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Thurston, Luke

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Unclean stream: Representing selfhood in Joyce and Lewis

Luke Thurston 

Aberystwyth University, UK

Correspondence

Luke Thurston, Department of English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University, Hugh Owen Building, Penglais, Aberystwyth SY23 3DY, UK.
Email: lut@aber.ac.uk

Abstract

This article explores questions of selfhood in Joyce's *Ulysses* and the early work of Wyndham Lewis. I argue that although Joyce apparently uses the stylistic technique of "stream of consciousness" to unravel the consistent agency of the conscious ego, in so doing his writing both echoes the discoveries of early twentieth century science and re-inscribes the ethical potential of subjectivity. I follow the trajectory of Scott Klein by examining the supposed literary rivalry between Joyce and Wyndham Lewis in terms of contrasting strategies for representing the "I" and the eye, the ego and the gaze. In Lewis' early work with its "wild anthropology," I trace a critique of the model of subjectivity implied by "stream of consciousness," a critique that anticipates key aspects of psychoanalytic theory. By switching the narrative centre from the logocentric "I" to the toxic gaze of the Other, Lewis aims to challenge the metaphysical presuppositions of "stream of consciousness" and thus expose one of the defining techniques of modernist writing as deluded or fraudulent. I conclude by examining the political dimension of Lewis' early work, arguing that the modernist stream of consciousness should be seen not merely as a stylistic practice but as an ethical one (in the sense indicated by Marian Eide).

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"Of all the modernists," writes Andrzej Gašiorek, "none was more concerned to debate the merits of his contemporaries than Lewis" (Gašiorek, 2016, p. 34). At stake was the question of the so-called modernist "revolution," whether in the work of a Proust or a Joyce the restrictive aesthetic universe of the Victorians is genuinely overthrown or else, as Lewis put it in *Paleface*, surreptitiously perpetuated through representations of "this plausible "life" that often is not life" (Lewis, 1929, p. 109). In a series of polemical works during the 1920s, Lewis insistently challenged the whole conception of self-representation and indeed selfhood he found embedded in many modernist prose writers, above all those who made use of the new stylistic possibilities that came to be grouped under the heading of "stream of consciousness." Following Scott Klein's insightful remark that the antagonism of Joyce and Lewis "is rooted in investigations of representation and selfhood" (Klein, 1994, p. 17), I focus in the following article on two exemplary scenes of those investigations—the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses* and Lewis's stories from *The Wild Body*—in order to explore their ethical implications.

I am therefore linking "stream of consciousness"—at work in very different (even perhaps antithetical) senses in these texts by Joyce and Lewis—to questions of ethics. In both writers, a huge transformation in the representation and understanding of selfhood during the early twentieth century is simultaneously inscribed and contested; but what are the implications of that change in self-representation for the ethical encounter, the encounter with others? The key ethical stake of these early inscriptions of literary selves by Joyce and Lewis is, I will argue, their capacity to reveal a subjectivity exposed to the otherness of others, so to speak, confronted by the stubborn heterogeneity of other humans in the face of the discursive violence imposed by a dominative logic of identity. I follow Marian Eide (2002) in turning to the Levinasian concept of the ethical, in the sense of a radical openness to the Other, to help understand this resistance to identitarian violence, a violence whose guises are multiple and often hard to decipher. That modernist literature was gauging and challenging that violence a century ago is perhaps the best reason for us to persist in trying to read it now.

"Signatures of all things I am here to read," muses Stephen Dedalus as he tramps along the shore near the beginning of *Ulysses*, "seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot" (Joyce, 1986, p. 31). The narrative stream of consciousness thus aptly seems to mimic the flowing tide, and like that tide it bears along and serves up for the interpretive eye all of the flotsam and jetsam of everyday reality, from the rich and strange to the absurdly commonplace. But if here the modernist eye, with its comfortingly ineluctable modality, can still gather all things before it in a potentially meaningful constellation, it can be seen as still indebted to a literary tradition that had, as far back as the allegorical work of Bunyan and Defoe, posited the reading of reality as a subjection or mastery, an act of appropriation or domination. For in those forefathers of the English novel, writes Terry Eagleton, "[t]he meaning of that vast, cryptic sign-system which is history must be constantly displaced to be discovered—ceaselessly referred to a supportive system of transcendental *signata*, in an act whose literary name is allegory" (Eagleton, 1981, p. 14). Even if Stephen, it seems, is only playing around with the old transcendental schemata of Aristotle, Boehme and Berkeley, his affirmation of "I" as omnispecular and all-inclusive binds him closely into those masterly philosophical frameworks. It is as if, for all his apparent modernist scepticism, Stephen can't quite wrench himself free from the position of specular dominion once offered (offered mostly, that is, to well-educated men) by the "supportive system" of patriarchal knowledge-power.

One of the great lessons of *Ulysses* is the displacement and disinheritance of this omnispecular "I," and the mingled joy and sadness of the "Proteus" episode may be seen in its combination of gentle Joycean self-mockery with a sense of the imminent disappearance, the ebbing tide, of the cultural tradition or stream that once gave an artist the power to survey the universe, read its lessons and re-inscribe them in meaningful constellations. The mock-grandiloquence Joyce gives the consciousness of his youthful ego spells out that ego's fate—indeed what we could call, using Derrida's term, its *destinerrance* (Miller, 2006): "Will you be as gods? Gaze in your *omphalos*. Hello! Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one" (Joyce, 1986, p. 32). Stephen may think himself only a joking Jesus, veiling with irony his desire to link up with the divine call centre, but the ego, nevertheless, imagines itself on the line to God. What is crucial, however, is that this telephonic *sum* is underwritten by the grim arithmetic of a mortifying textuality: while the "I" still cherishes its fantasy of artistic centredness and unitary supremacy, the

text reminds us that as “one” it is literally no more than a signifier, an iterable mark scratched on the edge of the void.

Around the same time as Stephen's protean “wavespeech” (Joyce, 1986, p. 41)—in diegetic terms, of course, mid-June 1904—the tide was beginning to turn against Newtonian physics, that master discourse that had upheld the apparatus of a legible universe for so long. A new mechanics was emerging (Planck, Einstein, Bohr) that was raising fundamental questions about the nature of matter and energy. A wave of light, it was discovered, behaved just like a stream of particles, while material particles themselves were more accurately described mathematically as behaving like waves—thus undermining the old Newtonian distinction between inert matter and active force, and launching a perplexing new set of questions about the relation between potential and actual states. Although, as Mark S. Morrisson notes, one must be careful not to speculate anachronistically about Joyce's awareness of these scientific developments (of which there is clear evidence by the time of *Finnegans Wake*), there is no doubt that “Proteus,” drafted several years after the publication of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, is permeated by a sense of shifting epistemic sands, of a solid scientific worldview dissolving along with the old philosophical metanarratives (Morrisson, 2009, p. 347). But the central question in the early episodes of *Ulysses* centring on Stephen is a question of the semiotics of selfhood, of the consistency of “I” in a world where self-identity is no longer a known quantity. We can see that question voiced in Stephen's reflections as “fourworded wavespeech” (Joyce, 1986, p. 41), where semiotic particles behave, as it were, like a wave: is the ego particular or undular, an atom or a wave?

The semiotics of the “I” are on Stephen's mind again later in the day too, as he mulls over how to plot a course between the turbulent vortex of signification and the supposedly self-identical core of empirical reality. Just as physics was revealing a turbulent atomic activity within apparently inert, self-identical entities, so the ostensible unity of the ego (as Lacan would argue three decades later) masks the mutable otherness of the psyche: “Molecules all change. I am other I now. Other I got pound. ... But I, entelechy, form of forms, am I by memory because under everchanging forms. ... I, I and I. I. A.E.I.O.U. (Joyce, 1986, p. 156). Joyce's stream of consciousness responds to modern science first with erudite philosophy, then with another serious jest: the supposedly transcendental form or Aristotelean “entelechy” of “I” can only now make sense if it corresponds to the formal consistency of the speaking subject, precisely what links its mutable potentiality to its historical actuality in a finite discourse. And although Stephen momentarily ponders the possibility that modern science (and modernism: note the uncanny echo of Rimbaud's *je est un autre*; Rimbaud, 1958, pp. 305–306) might logically free him up from having to repay all the money he has borrowed, his closing jest confirms that “I” remains heavily in debt, mortgaged to the discourse of the Other. If the streaming consciousness of the subject involves “everchanging forms” that jeopardize its specular unity, at the same time, and despite the turbulent waters of Joycean style, its formal obedience to the logic of discourse keeps it tethered to the domain of intersubjective rationality, the site of communication and transaction where the subject is always in debt to the signifying Other. So the closing list of vowels is both a mockery of fiscal honesty and, quasi-paradoxically, an *actual* pledge of it (for Joyce “really did” owe a guinea to George Russell, a.k.a. “AE”; Joyce 1986, p. 26).

What Joyce's “A.E.I.O.U.” reminds us of, then, is that the discursive “I,” for all its singular creative particularity, still functions as an ultimate affirmation of its indebtedness to the Other. This indebtedness, comically equivalent in the diegesis to Stephen's long list of creditors (Joyce 1986, pp. 25–26) clearly implies a subject that, however idiosyncratic its utterances, still inhabits the domain of communicative legitimacy, a domain governed by the fundamental elements of language (like the five vowels). On the one hand, then, the modernist stream of consciousness both foregrounds the specular agency of the ego and displaces it from the position of ontological stability and unity where it once supposedly read the signatures of all things. But on the other hand, and crucially, the subject thus displaced still retains its formal consistency as “I,” an agency necessarily linked to the intersubjective horizon of discursive rationality, opening the possibility of dialogue with the Other. It is this constitutive relation to the Other, we will argue, that allows Joycean writing, for all its stylistic playfulness and linguistic inventiveness, to constitute a literary intervention that has an ultimately ethical significance.

Like his one-time friend and rival Joyce, Wyndham Lewis saw his artistic project as both stylistic experiment and polemical intervention. The self-styled “Enemy” was certainly eager for his work to scandalize and antagonize the canons of bourgeois decency and artistic good taste, but from the very start of his career as a writer he also set out to engage with, to interpret, dramatize and contest, contemporary aesthetic and political thinking. In this practice and advocacy of an actively politicized modernism, Lewis reaches beyond the traditional parameters of literature, attempting in his early work to formulate what he called a “wild anthropology” that would explore questions of individual and social identity, of ego and group, that clearly resonate with how Joyce uses the stream of consciousness to interrogate the ontological consistency of the “I.” What fascinates Lewis most, however, are elements of subjectivity that lie *beyond* the apparent self-evidence of conscious thinking: what he calls the “acrid savour” or the “unclean stream” of a psychical domain irreducible to rationality or accountability. If the stream of consciousness in Joyce is enmeshed in the epistemic flux of modern thought, in Lewis what streams from the psyche seems to mock the very idea of a comprehensible self.

One of the earliest of Lewis's writings is a journal he kept while on holiday in Brittany in 1908. Demonstrating what Paul Peppis calls a “typically Edwardian fascination with the phenomenon of ‘national character’” (Peppis, 2000, p. 20), the young Lewis self-consciously adopts the role of an artistic ethnographer on an expedition, seeking in Brittany, with its supposedly primitive inhabitants, the remnants of a pre-modern humanity or “wild body.” What most interests Lewis when he gets there is the behaviour of groups of people, notably in scenes of collective enjoyment:

... these groups of four or five men would move about, or sit at the tables ... self-sufficient. These were older men ... finding the starting point there of their orgies in the clamour, the multitude of the fête, —using this as a man uses food to live, such as a gourmet, —each time with more abandon, [they] found there the acrid savour of their own personality and pursued their flagrant ego like a dog in heat, —a self wonderfully fertilized in these circumstances; —they enjoy'd their self voluptuously, they enjoy'd the enjoyment that others had in them, and with that enjoyment. (Lewis, 1982, p. 193)

The telegraphic style of the notebook does nothing to diminish the bizarre originality of Lewis's thinking. A directly sexualized language is used to theorize the addictive pleasure of “a synthesis of beings” (Lewis, 1982, p. 194), and Lewis's playful disrespect for correct grammar allows him to formulate with odd precision the strange merging of identity in which “they enjoy'd their self.” As David Ayers notes, there is a distinct echo here of the nihilist voice of Max Stirner (Ayers, 1992, p. 16). With his talk of a self-involved, intransitive enjoyment, Lewis is almost paraphrasing a passage on “My self-enjoyment” from Stirner's notorious *The Ego and Its Own* (Stirner, 2009, pp. 282–296). In a crucial sense, though, with “they enjoy'd their self” Lewis is linking this intransigent and unaccountable enjoyment to one of the obsessions of late nineteenth-century thinkers, namely the experience of the crowd. More than a decade before Freud's ‘Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego’ (Freud, 1920), Lewis's eye is open to the ecstatic phenomenology of crowd-enjoyment, the delirious submerging of the “flagrant ego” in a collective “self. It is the crowd that makes possible an intensity of enjoyment (“their orgies in the clamour”) which is forbidden to the ordinary rational self.

It is this sense of a vital and dangerous link between individual and group that accounts for the insistent preoccupation in early Lewis with numbers—especially with the supernumerary element, the “plus one.” In “The ‘Pole,’” the first story Lewis published in 1909 under Ford Madox Ford's editorship in *The English Review*, this odd algebraic obsession is apparent from the very first line: “A young Polish or Russian student, come to the end of his resources, knows two or three alternatives” (Lewis, 1982, p. 209). As a strict grammarian might insist, properly speaking there can only ever be two “alternatives,” but Lewis's free hand with English allows him to formulate things in a distinctive and precise manner. For the key to the identity of the “Pole”—always written in scare-quotes by Lewis—is the supernumerary figure, the irrational element outside a given set (such as the ordinary set of two alternatives). According

to Lewis, the behaviour of “Poles” follows a set pattern, which he describes with mock-ethnographical solemnity: having arrived at a Breton hotel and paid “two or three months’ board and lodging” (note the recurrence of “two or three”), they cease paying and “henceforth become the regular, unobtrusive, respected inhabitants of the house” (p. 209). The set of “Poles” thus consists of elements that are neither public (i.e., the set of paying guests) nor private (i.e., the set of family and friends); they are merely “inhabitants of the house,” supernumerary and thus unaccountable. As such, the “Pole” no longer counts, strictly speaking, as an ordinary human being, since as subject he now occupies a third position beyond the binary alternatives of inner (“home,” defined by love) and outer (“business,” defined by money). Lewis figuratively inscribes this extra-human status:

The idea that the patriarchal life still surviving in Brittany keeps alive in people helps to account for the introduction of this new domestic animal into their households. Rich peasants keeping a large house have been used to seeing poor familiars—supernumeraries doing odd jobs on the farm—find a place by their hearth. (Lewis, 1982, p. 210)

Seen either as fireside pet or impoverished vagrant, the “Poles” are by definition supernumerary, in excess of the domestic economy with its even account of production and consumption (any jobs they do are therefore necessarily unaccountable, “odd”). Present in the house but not part of its economy, unaccountable extras to the set of human subjects, these “figures unstructured by politics” (Ayers, 1992, p. 167) form part of the restless enquiry in Lewis into what constitutes the human subject both as individual and as social entity. This early work broaches that enquiry by bringing the notion of racial identity as timeless fixed essence into collision with a completely different conception of identity, one apparently endorsed by the Lewisian text: namely the idea that the self is a theatrical artefact, a performative effect. Lewis has one character from the odd set of “Poles” struggle with the problem of performing his “own” identity:

His preoccupation to appear independent and strong-minded did not permit of any other conscious sentiment: but he had the suavity and natural coquetry of a pretty brute, that—as he was not aware of it—was constantly baffling him and relaxing his stern purposeful independent expression, sometimes at a crucial moment. His nature was the darkest of mysteries for him, and this enemy in the camp, this something that was constantly corrupting his implacable self under its very nose, perplexed him somewhat, and he mused about it. (Lewis, 1982, p. 213)

Psychoanalysis, of course, will proclaim as one of its central tenets the splitting of the “I” (an idea explicitly invoked in one of Freud’s last texts; Freud, 1940). What we see here, however, opens up a mimetic self-complexity beyond any straightforward Freudian split between conscious ego and unconscious other. Far from being the essential core of the subject’s identity, what is stated in Lewis as an “implacable self” is at the same time a wholly performative affair, a mimetic enactment of selfhood that is constantly being wrong-footed by “the suavity and *natural* coquetry” (my emphasis) of another self, an entity less invested in the very notion of “self” as unitary essence, more wrapped up in the existence of other selves. Thus the *performance* of “natural,” “independent” identity is subverted by a *natural* “coquetry” or performative multiplicity: it is as if, in some Wildean chiasmus, the natural-essential and the performative-accidental have switched places or swapped attributes.

This paradoxical notion of an “essential” self-performativity is the subversive undercurrent of “The ‘Pole,’” as even its citational title already suggests. If here the self is divided, it is not split between a primal essence and a mere epiphenomenal surface, but rather between an inherently performative nature and the supposed unity of a deluded

ego, between “natural” trickster and imaginary dupe. For Lewis in this early work, the only authentic identity, far from being inborn, is mimed and enacted due to the “natural coquetry” of the human subject, its constitutive self-mimicry before the gaze of the Other.

If a Pole thus has to be written as a “Pole” in Lewis’s first published text, the second piece he published in 1909—again in Ford’s *The English Review*—should be seen not as a story but, according to Bernard Lafourcade, the editor of *The Complete Wild Body*, as only a “story” (Lewis, 1982, p. 220). There is a fundamental generic uncertainty about this text, whose very title, “Some Innkeepers and Bestre,” signals its heterogeneity: elements of “wild” anthropology and journalism mingle with a fictionalized travel narrative. The effect of this discursive hybridity is to allow Lewis to use his “story,” at least to start with, as a kind of mock-philosophical essay, with an imagined (or perhaps remembered) “eloquent Frenchman” (225) discoursing fluently on the problem of self and other which had been explored in “The ‘Pole’”:

So man has developed a kind of abstract factor in his mind and self, a social nature that is the equivalent of money, a kind of conventional, nondescript, and mongrel energy, that can at any moment be launched towards a friend and flood him up to the scuppers, as one might cram his pockets with gold. One cannot give him one’s own gifts or thoughts, but one bestows upon him this impersonal, social vitality, with which he can acquire things fitted to his particular nature. ... The characterless, subtle, protean social self of the modern man, his wit, his sympathies, are the moneys of the mind. When the barter of herds, tools and clothing gave place to coinage this sort of fellow began to exist. And this artificial and characterless go-between, this common energy, keeps the man’s individual nature all the more inviolable and unmodified. (Lewis, 1982, pp. 223–224)

This fictional Frenchman has been reading Marx as well as Frazer, and sets forth a highly developed theory of social interaction and economic exchange. If, according to this theory, modern sociality is only made possible by an “impersonal, social vitality” that functions to mediate and cordon off the intransigent natural self, Bestre himself seems to embody a one-man regression to premodern barbarity (and his name, of course, suggests the bestial). It is here that Lewis seeks to evoke a dimension of the psyche irreducible to conscious discourse, a dimension he does not balk at linking to specific ethnic traits:

A survival of certain characteristics of race, that I recognised as Spanish, is particularly curious in Bestre. Bestre is an enormously degenerate Spaniard [...] A Spanish *caballero* had an extravagant belief in the compelling quality of his eye, of his glance: he would choose to shrivel up a subordinate, daunt a rival, coerce a wavering adherent, rather by this dumb show than by words. ... All Spaniards are peculiarly sensitive to that speech of glance, gesture, and action independent of speech. (Lewis, 1982, p. 232)

It is as if discourse itself corresponds to the “abstract factor” that was earlier posited by the Frenchman as the medium of modern sociality, while the gaze, an “action independent of speech,” harks back to some pre-linguistic or animal ethology. The “protean social self” is a symptom of abstract modernity, while another dimension of the self is inscribed in Bestre’s performance of acts more powerful, less symbolically mediated, than ordinary discourse. Such acts (supposedly characteristic of the more “backward” races of southern Europe) have a radically unsettling effect upon the normal subjects of civilized modernity:

For this extraordinary man with a mere nothing, seemingly, could cause a veritable panic. Notably a well-known painter and his family were angrily responsive to this something in Bestre that seemed to make the human animal uneasy, as though in his composition were elements derived from the fauna of another planet. (Lewis, 1982, p. 230)

On planet Bestre, a primitive version of our planet, the gaze is toxic, at odds with the ordinary “characterless” social protocols of discourse. And it is this uncanny ocular power, not consciousness, that streams, that flows between subjects and penetrates psychical defences. One fateful morning, the hapless wife of the said painter has the ill luck to gaze into Bestre’s kitchen window in a way he disapproves of: as she “cast” her eyes into the kitchen as usual:

[...] there stood Bestre himself, alone, quite motionless, looking at *her*; looking with such a nauseating intensity of what seemed meaning, but in truth was nothing more than, by a tremendous effort of concentration, the transference to features and glance of all the unclean contents of his mind, that had he suddenly laid bare his entrails she could not have felt more revolted. (Lewis, 1982, p. 230)

This psychical “transference,” the gaze as uncanny revelation of something “repressed” from the ordinary world of modernity, crucially has to be *framed*: the window serves as an equivocal frame marking a transparent borderline between inner and outer, between Bestre’s private universe and the normalized world of intersubjectivity outside. As such, indeed, the window is the perfect figure for the gaze itself: the point where the scopic drive oscillates undecidably between active seeing and passive being-seen. What happens to the unfortunate woman who gazes through Bestre’s window, indeed, corresponds exactly to the sudden reversal that strikes the subject of consciousness in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* (as read by Lacan, in Robert Samuels’ commentary):

In short, all is familiar and the entire scene is regulated by my intentionality and my point-of-view. However, suddenly a face appears that turns towards me and stares at me. Now I am the object of the Other’s gaze and the target of unknowable desires and judgements. I am no longer the eye or “I” of consciousness, that is, I am no longer the one that sees what I want to see, but rather I am seen in a way that I don’t want to be seen. Here we find a reversal of perspective and a de-centering of my field of vision. (Samuels, 1995, p. 185)

What psychoanalysis adds to this Sartrean account is to link the decentring of the “I” to a more radical trauma, an event that takes place at the level of the Lacanian real. After all, why is it such a severe bodily affliction (with the woman “laid up for several days”; Lewis, 1982, p. 30) for a subject to be no longer the one looking but instead the object looked at? What is at stake, as Žižek makes clear, is not in fact merely the status of “my point-of-view” but that of the whole symbolic structure of reality, the structure that allows subjects to co-exist without encountering one another as unmediated singularities. The “most elementary phenomenological relationship to the living body,” writes Žižek, is an unconscious product of the symbolic order and as such is a synecdoche for the way language forecloses “raw” unmediated enjoyment in order to institute human reality: thus “one of the definitions of the Lacanian real is that it is the flayed, skinned body, the palpitation of raw, skinless red flesh” (Žižek, 1995, p. 208). It is clearly such a “palpitation” that confronts the onlooker in *The Wild Body* when Bestre figuratively “laid bare his entrails”: in

other words, precisely exposed what must be kept concealed for reality to be liveable. The “unclean contents” of the psychical real are simply not compatible, as Lewis sees half a century before Lacan, with signifying reality. Lewis’s text takes careful note of this strange discovery, emphasizing its anomalous, untimely status: as the viewing subject confronts Bestre,

he seems teaching you in his look the amazement you should feel, and his own expression gathers force and blooms as the full sense of what you are witnessing, hearing, bursts upon you, while your gaping face conforms more and more to Bestre’s prefiguring expression. (Lewis, 1982, p. 231)

In the figure of Bestre’s gaze Lewis’s text inscribes an act or movement that transfers or streams, directly threatening the “I” that governs the possibility of discursive communication. If, as we saw, in Stephen’s protean stream of consciousness the “I” floated undecidably between social agency and decentred signifier, in the “unclean stream” of Bestre’s gaze we encounter something that strips away the symbolic “skin” of reality, dumbfounding the subject of the signifier by evoking a naked singularity supposedly banished by the symbolic order (or else by “modernity”) and evoking, at the fantasmatic level, the instinctual or pre-human. But as the theatrical *mise en scène* of Bestre’s gaze reminds us, this act, for all its unprecedented force and strangeness, is a performance before an audience, a spectacle offered to a witness. The subject position of Bestre can in fact be seen as the dialectical reversal of that of the “Pole”: whereas the latter occupied a third site in excess of the rational alternatives of social self and individual essence (and as such became “the darkest of mysteries” to himself; Lewis, 1982, p. 213), Bestre’s performance at the window allows him to move beyond conscious discourse—the medium of the “protean social self,” to recall Lewis’s “French” theorist—to master the other, impose his own singular “expression” on him or her. But the key to Bestre’s mastery, with its shocking or telepathic hold on the witness, is its destruction of the signifying surface of the intersubjective encounter, its operation at a level beyond the normative rituals of discursive reality. Lewis is quite clear about this breach of the rules that normally bind and differentiate speaking subjects:

He would, in the security of his kitchen, even have ventured on speech, had he not known how much more effective was his silence. She paled, rendered quite speechless—in Bestre’s sense, that is expressionless, her glassy look shivered to atoms—hurried on home, and was laid up for several days. (Lewis, 1982, p. 230)

Acutely sensitive to his own subject position, Bestre considers spoken discourse a valid tactic within his own domestic empire, but chooses the far deadlier weapon of the gaze when it comes to dealing with an attack on the border that distinguishes that empire from the external world. What is at stake is a knowledge—though since “Bestre is perfectly unconscious of this weird dumb-passive method of his” (Lewis, 1982, p. 231) it is an *unconscious* knowledge—a knowledge both of and on the non-discursive borders of discourse. The effect of this knowledge is to suspend the signifier, to abolish speech and impact directly on the psychical real. The light-footed pace of Lewis’s writing belies the enormity of what it seeks to evoke here: a non-metaphorical, “expressionless” *sense*; a psychical stream beyond discourse that can impact a real outside the intersubjective relation, access what eludes the conscious “I” and thus smash apart the subject’s fantasmatic window-of-the-soul, destroy the psychical self-mastery of another.

What Lewis’s early work thus stages can be seen as an alternative theory of the psyche, and of psychical movement or energy, to the theory subtending the exploration of eye and “I” in Joyce’s “Proteus.” As I have argued, for all the displacement of “I” in Stephen’s stream of consciousness, it remained ultimately linked to a symbolically

consistent Other, indebted to a regime of signification where identity is always suspended, never fully realizable or representable. The Joycean comedy of “A.E.I.O.U.” inscribes a sense of the fictional dimension of the subject's truth, where Wildean masquerade provides scope for a “real” declaration of symbolic debt, the future-anterior modality where identity will have been produced in the intersubjective domain of “I.O.U.” (anagrammatizing *oui* and thus perhaps anticipating the “yes” Molly will utter and Derrida will see-hear in *Ulysses*) (Derrida, 1992, pp. 253–309). It is this affirmative dimension of subjectivity in Joyce which Marian Eide has linked to “the ethical impulse of “Saying”” in Levinas, an “impulse to respond to an other” which “exposes the subject to alterity and at the same time acknowledges responsibility to an other in a gesture that destabilizes the centrality of the self in deference to the other” (Eide, 2002, 86). In the early work of Wyndham Lewis, by contrast, the encounter between ego and other takes place as a virulent “transference” of what lies outside the equivocal realm of social meaningfulness, in a fantasy domain dominated by a “regressed” other-self (recalling Stevenson's Mr Hyde among other late Victorian monsters). If this little-known early work by Lewis can be astonishingly insightful—it anticipates the hugely influential theories of the gaze and of performative identity—at the same time it is permeated by a troubling political fascination with a “primitive” alternative to the equivocal contingency of modern identities. Even if Lewis's monsters can be theatrical—it is clear that Bestre's nauseating scopic assault is a deliberately-staged contrivance—they remain essentialist, fantastic incarnations of some primal identity (Bestre manifests a “survival of certain characteristics of race”; Lewis, 1982, p. 232). It was this kind of primitivist fantasy that Joyce's protean textuality would always deplore and deride. At the level of modernist style, we can see the stream of consciousness playfully reflected on in “Proteus” as the crucial support of a model of modern subjectivity as ontologically inseparable from an ethical “Saying” and thus irreducible to any fixed or predetermined essence. Another vision of psychical life comes to light in Lewis, an “unclean stream” that breaches the ethical defences of the ego and threatens the fragile coherence of signifying reality. In that reality, as Joyce teaches us, “I.O.U.”, I owe you: the ego is always dispossessed of any ownership, and must affirm its immemorial debt to the Other.

ORCID

Luke Thurston  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8192-5010>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Luke Thurston is a Senior Lecturer in Modern Literature at Aberystwyth University and Director of the David Jones Centre. He is a co-editor (with Scott Brewster) of the *Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story* (2018), and author of *Literary Ghosts from the Victorians to Modernism* (2012) and *James Joyce and the Problem of Psychoanalysis* (2004). He has published widely on modernist literature and psychoanalysis, and is the translator of Jean Laplanche's *The Unfinished Copernican Revolution* (2020). He is on the Advisory Board for The Edinburgh Critical Editions of the Works of May Sinclair.

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