of Lewis' verifiable relatives, William Chisholm, who worked in Oakville's “white-oak stave trade,” helped to inspire Mazo de la Roche's *Jalna* series. Other Canadian connections, certainly more than I can summarize here, are catalogued in Catherine Mastin, Robert Stacey, and Thomas Dilworth's prodigious 200 page

catalogue called “*The Talented Intruder*”: *Wyndham Lewis in Canada* – proving that we are not stretching the bounds of credibility too much in probing Lewis’ relationship to Canadian modernism. *The Talented Intruder* advanced work already done by Sheila Watson in the 1967 special issue of *artscanada* that focused on Lewis’ Canadian work. Watson cleverly alludes to the design and layout of *The Art of Being Ruled* with her own typographical design. It was, in fact, a technique she developed in her Ph.D. dissertation on Lewis that was completed in 1964.

From Watson, we can expand this potential circle of Lewis-ites to Marshall McLuhan, both a friend and a follower of the English artist in his early career. McLuhan supervised Watson’s doctoral project on Lewis, and as supervisor, presents a model few of us could ever fulfill: for inspiration, he lent her an original Lewis drawing. The great modernist scholar Hugh Kenner, like Watson, applied to work with McLuhan for his Ph.D. and, despite the fact that it did not work out, the two became great correspondents. Through McLuhan, Canada had a legitimate portal into the now-canonized world of Modernism and, most prominently in the early years, directly to Lewis. Throughout the 50s and 60s, the office across the hall from McLuhan was occupied by John Reid, the Lewis imitator I mentioned earlier. Reid lived with Ezra Pound for nine months in Raopollo, Italy, where he first came into contact with Lewis. Reid had sent Lewis his first novel, *There Was a Tree*, a still-unpublished book written through “the Lewis exemplar” and that was characterised by the author himself for its adulation of our talented intruder (97). After purveying this first sample of Reid’s work, Lewis refused any further similar experiences. It is just such a tight network of entanglements, though, that provokes the possibility of a Canadian Vorticism.

In the maelstrom of this proposed Canadian Vorticism belongs Sheila Watson’s novel *The Double Hook*, published in 1959, that depicts the spiritual struggle of a community locked in

paralysis. McLuhan summarised the book as a portrait “of people in a simple frontier community in British Columbia trying to create a sort of unity in their inner lives by forming images of social cohesion and communication” (“Canada” 119). McLuhan’s summary evokes the book’s modernist search for order in chaos, and hints at the more avant-garde implications of this experimental Canadian classic. Watson died in Nanaimo in 1998, prompting, in 2003, the publication of her dissertation on Lewis and, in 2007, the appearance of a biography. Combined, these more recent publications draw attention to the substantial influence of Lewis on Watson’s aesthetics and writing. Much more directly than the Pratt-Lewis convergence, Watson found in Lewis a concrete answer to an aesthetic problem she had been wrestling with for decades on how “to get the narrator out of [my]” writing (Flahiff 48, hereafter *Always*) and yet let “the things I [know] create their own space” (49). The nature of this ambition gives us insight into Watson’s less acknowledged avant-gardism. Lewis’ direct impact is revealed in the 83 page transcription of Watson’s Paris journals made available in Flahiff’s biography.

On the 21st of October, 1955, Watson sent an early manuscript version of *The Double Hook* to Chatto and Windus, which she noted was to the same address as Leonard Woolf’s Hogarth Press (114). The manuscript was rejected and returned on the 21st of November (124). Three days later, according to her journal, she purchased two novels by Lewis – *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*, books two and three of his *Human Age* trilogy: they were, she wrote, “the best thing I’ve read for some time.” She took particular note of his detached narrative voice and perspective: “There is no malice, no excitement, no castigation” (125). The Paris years were difficult for Watson, whose marital problems provoke references to her “crushed” heart and led her to wonder at “how hard it is for an artist to live at all” (121). In contrast, the cool neutrality of Lewis’ supernatural “literature of ideas [...] of salvation” (125) provided her with a literary

model that both intelligently and elegantly limited emotionalism and avoided her own predilection for over-intrusive narrators. On the 23rd of November she purchased *The Apes of God*, read it, and by the 10th of January had transformed her study of Lewis's writing into a tidy aesthetic formula. Echoing her observations about Lewis' prose style, she declares, "It is absolutely necessary to liquidate anger, chagrin or contempt before writing. In short, a writer must have mastered the emotions before he can use the insight which the emotion has given him" (136).

Thus inspired, on the 26th of March, Watson began editing *The Double Hook* – taking out the narrator as a Joycean personality, taking out the history of the characters, taking out cultural references and backgrounds. She wrote in her journal on the 21st of April: "Now I ask myself if I have the power to make it come whole – to fuse completely character, event, setting" (151). By most scholarly accounts, she indeed managed to fuse the figures in her text with the ground in which they operated by dehistoricizing, even deracinating, her characters as my first quote implies. The characters, in confronting their spiritual paralysis, are born on the page, characterized by the extent of their willingness to embrace life and reject mechanical passivity. This shift is consistent with Lewis' own embrace of the active mind, and the orientation of his art to what McLuhan called the "pure present" (*Interior* 92). Or as Pound described him, "Wyndham Lewis, the man who was wrong about everything except the superiority of live mind to dead mind; for which basic verity God bless his holy name" (qtd. in Kenner xiii).

Watson's editing phase in Paris lasted four steady months. When the book was published, she had separated from her philandering husband Wilfred, and Lewis was by that point already three years deceased. Wilfred wrote to congratulate her, however, on the appearance of this remarkable first book. The way he phrased his congratulations is worth repeating for what it

reveals of both his own egotism and, more importantly, his sense of the text's genesis. He writes: "I and Wyndham Lewis [...] approve this book" (*Always* 166).

The novel's reception has grown gradually to the point that it is now generally regarded as one of the landmark texts in Canadian literary modernism, with some critics arguing further that its ahistorical focus on interactivity anticipates tropes and styles of postmodernism. *The Double Hook* should not be read as an imitation of Lewis – but rather it should be read with some awareness of the fact that Watson's engagement with his work helped her to edit and thereby hone the aesthetics at play in the book. In her dissertation, she describes Lewis' total project as developing "in a specific matrix [...] responsive to the conditions of its existence" (195). In other words, despite the slightly modified vocabulary, her theory of Lewis' work was identical to her own literary ambition of fusing figures with their ground. Such an ambition connects to the avant-garde which, as contemporary theorist Matei Calinescu explains, develops from a desire "to overthrow all the binding formal traditions of art [...] For they believed that to revolutionize art was the same as to revolutionize life" (112). Rereading and rethinking Sheila Watson through a potential Canadian Vorticism would invite, amongst other considerations, a re-examination of her figure/ground aesthetic initiative. For, rather than aspiring to a high modernist aesthetic integrity or a postmodern troubling, with the connection to Lewis we can read her text as part of an avant-garde attempt to fuse art and life outside of bourgeois institutions and stylistic conventions. Watson began her doctoral work on Lewis in 1956, under the supervision of Marshall McLuhan.

McLuhan's devotion to Lewis can be registered in his 1954 tribute to the publication of *Blast*. McLuhan's second book, the 17 page *Counterblast* manifesto, was intended to be a tribute to and a commemoration of Lewis's avant-garde magazine. Though the time-lag between the

parallel projects suggests Canada's paradoxical behind-the-curve avant-gardism, McLuhan did try to update Lewis's model to the "new media of communication" as well as to the Canadian context. Incidentally, to add another name to our growing list, McLuhan's *Counterblast* was designed by Harley Parker, a Toronto painter who was also swept up in the maelstrom of Canadian Vorticism.

Unlike the case of the novelist John Reid, the hierarchical model of imitation is of only limited value in discussing McLuhan's work. Critics like Glenn Willmott and Richard Cavell catalogue the complexity of McLuhan's early development, emerging out of New Criticism, Eisenstein's radical cinema, and his own direct response to modern art. Both critics, however, acknowledge that Lewis provided McLuhan with a perspective by which to regard the totality of the processes at play in contemporary culture and – perhaps more importantly – a technique by which to stage that perspective. McLuhan began reading Lewis voraciously in 1934 (Willmott 40) and was particularly inspired by *Time and Western Man* (Cavell 9-12). Poignantly, for those familiar with McLuhan's media theories, this landmark book provided a clear analogy between cinema and advertising linked in the figure of the passive "revolutionary simpleton" who characterises Western democracies. In Lewis' theory, this figure represents the end of "all *individual* continuity" (13). The isolated personality of the previous age dissolves into the sensual experience of the life-of-the-moment that characterises capitalist culture and "the perfect American." *Time and Western Man* presents a unified vision of the *Zeitgeist* of Western culture "battered and deadened" by its reification of the here-and-now, alienating the thinking man or what McLuhan would later characterise as "literate man". It is Lewis' total social vision, perpetually altered by science and consequently reflected in art that, Willmott argues, becomes "the fundamental project of McLuhan's work" (44). But whereas Lewis turned to satire to

expose the “truth” of his era’s ideology, McLuhan turned to a fusion of art and criticism that self-consciously parodies the forms he wanted to expose. McLuhan developed these ideas into his first major publication, *The Mechanical Bride* – a title that evokes Lewis’ critique of the machine-like nature of mundane human life. *The Mechanical Bride* is filled with conceptual borrowings from *Time and Western Man*, and even the design of McLuhan’s next book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, imitates Lewis (236). This latter book was written while McLuhan was supervising Watson’s dissertation, and it was his idea that her book also follow Lewis’ design template. Both were intent on using their writing to wake society up from, in Lewis’ terms, “the hysterical imbecility” induced by the “mesmeric methods” of media and advertising (*Time* 26). As McLuhan wrote in a letter to Ezra Pound in 1951, he regarded himself as taking the same position adopted by Lewis during the Vorticist period: “I am an intellectual thug who has been slowly accumulating a private arsenal with every intention of using it. In a mindless age every insight takes on the character of a lethal weapon.” (*Letters* 227). In 1953, McLuhan described Lewis as a “one man army-corps” (“Interior” 83), and in 1971, as if misquoting himself, described Lewis as “an avant-garde by himself” (64). In both contexts, McLuhan argues that Lewis was motivated by the singular aim of delivering “us from the bondage of primitive religion” (85), an ambition McLuhan enthusiastically embraced for himself. His 1947 essay “American Advertising,” for instance, lambastes the “strong totalitarian squint” of contemporary advertising with its aim to produce “a zombie horde” (14) driven by monolithically constructed fears and desires. His essay argues for increased educational budgets and new educational techniques to combat the subconscious impact of advertising. Rereading and rethinking Marshall McLuhan through a potential Canadian Vorticism would invite, amongst other considerations, a re-examination of his blending of theory, traditional literary criticism, and experimental writing.

For, rather than indicating sloppy scholarship or a detached conservative perspective, with the connection to Lewis we can read his theories and his critical style as an avant-garde attempt to disrupt the bourgeois institutions of art and reveal how they structure and organize life in the West.

With McLuhan and Watson, and Pratt and Reid in the broader matrix, we have a set of prominent Canadian examples whose work developed out of their engagement and imitation of Lewis. The final example I would like to discuss is Bertram Brooker, a figure I have taken to calling Canada's first avant-gardist. He was our first abstract painter, winner of the country's first Governor-General's award for fiction, an experimental poet, a playwright, and an art critic. In other words, he was more like Lewis than any other Canadian I have yet come across – except for the fact that he dwelt in relative obscurity throughout his life. Whereas Lewis handed his first short-stories directly to Ford Madox Ford in London in 1909 (Kenner 1), Brooker that same year lived in the small village of Neepawa, Manitoba, working on the railway, where his stories and essays were considered by the local media to be entirely unpublishable. While his experimental work suffered almost total neglect, Brooker managed to avoid succumbing to the pressures of standardization which would have meant abandoning his unabashedly grandiose literary ambitions. Instead, he developed a theory of a *virtual* movement he called Ultimatism based on the idea of an Ultra-homo, and began scanning global literature in search of like-minded individuals. In defence of this virtual avant-garde, he wrote manifestos, stories, and plays, and produced illustrations through which we can recognize the influence of Futurism – particularly Russian Futurism. He transformed himself, literally, into a one-man avant-garde. He also, during the early period, became aware of Lewis, producing in 1913 an image I was not able to

reproduce for this symposium called “Vortexing upwards and outwards through vaster and greater births.”

Brooker relocated to Lawren Harris’ Toronto, discovered mysticism – affording him even further insight into Kandinsky’s spiritualized abstractions – and became an advocate for a spiritual revolution that he described through the idea of an evolutionary spread of cosmic consciousness. Two weeks before Brooker officially became Canada’s first abstract painter in 1927, he gave a lecture on William Blake and Lewis’ *Time and Western Man* at Toronto’s Hart House (ironically, a venue Lewis satirized a decade later in *America I Presume*). Borrowing from Lewis, Brooker introduced his talk by arguing against the “splitting up of artistic tendencies into schools and groups, each with their blasts and manifestoes” (“Blake” 1). Brooker’s spiritual revolution was predicated on a grand cosmic unity, and he therefore resisted the partisanship of groups, schools, and movements. He turned to one of Lewis’ most mystical utterances to contradict the modernist artistic disunity: he quotes Lewis in *The Enemy* writing: “If you say that creative art is a spell, a talisman, an incantation – that it is magic, in short; there, too, I believe you would be correctly describing it. That the artist uses and manipulates a supernatural power seems very likely.” Brooker interprets Lewis’ supernaturalism through the *Weltanschauung* of mystical modernism: “He means more – he means that to be at all, in any real sense, is to become one with the world of imagination, to give up the self, literally, to god, who is, so to speak, the sum of human imagination” (11). It was by this act of surrender – reminiscent of Pullman’s earnest prayers and ascension at the end of *The Human Age* – that Brooker reasoned artists could evolve into cosmic consciousness. Society in general and Canada in particular needed to be remade in order to facilitate this general awakening. Similar to the Pratt

convergence, the two advocated for a parallel avant-garde approach to art and society – and by avant-garde, I mean revolutionary.

In his essays on Canadian modernism throughout the 1920s, Brooker frequently borrows Lewis's particular criticisms of Joyce, Eliot, Pound, and Gertrude Stein and their distortion of time. By 1930, however, in an essay called "Prophet's Wanted," Brooker carefully distinguishes his own mystical idealism from Lewis – whom he critiques for not being revolutionary enough. Lewis, he writes, cries "in the wilderness of pessimism [...] bewailing what men have lost, and yet [he is] afraid [...] to die into life" (11). Brooker dismisses Lewis, in the end, as "cloistered and unadventurous" unwilling to accept that "soon" the human race will be "utterly changed." Lewis, he realized, despite a revolutionary imagination, was not actively working to support a specific revolution. For his part, Brooker entered the world of advertising conscious of the fact that it had the power to change society, and hoped to harness that power to move humanity to what he called "The Next Beyond": "man will someday be surpassed." Though he would eventually sour to the potential of advertising, for decades Brooker envisioned a vortex of art, media, and advertising that would disrupt all of the lifeless habits of Western culture. Rereading and rethinking Bertram Brooker through a potential Canadian Vorticism would invite, amongst other considerations, a re-examination of his mystical and experimental aesthetics. For, rather than interpreting his criticisms of Joyce, Eliot, and Stein as sign of either a colonial cultural lag or a Coleridgean Romanticism, with the connection to Lewis we can read his aesthetic project as commiserate with other avant-garde rejections of High Modernism and aestheticism.

This potential Canadian Vorticism invites a re-examination of both the avant-gardeness of modern Canadian letters and the transnational influence of Wyndham Lewis. Through Watson, McLuhan, and Brooker we have three prominent examples of Canadians who attempted

to use their writing to overcome the separation of art from life. They were each unique in their approach to this problem, and hardly colonial acolytes in a Vorticist school. The common inspiration they took from Lewis was not imitative, nor static, but generative and dynamic. It provided them with an aesthetic vocabulary suitable for addressing the mythological structures underpinning their social world. It helped them to reconsider how the eurocentric world view might be remade, revolutionized and as Lewis wrote in *The Art of Being Ruled* “strangled off the stage” in preparation for a new “world-consciousness” (67). Lewis, himself, offered forth a compelling example of a new world-consciousness.

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