The Experiment of Vorticist Drama:
Wyndham Lewis and
"Enemy of the Stars"

SCOTT KLEIN

Wyndham Lewis was the only writer and painter in England during the early part of the twentieth century who was consistently engaged by the continental avant-garde. His movement, vorticism, spearheaded by the 1914 magazine Blast, brought the radicalism of futurism and cubism into British painting and the theoretical concerns of continental manifestos into English writing, proclaiming both the importance of the individual and the artist's freedom from Romantic and Victorian thought. Blast also contains an attempt at vorticist drama, "Enemy of the Stars." This prose experiment, comparable in its extravagant unperformability to works by the Russian futurists and Artaud, occupies a crucial position in Lewis's work. The centerpiece of Blast, it attempts to demonstrate that language can be abstracted from representation as earlier experimentation had done with the visual arts. Yet in contrast to its continental fellows its dramatic form is a matter of Lewis's assertion rather thanactable form. Its scenes are entirely composed of narrative prose, which makes liberal use of the block capitals typical of Blast's manifestos; the text is undivided into autonomous speaking parts. Passages of abstract description alternate with more conventional dialogue that is nonetheless presented novelistically, spoken passages placed between quotation marks rather than cued as speeches by particular actors. "Enemy of the Stars," in short, is fully presented in readerly form, and is a play only insofar as Lewis declared it to be so.

Attention to "Enemy of the Stars" has tended to diminish the theoretical problems raised by its overt assumption of a form it only
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

problematically occupies, scanting the issues of its narrative in favor of analyzing the audacity of its style.¹ Yet the relationship between the narrative of "Enemy of the Stars" and its style illuminates a paradigmatic crux in Lewis's work. The concerns of his nascent modernism are theoretically and practically incompatible with its chosen genre, and that incompatibility is a key contradiction of the vorticist aesthetic, particularly in its presentation of the individual artist as self-reliant creator of new forms. "Enemy of the Stars" narrates the artistic struggle of mind against nature as a parable of the vorticist movement's own contradictory attitude toward tradition and creation. This mode is made clearer when the play is positioned first within vorticism itself and then within the tradition of Romantic "closet" drama, the philosophic form that "Enemy of the Stars" both repudiates and obliquely follows.

To explore the modernism of the play one must look first at the manifestos of Blast. Vorticism was based upon graphic models and the ascendancy in Europe of artistic abstraction. It also rejected the turn to the past as both political and aesthetic gesture. According to Lewis England was built upon "Dickens' sentimental ghoul-like gloatimg over the death of little Nell" (Blast 133). Even more than the historically defined products of the Victorian age Blast objects to Romanticism, which Lewis understands not so much as a period as a philosophical approach that led to, and included, the sentimentality of the Victorians. Although Blast criticizes Keats directly (Blast 133), Lewis, with T. E. Hulme, associated "romantic" art more generally with habits of thought unrelated to particular historical conditions. For Lewis Romanticism meant temporality, and he therefore rejected his contemporary futurism as "romantic" for fetishizing time, while he lauded "classicism," which emphasized hard-edged form, or space. That English artists should be the "great enemies of Romance" is Blast's rallying cry (Blast 41), for romance is the "fostering of unfactual conditions" (Blast 8) whether that fostering be the excessive valuation of time or the sentimentalizing of mass culture. Lewis indeed conflates the futurist movement with the excesses of Victorian decadence and realism: "Wilde gushed twenty years ago about the beauty of machinery," Lewis writes, "Gissing, in his romantic delight with modern housing was futurist in this sense" (Blast 8).²

Against this nineteenth-century model of retrogressive excess Lewis proposes the revolutionary classicist, the independent self devoted to the aesthetic exploration of space. This spatiality depended upon the shaping power of the artist, whom Lewis envisioned as a self
independent from the world, producing "vortices" of self-enclosed geometries. Art was imperfect when it dealt too much with the unformed materials of nature, and threatened the integrity of the self. The true artist or vorticist, unlike the Romantic, stands aloof from the seductions and divisions of the external. He creates forms that reaffirm, rather than threaten, his individuality and independence. Yet while the artist stands in opposition to the world, he is himself the product of oppositions. In Blast Lewis describes the vorticist's ability to create and hold oppositions within the self, containing and therefore achieving a "harmonious and sane duality," as a function of a will to artistic power. In the paradoxical language typical of avant-garde movements of the period, he emerges as the generator and container of doubleness:

1. Beyond action and reaction we would establish ourselves.
2. We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structures of adolescent clearness between two extremes.
3. We discharge ourselves on both sides.
4. We fight first for one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause, which is neither side or both sides and ours. (Blast 30)

In this passage the vorticist is above all an omnipotent selfhood. "Beyond Action and Reaction we would establish ourselves" expresses his transcendental goal, which is Nietzsche's good and evil translated into the painter's dialectic of physical law. Similarly Nietzschean are Lewis's implicit claims for the vorticist's ability to control his environment. Although the "would" of "we would establish ourselves" suggests intention rather than ability, Lewis unambiguously grants his artist the power to break free of the boundaries that confine realist painters—the artist starts from a "chosen" world rather than the received phenomena of the external. He erects "violent structures" of signification rather than working within the parameters typically available to the artist.

"We establish ourselves" therefore roots the vorticist in the closed system of self-nomination. The artist is empowered by his own consciousness rather than by the surfaces of the world, by his sheer ability, as Lewis writes, to break free from origin, to "invent [him]self properly." Lewis's vocabulary further suggests his oppositional independence. "We discharge ourselves on both sides," adapts the language of both battle and purgation. The vorticist artist is a "Primitive Mercenary," that is, one who is free of allegiance, and is therefore able to turn against, rather than surrender to, the external world. The sole
containing force for his own energies, Lewis's ideal artist is an unpredicated model of the powerful self. Able to hold dualities in balance as part of his overarching coherence, he stands free of the external—both the inanimate world and the world of other people.

This emphasis on the creative individual's singularity and paradoxical doubleness finds its detailed expression in "Enemy of the Stars." As independence from the other (which includes the past and mass culture) is Lewis's first requirement of creation, it is suitably, therefore, the concern of the narrative. Arghol, the protagonist, is an intellectual who "has come to fight a ghost. Humanity" (Blast 61). He represents the possibility of the self's independence, a "statue-mirage of Liberty in the great desert" of human affairs (Blast 59). He stands against nature even as he uses it for his obscure and metaphorical purposes. He is the "enemy of the stars" of the title, who stands alone as a "MAGNET OF SUBTLE, VAST, SELFISH THINGS" (Blast 61) and attempts to give some shape to the "archaic blank wilderness of the universe" (Blast 64). Lewis stresses that Arghol is discontinuous with the world around him in his descriptions of the landscape—"The canal ran in one direction, his blood weakly, in the opposite." Arghol rejects the world of desire in order to achieve a transcendent distance from it.

Like the vorticist, he wants to "leave violently slow monotonous life" in order to enter the void that is the merging of paradoxical opposites, to "take header into the boiling starry cold." He hopes to achieve this transcendence through solitude. If he keeps the "fire of friction unspent in solitariness," he explains to Hanp, he will "reach the stars" (Blast 67). Hanp, on the other hand, epitomizes the "BLACK BOURGEOIS ASPIRATIONS" that threaten to undermine Arghol's "BLATANT VIRTUOSITY OF SELF" (Blast 59); he is an indistinct form who merges with all around him. Arghol castigates him in the same metaphoric terms with which Lewis dismisses the Romantic artist—"You cling to any object," he says, "dig your nails in earth, not to drop into it" (Blast 67). Arghol sees in Hanp only a general portrait of homogeneous mankind, an "anonymous form of the vastness of humanity" (Blast 71) that he must counteract with his theories of selfhood. He asserts that the self represents the opposite of Hanp's mass mediocrity. "Between Personality and Mankind it is always a question of dog and cat," Arghol states, "they are diametrically opposed species" (Blast 66). He therefore rejects all that is not the self as repulsive to the purity of the individual, blaming the other for its gradual destruction—"The process and condition of life, without exception, is a grotesque degradation and 'soillure' of the original
solitude of the soul. There is no help for it. . . . Anything but yourself is
dirt. Anybody that is” (Blast 70).

In living out this startlingly egoistic and misanthropic philosophy,
moreover, Arghol rejects all action, even in self-protection. When Hanp
suggests that he avenge himself against the uncle who appears regularly
to beat him, for instance, Arghol declines, for any contact with the
other, however defensive, can only tarnish the self. Arghol considers
himself to be a superior force, “too superb ever to lift a finger when
harmed,” he argues, and cannot lower himself by responding to the
world (Blast 67). In rejecting the kinetic impulses of life, moreover, he
believes he can ultimately transcend mortality. He trusts that the
metaphysical weight of his adopted symbols can prevent his dissolution.
His intellectual activities are a form of exercise to ward off destruction,
the production of an art that can transcend time. “The stone of the stars
will do for my seal and emblem,” he says, “I practice with it,
monotonously ‘putting,’ that I may hit Death when he comes” (Blast 70).

Yet as the play progresses it becomes clear that Arghol, unlike the
ideal artist of Lewis’s manifestos, cannot protect himself from the world
through his trust in self and symbols. When Hanp attacks Arghol after
being contemptuously dismissed as a parasite, Arghol has no choice but
to fight back in Hanp’s sphere of “life,” “break[ing] vows and spoil[ing]
continuity of instinctual behavior” (Blast 74). He becomes an extension
of the world rather than its opposite. He becomes a “soft, blunt paw of
Nature” (Blast 75) and loses his distinctiveness, falling into Hanp’s
condition of integration with the surrounding real as “part of the
responsive landscape” (Blast 76). This grudging acceptance of nature
seals Arghol’s downfall. Infuriated by his inconsistency and in “sullen
indignation at Arghol ACTING, he who had not the right to act” (Blast
80), Hanp turns against him a second time and murders him as he
sleeps.

Arghol’s defense against Hanp therefore foreshadows his own
destruction. Hanp cannot resolve the contradictions between Arghol’s
transcendent theories and worldly actions without obliterating their
source. Arghol’s death is Hanp’s dramatic proof that despite his
opposition to nature Arghol is still “imprisoned in a meshed socket of
existence” (Blast 64). Yet although Hanp is the direct agent of his death,
Arghol’s downfall results logically from his programmatic rejection of
the other. This is implicit in the dream that Arghol has before his death.
He remembers himself as a student in the city who, furious with the
confinement of his room, rejects the book that lies “stalely open” before
him, Einege und Sein Eigenkeit by the German philosopher Max Stirner
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

(Blast 76). Disgusted with the book as yet another of the tarnishing influences of the external world, Arghol flings it from his window. He calls it “one of the seven arrows in my martyr mind,” and dismisses it both because it is a drain of the authenticity of the self and because its otherness is a perverse call to external experience—“These books are all parasites . . . eternal prostitute” (Blast 77). A dream figure appears at the door to return the book, however, a “young man he had known in the town” who changes first into Hanp and then into a “self-possessed” and “free” image, “Stirner as he imagined him” (Blast 77). The figure ignores Arghol’s repeated attempts to eject him, and, as Stirner, provokes Arghol into a repetition of his recent struggle with Hanp—“A scrap ensued, physical experiences of recent fight recurring” (Blast 77).

Although Arghol succeeds in banishing the dream figure from his room, his rejection of Stirner is puzzling. As Tom Kinnimont has noted, Stirner’s ideas are substantially those of Arghol, and, insofar as Arghol is a figure of Lewis, of Lewis himself. Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum asserts the truth of the self, and attempts to establish its independence from society’s falsehoods and the limitations of the real by declaring that the self is all-sufficient, its own master and owner. For Stirner, as for Arghol, the self is an ultimate good that can be achieved only by egoistically conserving one’s power. “My own I am at all times and under all circumstances,” he writes, “if I do not throw myself away on others” (Stirner 112). Stirner emphasizes that man needs to cast off the bonds of the external world, rejecting desire and the societal constructs that limit his autonomy. “I am my own only when I am mastered by myself,” he writes, “instead of being mastered by sensuality, or by anything else . . . what is of use to me . . . my selfishness pursues” (125). The similarity of Stirner’s formulations to those of Arghol is obvious. Yet Der Einzige also provides the actions of “Enemy of the Stars” with their underlying metaphor. Stirner describes man as a slave who must endure the torments of a mastering reality in order to assert his natural power:

The fetters of reality cut the sharpest welts in my flesh every moment. But my own I remain. Given up as a serf to a master, I think only of myself and my own advantage; his blows strike me indeed, I am not free from them; but I endure them only for my benefit, perhaps in order to deceive him and make him secure by the semblance of patience, or, again, not to draw worse upon myself by subordination. But, as I keep my eye upon myself and my selfishness, I take by the forelock the first good opportunity to trample the slave holder into the dust. (113)

This is also the response to the self’s limitations represented in the
play by Arghol’s rejection of action and Hanp’s revenge. Arghol refuses
to fight against his uncle, the “master” of the play (Blast 85) for Stirner’s
reasons. He will not condescend to act because his uncle is of use to
him—“He loads my plate” Arghol explains (Blast 69). Moreover, like
Stirner’s self, Arghol obscurely intends to use the energy of the attacks
to liberate himself from mastery, “as prisoner his bowl or sheet for
escape: not as means of idle humiliation” (Blast 68). Yet Arghol is also a
master, to Hanp, and he abuses his disciple as severely as he is himself
maltreated by his uncle. Hanp’s revenge is therefore also a response to
the play’s avowal of the self’s power. He endures Arghol’s abuse, like
Stirner’s selfhood, for his own benefit, eagerly accepting it because it is
the only way he can find out about the city, which desire has placed him
“under Arghol’s touch” (Blast 72). Only when Arghol dismisses him
completely does he take the occasion of Arghol’s sleep to “trample him
into the dust.” Both Arghol and Hanp therefore act according to
Stirner’s ideas of the self. Arghol explicitly presents the theoretical side
of philosophical egoism, while Hanp embodies the destructive action of
that theory. “I serve my freedom with regard to the world in the degree
that I make the world my own” (120), Stirner concludes; both Arghol,
who claims to dominate the stars, and Hanp, who murders his master,
are versions of the self that seeks its freedom through the egoistic
domination of its environment.

Arghol’s rejection of Stirner exposes the defective contradictions in
his own thought. If he rejects the other simply because it is not the self,
then Arghol blinds himself to the possibility that the object of his scorn,
in this case Stirner, may be an equal who shares his ideas and therefore
his power. When he rejects Stirner on the automatic grounds of his
externality, therefore, Arghol unwittingly rejects his own selfhood. The
dream figure, who initially appears as “a young man he had known in
the town, but now saw for the first time, seemingly” (Blast 77) can be
read as a figure of Arghol’s division. As an aspect of the self he “had
known in town” the figure offers him the literal opportunity to see
himself for the first time. He gives Arghol the chance to reintegrate his
personality by reaccepting the book that he has rejected, implicitly
offering him the awareness that his self is also, in a sense, other. Their
fight demonstrates, however, that Arghol refuses to recognize the
contradictions implicit in the cult of selfhood. By throwing Stirner’s
book from the window he both adheres to his philosophy of selfhood
and transgresses it. By refusing to reaccept it he completes his
destruction. Arghol emerges from the fight with only a partial
understanding of his endangered self. He tears up his books, and in a
paradoxical effort to reclaim his identity he wanders through the streets of the city denying himself to those he meets—"I am not Arghol," he claims, "This man has been masquerading as me" (Blast 78).

Yet although Arghol believes he can control the logic of his self with his paradoxes, his avowals only underscore his actual loss of control. Lewis has described him earlier in the play as "a large open book, full of truth and insults" (Blast 71). When he destroys all of his books the reader understands that he has completed metaphorically the eradication of the self that began with his rejection of Stirner. When he returns to the wheelwright's yard at the play's beginning, then, he has already been defeated. In rejecting the other he has already rejected himself.6

"Enemy of the Stars" is therefore a narrative about failure. Arghol's theories foreshadow his destruction, for he can no more overcome the material world than he can be consistent with himself. His fall, as Lewis warns the reader in the play's first line, is part of an "IMMENSE COLLAPSE OF CHRONIC PHILOSOPHY," not simply of temporal philosophy but of continuous and excessive thought (Blast 59). "Enemy of the Stars" therefore occupies a problematic position within Blast. Where the manifestos insist that the autonomous self is the basis of the artist's power, the play both rejects the efficacy of that philosophy and exposes the vorticist self as a divisive delusion. Arghol's theories serve only to divide him from himself, and he and Hanp can only be united in their mutual obliteration. The play's content is therefore opposed to that of the manifestos.

In the play opposites are irreconcilable, for they result only in destruction. In the manifestos, on the other hand, the balance of oppositions leads to a higher creativity. "Enemy of the Stars" therefore presents the reader of Blast with a fundamental paradox. If the manifestos' version of opposition is authentic, then the play's apparent contradiction of that truth is not a real contradiction. It can be read as one of the "opposite statements of a chosen world" that the artist erects as part of his power, an extreme whose denial makes the self stronger. Yet the struggle between apparent opposites has quite different results within the play. The intellectual is unable to balance himself against his negation, and the powerlessness of his rhetoric leads to his destruction. "Enemy of the Stars" therefore threatens to invalidate the very principles upon which the manifestos are erected even while formally fulfilling them.

The paradox is underlined by Lewis's presentation of his failed hero as a quintessential practitioner of the manifestos' doctrines. Like Lewis's ideal artist he tries to use a studied inactivity to escape from
the "action and reaction" of common life. His approach to the world is familiarly figurative and double. According to Hanp, Arghol's logic is mysterious, his association of opposites inescrutable—like the vorticist "He gave men one image with one hand, and at the same time a second, its antidote with the other" (Blast 80). Moreover, the play takes place in a "wheelwright’s yard" (Blast 62), a setting where whirling products, metaphorical versions of the vortex, are created. Like the vorticist, moreover—or at least the vorticist author of "Enemy of the Stars"—Arghol is a metaphorical playwright, creating from the materials of nature that he attempts to rule and elude—"The stars are his cast." Arghol's struggles are therefore implicitly the struggles of his author, an identification made explicit in Lewis's introduction to the play. In the "advertisement" that precedes it Lewis writes that "Enemy of the Stars" is a version of the conflict between an artist and his audience. He informs the reader that the play is "VERY WELL ACTED BY YOU AND ME" (Blast 55). (One notes already the element of agon with the unsympathetic readership in Blast at large, where Lewis lambastes his own scoffing readers: "CURSE those who will hang over this Manifesto with SILLY CANINES exposed" [Blast 17].) Lewis therefore appears to implicate himself in his own fictional designs. Just as Arghol falls prey to self-contradiction by dismissing the text of himself as his opposite, Lewis seems to negate himself by creating a text whose content suggests his own necessary failure.

The play's narrative of division and failure, however, can be read as a reflection of its problematic position within both Lewis's artistic canon and the tradition of "readerly" drama. Lewis wrote "Enemy of the Stars" with the goal of inventing a vorticist prose, and it stands out strikingly from the other prose offerings in Blast, stylistically conservative efforts by Ford Madox Ford and Rebecca West. He hoped to create a language that would be analogous to his painterly abstractions, revivifying literature with nonrepresentational techniques borrowed from other forms of modernism. "My literary contemporaries I looked upon as too bookish and not keeping pace with the visual revolution," he later explained. "A kind of play, 'The Enemy of the Stars' ... was my attempt to show them the way" (Lewis, Rude Assignment 129). Yet the relative conservatism of the resulting abstraction of language is striking next to the visual experimentation of the canvases that Lewis reproduced in Blast under the play's rubric. Here, for instance, is an example of description from the middle of the play: "Throats iron eternities, drinking heavy radiance, limbs towers of blatant light, the
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

stars poised immensely distant, with their metal sides, pantheistic machines" (Blast 64).

Lewis here distorts expected structure and connotation, much as he rejected expected shapes in his canvases. He places short phrases in apposition without consistent grammatical markers, juxtaposes nouns illogically, and uses verbs to shape disjunct fragments within the sentence rather than to relate them to one another. Yet the sentence’s grammar can be easily normalized. If one places the word “are” between “throats” and “iron,” “limbs” and “towers,” “stars” and “poised,” the apparent idiosyncrasy of the sentence’s structure is recontained as “proper” English. It depends upon the elision, rather than the subversion, of traditional perceptual markers, and its syntax can still be perceived through its apparent discontinuities. The abstraction of its content is similarly limited. A phrase such as “throats iron eternities” depends entirely upon juxtaposition for its abstract effect. The words invoke three distinct images, whose proximity creates an aggregate nonrepresentational image. Yet even if the phrase as a whole has no direct corollary in the world, and is therefore abstract, its components remain indivisibly referential. The words “throat” “iron” and “eternities” always invoke real objects or concepts separate yet pragmatically connected to the words themselves, even when they are juxtaposed in otherwise extravagant contexts. Lewis himself condemned juxtaposition for artistic effect in his later criticisms of surrealism. Its interest was psychological rather than pictorial, he wrote, for it arranged “the same old units of the same old stock-in-trade” in novel patterns but added nothing to the vocabulary of representation (Lewis, “Super-Nature Versus Super-Real” 333). By Lewis’s own stringent criteria, therefore, abstraction and language are intrinsically incompatible. Words, more than visual symbols, are inseparable from their logical systems and fixed referents. Sentences cannot be radically distorted without obliterating their structural sense, while the words themselves can never be separated entirely from the signified.

Lewis would later admit the hopelessness of the experiment. The writing of Tarr, he explains in Rude Assignment, made him see “that words and syntax were not susceptible of transformation into abstract terms” (129). Later in Men without Art he states the more general disbelief “that anything in the literary field can be done that will correspond with what has been called ‘abstract design’” (11). The form as well as the content of “Enemy of the Stars” already suggest its contradictions with his ideal art. By designating his prose experiment a “play” Lewis emphasized the work’s visual origin; it is intended to be
“seen” rather than read, “acted by you and me” rather than confined to the page. By presenting it as drama Lewis draws particular attention to those aspects of “Enemy of the Stars” that coexist uneasily with vorticist ideals. As narrative it necessarily unfolds over time; its linearity emphasizes and replicates the temporal nature of the signs with which it is constructed. As drama, moreover, it necessarily places action in its foreground. Its visual and narrative interest must be propelled by the same kinetic surrender to desire that the manifestos associate with fragmentation. Arghol is condemned as much by the logic of the dramatic form as his ideas. He cannot avoid nature or mortality, for the language in which he is described cannot transcend a synchrony or the necessary presentation of action. His failure of transcendence within the play mirrors Lewis’s self-created failure of form. As author Lewis cannot escape the demands of the word and its related structures of syntax and narrative. His use of narrative language is therefore a capitulation to the temporal desire and explicit representation that vorticism elsewhere rejects. Like Arghol’s unwilling acceptance of nature Lewis’s use of the signs of language intrinsically contradicts his claims to power.

The very unperformability of “Enemy of the Stars” is therefore a part of the aesthetic implication of its narrative. In order to reject action and desire one must erect a language that can remain only theoretical. “Enemy of the Stars” therefore operates within Blast both as a reminder of the paradoxes of the transcendental aspects of the vorticist position, and of its own paradox: as modernist drama, it is rooted in a self-contradictory vision of representation inimical to its own expressed intentions. It can be enacted only as an act of cognition by reader and author, and the tale it tells is of the author’s dissolution.

As drama, moreover, it marks a problematic historical return of the nineteenth-century models against which vorticism has implicitly defined itself. Arghol’s murder by Hanp is an example of the Gothic archetype of the doppelgänger, in which a divided and unacknowledged part of the self returns to wreak destruction upon the agent of its own repression. This narrative motif of German Romanticism persists in Lewis’s work despite the thematic denial of Romanticism as a historical category, a pattern similarly visible in the persistence of E. T. A. Hoffman and Dostoyevski in Tarr. But these terms suggest the more curious generic affiliations of “Enemy of the Stars” as a programmatically unperformable “play.” For it is surprisingly closer in generic intent to the verse drama of the English Romantics, in which an
TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

essentially non-narrative form is pressed into narrative service, than to
the theatrical pieces of its contemporary European avant-garde.

This is particularly true of its dramatic motifs. In his study of
English poetic drama from Wordsworth to Beddoes, Alan Richardson
has abstracted the narrative features that bind together prominent
representatives of the genre. The plays deal with the history of an
individual protagonist's consciousness; they hinge upon highly
rhetorical confrontations between the protagonist and his opposite,
who represents an aspect of the divided consciousness of the hero.
The hero is seduced into transgression by his daimon and lapses into
repetition of that transgression, having become dependent upon his
Other, as Hegel's master and slave come to depend dialectically upon
one another. Finally, the divisions within the protagonist revealed, he
becomes destructive, either toward others (cynically replaying his own
seduction into transgression with another) or toward himself.8

The pattern of Manfred and works that resemble it is also that of
"Enemy of the Stars." Arghol is seduced into action by Hanp in an
atmosphere of intense rhetorical opposition (here including the stylistic
opposition of non-narrative vorticist prose against the demands of
action), which betrays Arghol into his own repetitions. The dream of
struggle repeats Hanp's attack, as Hanp's attack is itself a repetition of
the attack of Arghol's uncle. Arghol's dependence on his uncle—"he
loads my plate"—is itself a Hegelian reduplication of Hanp's depend-
dence upon Arghol, as the importance of Stirner's work here,
formatively influenced by Hegel, grudgingly suggests.9 And Arghol
recognizes overtly that Hanp is a part of himself—"Why do I speak to
you? . . .," he says, "It's not to you but myself. . . . You are an unclean
little beast, crept gloomily out of my ego" (Blast 73). The narrative of
Hanp's murder of Arghol is therefore, as Richardson notes of Manfred,
"less a celebration of isolated subjectivity than a critique of the false
assumptions behind psychic autonomy" (5). The unitary protagonist is
revealed to be divided, and his transgressions against his self destroy
him.

To reclaim "Enemy of the Stars" as what Byron called "mental
theatre" is not simply to note that it fits into a preexistent pattern of
motif and form, but to insist upon a family resemblance between
nominally diverse works that deal with similar themes of rebellion and
individuality, including such works as Arnold's "Emptecles on Etna,"
and work through their themes with analogous styles and narratives.10
Like the Romantics, Lewis was attempting to forge a style that was by
definition private, to construct a personal language. Yet this essentially
lyric impulse (for Lewis the creation of a style rather than a narrative form) is in conflict with the necessity of the artist’s public pronouncement of that style. The verse or readerly drama is caught between the realms of the non-narrative and the public realm of narrative, and is produced as the problematic product of that dialectic. The divisions between ideal and actual, private and public, are enacted in Lewis and in the plays that share his representational concerns, by the work’s characters, who are themselves rent by self-destructive yet potentially transcendental division. And this may in turn be seen as part of the legacy of the English theater itself, which traces its heritage not from the interplay of individuality and society implied by the structure of chorus and individual performer of the Greeks, but from the dialogic dramas of Seneca. In Seneca, unlike Aeschylus and Sophocles, the philosopher/author, like Lewis, divides issues of thought into characters that reify, through the logic of the dramatic form, the spectacle of mutilation rather than cultural affirmation.¹¹

Vorticism and “Enemy of the Stars” do not merely recapitulate the forms and genres of the Romanticism that Blast claims implicitly to reject, nor the tradition of philosophic drama since Seneca. Yet the avant-garde reappropriation of outmoded forms, the philosopher/poet’s divided voice enacted through warring opposites, the tragedy of consciousness and self ending in destruction, all suggest continuity rather than break between the avant-garde practices of the early nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Nor are other precedents absent in the vorticist experiment. From Arnold, indeed, Lewis may have gained the insight, as he expresses elsewhere in the manifestos, that “pessimism [is] the triumphant note in modern art” (Blast 145).

From Shakespeare Lewis learned tragic irony, the sense, as he says in The Lion and the Fox, that Shakespeare’s characters are caught in “a real action; whereas they come from, and naturally inhabit, an ideal world” (187). But the shadowing of the genre of the unperformable play suggests most powerfully the persistence of the myth of the Prometheus creative impulse within the avant-garde, and reveals, by utilizing a form that contains its own critique, that its author, like its hero, can be led into the tragic transgression enacted by style and form. In “Enemy of the Stars” Lewis therefore reveals the “fostering of unactual conditions,” his own definition of Romanticism, rife within his own avant-garde. The play, by insisting upon its own programmatic unperformability, exposes the degree to which the stylistic experimen-
tation of vorticism is its own unperformable act, containing within itself the failure of its own transcendence—of language, self, and narrative genre.

NOTES

1 See Dasenbrock, ch. 4. Kenner has noted that the narrative of "Enemy of the Stars" is a determining model for Lewis's later fiction, while Flory has called the play "a serious, eloquent and complex piece of self-analysis" (92). Lewis's most astute recent critic, Fredric Jameson, however, leaves Lewis's vorticist period, including "Enemy of the Stars," largely undiscussed. Lewis himself produced a weaker revision in 1932, long after the vorticist period, intended to make the play more "performable."

2 The manifestos particularly attack the Victorian age. "BLAST years 1837 to 1900" Blast declares unequivocally (Blast 18) and declares its independence from the "sacripant [sic] past" (Blast 7). This independence is both cultural and aesthetic, embodied in the physicality of England as well as its artistic products. The fog of London is the "VICTORIAN VAMPIRE" (Blast 11), itself a remnant of the "GLOOMY VICTORIAN CIRCUS" (Blast 11) of the city as a whole, which is itself constituted as a "CHAOS OF ENOCH ARDENS" (Blast 19).

3 Lewis makes this description explicit in the 1932 revision, adding "Nature and he pursue opposite paths, in a hostile polarity." See Lewis, Collected Poems and Plays 148.

4 Lewis misquotes the book's correct title, Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum. Alan Munton suggests that Lewis was working from the memory of reading the German original when he was himself a student (Collected Poems and Plays 221).

5 See Kinnimont 5–6. Kinnimont notes that Stirner embodies "a triumphant egotism with which Lewis, or at least Arghol, must have been in some sympathy." He concludes that the altercation is an "obscure" example of vorticism's inexplicable contradictions.

6 Lewis's repetition of this scene late in his career—the rejection of a revelatory text as the symbolic prelude to a protagonist's self-destruction—may be taken as an indication of its centrality to the issues raised by his work. In his last important novel, Self Condemned (1954), Lewis's protagonist René Harding throws a copy of Middlemarch over the side of a ship. Unwilling to recognize that his intellectual and emotional frigidity will drive his wife to suicide and turn him into a "glacial shell of a man," Harding refuses to read Eliot because of his own mirroring of the text. He is unwilling to recognize himself in Eliot's Casaubon, much as Arghol is unwilling to recognize himself in Stirner, with results made clear by the novel's title.

7 See, for example, "Plan of War" and "Slow Attack," which are reproduced between the title and the text of "Enemy of the Stars," between pp. 55 and 57, Blast 1.

8 See Richardson, introd. Richardson bases his analysis upon close readings of Wordsworth's The Borderers, Byron's Manfred, Cain, and Heaven and Earth, Shelley's The Cenci and Prometheus Unbound, and Beddoes's Death's Jest-Book.

9 Lewis's use and apparent rejection of Stirner may have another valence as well. The Egoist, Blast's aesthetic "competition," was named in honor of Stirner's
theories. To reject Stirner within "Enemy of the Stars" is to strike another apparent blow for Blast’s literary independence. For more on Stirner’s currency among the early moderns, see Levenson 63–68.

10 Lewis is known to have admired Arnold’s work. For Arnold’s isolated philosopher hero, like Arghol, “Mind is the spell which governs heaven and earth” (Arnold 2:27). Like Arghol, Empedocles wills his own destruction, through suicide. One notes the influence of Arnold on Lewis’s conception also, perhaps, in Empedocles’s cry to the heavens “And you, ye stars / . . . Are you too what I fear to become?” (Arnold 2:276–81). Arnold’s fear of endless temporality transposed into Lewis’s dialectic of feared influence.

11 One notes that Lewis was always attracted to the Senecan side of Shakespeare, which emphasizes the fate of the tragic individualist. Blast includes a reproduction within the pages of “Enemy of the Stars” of a drawing from his 1912 portfolio based on Timon of Athens, while his book on Shakespeare and Machiavelli, The Lion and the Fox, deals largely with Timon and Coriolanus, two “egoists” whose apparent self-sufficiency leads, like Arghol’s, to self-destruction.

WORKS CITED


______. The Lion and the Fox. London: Grant Richards, 1927.


