

Chapter 1

Introduction: ‘the subject of modern war’

DAVID PETERS CORBETT

In his article ‘The Men Who Will Paint Hell: Modern War as a Theme for the Artist’, which appeared in the *Daily Express* for 10 February 1919, Wyndham Lewis spoke of a ‘new subject-matter for art’. He wrote that this ‘subject-matter is not war, which is as old as the chase or love; but modern war’.¹ Lewis’s lifetime was bracketed and punctuated by modern war. He was born in 1882, soon after the first mechanised campaign on European soil, the Franco–Prussian war, had been fought in 1870–71; he died in 1957 in the thick of a ‘Cold War’ elaborated from the constraints of post-nuclear conflict. In between he suffered the extraordinary disruption of two world wars. The first ripped apart his early career and set him on an entirely new course in the 1920s and thirties; the second dragged him out of the mainstream of British cultural life and left him neglected in his final years.² The effects of this history on Lewis have frequently been speculated upon. Critics and historians have pointed to the undertow of violence in his works and to his pre-occupation with conflict and the anxieties it engenders. But, despite the general agreement that war and aggression might somehow be central to an understanding of Lewis’s art, literature, and thought, such speculation has remained largely unsubstantiated. This volume begins to remedy that situation. The connections between war, aggression, violence, and meaning in Lewis’s work are examined from a number of perspectives, and the central themes of Lewis’s *œuvre* are reinterpreted in the light of what emerges. The cumulative effect of these chapters is to make us appreciate that for Lewis, as for all citizens of modernity, ‘the subject of modern war’ has a threefold meaning. Firstly, it describes the private theme of so much of Lewis’s drawn and written work, the place of the individual ‘subject’, torn and harassed by the violence of modernised aggression.

Secondly, it identifies one of the principal cultural mechanisms of modernity, the ruinous impersonal technologisation of conflict which repeatedly marks the history of the twentieth century. Finally, it indicates that Lewis's modernism itself is central to the preoccupation with violence that forms the 'subject' of so much of his production. The desire to investigate modern life through the medium of art seems to bring with it a complicity with the principles of violence which structure modernity itself. Lewis's 'modern war' connects to wider cultural themes which concern us all.

Laplanche and Pontalis, in *The Language of Psycho-analysis*, offer the following definition of aggression (or aggressiveness, or aggressivity, the terms are interchangeable):

Tendency or cluster of tendencies finding expression in real or phantasy behaviour intended to harm other people, or to destroy, humiliate or constrain them, etc. Violent destructive motor action is not the only form that aggressiveness can take: indeed there is no kind of behaviour that may not have an aggressive function, be it negative – the refusal to lend assistance, for example – or positive; be it symbolic (e.g. irony) or actually carried out.³

The view of Lewis as driven by aggression in this sense is a powerful one in the literature.⁴ Lewis is seen as the 'Enemy', opposed in some irredeemable way to the society around him and to his fellow human beings, satisfying in his texts and opinions the urge to 'destroy, humiliate or constrain' other people which obsesses him. Lewis encourages this reference back to biography as a controlling principle of understanding. His histrionic personality, lacking in the diplomatic skills so evident in contemporaries like T. S. Eliot, was compulsively self-dramatising. The self is a central preoccupation in his writing. Moreover, it is difficult to subsume Lewis's variety of production – a large body of writing in politics and cultural criticism, novels, verse, and plays, as well as his work as a visual artist – under a model which confines itself to the text or painting as autonomous object. The need to reach out from the paintings or the novels to the discursive writings is too great; and the need to account for that vast outpouring of books and articles by means

of a biographical explanation is acute.⁵ Lewis is notorious as the modernist who wrote a book called *Hitler* in 1931 celebrating the advent of National Socialism, as the relentless critic of other modernists like Joyce, Pound and Woolf, and as a persistent right-wing presence in the 1920s and thirties. One might think that this highly public involvement with the ideologically suspect or distasteful would have made the historical circumstances of his career very pressing for those seeking to evaluate his work. But in fact history has largely been eschewed by Lewis's commentators, who have chosen to account for the interest in right-wing ideas and the putative aggression of the writing by means of explanations based on ideas of psychological difficulty.

In the most influential version of this account, Fredric Jameson's 1979 book *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*, Lewis is said to be a seething morass of negative and hostile opinions, all 'ugly or ideologically offensive'.⁶ Jameson presents a Lewis wholly given over to 'intransigence,' who 'makes himself the impersonal registering apparatus for forces which he means to record . . . in all their primal ugliness' (p. 21). There is an endemic 'aggressivity' in Lewis, which amounts to 'a lifelong constant of both the form and content of his works, and of his own characterological style' (p. 4). This aggressivity Jameson traces in its gradual expansion into 'a global hostility, not merely to his own characters, but also to the quasi-totality of his contemporaries as well, not excluding his own readership' (p. 4). Finally Lewis becomes a mass of 'unbound impulses released from the rationalizing censorship of a respectable consciousness intent on keeping up appearances' (p. 21). This uncontrolled aggression paradoxically turns out to be the source of 'value' for Jameson in Lewis's work (p. 18), for by constituting itself as the conduit for the articulation of the violent, ideological content of 'protofascism', Lewis's writing gives to that content the means to display 'its own contradictions' and to 'blurt . . . out in public speech what even in private was never meant to be more than tacitly understood' (p. 23).

The glamour of this powerful reading has coloured the received view of Lewis for nearly twenty years. Jameson's Lewis, the 'fascist', the aggressor, the channel for cultural and political forces beyond

his own comprehension, has become the standard figure of academic opinion. But this view is not without its complications, principally because it promotes a version of Lewis which is hard to defend when his career is considered historically and harder still to justify from his texts or visual works. Faced with the call of history in reading Lewis, Jameson's crucial contribution has been to argue that commentators should refuse the biographical appeal on the grounds that its reality is unknowable. In its place he constructs a 'model' of the psyche of the text with which to work. He posits a 'libidinal apparatus' – a concept adapted from Lyotard's '*dispositifs pulsionnels*':

an independent structure of which one can write a history: and this history – the story of the logical permutations of a given fantasy-structure, as well as of its approaches to its own closure and internal limits – is a very different one from that projected by the conventional literary psychoanalysis or psycho-biography, which take as their object of study something to which we no longer have access . . . namely the private psyche of the biographical individual, Wyndham Lewis himself. (p. 11)

Although Jameson intends that this process should also be an historical one – he refers to the impact of the political dispositions of the Great Powers and to the affect of the First World War on Lewis – the actual outcome of his methodological approach is to uncouple history from the work. The consequence of this sundering of the subject and the circumstances in which textual unity comes into being has been to encourage a neglect of history in assessments of Lewis, to do away with the historical biography and to move towards what is essentially ahistorical free interpretation. In the end, the affect of Jameson's book has been to justify the identification of Lewis as a violent aggressor while discounting any need to test these characteristics against the actual historical circumstances of his career.

More recent commentators, whose methodology and point of departure are heavily influenced by Jameson's reading, find themselves caught up in this approach.⁷ David Ayers, in his 1992 book *Wyndham Lewis and Western Man*, claims that he will write a history. He rightly notes that to adopt Jameson's strategy of the 'libidinal apparatus' still depends on the idea of the biographical author as

the ‘binding’ structure of the series of texts from which the psycho-analytical model is derived. History, he points out, is reintroduced in this way but is not taken account of.⁸ Despite this insight, Ayers adopts a methodology very similar to Jameson’s, with the result that the arguments which emerge from his study as they concern history – Lewis’s ‘fascism’, his motivations, his beliefs – become seriously distorted. Ayers uses the concept of a modelled psyche derived from the texts to argue for an endemic anti-Semitism in Lewis. And because he is now effectively free of his obligation towards history he can move – in practice if not in intention – to a formalist reading of a modelled textual unity and into an interpretative freedom where absences, silences, denials or statements to the contrary can be read as the clearest of confessions. Ayers’s evidence that Lewis believed there was a Jewish conspiracy to subvert western civilisation is again and again the evidence of Lewis’s ‘indirection’. It has to be like this because, as Ayers recognises, ‘the so-called “Jewish Question” is never allowed pride of place in his writings, and indeed . . . sometimes fails to reach the light at all.’⁹ Indeed, Lewis simply does not say there is a Jewish conspiracy. Ayers’s attempt to connect Lewis’s argument with post-war culture – although it does throw up some interesting readings – is largely vitiated by the fact that in order to make it credible he has had to construct a ‘self’ for Lewis so heavily ‘remodelled’ as to renounce history altogether.

The issue here is not primarily Lewis’s anti-Semitism. It is the decoupling of the imputed ‘aggressivity’ and violence in his texts from their formation in history. In practice the remodelled integrity of the texts tends to slip back into the biographical Wyndham Lewis, who is then convicted as an individual of the ‘ideological ugliness’ of the themes identified in his work. My objection to this slippage is that it misreads. Lewis may have been concerned with violence and aggression as central themes and principles of his work, he may have had anti-Semitic views, but the only way of gaining an understanding of these things and judging them properly, is to see them historically. If we do not do this, then we will not be able to establish their reality. If we balk at seeking to identify and place these things within the history that shaped them, then we betray our responsibility to understand the past.¹⁰

It is this refusal of history in the discussion of Lewis's aggressivity that the chapters here begin to address. The insight, offered by both Jameson and Ayers, that the First World War is as a turning point in Lewis's career and in the history of aggression in his writings and paintings is confirmed. The resulting complexities are worked through within a close attention to history, displacing a modelled textual 'psyche' in favour of an historical individual located within historical circumstance.

II

The chapters in this volume can be divided into two groups. In the first, there are discussions like those of Alan Munton and David Wragg, which deal with the question of aggression generally in Lewis's work and career. In the second, those arguments whose focus is on the First World War and on its subsequent transformations in Lewis's work of the 1920s and thirties. Christine Hardegen and Tom Normand are in the first sub-group, dealing with the war; Geoff Gilbert, myself, Paul Edwards and Andrew Causey are in the second, dealing with the war's consequences. The focus and concerns of the collection as a whole therefore revolve around an interlinked series of issues which develop a reading of Lewis's aggression while offering different, and in some cases contrasting, interpretations of its meanings. These issues are firstly, Lewis's imputed and actual aggression; secondly, the laboratory for that aggression, which is the First World War; thirdly, the role played in these issues by Lewis's practice as a modernist. Overall, the chapters offer a concentrated reading of Lewis's aggression, reinterpreting it in the light of his modernism and his experience in the world war. The period of the interwar years, between 1918 and 1939, emerges here as crucially formed by Lewis's reaction to the chaos wrought on the world by the conflict of the First World War. For Lewis the war initiated a questioning of the modernist moment of 1914 which sent his own practice and ambitions into a period of crisis.

Alan Munton opens the volume by discussing the general question of Lewis's relationship to war and aggression. For Munton, an assessment of Lewis which sees him as bound into psychological opposition to the world is an accurate one. Lewis is implicated in

an aggression which depends on a complication of the sense of self and its power over the other. But if in his writings Lewis attacks the other, this is not the case in his visual art, where he assumes a contemplative role. In Lewis's art of the First World War the spectator is encouraged to think about the dehumanisation and inhumanity of warfare. Lewis's contemplative evocation of the experience of the war depends upon his intimate familiarity with the existence of the gunners he depicts, and his identification with their lives and hardships. In presenting this material, Munton argues, Lewis is setting himself against the domination and aggression of modernity itself. In the visual works he produced under the impulse of his experience of conflict, Lewis found a position from which to critique the inherent violence and destructiveness that lies within modernity's rational construction of the means to wage war.

That opposition to aggression returns in Lewis's final, self-critical, works of fiction, *Self Condemned* (1954), *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta* (1955). There, through the self-accusatory figures of René Harding and James Pullman, Lewis judges himself and his own involvement in the systems of destruction and violence that characterise modernity. Whatever the motivations behind it, his aggression, impelled by the frustration of his desire to create a utopian community of artists and a utopian society, had, as he finally acknowledged, its negative and destructive sides.

Munton's chapter sets out the context of the arguments which follow. Subsequent chapters flesh out further the issues of the effect of the First World War; the motivations for and character of the works of the 1920s and thirties; and discussion of the degree to which aggression is a useful way of describing Lewis's work and career. Tom Normand, in his chapter on Lewis as an anti-war artist, argues that Lewis's opposition to the First World War emerged as the outcome of a comprehensive philosophical assessment of the character and virtues of human society. War for Lewis was to be repudiated not because, or not simply because, it involved violence and the destruction or degradation of individual human beings, but because it stood for a willed abandonment of the gains of civilisation. War was the means by which the promise of an ordered and organised society was undone and destroyed. Normand identifies the artist as

a bulwark for Lewis in the struggle to prevent this entropic tendency in human society to regress to a pre-civilised stage of development. He relates Lewis's dichotomised view of society – divided into the masses and the individuals – to the intellectual heritage Lewis received from the nineteenth century and most particularly from Matthew Arnold. Doing so enables Normand to make sense of the division between the intuitive and animal actions of the majority of fighting men who swarm through the First World War pictures, and the contemplative and judging figures who watch from the left-hand side of *A Battery Shelled* (plate 2). For Normand, Lewis's objection to the war was the deadly efficiency with which it reduced most human beings to the mechanical level of their animality, to a place where 'the instinctive animal aggression of humanity was realised'.

Faced with the precarious state of civilisation and art and the fallen nature of humanity which were grotesquely revealed by the war, Lewis suffered a blow to his earlier confidence in the mission of art to civilise and instruct. It came to seem to him that the role of art in constructing an ideal society and in ameliorating the world was now questionable in ways he had not hitherto understood. Faced with this uncertainty, the way was prepared for the 'disillusion' Lewis suffered in the post-war years, and for the increasingly passionate and idiosyncratic thinking which dominated his attempts to recreate or theorise the conditions for the ideal society, ushered in by a revived, modernist art, which he pursued in the 1920s and thirties. The political positions Lewis took up in those decades are seen to flow directly from the shock of finding his belief in the possibility of amelioration through art undermined by his experiences in the war.

This sense of the powerful effect the First World War had on Lewis's thinking is confirmed by Christine Hardegen, who argues that the consecutive literary and visual art Lewis produced during the various stages of his wartime career describe his changing assessments of warfare, art, and his own identity as artist under the impact of that experience. Lewis is critical of both the war and of himself and his own self-image. The reformulation of his opinions which it imposed, not only of the systems of society, but of himself and his constitution, make of the First World War the most important single experience that Lewis underwent. In *Blasting*

and Bombardiering, published in 1937 when another destructive European conflict seemed inevitable, Lewis was still attempting to work through the experience of the first war and make sense of it. The war is the seed from which Lewis's new career after 1918, with all its oddities, grew.

After the war Lewis set about trying to recover the gains of the modernist art he had espoused with Vorticism. But he found himself confronted by a new set of conditions in which the radicalism of 1914 was no longer wanted. Writing to his friend Thomas Sturge Moore about the years before the war, Lewis bemoaned in 1941 the effect of the outbreak of the Second World War on a career only just recovering from the effects of the First: 'things had started to look up – another year or so and I should no longer have been poor!' He recalled the state of society which 1914 had seemed to put an end to forever:

How calm those days were before the epoch of wars and social revolution . . . It was the last days of the Victorian world of artificial peacefulness – of the RSPCA and London Bobbies, of 'slumming' and Buzzards cakes. As at that time I had never heard of anything else, it seemed to my young mind in the order of nature. You – I suppose – knew it was all like the stunt of an illusionist. You taught me many things. But you never taught me *that*. I first discovered about it in 1914 – with growing surprise and disgust.¹¹

This 'peaceful' world was the site of Lewis's attempt in 1914 to create a modernist English art. Vorticism asserted the ability of the visual and literary arts to describe the modernity of that world in a new and critical idiom. In the years during and after the war Lewis had to come to terms with the compromising of that ambition and with an attack on modernism's claim to express modern life.¹² Once the war had ended, this led him on the one hand to various shifts of recuperation and confrontation with other, popular, interwar modernisms, on the other to a totalising drive that powered the aggressive desire to find a scapegoat for the situation. Geoff Gilbert describes the consequences. For Gilbert, the affect of the war was to bring home to Lewis the subjection of the artist to the world of action. Art is not located outside the determination of social action but within it, subject to politics and the larger preoccupations of sociality. Faced with this realisation, Lewis in the post-war had to

invent a way of turning ‘this fragile and traumatic recognition’ into ‘a critical position’ which would continue the ambition to judge the world which his modernism had espoused before 1914. Lewis had therefore to find a way to negotiate the implication of art in action while finding a new position of leverage from which to articulate a critique. Gilbert argues that this complex and disturbing challenge, virtually a double bind from which no attempt to strike out and resolve the problem was ever likely to bear fruit, powers the renewed interest in aggression visible in some parts of Lewis’s post-war production. Anti-Semitism arises as the instrument through which ‘the unmasterable experience of war’ and its consequences can be stabilised under a totalising explanation which will compensate for the difficulties enforced or revealed by the war. It serves to provide both a subject of critique and explanation and a mechanism for ensuring that art can once again be separated from politics and can find a space from which to critique the world of action.

In his final observations, Gilbert considers the problems this raises. The attribution of anti-Semitic opinions to Lewis is difficult. As David Ayers found, much of the evidence is indirect and inconclusive. But, Gilbert argues, evidence there is. How can one judge this aspect of Lewis’s post-war career, centrally relevant as it is to the question of his aggression, without repeating the problematic of the avant-garde which Gilbert identifies? Either we attribute a wholesale, consistent and totalising anti-Semitism to Lewis, or we deny that it was anything but a casual and reflex handful of beliefs, simply the standard opinions of a man of Lewis’s time, society and class. As Gilbert says, this choice repeats the options that Lewis himself faced after 1918. Neither the urge to totalise history nor the urge to surrender to it allows the historical scrupulousness which investigation requires.

In my chapter on the Tyros and war, I argue that this sense of the impossibility of action and the problematic of the relationship of art with life defines parts of Lewis’s post-war production that have not hitherto been associated with the war. Lewis’s critical diagnosis of the response of British society to the war found him criticising others for an inability to focus and articulate the issues and emotions it raised. But Lewis himself was affected by this inability to achieve a