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Introduction

Janus-Faced Lewis, Avant-Gardist and Satirist

> We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause, which is neither side or both sides or ours.
>
> ("Manifesto," *B1* 30)

> Nineteen-thirty-seven is a grand year. We are all in the melting pot. I resist the process of melting so have a very lively time of it. I know if I let myself melt I should get mixed up with all sorts of people I would sooner be dead than mixed into. But that's the only sense in which I'm conservative. It's myself I want to conserve. I wouldn't lift a finger to conserve any "conservative" institution. I think they ought to be liquidated without any exception at all.
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> (*B&B* 16)

Wyndham Lewis's personality and art have often been viewed through the various dualisms he strove throughout his life to embody and control. Thus, for example, Lewis was gifted as both a painter and a writer, whose creativity in each of these media was distinct but complexly interrelated to his mastery of the other. He excelled at both "figurative" ("artistic") composition and discursive ("critical," "theoretical," "political," etc.) argument, often intertwining them in hybrid forms that make it difficult to sort his opus into too-crude categories of fiction and nonfiction or artistic and expository works. Lewis was philosophically and existentially obsessed with the Cartesian duality of mind and matter, body and soul, and was driven to explore, in work after work, the human eccentricity of being compelled to *think* within a fleshly mechanism traversed by automatisms of motion, action, appetite, and sexual drive. Lewis appeared at times wildly radical or even anarchically irresponsible in his cultural and political views and at other times a stolidly rational defender of conservative values. Professing himself to be a revolutionary dedicated to the cause of human freedom, in fundamental sympathy with the emancipatory aspirations of communism, socialism, and anarchism, for an extended

period in the interwar years he also expounded, in thoroughly self-contradictory fashion, far-right and even fascist political views that would have entailed the surrender of his closely guarded liberty to an authoritarian, totalitarian state machine. Then again, while professing to be uninterested in politics, Lewis consistently divided the arts, the cultural scene, and even his personal acquaintances along dualistic lines of "friend" and "enemy" – a dualism that is essentially *political*, if we follow the thinking of the German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt, who in 1926 cited Lewis's brand-new book *The Art of Being Ruled* approvingly for having explained "the transition from the intellectual to the affective and sensual in modern democracy."[1]

Any single thing that Lewis posited seems, ineluctably, to have conjured up its twin and opposite; yet such dualisms in his life and work must, as my opening epigraphs suggest, be understood as split manifestations of the same "cause." One of Lewis's most discerning critics, the Marxist literary theorist Fredric Jameson, turned to the novels of Samuel Beckett, who similarly explored such dualisms and produced ever new instances of paired opposites, for a characterization of this basic infrastructure of thought and composition in Lewis's art. Lewis's work, Jameson argues using Beckett's coinage, can be thought of as an indefinitely extendable set of "agons of the pseudo-couple,"[2] dualistic battles in which the two antagonists are not really separable, but are faces of one divided, internally conflicted self or impulse. In this Introduction, I too will explore at length another such pair of apparently opposed, but actually complementary aspects of Lewis's artistic personality and career: his role as a leader of the modernist avant-garde and his role as a satirical critic of modernity and its modernistic expressions in the arts.

Lewis as Avant-Gardist

More than any other figure of his generation in Great Britain, Lewis, over his nearly fifty-year career as a painter, novelist, critic, and general cultural provocateur, personified the qualities we associate with the term "avant-garde." The designation of avant-garde, typically given to the experimental arts movements that exploded onto the scene around the turn of the twentieth century, was, it is useful to recall, originally of military provenance. Applied to the combative artistic groups and the various artistic "isms" they represented, the term "avant-garde" envisions twentieth-century artistic movements as small, mobile contingents of artists and writers foraying out in advance of the masses, probing the mainstream culture's lines for gaps and vulnerable points, and conducting sudden ambushes and raids before

vanishing as quickly as they had appeared. The avant-garde's connotation of combativeness also captured well its artists' regular invitation of scandal and outrage, making any given concert, performance, lecture, declamation of poetry, or exhibition of painting a potential occasion for riot, fisticuffs, and arrest. Especially in his younger days, Lewis himself participated in his share of such uproarious events, as when, for example, on June 12, 1914, he and his Vorticist artist-comrades attacked a lecture and reading at the Doré Gallery by the Italian futurist F. T. Marinetti and his English disciple C. R. W. Nevinson.[3] As an index of the rough-and-tumble spirit of the prewar artistic uprising, Lewis likewise recounts in his memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering* an amusing anecdote of being hung upside down by his pant leg on a railing in Soho Square while the modernist poet and philosopher T. E. Hulme continued to expound his radical ideas to the resistant painter.

For Lewis, we might observe, the term "avant-garde" wavers uneasily between its artistic and military connotations, in ways that in fact intimate a certain affinity between his contribution to the arts and the historical background of modern warfare. More than that of many of his modernist contemporaries, Lewis's work was shadowed by metaphors of battle as well as by the literal content of twentieth-century war. Not by chance had Lewis called his notorious Vorticist journal *BLAST*, in which one of his reproduced abstract-geometrical artworks was entitled *Plan of War* and his most important literary contribution was the expressionistic drama entitled *Enemy of the Stars*, projecting human conflict to the scale of a cosmic conflagration. The second and final issue of *BLAST*, which appeared shortly after the outbreak of the First World War, was subtitled the "War Number" and contained a number of essays and other reflections on the war. Lewis named one of his early literary avatars, Kerr-Orr, a "Soldier of Humor," whom he set out to lay malicious ambushes on his adversaries in the short stories collected as *The Wild Body*. Similarly, Lewis later nominated both himself and another of his journals, the *Enemy*, indicating his belligerent stance toward one and all.

In *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), Lewis diagnosed a struggle of the sexes at work in post–World War I British society that was, in his view, an extension of the trench warfare just concluded:

> We observe today that technically women "have won the war." Yet, so far, the "peace" after the "sex war" is of the same dubious character as the peace after the Great War. Even the "victors" are a little laughed at by the less delicate of the agents of the great system on which their success reposes. The soldiers, in the same way, were laughed at when, their Great War over, they came and showed their mutilated limbs, lost jobs, and broken health to their masters. (*ABR* 197)

By his 1931 satirical novel, *The Apes of God*, Lewis had extended this analysis of the "sex war" to a new set of cultural trenches being cut through contemporary society. Through his character Starr-Smith, loosely based on Sir Oswald Mosley, a political celebrity and electrifying orator soon to found the British Union of Fascists, Lewis "broadcasts" his views at an ironic distance:

> The *child-parent-war* is put across by means of the emotions aroused by the *age-complex* and the *youth-complex* dominating the first Post-war decade. The *child-parent-war* is the war next in succession to the *sex-war* ... (For the break-up of the aryan Family-idea, two "wars" have been arranged. The *sex-war* covers the child-parent relationship. This is a parallel "revolt." When these "wars" have been brought to bear in social life with full effect, the Family will have entirely disintegrated.) (*AOG* 531)

Lewis slyly puts his own words – the passage could easily be a quotation from one of his cultural-critical treatises – in the mouth of his fictional Blackshirted puppet, at once implying his own untrammeled originality and the mere imitativeness of the politician, which can only reiterate and "broadcast" that which the artist has first created. At the same time, Lewis meant the message he has Starr-Smith pronounce in deadly earnest: Though apparently at peace, the social world of Great Britain in the mid-1920s was rapidly becoming a trench system of warring classes, sexes, nationalities, and generations.

At a deeper level, Lewis's whole career as an artistic and cultural combatant can be viewed as intricately and intimately interwoven with twentieth-century warfare, framed by the devastating total wars that engulfed the whole of Europe and many other parts of the world in 1914–1918 and 1939–1945. Before leaving for the front in World War I, Lewis had already humorously expressed (no doubt serious) concerns about the war and its outcome, with a jab at his rival avant-gardist Marinetti, who praised war and sought to shake Italy from its posture of neutrality: "As for Desirability, nobody but Marinetti, the Kaiser and professional soldiers WANT war. And from that little list the Kaiser might have to be extracted" (*B2* 14). Lewis's traumatic experience as an artillery officer and later as a war artist during "the Great War" of 1914–1918, recounted in his memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering*, surfaces time and again in his work, sometimes directly, at other times veiled in symbolic or fictional language. His extensive engagement with politics during the 1930s, which included his disastrous misunderstanding of the threat of fascism and National Socialism, was foremost driven by his genuine dread that another war was just over the horizon and his belief that only decisive political means could keep it at bay. His novel of

expatriation in Canada during World War II, *Self Condemned*, which may be his greatest literary achievement, is a bleak dissection of the soul of a *noncombatant*, within which the traumas of war nevertheless find poignant reflection. His fantastic *Human Age* trilogy – *The Childermass* (1928), *Monstre Gai* (1955), and *Malign Fiesta* (1955), which Fredric Jameson aptly describes as "theological science fiction"[4] – spans both wars and captures their destructive conflicts within its cosmic scope. The first volume depicts a limbolike underworld where the souls of young men killed in the trenches are gathered for further processing, while the latter two volumes, completed after the Second World War, encapsulate the novel horrors of human experimentation in the concentration camps and nuclear destruction, ending with a concluding image of truly total war, the aerial assault of God's forces on a corrupted "Angeltown" (the etymological resonance of "angel" with "England" being intentional on Lewis's part): "Pullman rose, and found himself alone. But through the window he saw a bright cloud, like the advance across the sky of an insect mass. It was the Heavenly Army surrounding the position of Angeltown and the house which was now his residence" (*MF* 210–211).

Beyond its noisy and militant manifestations, the artistic avant-garde was also driven by a seriously felt imperative to live up to the demands of the present unhampered by rules and conventions that originated in the past and that had, the artists believed, outlived their validity. This led the avant-garde to value, above all, experimentation and innovation; to translate artistic forms and compositional practices in unprecedented ways across different media; to draw inspiration from new discoveries in science and technology; and to nourish their creativity with a steady stream of current ideas and theories. Measured by these characteristics, Lewis was a consummate avant-gardist. Even when considered against the didacticism of Ezra Pound's idiosyncratic "Ezuversity," the penetrating critical writings of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, the canny pragmatism of Gertrude Stein, or the Jesuitical erudition of James Joyce, Lewis stands apart for his relentless engagement with the emergent present and his insatiable appetite for philosophical ideas, critical observations, political analyses, and aesthetic theories. Moreover, unlike other major modernist writers such as Stein, Woolf, and Pound, who took inspiration from the revolution in the visual arts, and unlike other important modernists including D. H. Lawrence and E. E. Cummings, who were important writers but merely dilettantish painters, Lewis was one of the most accomplished British visual artists of the early twentieth century, as well as being a key innovator in modernist prose and cultural criticism.

Responding in the journal the *Egoist* to Lewis's debut as a novelist in *Tarr* (1918), T. S. Eliot wrote with admiration of Lewis's multifaceted

artistic capacities, noting both their independent development and their subtle interaction in his artistry:

> The fact that Mr. Wyndham Lewis is known as a draughtsman and painter is not of the least consequence to his standing as a prose writer. To treat his writing as an outlet for his superabundant vitality, or as a means on his part of satisfying intellectual passions and keeping his art healthy, cannot lead to accurate criticism. His prose must be judged independently of his painting, he must be allowed the hypothesis of a dual creative personality. It would be quite another thing, of course, to find in his writing the evidences of a draughtsman's training – the training to respond to an ocular impression with the motion of a line on paper; the special reaction to vision and especially the development of the tactile sense, recognition of emotion by the physical strains and movements which are its basis.[5]

Lewis embodied in his multifarious artistic and intellectual activity the boundary-crossing nature of the avant-garde, which tore apart the conventional boundaries between the various arts, between artistic and political activity, and between aesthetic works and conceptual discourse, only to recombine them in shocking new configurations and constructions.

In a 1955 review of Lewis's late novel *Monstre Gai*, T. S. Eliot returned to his old friend's work to sum up Lewis's achievement not only in the novel under review, but also in his entire lifelong output as an innovative writer, artist, and cultural critic. Interestingly, Eliot recurs to a point raised in his 1918 review of *Tarr*, the question of Lewis's dual role as painter and writer, now stressing not only this duality, but Lewis's fertile inventiveness *within* each medium:

> Mr. Lewis's eminence as both painter and writer has tended to mask the variety of his work in both arts. I mean that while recognizing his gifts in both painting and writing, people may overlook the variety of his achievement as a painter and variety of his achievement as a writer. . . .
>
> In his pictures, and in his prose, he has sought all his life to explore the possibilities of a number of different forms of expression: it is his strict awareness of the limitations of each of the several forms he has employed, that has driven him to make use of the others.[6]

Eliot concluded his review, however, with Lewis the writer and thinker, emphasizing his original literary style and sensibility. "There are some writers who please me because they seem to hold the same views as myself," Eliot wrote, "others who annoy me by maintaining opinions that seem to me manifestly silly, but very few who can set my sluggish brain in motion, and for that I am always grateful. The opinion to which I do not hesitate to

commit myself, is that Mr. Lewis is the greatest prose master of style of my generation – perhaps the only one to have invented a new style."[7]

In another sense, however, the designation of Lewis as an avant-gardist must remain paradoxical. Typically, the avant-garde was a group phenomenon. Early on, it is true, Lewis did attempt to organize artist groups such as the Rebel Arts Centre and the Vorticists, and even after the First World War, he tried to revive the prewar "movement" with the short-lived "Group X," which held one exhibition in 1920 before disappearing from the scene. Yet for most of his career, he was a loner and outcast (partially self-imposed), a one-man avant-garde. As Paul Edwards suggests:

> Lewis's efforts to establish his form of Modernism – one that would transform the lives of ordinary people – required direct action and organization, critical analysis of the aesthetic implications of painting's proposed cultural function and the actual development and practice of a type of painting that could fulfill this role. The effort was a failure as a whole, but Lewis was the only figure with the capacity to have made it a success. It was primarily in the field of "direct action" or group activity that Lewis was unsuccessful.[8]

Lewis's work is, in fact, punctuated by a disquieting, at times even tragic sense that while he is seeking to lead as forcefully as he can, there may be no one following, a possibility that makes him more an "enemy" or a doomed "prophet unarmed"[9] than a guide to follow.

In the content of his critical ideas as well – which stand in close relationship to his evolving style and themes in painting and writing – Lewis may even appear hostile to much of what we think of as the defining instances of modernist and avant-garde writing and art. In 1919, still committed to the revolution in art but already revealing his growing skepticism about its chance for success, Lewis offered the following quick, discouraging survey of the post–World War I European art scene (which, we should note, would bring dadaism, constructivism, surrealism, Neue Sachlichkeit, De Stijl, the Bauhaus, and many other major avant-garde tendencies to fruition in rapid succession in the early 1920s):

> The painter stands in this year in Europe like an actor without a stage. Russia is a chaos; whether a good one or a bad one remains to be seen. Writing in Paris has fallen among the lowest talents. Painting is plunged into a tired orgy of colour-matching. A tessaract broods over Cézanne's apples. A fatuous and bouffonne mandolin has been brought from Spain; an illusive guitarist twangs formal airs amid the debris. Germany has been stunned and changed; for the better, pious hope says. But for the present art is not likely to revive there. (*CD* 120)

In subsequent critical books such as *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting Pot*

(1929), *The Diabolical Principle and the Dithyrambic Spectator* (1931), and *Men without Art* (1934), Lewis went intellectually head to head with virtually every one of his most significant modernist peers and, in vigorously if not always generously argued polemics, found them wanting in both theory and practice.

Late in his life, in his book *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (1955), Lewis went so far as to polemicize against a growing "extremism" in the arts – especially manifest in the abstract and informal tendencies in painting that arose out of surrealism – an extremism that he admits to have himself once represented thirty years earlier during his Vorticist period. Now, however, he advises that "what every artist should try to prevent is the car, in which is our civilized life, plunging over the side of the precipice – the exhibitionist extremist promoter driving the whole bag of tricks into a nihilistic nothingness or zero" (*DPA* 33). The art critic Herbert Read, long a champion of surrealism and abstract art and a cofounder of London's Institute for Contemporary Art after World War II, felt directly stung by Lewis's polemic, which named him as one of the primary perpetrators of the extremist program. In a 1955 essay entitled "The Lost Leader, or the Psychopathology of Reaction in the Arts," which Read admitted was largely motivated by response to Lewis's treatise against artistic "extremism," Read placed the once avant-garde Lewis in the present-day camp of artistic reactionaries and counterrevolutionaries, ascribing to him a failure of nerve and resentment against those whose vision and talents had continued to evolve: "Reactionaryism is a negative doctrine. It vigorously denounces an existing trend – the historical present – and seeks to establish a contrary trend. It is revolution in reverse."[10]

The influential American art critic Clement Greenberg, one of the most important advocates for New York's abstract expressionist painters, similarly rejected Lewis's *Demon of Progress in the Arts*, if in a less offensively ad hominem way than Read's psychologizing counterblast. Expressing his respect for Lewis's discerning art criticism of historic art and for Lewis's technical expertise as a painter of note, Greenberg nevertheless argues that in the *Demon of Progress* Lewis failed to treat the art of the present with appropriate aesthetic discernment. Characterizing Lewis's intentions as "anti-modernist," Greenberg accurately identifies a problematic feature of Lewis's criticism, which had already become evident in his polemics of the 1920s against Joyce, Pound, Stein, and other modernists in *Time and Western Man*. Lewis's criticism of present-day art (and, implicitly, writing as well), Greenberg argues, focuses on a broad cultural "tendency," an atmosphere of ideas and ideologies, or certain artists' overall mentality, at the expense of considering and judging particular works of art. To this approach, Greenberg counters:

> The enterprise of anti-modernism, whether in book, magazine, or newspaper column, remains a frustrated one ... and it must remain that as long as it remains a priori and categorical. One cannot condemn tendencies in art; one can only condemn works of art. To be categorically against a current art tendency or style means, in effect, to pronounce on works of art not yet created and not yet seen. It means inquiring into the motives of artists instead of into results. Yet we all know – or are supposed to know – that results are all that count in art.[11]

Lewis was contradictory on this last point that Greenberg so confidently advances as self-evident. Throughout his life, to be sure, he held up art as a special domain of imagination and truth and sought by any means necessary, even if it meant climbing down into the mud of ideological conflict and politics, to preserve its special status – to ensure "the results," as Greenberg states it. Yet Lewis also fervently believed that "tendencies" and "motives" mattered, that the field of artistic creation was veritably crisscrossed by trenches of friendly and enemy cultural camps, and that the conduct of this cultural war of position played a critical role in whether the results of artistic creation were good or bad.

Indeed, even more was at stake for Lewis in how the war of tendencies played out: For him, the arts themselves hung in the balance, deciding, as the title of his 1934 book *Men without Art* implied, whether the arts as we know them might yet survive the chaos of the modern present. Dispositionally, Lewis was thus unable to agree with Greenberg that we can only call single works of art, *not* a tendency or style, good or bad. On the contrary, Lewis viewed most contemporary artistic tendencies from the 1920s on as troubling symptoms of a loss of artistic individuality, which, he believed, was the source of all genuine creation, of all positive "results" in the arts. All such "tendencies" were necessarily, he believed, reductions and vulgarizations of that individuality, and thus all were equally worthy of hard scrutiny and criticism. In arriving at this conclusion, however, Lewis's avatar as avant-gardist had already turned toward another of his creative personae, which became over the course of his career his dominant mask: the satirist.

Lewis as Satirist

As Lewis himself suggested in his memoirs *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) and *Rude Assignment* (1950) and as several of his best critics have further documented, in the early 1920s he opened a new phase of work, evolving the theory and practice of a satirical mode that reflected his dawning sense, after World War I, that the power of the arts and the artist to catalyze cultural change, a power that fed the aspirations of the

avant-garde, had become decisively limited. This more pessimistic and defensive attitude found external expression in Lewis's intense engagement with prose at this time, in both critical-theoretical and fictional-satirical writings, and partly at the expense of his work as a painter and draftsman (though at no time did he fully abandon visual art). In a mere decade, Lewis published a veritable torrent of books, including the culture-critical and political treatises *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *The Lion and the Fox* (1927), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *Paleface* (1929), *Hitler* (1931), *The Diabolical Principle and the Dithyrambic Spectator* (1931), *Doom of Youth* (1932), *The Old Gang and the New Gang* (1933), and *Men without Art* (1934), as well as the satirical narrative represented by *The Wild Body* short stories (1927); *The Childermass* (1928), a revised version of his 1918 novel *Tarr* (1928); *The Apes of God* (1930); *The Roaring Queen* (1931); his satirical travelogue *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932); and *Snooty Baronet* (1932).

Lewis's turn to satire not only entailed a new emphasis on writing as his expressive medium of choice; it also held implications for his view of human life and his way of figuring it in the written word and painted image. In his 1926 book *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis expresses his sense that nothing less than a species revolution, a fundamental change in human nature, was under way, and satire was to be his preferred way of gaining provisional distance on a process that he could not help but be caught up in, so as to be able to observe and record its effects:

> I can very briefly offer an interpretation of the great cluster of movements disrupting our time. The first thing to notice about it is its implacableness, inasmuch as no local success will satisfy it. It is not any personality, nation, or even particular ruling class that is aimed at, but an entire human revaluation. That is, of course, why it is more like a religion than a rebellion. It is as though a mind had placed itself over against the world and formed the resolve to reconstitute the human idea itself. It is the whole of humanity this time that is at stake. The philosopher's dissatisfaction with the human animal expresses itself at the heart of this disturbance, rather even than the outraged prophet's disgust at the way men treat each other. (*ABR* 76)

As Andrzej Gąsiorek has commented, "Satire enabled [Lewis] to combine metaphysics with history: his pessimism about human life melded with a reading of modernity to produce a writing that portrayed Western society in its death throes and that set out to bring 'human life more into contempt each day' by demonstrating its 'futility and absurdity.'"[12]

Lewis's engagement with the absurd sometimes took the form of ludicrous and ribald satire – as in *The Apes of Gods* (1931) or *Snooty Baronet*