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WYNDHAM LEWIS AND ALDOUS HUXLEY – THE PLATONIST AND THE ARISTOTELIAN

The controversy between Platonists and Aristotelians has accompanied human thought almost incessantly since ancient times. The sources of this debate lie in two different attitudes to ideas, attitudes which were expressed by the two greatest philosophers of antiquity. The Platonist believes that ideas are real whereas the Aristotelian regards them as generalisations. Throughout centuries these two stances were interpreted in all kinds of ways,¹ depending on the intellectual and, quite often, political atmosphere of the given period of time. The controversy assumed its most intense character probably during the medieval debate between nominalists and realists, when it became the most hotly discussed philosophical issue of the then scholasticism. The aim of my paper is to show how these two stances were represented in more recent times, that is in the nineteen twenties and thirties, in essays of Wyndham Lewis and Aldous Huxley, who – although they were not engaged in a personal debate – were often dealing with the same issues, issues frequently reflecting the period of time in the shadow of rising totalitarianisms but still full of fresh memories of the First World War.

The part of this paper devoted to Wyndham Lewis I will begin with a quote which can be regarded as a summary of his views and which simultaneously places him clearly in the Platonist tradition. In “The politics of the intellect”² he writes about the intellectual:

More than the prophet or religious teacher he represents at his best the great unworldly element in the world, and that is the guarantee of his usefulness. It is he and not the political ruler

¹ Tatkiewicz (1990:104) quotes the following as having their source in Plato’s philosophy: *supreme beauty, perennial truths, creator of the world, eternal word, divine ideas, spiritual love, immortality of the soul.*

² All Lewis’s essays I am referring to come from Symons, J., (ed.). 1991. *The Essential Wyndham Lewis*. London: Vintage.

who supplies the contrast of this something remote and **different** that is the very stuff of which all living (not mechanical) power is composed, and without whose incessant functioning men would rapidly sink back to their mechanical origins (see Symons (1991:97)).

Lewis obviously believed in the existence of something outside the physical world that has to be constantly referred to in order to make human life meaningful on the spiritual – ‘not mechanical’ – level. And it is only the intellectual who is able to comprehend and represent this ‘unworldly element in the world’.

This antiegalitarian streak in Lewis’s views is even more conspicuous in “The code of a herdsman”. The main image of “The code”, the mountain, can be regarded as representing his ‘great unworldly element in the world’. It is the refuge of the herdsman – the lonely man – and it gives him the feeling of superiority to the herd – common people. In fact, the herdsman’s chief function is to keep the herd at a distance from the mountain, as some of them, *in moments of boredom or vindictiveness, are apt to make rushes for the higher regions* (see Symons (1991:29)). What Lewis apparently has in mind here is that the mountain has to be protected because assimilation of ideas without comprehending them could devalue ‘the very stuff of which all living (not mechanical) power is composed’. In “Bolshevism and the West”, for example, Lewis deals with the idea of freedom. He believes that people want to be free and actually think that they are but they do not really know what freedom is. According to him freedom essentially calls for a relatively solitary life, and most of people desire *disciplined, well-policed, herd life* (see Symons (1991:45)).

The reason why people think that they are free is stated by Lewis in “The contemporary man ‘expresses his personality’”. The right to express one’s personality is, according to Lewis (see Symons (1991:60)), one of the ‘libertarian sugar-plums’ of a democratic society. Therefore, people are taught (by those in power) that they are free and that it is the privilege of the free man to ‘express his personality’. But as most of people in the standardized society are not actually free, Lewis argues, so they do not have their own personality. What they have is a kind of a group personality which they acquired in the process of education, reading of newspapers, going to the cinema and listening to the radio. In case an individual has even a little fraction of his own personality, he is induced to ‘express’ it, in the process of which any rough edges that may remain from his untaught, spontaneous days will be rubbed off. Thus, an individual who ‘expresses his personality’ has an illusion of exercising one of his inalienable rights and simultaneously he is efficiently standardised into one of the herd. In the process of this standardisation any terms of differentiation among people, even between sexes, become taboo and the abstract ‘man’, a word without any narrowing specification, is considered to be the only proper form of address. This word, as Lewis puts it in “The politics of the intellect”, is used to express as little as possible, and in fact it refers to nobody:

Our minds are still haunted by that Abstract Man, that enlightened abstraction of a common humanity, which had its great advertisement in the eighteenth century. That No Man in a No Man's Land, that phantom of democratic 'enlightenment', is what has to be disposed for good in order to make way for higher human classifications (see Symons (1991:99)).

The democratic system is a 'false-revolutionary movement' because it is based not on real ideas but on empty words.

The sin of dissolving ideas in words is committed mainly by those who regard themselves as progressive thinkers. It is one of Bernard Shaw's plays, *St Joan*, that Lewis uses in "Violence and 'kindliness'" as the material for analysis of the philosophical stance of one of these thinkers. What he despises in the play is *the incessant rattle of stale, clever argumentation – the heartiness and 'kindliness' pervading everything – the chill of a soulless, arty, indefatigable 'rational' presentation of the theme* (see Symons (1991:49)). Similar 'kindliness' characterises the social theories of Bertrand Russell. *An unpleasant sound of moral charlatanism* (see Symons (1991:49)) of their writings allows Lewis to trace back their views to the prosperity of old liberal England and Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. Lewis thinks that Shaw and Russell try to explain and represent everything in words (which are in addition 'kindly') but these words do not reach the truth. What they convey is a kind of humanitarianism which Lewis considers worthless because it is *a sort of spiritual nineteenth-century vulgarisation of the great fanatical compassion of which it is a degenerate, genial, tepid form; a half-measure, embalmed in rationalistic discourse* (see Symons (1991:50)).

One of the characteristics of this humanitarian attitude is, according to Lewis, an exaggeration of the importance of crude and concrete *life* itself. For Lewis crude life itself has not much importance if it does not serve any idea. Life of ordinary people is not much more valuable than life of animals. Most people do not think much of their lives either. It is thinkers such as Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell who, by making human life the subject of their rationalistic, clever argumentation and 'kindliness', are inflating its meaning to an enormous size. To support his point of view, Lewis gives examples from animal life and argues that animals are not afraid of death – what is more, in some cases they even enjoy their last moments of life in the claws of a predator. Then he proceeds:

Who can doubt that the spinster or susceptible widow with a small bank account enjoys every minute of the time during which she is being destroyed by some homicidal impostor for her money? And the soldier, except when he is inactive and has to think and imagine instead of act, is no doubt usually having the most enjoyable time (see Symons (1991:54)).³

Having made such a comparison, Lewis concludes that people are more like animals than anything else and it is useless to try to change them with 'kindliness' and appeals to moral values as such thinkers as Shaw and Russell do.

³ Lewis had combat experience as a soldier during the First World War.

However, after rejecting Shaw's 'kindly' humanitarianism and his 'fairness' of moral authority, Lewis is left with unsolved problem of human violence, which Shaw tried to appease with his philosophy. To cope with the problem Lewis falls back on the idea of art. He regards violence as simply an excess and art, real art, is the enemy of all excess. Therefore, where violence is concerned the aesthetic values are more appealing than 'moral' and the ethical canon should ultimately take its authority from aesthetic taste.

Such an aesthetic way of dealing with human violence Lewis apparently sees in dictatorship (that of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia) – for him it would certainly be a more efficient principle of order than that of the humanitarian philosopher:

Instead of the ineffective sporting "fairness" of moral authority, there will be the justice of force. Let us suppose that that turns out worse than things have always been. At least the attempt is on novel lines, the old factors of failure are as far as possible eliminated (see Symons (1991:57)).

The mere novelty of the new way of governing which cuts it from the 'old factors of failure' makes it commendable. Like a true revolutionary he is ready to sacrifice anything in order to find an ideal government.

Why such thinkers as Shaw and Russell are eventually doomed to failure is because they *fail as artists, they have no dramatic sense above the rhetoric of the Anglican pulpit. [...] They are just words, opinions, that they have been unable to fuse* (see Symons (1991:51)). Lewis was an artist and art was very important for him. He makes it here the point of reference for all human thought. It is through art that people can reach the truth ('this something remote and *different*') and not through words. The words themselves will not solve the problems of modern society and Lewis believed that people should have contact with something more than clever argumentation in order to understand the world.

In "An analysis of the mind of James Joyce" Lewis makes it clear what exactly he understands as art. For him Joyce is not the artist but the craftsman. He writes for the sake of writing and in this he can be professional to a fault. But he makes out of his writing the end of his endeavours and does not use it as the means. Using it as the means would demand having something to say. And Joyce, as Lewis argues, has nothing to say: *There is not very much reflection going on at any time inside the head of Mr James Joyce* (see Symons (1991:201)). Joyce is 'an instinctive' and this is, according to Lewis, characteristic condition of the craftsman. He describes the world in meticulous detail but he does not explain it. To explain things is to point out the course of further action. What stimulates Joyce is, as Lewis puts it (see Symons (1991:201)), ***ways of doing things, and technical processes, and not things to be done***. It does not matter much to Joyce what he writes, or what idea or world view he expresses, so long as he can enjoy trying his hand at various techniques and manners. In fact, Lewis argues, Joyce has not any point of view, or idea

which he could express, at all. Therefore, he is not the real artist, for art involves intellect. It is the creative intelligence that makes the real artist as well as the intellectual concern himself with ‘things to be done’. In fact, Lewis seems to consider art and intellect as mutually dependent things. Intellectuals who fail as artists will not convince anyone and art without intellect is merely craftsmanship. Both art and intellect concern themselves with expressing ideas, and certainly the artist can be regarded from Lewis’s point of view as *an ‘intellectual’ of one sort or another* about whom he writes in “The politics of the intellect” (see Symons (1991:97)). Lewis describes here the role of the intellectual in society. He regards him as the brain of society but one that is placed outside it and therefore totally independent. In fact, Lewis thinks that the most conspicuous characteristic of the intellectual is the fact that he embodies freedom. He does not belong to any political group or social class as he is essentially an individual. However, his individuality is not a snobbish withdrawal, but a going aside for the purposes of working for society. From there he can exercise his power based on the intellect:

[...] this leader claims the authority of the function that he regards as superior to any mechanical dominion of physical force or wealth. Also it is not for his own sake that he claims it; in this he resembles the king. More than the prophet or religious teacher he represents at his best the great unworldly element in the world, and that is the guarantee of his usefulness. It is he and not the political ruler who supplies the contrast of this something remote and different that is the very stuff of which all living (not mechanical) power is composed, and without whose incessant functioning men would rapidly sink back to their mechanical origins (see Symons (1991:97)).

Wyndham Lewis believed that words themselves were not important if they did not express any idea or reflection. Aldous Huxley thought quite the opposite: he regarded words as a superior reality. I think that the key work to understand Huxley’s philosophy at that time and his view of reality is the essay “Writers and readers”⁴ from *The Olive Tree* (1947). It is also the best example of his Aristotelian stance. Borges (1990:91) writes that words are for an Aristotelian a map of universe. Huxley (1947:41) claims that *in words men find a new universe of thought and feeling, clearer and more comprehensible than the universe of daily experience. The verbal universe is at once a mould for reality and a substitute for it, a superior reality*. Being tools with which people can express their thoughts, words indirectly influence these thoughts and thus affect people’s existence. They not only influence the nature of human experience but are also the basis of a new kind of experience: *intense, pure, unalloyed with irrelevance* (see Huxley (1947:41)).

⁴ All Huxley’s works I am referring to come from two collections of his essays: Huxley, A. 1947. *The Olive Tree* (first published in 1936) and Huxley, A. 1950. *Music at Night* (first published in 1931).

One of the ways in which this verbal universe manifests itself is through books. Huxley claims that there was once a certain set of books which created a common ground for all western cultures. These books were the Bible and Greek and Roman classics:

Men's philosophy of life tended to crystallise itself in phrases from the Gospels or the Odes of Horace, from the Iliad or the Psalms. Job and Sappho, Juvenal and the Preacher gave style to their despairs, their loves, their indignations, their cynicisms. Experience taught them the wisdom that flowed along verbal channels prepared by Aeschylus and Solomon; and the existence of these verbal channels was itself an invitation to learn wisdom from experience (see Huxley (1947:41)).

It is characteristic of an Aristotelian that Huxley does not speak of ideas but of words. It was not Christianity, the idea of one common God, that unified once Western cultures but – a book, a set of stories creating a certain verbal unity and thus allowing all people to express themselves in its terms.

Nowadays, as Huxley argues (1947:42), this common ground of the Western cultures ceased to exist as there is no longer a single set of authoritative books. The common verbal universe of the past has broken to pieces. Now two kinds of literature fill the vacuum created by the disappearance from the modern consciousness of those internationally authoritative literatures which dominated men's minds in the past. One of these is what Huxley (1947:43) calls the *literature of information*. This literature covers the world events with meticulous conscientiousness but it lacks anything which would demand from the reader an intense concentration. In effect, very little of it remains in his memory. The reader is provided with a greater amount of facts from all over the world than his ancestors in the past ever had an opportunity of considering. But he is not able to derive from these facts any deeper understanding of the ways of thinking of other people. What people of the Western cultures share nowadays is only information and not any mind- and conscience-shaping literature.

The second kind of literature which fills the gap left by the old common set of classics is what Huxley (1947:42) calls *locally authoritative literature*. By this he means such books as *Main Kampf* or Lenin's works, which have become in Germany and Soviet Union respectively kinds of Bibles with millions of copies sold. These new literatures are, according to Huxley, one of the causes of the wave of nationalisms and dictator-worship in the twenties and thirties.

Why such books as Lenin's works or *Main Kampf* find so many readers is because people always seek justifications for their feelings, desires, passions: *Particular cravings cry aloud to be legitimised in terms of a rational philosophy and a traditionally acceptable ethic* (see Huxley (1947:16)). Any philosophical writing, good or bad, will be welcomed by those whose desires and self-interest it could justify intellectually and morally. Thus, according to Huxley, philosophies do not deal with ideas, with the truth, but are just rationalisations of prevailing passions and desires. In this way, he reduces

philosophy to the mere propaganda. Circumstances, whether external or internal and purely psychological, produce in certain persons a feeling of discontent and thus a desire for something new, an aspiration for change. These emotions may find an outlet in violent but undirected activity. But usually a writer appears who with his theory rationalises these vague feelings. And then people can do in cold blood what they previously could do only in the heat of passion. Here it is how Huxley himself sums up the mechanism of successful propaganda:

Men accept the propagandist's theology or political theory, because it apparently justifies and explains the sentiments and desires evoked in them by the circumstances. The theory may, of course, be completely absurd from a scientific point of view; but this is of no importance so long as men believe it to be true. Having accepted the theory, men will work in obedience to its precepts even in times of emotional tranquillity (see Huxley (1947:15–16)).

These theories, however, do not establish themselves for generations as some fixed truths or ideas. Huxley thinks that history pursues an undulatory course. And these undulations are the result of the tendency displayed by people to react, after a certain time, away from the prevailing habits of thought towards other habits. Then new writers come out with new theories to rationalise the appearing fashion of thought or feeling.

This mechanism of rationalisation does not apply only to politics. Also religions are created in that way. In “Meditation on the moon” Huxley describes the process of creating a religion. It starts with a peculiar kind of feelings which he calls *numinous* (1950:56). What is the source of these feelings? Once, Huxley explains, they were the terrors which men felt in face of enigmatically fearful universe. But that was in the beginnings of religion. Nowadays, one of the sources of such feelings may be, according to Huxley (1950:57), the moon. It affects the soul directly through the eyes and indirectly – through the blood. Huxley claims that the physiological and therefore spiritual life, which is an aspect of physiological life, of half the human race ebbs and flows with the changes of the moon. Through blood and ‘humours’ the moon may provoke *unreasoned joys, inexplicable miseries, laughters and remorse without a cause* (see Huxley (1950:57)). The less gravely awe-inspiring of these moods may, according to Huxley, be hypostasized as hobgoblins and fairies, the more gravely numinous of them, together with other numinous feelings (Huxley does not reveal any more sources of them) compose something which he (1950:56) calls *the original god-stuff*. Provided with such stuff a theory-making mind creates from it various gods or one omnipotent and thus – a religion.⁵ Having been created in such a way, this religion in its turn begins to evoke numinous feelings. Thus enigmatically fearful

⁵ It is worth noticing here that later in his life Huxley changed his attitude to religion and spiritual side of human life (see *The Perennial Philosophy*, first published in 1946).

universe, or the moon, or still something else, evokes in people feelings of awe, which lead them to postulate the existence of fearful gods. These gods themselves in turn become the source of awe, even when the world around has ceased to be enigmatic and terrible. *Emotion, rationalisation, emotion* – this is according to Huxley (1950:57) the way – circular and continuous – in which religious life works. However, as the general pattern remains the same, its components may assume various shapes, as both rationalisations and feelings may be radically different from those of the previous turn.

In “Writers and readers” Huxley (1947:20) agrees with the claim of Professor Crane Brinton, who divides religions into active and inactive and says that all active religions tend to become inactive within a generation at most. Thus the Roman Catholic Church, which is, as Huxley (1947:20) thinks, an inactive religion, has always been threatened by outbreaks of active religion. Until Luther, it managed to tame such outbreaks with laws and institutions. Since the Reformation, however, many outbreaks of active religion have taken place outside the Catholic Church. As the first of them Huxley mentions Calvinism which has long since been sobered. The second active religion which shook the Catholic Church was, according to Huxley, Jacobinism and the third – Marxism. Religion, revolution, philosophy – all that Huxley apparently regards as the same stuff – god stuff (‘unreasoned joys, inexplicable miseries, laughters and remorse without a cause’) – which is put into words. There are no perennial ideas or truths in the world, only rationalisations which give shapes to various moods caused by the blood and humours, which *obey, among many other masters, the changing moon* (see Huxley (1950:57)).

But rationalisations can have also practical sources. Sin, for example, is for him not the action against God’s perennial law but the action which could have disastrous social consequences or could be dangerous for the health of the ‘sinner’. Terrors caused by down-to-earth reasons are, according to Huxley, given moral dimension by being classified as sins:

Thus, it is obvious that sexual morality would not have changed as radically as it has if the decay of religion had not synchronised with the perfection of a contraceptive technique which has robbed sexual indulgence of most of its terrors and, consequently, of much of its sinfulness (see Huxley (1950:106)).

On the whole, Huxley thinks that moral virtues are liable to the changes of economic situation. He sees the decay of religion and Catholicism in particular in the increased prosperity of more advanced sections of modern Western Society, which has caused self-denial to be less desperately necessary (and therefore, as Huxley (1950:107) remarks, less meritorious) than it once was for the majority of the society. Over-production calls for over-consumption and it is excessive consumption that has become virtue in modern western societies. One rationalisation replaces another.

Words, however, are used not only to justify feelings but also to quell them. In “Words and behaviour” Huxley claims that people often create artificial verbal worlds which are parallel to the bitter reality but placed on the much lower level of moral responsibility. *Our egotisms are incessantly fighting to preserve themselves, not only from external enemies, but also from the assaults of the other and better self with which they are so uncomfortably associated* (see Huxley (1947:83)). And they fight using words which mould the bitter reality into something more digestible for our consciences. Huxley is especially exasperated by the falsification of the reality of war. People do not want to face the reality of war, which is too unpleasant to contemplate. The worst thing in war is the fact that innocent individual human beings are condemned by the conventions of politics to murder or be murdered in conflicts not their own. Therefore the language of politics is so designed as to hide this fact and make wars look less absurdly cruel as they are in reality. Thus, instead of wars fought by individuals *drilled to murder one another in cold blood and without provocation* (see Huxley (1947:84–85)) readers learn about wars fought by impersonal forces or by personified abstractions. In the essay Huxley (1947:89–90) gives an example of an expression in political jargon: *You cannot have international justice, unless you are prepared to impose it by force*. This sentence, according to Huxley, in terms of reality should sound:

You cannot have international justice unless you are prepared, with a view to imposing a just settlement, to drop thermite, high explosives and vesicants upon the inhabitants of foreign cities and to have thermite, high explosives and vesicants dropped in return upon the inhabitants of your cities (see Huxley (1947:90)).

But with such a slogan the politicians could not begin war.

This apparent stupidity of politicians who talk about a world of persons as if it were not a world of persons is, according to Huxley, due to self-interest. Rulers find it easier to rule in the artificial world of symbols and abstractions. The ruled can gratify their lowest instincts which the imperatives of morality demand that they should repress. Therefore, the only way in which politics can become moral (and the only way to stop wars) is, according to Huxley, that of speaking of its problems exclusively in terms of concrete reality. Everyone would turn pacifist if he heard words precisely describing the reality of war.

However, this coming down to facts would be beneficial not only for politics. Humanity itself would benefit greatly if it faced reality. Or maybe not so much reality as the words describing it. In his essay “To the Puritan all things are impure” Huxley sees one of the ways of saving humanity in the reform of society which would rehabilitate the words describing frankly the animal side of human life, which should be treated as equal to the spiritual side. As Huxley (1950:117) puts it: *From the time of Plato onwards there has been a tendency to exalt the thinking, spiritual man at the expense of the animal*. Huxley would like to see

frank description or representation of certain acts which everyone performs because it is through words that people can be made aware of the animal in themselves. *For these words bring the mind into direct contact with the physical reality which [the spirit] is so desperately anxious to ignore* (see Huxley (1950:118)). What is important here is Huxley's belief that it is only through words that people can be made aware of anything, even of the animal in themselves. What does not exist in verbal universe does not exist at all, for words are the only system of reference for the human world.

Such as it is, the consistency of human characters is due to the words upon which all human experiences are strung. We are purposeful because we can describe our feelings in rememberable words, can justify and rationalise our desires in terms of some kind of argument (see Huxley (1947:82)).

The Platonist and the Aristotelian. The Platonist believes that there is certain order in the universe (see Borges (1990:91)), a hierarchy of ideas, which one has to discover. Lewis was sure that the liberal democracy in the shape it had at the beginning of the twentieth century was not a part of this order. Searching for a perfect government was for him a quest for a larger, universal order of things. Such an end justifies all the means and Lewis in his disregard for anything which could hinder reaching of the goal could be called a revolutionary.

The Aristotelian in turn does not believe in an absolute order. Every ideology, every hierarchy of values is for him merely a rationalisation of vague feelings. There is nothing out there that could be blindly pursued, only words which create everything. Therefore, Huxley thought that there is no point in dying for ideologies as there is no point in dying for words.

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