

Wyndham Lewis

Stuart Bailey

BLAST

years 1837 to 1900

Curse abysmal inexcusable middle-class

(also Aristocracy and Proletariat).

BLAST

Pasty shadow cast by gigantic Boehm

(imagined at introduction of BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS).

WRING THE NECK OF all sick inventions born in

that progressive white wake.

Our vortex is not afraid of the past:

It has forgotten its existence.

(Wyndham Lewis, *BLAST* 1, 1914)

As with Joyce, Beuys and Mark E. Smith, the historians will be arguing about (Percy) Wyndham Lewis until the kingdom comes. 20th century culture has been kept alive by the irritants which work their way under its skin. In this much, McLuhan's call for 'the need for a counter-environment as a means for perceiving the dominant one' required a new century to prove its accuracy. Wyndham Lewis, who could so easily be the subject of a myriad quarterly reviews, has remained a shadowy and mistrusted figure, silhouetted on the banks of the cultural mainstream. As our times appear to demand art terrorist outsiders, Lewis has called the era's bluff by refusing easy routes to fashionable and commercially-lucrative acceptance. While Marinetti caught, peeled and ate the orange thrown at him in public disgrace, Wyndham Lewis—unknown to many—continues to ply his trade as a novelist, satirist, poet, critic of literature, philosophy and art, magazine editor, painter and fly-in-the-ointment.

Lewis formed the Vorticist group (as the point of maximum energy) in London in 1914. At the time he was painting and writing around the fringes of London's Bloomsbury, later from the Rebel Art Centre which he co-founded with Kate Lechmere. This was a time when most of Europe was largely unsuspecting of the imminent war, only a few months away. The studied neurosis of Realism and Impressionism was about to give way to the deliquescing anarchy of Cubism and Expressionism. But the Vorticists had no place—nor wanted one—in either camp. From their inception, Lewis's Vorticists were bloody-minded outsiders, possessing an extraordinary ability to get up noses. At a time when Post-Impressionism was about to disgrace itself with the saccharine posturing of Abstraction, Lewis appeared equally comfortable in the regulation uniform of trench warfare, as much as the louche smoking jacket of his gentleman's club. In 1914 art was reinventing itself as a minefield of carefully stylized factions; the Vorticists, immovable in their determination to remain aloof from the posturing of their peers, quickly earned not only incomprehension but also hostility. In an early appearance at one of Marinetti's London speeches at the Doré Gallery, Lewis and company brought the volatility of a working men's club to a scene which believed itself to be self-contained and self policing. The rhetoric of the Vortex was similar to suddenly finding oneself in a slanging match with a chauvinist, fascist, intellectual drunkard. For this invective Lewis has never been forgiven. Challenged with the notion

that the Vorticists drew their menace from the seismic detonation of Futurism, Lewis replied with a dismissive sniff, 'Automobilism—Marinnetteism—bores us. We don't want to go about making a hullo bulloo about motor cars, anymore than about knives and forks, elephants or gas-pipes. Elephants are VERY BIG. Motor cars go quickly.'

Like Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto, Lewis's *BLAST* magazine was regarded as the alarm call of the pre-war years; this was polemic which seemed to deal with personal and political dissatisfaction in a manner which was both sinister and confrontational. By the end of the decade the Futurists resembled a self-parodic cabaret turn fit only for the history books. The Vorticists, on the other hand, made their sense of alienation part of their art, laying the foundations for a creative process which was almost immediately disrupted by a war which saw them divided, dispersed and, in some cases, killed in action. For Wyndham Lewis, irreverence was put to work for Vorticism. As the self-titled 'Enemy', he would parade around London's art and literary circles shouting random insults at the bewildered cognoscenti. The Futurist statue will move: then it will live a little: but any idiot can do better than that with his good wife, round the corner, 'This war talk, sententious execution and much besides, Marinetti picked up from Nietzsche' or, 'I loathe anything that goes too quickly. If it goes too quickly it is not there' when delivered with the correct mixture of urgency and forethought, could obtain an effect that bordered on the sinister.

It was only a short step, aesthetically, from confusing Marinetti and the Futurists with dismissive put-downs to offending the art cognoscenti by challenging their self-satisfaction. *BLAST* was jarring and disjointed, making a virtue of its graphic appearance, faithfully set according to The Enemy's bombastic wishes by an alcoholic ex-printer between startling puce covers:

'The "Poor" are detestable animals! They are only picturesque and amusing. The "Rich" are bores without a single exception, En tant que riches! / We want those simple and great people found everywhere / *BLAST* presents an art of Individuals'.

Already, Lewis's campaign bore marked similarities to the *Live At The Witch Trials* phase of Mark E. Smith's and The Fall's assault on the post-punk new wave. Smith was a Renaissance Man without a culture vital enough to support the fulfillment of his talents. Similarly, Lewis is locked in a position of terrorist warfare, cerebral and caustic against a fashion driven society which is indurate to all attitudes save its own conservative 'non-conformity'. Thus Lewis is cast (again like Smith) as a cat amongst pigeons, stalking the effette by saying the unspeakable. In 1914 Lewis wrote: 'OH BLAST FRANCE! / pig plagiarism / BELLY / SLIPPERS / POODLE TEMPER / BAD MUSIC / SENTIMENTAL GALLIC GUSH / SENSATIONALISM / FUSSINESS / PARISIAN PAROCHIALISM'. Or again: 'As to women: wherever you can, substitute the society of men. Treat them kindly, for they suffer from the herd, although of it, and have many of the same contempts as yourself. But women, and the processes for which they exist, are the arch conjuring trick: and they have the cheap mystery and a good deal of the slipperiness, of the conjuror. Sodomy should be avoided, as far as possible. It tends to add to the abominable confusion already existing.'

Whist Lewis's polemic continues to affront every notion of political correctness, his audience recognize that his contrariness is merely a facet of a far more complex, and engaging, world vision. The ability to provoke and doubt, simultaneously, has often been cited as being fundamental to great art. Lewis himself went some way to acknowledging this in 1917:

‘You must be a duet in everything. For the individual, the single object, and the isolated is, you will admit, an absurdity. Why try and give yourself the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality?’

From the very beginning, Vorticism has been Wyndham Lewis’s medium for expressing his unique world view: everything outside the Vortex is meat for his stew. Within the chaos of Vorticism, and within the oblique, humorous code of Lewis’s writing, there are precise patterns and a finely focused lucidity. He assembles his words in such a manner that found language, narrative, slang, double-talk, trigger phrases and rapid juxtapositions are combined to create a discourse which describes as it commentates. The style is not artless, as it may seem, but the product of careful design. ‘Life is what I have gone out to get’ says Lewis, ‘—life where it is merging with something else, certainly. But I catch it just before it goes over into the fastuous element. The fish is still in the stream. Or if you like, this is the raw meat in the kitchen—destined, perhaps, for the Banquet of Reason, but as yet highly irrational.’

Like Mark E. Smith, Wyndham Lewis will suggest the existence of a conspiracy behind most manifestations of modern culture. In texts such as ‘Enemy of the Stars’, ‘Life is the important thing’, ‘Policeman and artist’, ‘Orchestra of the Media’, ‘Tarr’, and ‘Code of a Herdsman’, Lewis appears to endorse what Smith meant by ‘the war against intelligence’. In 1937 Lewis stated: ‘Do not play with political notions, aristocratisms or the reverse, for that is a compromise with the herd. Do not allow yourself to imagine “a fine herd though still a herd.” There is no FINE HERD. The cattle that call themselves “gentlemen” you will observe to be a little cleaner. It is merely cunning and produced with a product called SOAP. But you will find no serious difference between them and those vast dismal herds they avoid. Some of them are very dangerous and treacherous.’

If Vorticism is both Lewis’s vision of the world and his means of describing it, then the Great British Vortex is peopled with grotesque characters whom Lewis has invented. These would include BRITANNIC AESTHETE, WILD NATURE CRANK, DOMESTICATED POLICEMAN, GAEITY CHORUS GIRL, AMATEUR, SCIOLAST, ART-PIMP, JOURNALIST, SELF-MAN, ORGANIST, and THE HAIRDRESSER. One gets the impression that Lewis’s imagination was incubating this cast since before Vorticism began. In many ways his writing has served to fill the biographies of these characters; at the same time Lewis will write pseudonymously under their names. In a later autobiographical piece entitled ‘The “Author of Tarr”’ he begins, ‘So much for Mr Cantleman. Need I repeat that this hero of mine is not to be identified with me? But to some extent, in the fragments I have just quoted, you get the lowdown on the editor of Blast. That is why I used them.’

When asked to clarify this assessment of these characters, Lewis cautiously sips his beer before replying ‘Never fall into the vulgarity of assuming yourself to be one ego. Each trench must have another one behind it. Each single self—that you manage to be at any given time—must have five at least indifferent to it. You must have a power of indifference of five to one. All the greatest actions in the world have been five parts out of six impersonal in the impulse of their origin. To follow this principle you need only cultivate your memory.’

‘In order to live you must remain broken up,’ Lewis announced in 1917. Whilst critics have yet to agree whether the Vorticists, artistically, are drab or dynamic, the roots of mesmeric intensity lie in the practice of contradiction. In the most compelling Lewis texts, the language and typography merely provides an open structure through which Lewis roams like a suspicious caretaker, flashing his torch from one empty dark room to another. This is best illustrated in *BLAST*’s ‘Manifesto’, signed by ten others.

The seven-part polemic begins with a ten-point prologue in which Lewis declaims:

Beyond action and reaction we would establish ourselves
We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure of adolescent
clearness between two extremes
We discharge ourselves on both sides
We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the same cause, which is neither
side or both sides and ours.

As Lewis explains, the idea of the Vorticists was always to create a violent central activity, attracting everything to itself, absorbing all that is around it. ‘Vorticism was an intellectual eruption, productive of a closely-packed, brightly-coloured alphabet of objects with a logic of its own. The doctrine which is implicit in this eruption is to be looked for in the shapes for which it was responsible ... I should have encouraged the shaping, in clay or in wood, of objects conforming to these theories. In other words, a world of not-stone, not-trees, not-dogs, not-men, not-bottles, not-houses, etc.’

Initially, the received idea of the Vorticists’ audience was that of pale, tall, exceedingly romantic-looking fellows. The obscurity of *The Vortex* appeared to demand supporters who were socially dysfunctional—the weird cousins of the Bloomsbury Group. In time, however, the Vorticists have achieved a certain following alongside fellow modernists such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

‘It was scarcely our fault that we were a youth racket. It was Ezra who in the first place organized us willy nilly into that. For he was never satisfied until everything was organized. And it was he who made us into a youth racket—that was his method of organization.

‘All politics today, and all the “Youth-racket” element in politics are put across by men-of-letters, journalists, philosophes, or the propaganda of intellectualist sects, groups and philansteries, rather than via the Clubs or the floor of the House of Commons. And as I have already indicated, there was a tidy bit of political contraband tucked away in our technical militancy. But I was not the responsible party.

‘Yes Mr Joyce, Mr Pound, Mr Eliot—and, for I said that my piety was egoistic, the Enemy, as well—the Chiricos and Picassos, and in music their equivalents—will be the exotic flowers of a culture that has passed. As people look back at them out of a very humdrum, cautious, disillusioned society, the critics of the future day will rub their eyes. They will look, to them, so hopelessly avant-garde! so almost madly up-and-coming!

‘What energy!—what impossibly Spartan standards man will exclaim! So heroically these “pioneers” will stand out like monosyllable monoliths—Pound, Joyce, Lewis. They will acquire the strange aspects of “empire-builders”, as seen by a well-levelled and efficiently flattened out Proletariat, with all its million tails well down between its shuffling legs!’

But, despite their position as a ‘difficult’ group already at odds with shifting cultural fashions, the Vorticists’ Luddite tendencies have brought them into the focus of serious debate about contemporary art.

‘The Arts with their great capital A’s are, considered as plants, decidedly unrobust. They are the sport, at the best, of political chance: parasitically dependent upon the good health of the social body.

‘A few arts were born in the happy lull before the world-storm. In 1914 a ferment of the artistic intelligence occurred in the west of Europe. And it looked to many people as if a great historic “school” was in process of formation. Expressionism, Post-impressionism, Vorticism, Cubism, Futurism were some of the characteristic nicknames bestowed upon these manifestations, where they found their intensest expression in the pictorial field. In every case the structural and philosophic rudiments of life were sought out. On all hands a return to first principles was witnessed.’

Wyndham Lewis’s writing anticipates and rejects academic criticism, although he has offered analyses of his work. Of his various BLASTs (1914) Lewis says, concisely: ‘Take the first BLAST, “Blast Humour”. That is straightforward enough. The Englishman has what he calls a “sense of humour”. He says that the German, the Frenchman, and most foreigners do not possess this attribute, and suffer accordingly. For what does the “sense of humour” mean but an ability to belittle everything—to make light of everything? Not only does the Englishman not “make a mountain of of a molehill”; he is able to make a molehill out of a mountain.’ The more ambitious Tarr (1914–15), a terse first novel of verbal economy, was summarized by Lewis as displaying ‘a certain indifference to bourgeois conventions, and an unblushing disbelief in the innate goodness of human nature.’

Lewis, spokesman of ‘The New Egos’, maintains a similar single-mindedness towards the traditionally sensitive subject of politics. ‘I am trying to save people from being “ruled” too much—from being “ruled” off the face of the earth, as a matter of fact.’

But would Lewis invest, seriously, in politics? ‘Really all this organized disturbance was Art behaving as if it were Politics. But I swear I did not know it. It may in fact have been politics. I see that now. Indeed it must have been. But I was unaware of the fact: I believed that this was the way artists were always received; a somewhat tumultuous reception, perhaps, but after all, why not? I mistook the agitation in the audience for the sign of an awakening of the emotion of artistic sensibility. And then I assumed too that artists always formed militant groups. I supposed they had to do this, seeing how “bourgeois” all Publics were—or all Publics of which I had any experience.’

‘Anyhow, in 1926 I began writing about politics, not because I like politics but everything was getting bogged in them and before you could do anything to deal with the politics with which it was encrusted. And I’ve got so bepoliticked myself in the process that in order to get at me, today, you have to get the politics of me first. However, when politics came on the scene I ring down the curtain; and that was in 1926.

That was when politics began for me in earnest. I’ve never had a moment’s peace since.’

Inevitably, Lewis is in danger of becoming as marginalized as Mark E. Smith became in

his later and most prolific years. As yet, however, the Vorticists remain a question mark in the history of art. But Lewis continues to rant. 'Peace is a fearful thing for that countless majority who are so placed that there is no difference between Peace and War—except that during the latter day they are treated with more consideration. In war, if they are wounded they are well treated, in peace, if struck down it is apt to be nothing like so pleasant.

'You will be astonished to find out how like art is to war, I mean "modernist" art. They talk a lot about how a war just-finished effects art. But a war about to start can do the same thing. War, art, civil war, strikes, coup d'états dovetail into each other. It is somewhat depressing to consider how as an artist one is always holding up a mirror to politics without really knowing it. My picture called *The Plan of War* painted six months before the Great War "broke out", as we say, depresses me. A prophet is a most unoriginal person: all he is doing is imitating something that is not there, but soon will be. With me war and art have been mixed up from the start. It is still.'

This piece, originally published in *Metropolis M*, no. 2, 2005, is an inversion of a piece by Michael Bracewell and Jon Wilde, 'Mark E. Smith', originally published in *Frieze*, no. 6, 1992.

Lewis's 'conversation' is drawn from his various writings, particularly his autobiography *Blasting And Bombardiering* (1937).

Mark E. Smith

by Michael Bracewell & Jon Wilde

Yer got sixty hour weeks and stone toilet back-gardens
Peter Cook's jokes, bad dope, check shirts, lousy groups
Point their finger at America
Down pokey quaint streets in Cambridge
Cycles our distant spastic heritage
Its a gay red, roundhead, army career, grim head
If we were smart we'd emigrate

(The Fall, *The English Scheme*, 1980)

The Fall have always been at arm's length.
That's our mentality.

(Mark E. Smith, 1980)

As with Joyce, Beuys, and Wyndham Lewis, the historians will be arguing about Mark E. (for Edward) Smith until the kingdom comes. 20th Century culture has been kept alive by the irritants which work their way under its skin. In this much, Wilde's late-Victorian aphorism, 'To be great, one must be misunderstood' required a new century to prove its accuracy. Mark E. Smith, who could so easily be the subject of a myriad Sunday supplement profiles, has remained a shadowy and mistrusted figure, silhouetted on the banks of the cultural mainstream. As our times appear to demand art terrorist outsiders, Smith has called the

era's bluff by refusing easy routes to fashionable and commercially lucrative acceptance. Whilst Damien Hirst prepares to suspend his Turner prize in a vat of formaldehyde, Mark E. Smith—unknown to many—continues to ply his trade as an independent musician, philosopher, historian, writer, wit and fly-in-the-ointment.

Smith formed the group, The Fall (after the Camus novel), in Manchester in 1977. At the time, he was working in Manchester Docks as a customs clerk. This was a time when the metropolitan impetus of punk rock was being challenged by the provinces. The deliquescing anarchy of the Sex Pistols and The Clash was giving way to the studied neurosis of Joy Division and Cabaret Voltaire. But The Fall had no place—nor wanted one—in either camp. From their inception, Smith's Fall were bloody-minded-outsiders, possessing an extraordinary ability to get up noses. At a time when postpunk fashionability was about to disgrace itself with the saccharine posturing of new romanticism, The Fall looked like a cross between a class outing from Please Sir! and a crew of chagrined pipe-fitters on their afternoon off. In 1980, pop music was reinventing itself as a kaleidoscope of carefully stylised factions: The Fall, immovable in their determination to remain aloof from the posturing of their peers, quickly earned not only incomprehension but also hostility. In their early performances, they brought the volatility of a bad night in a Wakefield Working Men's Club to a scene which believed itself both to be self-contained and self-policed. The rhetoric of The Fall was similar to suddenly finding oneself in a slanging match with a vituperative Mancunian lorry-driver. For this invective, The Fall have never been forgiven. Challenged with the notion that The Fall drew their menace from the twilight of punk rock. Smith replied with a dismissive sniff, 'Punk? I 'ate that stuff. I wouldn't have it in the 'ouse!'

Like Public Image's *Metal Box*, The Fall's debut LP, *Live At The Witch Trials*, was regarded as the death rattle of the 1970s; this was music which seemed to deal with personal and political dissatisfaction in a manner which was both sinister and confrontational. By 1981, Public Image resembled a self-parodic cabaret turn fit only for the chicken-in-the-basket circuit. The Fall, on the other hand, had made their sense of alienation a vital part of their art, laying the foundations for a creative process which has seen them through 15 LPs in as many years.

For Mark E. Smith, even irrelevance could be put to work for The Fall. As a teenager, he would ride around Manchester on the top deck of a bus, shouting random words in a pointed manner at bewildered passers-by. Leper, Penguin or, Grandmother! when delivered with the correct mixture of urgency and forethought, could obtain an effect that bordered on the sinister.

It was only a short step, aesthetically, from confusing Mancunian pedestrians with ordinary language to offending the music cognoscenti by challenging their self-satisfaction. *Live At The Witch Trials* was jarring and disjointed, making a virtue of its Northern bloody-mindedness:

'We are The Fall! Northern white crap that talks back; we are not Black; tall; no boxes for us / do not fuck us ...'

Already, Smith's campaign bore marked similarities to the *BLAST* phase of Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticist assault on inter-war Bloomsbury. Lewis was a Renaissance Man without a culture vital enough to support the fulfilment of his talents. Similarly, Smith is

locked in a position of trench warfare, blasting and bombardiering against a fashion-driven society which is indurate to all attitudes save its own conservative non-conformity'. Thus, Smith is cast (again like Lewis) as a cat amongst pigeons, stalking the effete by saying the unspeakable. Interviewed in 1979, Smith said: 'Nuking Russia might not be a bad idea as far as the bleedin' world is concerned. They've plunged a lot of people into miserable lives. You've only got to be in East Germany to see it. It's a horrible way to live.

It's like Middlesborough.' Again, in 1985: 'Live Aid? I smell a lot of Victorian bloody do-gooding about the whole thing. There are people in Hulme (Manchester) who are half starved, so why not send the aid to them? Never in a million years. And any country that can be invaded by the Italians must be a load of crap. Am I right?'

Whilst Smith's polemic continues to affront every notion of political correctness, his audience recognise that his contrariness is merely a facet of a far more complex, and engaging, world vision. The ability to provoke and doubt, simultaneously, has often been cited as being fundamental to great art. Smith himself went some way to acknowledging this in 1988: 'Whenever I say anything, I often think that the opposite is true as well. Sometimes I think the truth is too fucking obvious for people to take. The possibilities are endless and people don't like that. They go for the average every time. Well, that doesn't interest me in the slightest.'

From the very beginning, The Fall has been Mark E. Smith's medium for expressing his unique world view: everything outside The Fall is meat for his stew. Within the chaos of The Fall, and within the oblique, humourous code of Smith's writing, there are precise patterns and a finely focused lucidity. He assembles his lyrics in such a manner that found language, narrative, slang, double-talk, trigger phrases and rapid juxtapositions are combined to create a discourse which describes as it commentates. The style is not artless, as it may look. But the product of careful design.

'It's just precog,' says Smith. 'You write things down and you don't know what they mean but you know they're true and they come true later. It's not prophecy as such. It makes me laugh actually. I see things happening and I think: "Oh, that reminds me of something." Turns out it's something I wrote five years ago. I wrote a song called Zagreb Daylight two years ago. We were playing in Zagreb and I could feel this horrible, murderous shit in the air. I had a feeling that jobs were going to rule the earth. I'm half one myself you see. Anyway, I wrote this thing about a man in a shop with a dwarf behind the counter. It didn't go down well at all. If it came out a month from now, people would say it's topical.'

Like Wyndham Lewis, Mark E. Smith will suggest the existence of a conspiracy behind most manifestations of modern culture. In songs like 'Oswald Defence Lawyer', 'Kicker Conspiracy', 'Bug Day', 'The War Against Intelligence', 'Rowche Rumble' and 'Riddler!', Smith appears to endorse what Lewis meant by, 'the immense false-bottom underlying every seemingly solid surface.' Interviewed in 1990, Smith stated: 'It's natural to gripe at things like British Telecom. One time I was using the phone a lot and I dialled a number, and I could hear people munching sandwiches and talking about my last phone call. I actually rang the operator and said, "Look. I'm trying to dial a fucking number here and I can't get through because your people are talking about my phone calls. Have you got a bloody license to do this?" And she slammed the phone down on me!'

If The Fall are both Smith's vision of the world and his means of describing it, then the strange and frightening world of The Fall is peopled with grotesque characters whom Smith has invented. These would include Joe Totale, J. Temperance, Wireless Enthusiast, Fiery Jack, The Man Whose Head Expanded, Hip Priest, Man With Chip, Carry Bag Man and Slang King. One gets the impression that Smith's vivid imagination was incubating this cast since before The Fall began. In many ways, his writing for The Fall has served to fill in the biographies of these characters: at the same time, Smith will write pseudonymously under their names. On the sleeve of 1980's Totale's Turns, R. Totale XVIII pens a note entitled, 'Call Yourself Bloody Professionals?' and concludes with the comment, 'This is probably the most accurate document of The Fall ever released, even though they'll have a hard time convincing their mams and dads about that, ha ha.' Interestingly enough, the remains of R. Totale's ancestor are described elsewhere as being found buried on a Welsh hillside complete with instructions to unleash the content of certain tapes upon the world.

When asked to clarify this assessment of these characters, Smith cautiously sips his beer before replying, 'Man With Chip still going strong on the chat show. Cheap TV stance, yeah. Oprah Winfrey. Heh! Heh! Magnus fucking Pyke!'

'We've got repetition in our music and we're never gonna lose it,' Smith announced in 1978. Whilst critics have yet to agree whether The Fall, musically, are a din or a sublime symphony, the roots of The Fall's mesmeric intensity lie in the practice of repetition. In the most compelling Fall songs the group merely provide an open structure through which Smith roams like a suspicious caretaker, flashing his torch from one empty dark room to another. This is best illustrated in 1988's Dog Is Life/Jerusalem, a lyric which featured the unique songwriting credit of William Blake/Mark E. Smith. As the song approaches a narrative passage, the music is pared down to an unflinching pulse over which Smith declaims:

I was walking down the street when I tripped up on a discarded banana skin
And on the way down I caught the side of my head on a protruding brick, chip
It was the government's fault
I was very let down with the Budget
I was expecting a one million quid handout
I was very disappointed
It was the government's fault.

As Smith explains, the idea of The Fall has always been to write intelligent lyrics over a raw, basic beat 'That's never changed really. One thing we always get is, "this is their most commercial album for ages". In fact, the LPs have become less and less commercial over the years and I'm quite proud of that. The problem with that is, people get this idea that we're determined not to do well. Which isn't the case at all. So we get Top 30 singles and they won't even consider us for Top of the Pops. It's the last thing they want. I think there's a fear of The Fall in that respect. If people heard us, they'd find us entertaining and stimulating. Intelligence is actively discouraged these days though isn't it?'

Initially, the received idea of The Fall's audience was that of pale, spotty, adolescent males—bedroom misfits and train-spotters who wore anoraks with elasticated cuffs and lived off white bread sandwiches. The obscurity of The Fall appeared to demand supporters who were socially dysfunctional—the weird cousins of Clash fans. In time, however, The

Fall have achieved a massive European following which covers all social groups from art world fashion victims to pot-bellied middle-aged rockers.

‘Fall audiences have always been a bit weird,’ says Smith. ‘Well, not weird actually. I think they’re the salt of the earth. I get letters from kids in Wales. Their lives have been transformed by The Fall. I suppose if you’re on the dole in Wales there’s nowt else to do unless you’re out burgling.’

‘These guys in Wakefield, miners and all that, they’ve all grown up with wives and kids, and they’ve been with us since 1978. They don’t buy records anymore but they’re still into The Fall. It means a lot to me. They read interviews I’ve done and write me postcards saying, “Reel ’em in, cock—the lads in the Wakefield Pit.” Actually, we’ve always caught the individuals. In Germany, we played this gig and the oldest man in the world was there. He must have been about ninety. Had grey hair down to his arse. He looked like God with a Fall LP under his arm.’

‘It always annoys me when I hear other bands going on about how they’re not a student group like The Fall. Student group? You must be fucking joking! I don’t mean to sound prejudiced but if you go to university, you’re a bit daft anyway. I’ve nothing against students, mind. We play student places quite a lot. You walk into the disco and there’s all these kids on the dancefloor jiggling around to Lynyrd Skynyrd records. When *Slates* (1981) came out, we lost our student audience overnight. I was fucking glad about that.’

‘I feel a bit sorry for kids these days. They’re obsessed with animals and all that. That’s quite nice I suppose. I’ve got two cats myself. But they’re putting the frighteners on kids these days. Giving them anxieties they don’t need. I saw something yesterday. It was horrible. These kids in tears about elephants. I blame the fucking teachers.’

But, despite their position as a ‘difficult’ group already at odds with shifting musical fashions, The Fall’s Luddite tendencies have brought them into the focus of serious debate about contemporary art. ‘Some of our stuff is art and some of it isn’t,’ Smith shrugs. ‘We get it and we lose it. I like that as it happens. I think a lot of my writing is art but I’m a bit shy about it and that’s why it’s not printed. I couldn’t be so precious to force it on the public. I’ve seen too many rock bands go out and pretend they’re art. You get classed with them. I’ve always been careful to keep away from all that.’

‘I’d like to be considered as an artist But I don’t want to get into David Byrne territory. I’m not knocking the guy, but he was never any good to begin with. They go for him in a big way out in America. He’s not an artist like John Waters is an artist. I suppose Waters is a bit like me really; he takes trash, puts it together with what he thinks and does it very well. But basically, my attitude to life is to live. It’s more important to be a man than an artist. I don’t believe in the artist syndrome. I think I stimulate people’s brains by saying what I think. Always have done. But, when we tour America, we get people coming up to us saying, “If only you could be a bit more like Talking Heads.” Well we always had better backdrops than Talking Heads.’

Mark E. Smith’s writing anticipates and rejects academic criticism. Also, he has famously avoided offering analyses of either his records or his collaborative projects in theatre and dance.

Of his play, *Hey! Luciani* (1986) Smith says, concisely: 'It's like a cross between *The Prisoner* and Shakespeare. There's even bits that rhyme and stuff.' The more ambitious *I Am Curious Orange* (1986), a ballet with Michael Clark, dealing with the ascendancy of William of Orange to the British throne, was summarised by Smith as, 'The English get pissed off with their king, kick him out and get some Dutch bloke in.' As an historian, Mark E. Smith possesses the self-assurance of A.J.P. Taylor: 'You don't hear much about Cromwell these days, despite the fact that he built England up to what it was. There used to be this Statue of Cromwell outside Victoria Station, in Manchester, but they moved it and put it in some fucking park in Wythenshawe, behind some bush. Nobody knows about it!'

Smith, spokesman of the 'prole art threat', maintains a similar single-mindedness towards the traditionally sensitive topic of money. 'Fear is relative to how much you're earning and what kind of threat you're under. But I can live on a fucking quid a week, me. And I have done. But, if I suddenly made a load of it, I'd buy a house. I don't like shopping and all that but I like nice clothes. A good pair of trousers when you can. You usually find in Britain that the scruffiest people are the richest. Have you noticed that?'

But would Smith invest, seriously, in art? 'Course I would. Italian stuff mainly. Chairs and stuff like that. If I had an awful lot of money, I'd buy some of that Catholic stuff—Tintoretto, El Greco. I like the colour in those paintings. But what would I do with it all? I've got the books and that anyway. I'm well into Venetian art. They always had a bit of humour about them. Like, they'd put a German soldier in the middle of *The Last Supper*. Stuff like that.

'I look at some of the things in *Frieze*, like the stuff with the tin cans. I did all that in the fifth year at School. You'd get these sixth formers with Pink Floyd sleeves under their arms doing this stuff with green blobs and brown blobs. They'd be going, "Oh, it's about the economy and the Third World debt." Then they'd tell me that my stuff wasn't art but it were miles better than their fucking horrible blobs. Ten years later, they're doing it for themselves down in Chelsea. That's the tragedy of being a self-taught artist.'

Inevitably, Mark E. Smith is faced with the danger of becoming as marginalised as Wyndham Lewis became in his later and most prolific years. As yet, however, *The Fall* remain a question mark in the history of art. But Smith continues to blast.

'Manchester council had this "Bring Art to the People" Day, he concludes. 'They're all raving socialists that lot. There were five exhibitions in bars around the city. It was a kind of art pub crawl. They wanted me to kick it off, snip the ribbon and all that. I thought our fame was going down last year so I decided to do my bit. You've got to keep a high profile. It's that kind of business. Anyway, we were dragged around these bars and showed all this art. There was all this Factory stuff done by some bloke who won't get out of bed for less than £5,000. These sub-Warhol drawings of Carry On characters. I'm thinking, "This is crap!" but you don't want to be rude about it 'cus it's all middle-aged people. They're saying, "Oh Mark. I never knew you were into art" I was going, "Oh yeah, I love a bit of art. me. I'm into Tinzeretto and all that," and their mouths dropped.

'So, we got to the third bar. By this time, the band were dropping off one by one and going home for a bit to eat. I stuck around and I was trying to make an effort 'cus there were all these art writers from the famous papers. I was talking to one woman about Wyndham Lewis and she went into this rant for about twenty minutes about how he was a fascist

and all that I was saying, “Alright luv, we all know that. But at least he apologized for his mistakes.” Then they were asking me which ones I liked. So I pointed to this painting on the wall—a black and white thing with barmen wearing leather coats and all these grotesque characters hanging about. It looked a lot like an Otto Dix. Then this bloke from the Council ambles over and says, “Actually Mark, that’s not part of the exhibition”. Turns out it’s just part of the wall. Heh! Heh! It was easily the best though.’

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