

# WYNDHAM LEWIS: A Man Against His Time

By

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This paper was selected pursuant to a bequest in the will of  
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## WYNDHAM LEWIS: A Man Against His Time

WYNDHAM LEWIS once described himself as "a novelist, painter, sculptor, philosopher, draughtsman, critic, politician, journalist, essayist, pamphleteer, all rolled into one, like one of those portmanteau men of the Italian Renaissance." He was all of these things—he was not just a painter, but a very important one. His portraits of T. S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell, the latter in the permanent collection of the Tate Gallery, are in the great tradition of portraiture. At least one of his novels, according to Hugh Kenner, must be considered a classic of our time, and his *Time and Western Man*, quoting Kenner again, "is one of the dozen or so most important books of the twentieth century." From T. S. Eliot we have the statement, "The opinion to which I do not hesitate to commit myself is that Mr. Lewis is the greatest prose stylist of my generation—perhaps the only one to have invented a new style." And his old friend Ezra Pound said of him: "Not a commentator but a protagonist. . . . You cannot be as intelligent, in that sort of way, without being prey to the furies."

In Wyndham Lewis we are dealing with a formidable

person. He was not only many-sided, he was a man of strong opinions who provoked strong reactions—it is difficult, once one becomes acquainted with his work, to be indifferent toward him. I would like this evening to give you a brief account of his life, tell you something about his work and his ideas insofar as I am familiar with them, and then discuss why a man of such talent and achievement should be so little known, at least in this country.

Although Wyndham Lewis wrote two autobiographical books, he tells us little about his personal life, and nothing whatever about his family background. There seems even to be some question about where and when he was born. One account gives a yacht off the coast of Nova Scotia as his place of birth, and the year 1884, but another source mentions Canada and 1888. His father came from a well-to-do American family and had been an officer in the Civil War; his mother was an English woman whom he speaks of in a letter as "pure Irish." He apparently saw little or nothing of his father after his sixth year, and from then on was raised in England by his mother, with many vacations in France. He was sent to Rugby, but after remaining in the same form for two years was sent home, with the recommendation he be sent to art school when the headmaster discovered he had made his room into an artist's studio.

He spent the following two years at the Slade School of Art in London where, he said, he learned little. Like many aspiring artists before and since, he went to Paris, rented a studio, had a rather violent love affair, and also worked, studied and talked. During this period of some seven years he made extensive visits to Holland, Brittany

and Spain, and spent some time in an art academy in Munich. He spoke French and Spanish fluently, and must also have known German. He enjoyed Paris in its "last sunset," as he described it. He met many people, heard Bergson lecture at the College de France, and, for a time, as he said, "became a European." He was too young, he wrote later, to appreciate the "invisible English assets," which had mostly to do with character, or to perceive the defects of the French. As he put it, "It is dangerous to go to heaven when you are too young."

Lewis went back to England to stay in 1909, and soon after arranged for an exhibition of his work. He was immensely pleased to make his first sale of a picture to Augustus John, whom he had known well in Paris, and admired. He met Ezra Pound at this time, and through Pound, T. S. Eliot. Pound opened many doors for him and helped him to find a publisher, a service Pound performed for a whole generation of writers, including T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway.

It was during this period that Ford Maddox Ford, whose name was then still Hueffer, was bringing out his *English Review*. There are various accounts of Lewis' first meeting with Hueffer, the best I have read being the following from Hugh Kenner's excellent book on Lewis:

The Wyndham Lewis of subsequent legend materialized one day in 1909 on the stairway at 84 Holland Park Avenue, London. Mr. Ford Maddox Ford—then Hueffer—was at the top of the stairs, pink and aghast that his privacy and luncheon with the original of Christopher Tietjens should be invaded by a silent steeple hatted figure wearing a huge black cape. This figure mounted the stairs, saying nothing. From beneath the cape it produced and flourished crumpled rolls of manuscript, which it pressed into Ford's unnerved hands. More wads of pa-

per appeared from beneath the hat, from inside the waistcoat, from the pockets of the longtailed coat. Ford numbly accepted them. All the time the figure said nothing. At last it went slowly down the stairs, without a word, and vanished.

The manuscripts thus pressed into the hands of the "unnerved editor," who had an unfailing editorial eye—D. H. Lawrence was another of his discoveries—subsequently appeared in the *English Review*. They were stories Lewis had written in Brittany of artists and pseudo-artists, and included many of the ideas and figures Lewis was to develop in the nearly forty books that were to follow.

In June 1914 Lewis published the first issue of his magazine *Blast*, which, quite appropriately, launched Lewis as the man against his time. The first *Blast* in the magazine was of English humor and its "first cousin and accomplice," sports. "Take my next *Blast*," he wrote nearly thirty years later, "namely 'Blast years 1837 to 1900.' The triumph of the commercial mind in England, Victorian 'liberalism,' the establishment of such apparently indestructible institutions as the English comic paper *Punch*, the Royal Academy, and so on—such things did not appeal to me, they appeal to me even less to-day. . . ." With *Blast* Lewis announced the movement called "vorticism," the name having been invented by Pound. Vorticism was meant to express Lewis' idea that art should represent the present, at rest within the swirling periphery of past and future. "There is no Present—there is Past and Future, and there is Art," was one of his slogans. *Blast* also contained *Blesses*—the hair-dresser, for example, was blessed. This, he wrote in his first autobiographical book, ". . . will be a little more difficult to

understand. This might equally have been headed 'Blast Fluffiness.' It exalts formality, and order, at the expense of the disorderly and the unkempt. It is merely a humorous way of stating the classic standpoint, as against the romantic."

*Blast* created a sensation, a "comic earthquake" Lewis called it, and he suddenly became a much sought-after celebrity. In that last summer before the first World War he enjoyed all that English high society had to offer. He met Lord Oxford, then Mr. Asquith and Prime Minister; everyone who was fashionably interested in art and literature wanted to look over the brilliant young author. For a few months, as he said, he was on exhibition. When the ultimatums started in July he was guest, with Mr. and Mrs. Ford Maddox Ford, at a country house in Berwickshire. At breakfast, Mrs. Turner, the hostess, announced, "There won't be any war, Ford. Not here, England won't go into a war." He recounts the rest of the conversation as follows:

Ford thrust his mouth out, fish fashion, as if about to gasp for breath. He goggled his eyes and waggled one eyelid about. He just moved his lips a little and we heard him say, in a breathless sotto voice—"England will."

"England will! But Ford," said Mrs. Turner, "England has a Liberal Government. A Liberal Government cannot declare war."

Ford sneered very faintly and inoffensively: he was sneering at the British Government, rather than at us. He was being the omniscient, bored, and sleepy Ford, sunk in his tank of sloth. From his prolonged siesta he was staring out at us with his fish-blue eyes—kind, wise, but bored. Or some such idea. His mask was only just touched with derision at our childishness.

"Well, Ford," said Mrs. Turner, bantering the wise old elephant. "You don't agree!"

"I don't agree," Ford answered, in his faintest voice, with consummate indifference, "because it has always been the liberals who have gone to war. It is *because* it is a liberal government that it will declare war."

And, of course, as we all know, a Liberal Government *did* declare it. Within a few days of those country-house conversations, Great Britain was at war. Within a year or two all the country houses in Great Britain had become Heartbreak Houses; and the British Empire, covered in blood, was gasping its way through an immense and disastrous war, upon which it should never have entered.

Lewis himself was soon in it. After a period of illness, during which he prepared the second, and last, *Blast* and wrote the first draft of the novel *Tarr*, he enlisted. *Tarr* was written, Lewis said, much too hurriedly—"I said to myself that if I was going to be killed in battle I should like first to finish this first book, so that the world might have a chance on judging what an artist it had lost." He served as an officer in the artillery in a very active part of the front, and was then transferred as a "war artist" to a Canadian unit which was housed in an elegant Chateau where, according to Lewis, life was "quiet, dignified, aloof. Nobody fired on the Vimy front, at the time I was there. Nobody thought of war." Augustus John, who, according to Lewis, was the only officer in the British Army besides the king who wore a beard, was in the same unit. "Catching sight of him coming down a road any ordinary private would display every sign of the liveliest consternation. He would start saluting a mile off. Augustus John—every inch a King George—would solemnly touch his hat and pass on."

Lewis was demobilized some time in 1919 after an extended stay in a military hospital with influenza, and re-



turned to London. His first novel *Tarr* had been published during the war serially in a small magazine, it now appeared in book form and attracted wide attention, largely, says Lewis, because of a very sympathetic review by Rebecca West who called it, "A beautiful and serious work of art that reminds one of Dostoevsky. . . ." As the editor of *Blast*, a recognized artist, and the author of *Tarr*, Lewis had become an important figure.

For the next four years, Lewis went into semi-retirement. He worked hard to perfect his style as a painter, but except for the two issues of a magazine he called *The Tyro*, which contained contributions by T. S. Eliot, Herbert Reed and himself, and reproductions of the work of various contemporary artists, little was heard from him. There were two exhibitions of his drawings and paintings, for which he prepared catalogs, he began the large portrait of Edith Sitwell, which he didn't finish until 1935, and did other portraits, but except for *The Tyro*, published nothing. His next book, the long and important *The Art of Being Ruled* appeared in 1926, the year of the General Strike, which Lewis said also marked the end of the post-war period.

The four years of semi-retirement seem to have filled Lewis with enormous creative energy. *The Art of Being Ruled* was followed the next year by *The Lion and the Fox*, a study of politics in Shakespeare and Machiavelli, and perhaps his most important theoretical book, *Time and Western Man*. He contributed to magazines, including Eliot's *Criterion*, wrote two long novels, *The Apes of God* and the first volume of *Childermass*, brought out a completely revised edition of *Tarr*, painted, drew, took part in numerous controversies, made many friends, some

enemies, and became known as the most outspoken gadfly on the English scene. He met Joyce, through Pound, in the early twenties, and this became an important association for him, and he developed a very close friendship with T. S. Eliot which was to last until his death. Other friends of this period were the poet Roy Campbell, Richard Aldington, his publisher G. H. Prentice, and A. J. A. Symons. The Sitwells were friendly and helpful to Lewis, but this association seems to have cooled with the publication of *The Apes of God*, which they felt included them in its satire. Lewis' criticism of the "stream of consciousness" technique in *Time and Western Man* seems to have had the same effect on his friendship with Joyce.

*Blast* and *Tyro* were followed by still a third magazine, *The Enemy*. The first issue appeared in 1927, and the third and last in 1929. Lewis, of course, was "the enemy," and his opponent was the philosophy that dominated the time, which gradually crystalized as modern liberalism. Parts of his book *Paleface* appeared first in *The Enemy*. Lewis' war with Bloomsbury Liberalism began early in his career, when he resigned with storm and fury from a Bloomsbury art center, and took on major proportions as Liberalism grew in power and influence in the late twenties and, with the advent of the depression, came into its own as the dominating influence in the English speaking world. Lewis was strongly opposed to war, not on pacifist grounds, but because he felt that modern war had become so destructive that to engage in it was suicidal. "When first I met War face to face I brought no moral judgments with me at all."—he wrote in 1937—"I have never been able to regard war—modern war—as good or bad. Only supremely stupid." He also felt strong-

ly that Communism was not going to bring the millenium that many intellectuals of that time expected from it. All this, combined, I suppose, with his apparent enjoyment of the role of opposition to the accepted position, led him to take a rather favorable attitude toward Hitler in the early thirties, and in 1931 he published his book *Hitler*, which did him immense harm. Lewis took seriously, as did many others, Hitler's pose as an advocate of peace, as a man who hated war. It should be pointed out, however, that the book was banned in Germany after Hitler came into power. Lewis realized his mistake, and in 1939, published *The Hitler Cult and How It Will End*.

The Hitler book was followed by a bad novel, *Snoopy Baronet*. It is told in the first person, completely in the present. The characters are abstractions rather than persons; there is no development, only action. Whether it was intended to be a satire I do not know, but as a novel it doesn't come off. He wrote another novel using a similar technique which he withdrew from publication. He then turned his energies to painting. This is the period of the great portraits. He finished the portrait of Edith Sitwell started years before, and produced those startling portraits of T. S. Eliot, Stephen Spender, and Ezra Pound as well as of lesser known figures. When, some years later, eight of these portraits were exhibited together the total effect, said Charles Handley-Read, was "disquieting . . . they did not readily permit one to pass on, for they made an almost embarrassingly *personal* impression. . . . The intensity he bestows seems to transform a portrait into a presence."

Portrait painting, however, by no means took all of

Lewis' energy—he was soon writing again. *Men Without Art*, a brilliant criticism of the romantic influence in modern literature appeared in 1934, and two years later, *Left Wings Over Europe* in which he points out the disastrous consequences of another general war. "England's role would be at an end," he wrote in this book. "There would be no more courting of Great Britain as the arbiter of the destinies of Europe. Mr. Anthony Eden's tailor would shrink to unimportance on the world stage."

These were years of enormous productivity. He continued to paint, there was a major exhibition in December 1936 for which he wrote an Introduction for the catalog and which included twenty-four paintings and thirty-four drawings, and the following year he published three books—his first autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, an anti-war book, *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* and his greatest novel, and one of the great novels of our time, *Revenge for Love*.

Productive as these years were, they weren't without difficulties. For one thing, having no independent source of income, it wasn't easy for Lewis to make a living, and his antagonism to the intellectual establishment didn't make matters any easier for him. As time went on, it became difficult for him to find publishers to take his books, reviewers boycotted him, portrait commissions weren't readily forthcoming, except from friends. *Revenge for Love*, for example, was refused by all the New York publishers and wasn't published in this country until 1952, with a Chicago imprint. He could find no publisher willing to take on his huge satirical novel *The Apes of God* and finally published it himself. An amusing and characteristic episode of this period involved his submission in 1938 of one of his two portraits of T. S.

Eliot for the annual exhibition of the Royal Academy. The portrait was rejected. Augustus John resigned from the Academy in protest. Letters were fired off to the *Times*, Winston Churchill devoted a large part of a speech given at the annual meeting of the R.A. to the defense of its policies, a speech Lewis, in one of his letters to the *Times*, called a "passionate advocacy of platitude." The issue of the "rejected portrait" became a cause celebre. Lewis, needless to say, enjoyed it immensely.

Shortly before the outbreak of World War II Lewis and his wife crossed the Atlantic. He could see no place for himself in an England engaged in another suicidal war, and hoped that he might be able to improve his fairly desperate financial situation with some portrait commissions in New York. This proved to be impossible; he stayed in New York only a few months, finished a novel, *The Vulgar Streak*, for which he was unable to find a publisher, and spent most of the war years in Canada. This was a miserable period for him, but gave him much of the background material for his later novel *Self Condemned*. He sold a few drawings, was given an occasional portrait commission, and finally, after many unsuccessful efforts, obtained a teaching position in a small Catholic college in Windsor, Ontario, which he enjoyed. Following Windsor, he spent a year in St. Louis, where two admirers had made it possible for him to live and work. The year in St. Louis was by no means unpleasant for him, but St. Louis, compared to the London he had known, seemed provincial, and he missed the stimulation of his friends, and probably, of his enemies as well. He went back to England immediately after the War had ended.

Post-war London—shabby, rationed, ruled now by the

intellectual off-springs of Bloomsbury, was a great disappointment. His old flat at Notting Hill Gate was a shambles, and when this had been put into some sort of order, it was discovered that the building itself was disintegrating from dry rot. Notting Hill, it seemed to Lewis, symbolized the disintegration of English society. A novel of this period, *Notting Hill*, puts it all in Lewis' most biting prose. The book is really not so much a novel as a series of episodes, conversations, and stories, all concerned with life in post-war, socialist England. The book ends with the following scene:

Lastly, standing by one of the gate-posts, was Britannia. She wore what the Yankees called a "liberty-cap" (hired from Moss Bros.). Once so robust, she was terribly shrunken: some wasting disease, doubtless malignant. The trident now employed as a crutch, she held out a mug for alms. I saw in the mug what looked like a phony dollar bill, and dropped myself a lucky three-penny bit. I would give my last three-penny bit to poor old silly Britannia. In a cracked wheeze she sang "Land of Hope and Glory." I must confess that this last apparition, and its vulgar little song, rather depressed me.

The consequences of a second World War were all too similar to the predictions made ten years before in *Left Wings Over Europe*.

Lewis, during his last years, was still amazingly productive, and at last began to receive a degree of official recognition. From 1948 until his death in 1957, he finished eight books, including the novels *Self Condemned* and *The Human Age* Books 2 and 3, the first volume of which, *Childermass*, he had published years before. Two other important books of this period are *The Writer and the Absolute* and a second autobiographical book *Rude Assignment*. In 1951 Faber published *The Art of Wyndham*

*Lewis*, a beautiful tribute to Lewis the artist, which contained many excellent reproductions of his work, some in full color, and essays on Lewis as an artist by Eric Newton and Charles Handley-Read. The following tribute to the editor of *Blast* and *The Enemy* from this essay will help, perhaps, to put his work as a painter into perspective: "To speak of Lewis' period is to recognize that he was a prophet. His prophecies have been fulfilled and one tends to forget how long ago he uttered them. . . . There are plenty of young artists in 1950 who steal freely from the Lewis of 1920 and still look furiously up to date."

In 1952 he was granted an honorary D.Litt. by the University of Leeds, the only one he ever received, and in 1956, only a few months before his death, the Tate Gallery arranged a full-scale retrospective exhibition of his work. He had started to contribute art reviews to *The Listener* in 1946 which he continued until 1951—this was the only connection he ever had with a regularly published magazine. Several of his books were adapted for radio and broadcast by BBC including *Childermass*, which gave him the means to write the two remaining volumes. He was even given a small Civil List pension by the Labour Government—the "enemy" had almost become respectable. He had lost none of his fighting spirit, however. The Tate exhibit set off a very satisfactory controversy involving vorticism and some of the painters more or less associated with it, and Lewis, shortly before his death, started a letter on the subject to "A London Editor" which was never sent. This contains the following: "Lastly, Vorticism. The name is an invention of Ezra Pound. When he writes from his prison in Washing-

ton he addresses me as 'Old Vort.' What does this word mean? I do not know. How anyone can get angry about it, I cannot imagine. . . ."

While still in Canada Lewis had noticed some impairment of his vision. The condition grew steadily worse, and the cause was finally diagnosed as a tumor which was pressing on the optic nerve. By 1951 he could distinguish only between light and dark, and by 1953 was completely blind. But he went on working. *Self Condemned*, a novel of great power and almost overwhelming intensity, was written, longhand, line by line, after he was completely blind. What blindness must have meant to Lewis, who was not only an artist, but regarded the visual, the eye, as the key to all perception, can be surmised from the following from *The Writer and the Absolute*:

What holds the true apart from the false is a great force. This can be illustrated in the works of famous writers, but it is in the case of the great masters of painting that this instinct occurs with all the publicity of the visible, within sight of all of us, and so it is there that it may be studied to the best advantage. Chardin, with a bland intensity, fastens his eye, impacts his gaze forever upon some object of daily use. Van Eyck, with the same intense animal absorption and austere tenacity, upon Arnolfini and his wife. The *true* image must be put down.

From the very sketchy account I have given you of Lewis' career, you have probably surmised where he stood and have some idea of his general position. He was a man who lived in his time with all the intensity of his mind and personality, but he was strongly opposed to those who gave it its direction and general tone. At the end of a discussion of the intellectual, Lewis re-



marks, "All I need say, as my final word on the subject, is that few intellectuals are to be found who are prepared to oppose the *Zeitgeist*." He was one who did, and this opposition played a dominant part in his life as a writer.

Lewis felt that Western civilization was destroying itself; that for various reasons, philosophical, economic, political, the vitality, self-confidence, and sense of direction of the West was being undermined. For much of this he blamed the intellectuals—for aligning themselves behind ideas he felt were destructive, for placing their talents at the service of the powerful, and, finally, for not opposing the spirit of the times when it was clearly, in Lewis' view, heading for disaster. He felt that the intellectuals in all the major European countries had contributed substantially to bringing on the disaster of World War I—"Aggressive Frenchmen—Sorel, Barres, Maurras, Peguy—were, as much as the Prussian professors who usually get all the blame, pepping up the French for the slaughter." Much of his energy between the wars was spent trying to point out the calamitous results of a repetition of World War I. The task of the serious writer, in Lewis' opinion, was to question the assumptions of his time—"The names we remember in European literature," he wrote, "are those of men who satirized and attacked, rather than petted, or fawned upon, their contemporaries. Only *this* time exacts an uncritical hypnotic sleep of all belonging to it." In another place he says, "With all the energy at their disposal a majority of the modern intellectuals have striven to excite to passionate action—not to exhort to reflection or moderation, not applied to the reason, but always to the emo-

tions: they have pointed passionately to the battlefield, the barricade, the place of execution, not to the life of reason, to what is harmonious and beautifully ordered. This is in fact *the betrayal*."

His first large theoretical work, *The Art of Being Ruled*, is concerned with the situation of the individual in the modern industrial world where rulers have at their disposal not only the whole complex of instant and ubiquitous communications, but, with the assistance of the intellectuals, the highly developed arts of persuasion as well. Philosophy, literature, psychology, education, combined with the techniques of modern publicity, in Lewis' opinion, are reducing all individuality to a grey mass. One of the techniques of the modern ruler, Lewis points out, is the system *What the Public Wants*—this, he says, is "the metaphysic of government." By means of flattery, promises, by arousing the desire for more and more things, the masses are controlled and led. One of the results of all this, he held, is that the practitioners of *What the Public Wants*, whose approach is "an obsequious grin and a what can I do for you to-day, my little man?" are not only corrupted themselves, but develop a feeling of utter contempt for their victims. The intellectual, the potentially creative element of society, has a far more vital role to play in the world than to assist the powerful in the exploitation of the weakness of the masses. "In the ultimate interest of all of us we should sacrifice anything to the end of that this most priceless power of any (the intellectual power by which, as a kind, we express and illustrate ourselves, precisely because of which we are conscious of our poor organization and the fatuity of our record up to date) be put in a posi-

tion finally to be effective. . . . Instead of the vast organization to exploit the weakness of the many, should we not possess one for the exploitation of the few?"

*The Art of Being Ruled* was followed by a whole series of books which continued Lewis' attack on what he felt were the influences causing the disintegration of Western civilization. In *Paleface* he excoriated the sentimental romanticization of the primitive, of the black man at the expense of the white which he felt was merely a part of the campaign to undermine intelligence. Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter* and D. H. Lawrence's emotional excesses on the subject of Mexican Indians are the particular objects of Lewis' scorn in this book, but taken as a whole, the purpose of the book is to show the destructive influence of romanticism. The romantic attitude not only sentimentalizes reality, its emphasis on the past makes it difficult or impossible for those influenced by it to recognize their true situation as it is in the present. It isn't the Negro in the flesh or his "dark laughter" which will destroy the White Man and his civilization, but the inferiority complexes created within him by such intellectuals as Sherwood Anderson. As Lewis puts it, "Meanwhile inside himself (there he never looks, though it is, of course, there that he should direct the most objective glance that he can muster), the ferment of the intellectualist disease goes on, and 'complex' after 'complex' is introduced, attacks some mortal centre of life and vitality, and a further portion of the White civilized soul is disintegrated. . . ."

Lewis continued his attack on the romantic influence or attitude in *Men Without Art* in which he criticizes, among others, Hemingway, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf,

and the "pseudo" enthusiasms of his friend T. S. Eliot. Lewis' attitude toward the romanticism of Hemingway, for example, may be surmised from the following:

In *Farewell to Arms* the hero is a young American who has come over to Europe for the fun of the thing, as an alternative to baseball, to take part in the Sport of Kings. It has not occurred to him that it is no longer the sport of kings, but the turning point in the history of the earth at which he is assisting, when men must either cease thinking like children and abandon such sports, or else lose their freedom for ever, much more effectively than any mere *king* could ever cause them to lose it. For him, it remains 'war' in the old-fashioned semi-sporting sense. Throughout this ghastly event, he proves himself a thorough-going sport, makes several hairbreadth, Fenimore Cooper-like, escapes, but never from first to last betrays a spark of intelligence.

Lewis was well aware of the problems faced by the writer in modern society. In *The Writer and the Absolute* he considers the peculiar problems of the contemporary writer who, as Lewis puts it, lives "... in a period when total or absolute habits of mind have penetrated deeply into every department of life, although government itself is not yet totalitarian." To maintain his independence, Lewis felt, the writer must hold himself aloof from intellectual fads; when he becomes too closely identified with the community, his critical faculties become atrophied. He devotes much of the book to a study of Orwell and Sartre, and the effect on their work of their political commitments. "But what I am saying throughout this essay is *not* that socialism is wrong, but that every party is wrong for a philosopher or for an artist. To make myself quite clear, Orwell asserts, and I agree, that personal liberty for the intellectual or really for anybody else,

depends upon possessing the right to say that two and two make four. To be in a position to say that one must have no political affiliations. . . . Orwell should have taken up a position of absolute detachment, upon having his eyes so thoroughly opened as to enable him to write *Animal Farm*. It is his failure to do that which places him, to some extent, in the same class as Sartre."

In *Rude Assignment*, one of his last books, Lewis devotes several chapters to another problem the modern writer must face—what exactly is the public he is writing for? He felt there were two publics—the very limited public interested in serious work, and the public who read for entertainment and nothing else. Lewis believed that what he called the "minority public" of our time is smaller and far less perceptive than the public which a serious writer had for his books in the eighteenth century. One must imagine, he writes in another place, ". . . a Chesterfield, a Pitt, or a Burke occupied in their spare moments with nothing but books of the order of the 'Crime Club' or the Gem Library" which are the regular fare, he says, of "the Cabinet Minister, the philosophy don, the Harley Street Specialist, the 'rebel' poet as much as the scullery-maid and the office boy" to realize the extent of the "proletarianization of taste." Not only is this minority public much smaller than the similar public of the eighteenth century, it is too specialized, Lewis believed, to be representative of the public as a whole, but the writer needs the whole—to be confined to a highly selected public is utterly frustrating to a writer who wants to speak to his time. D. H. Lawrence, Lewis remarks, was able to reach the general public only through the bedroom window—until he wrote *Lady*

*Chatterly* he was a hero of the intellectuals, perhaps, but to the general public a complete outsider. But worst of all, Lewis felt, was that through the flattery of advertising and the press the "low" public is beginning to claim that "it is the real, the best, and the only one," and the right, therefore, to set standards of taste.

I hope that I have been able to give you some idea of the breadth of Lewis' interests and of his general position. A consideration of Lewis as a writer should also give some attention to his novels, but there is hardly time for that. In *Revenge for Love* and *Self Condemned*, which were perhaps his best, the predicament of modern man is placed before us with a stark realism few writers can equal.

We are too close to Lewis and the controversies he was involved in, I suppose, to know what his ultimate place as a writer and thinker will be, but, as a professor of literature with whom I was discussing him not long ago remarked, there is certainly no contemporary writer in any way comparable to him. We don't seem to produce such people any longer; for a man to become a significant writer, he went on to say, he must not only possess talent, but a "heroic sense"—he must believe strongly in himself, he must believe in what he has to say, and he must be willing to commit himself to his profession of writer with his entire person. The implication, I gather, was, that our time may produce men of talent, but few or none having such a heroic attitude.

There can be no doubt that Lewis attached the highest importance to his calling of writer and artist. He often described himself as a satirist, which he most certainly was—"where there is truth to life," he said, "there is

satire," but in his point of view he was a classicist. He believed in order, that each thing must be seen as part of a larger whole. He believed that the classical mind must live firmly in the present, an injunction he certainly followed, whether or not he entirely agreed with the "present" in which he happened to find himself. There can be no doubt that Lewis could have made life much easier for himself if he had accepted and gone along with the prevailing intellectual fashion instead of fighting it and everything it stood for. If he had done, for example, what he describes Sartre as having done, "... arrange himself to the best advantage upon the political scene, which is identical with the literary scene: as far Left as possible without being *extrémiste*: accepting many Communist attitudes but railing at the Communists. . . ."; if he had so arranged himself his career would have been far less difficult, but not to have made such compromises indicates, I think, the heroic attitude my professor friend was speaking of.

Writing in 1947, in the disillusionment of post-war London, he wondered if his fight had been worthwhile. "Today," meaning 1947, "I should not write such books at all. People ought to be allowed to drop to pieces in any way they choose." But, as if to justify it all nonetheless, he continues, "... Darwin, Voltaire, Newton, Raphael, Dante, Epictetus, Aristotle, Sophocles, Plato, Pythagoras: all shedding their light upon the same wide, well-lit graeco-roman highway, with the same kind of sane and steady ray—one need only mention these to recognize that it was at least excusable to be concerned about the threat of extinction to that tradition. . . . For it to remain intact, however, and to transmit its ways

of thinking to other generations, Western Europe had to remain intact." Lewis, as few others, not only clearly saw the nature of the threat to the Western tradition, he devoted all the force of his great intelligence and talent to its defense.

Rebecca West, writing in *Time and Tide* in 1929 asked, "Why does Mr. Wyndham Lewis not produce a greater effect on his time? There is no one who has had greater acumen in detecting the trends of contemporary thought that are not candid, that are mere rationalizations of a desire to flee towards death. There is no one whose dialectic style is more sparkling. There is no one who can more deeply thrill one by a vivid and novel vision (as in parts of *Childermass*). Why is it that he is not moulding the intellectual life of his time more powerfully than he does?"

Since World War II at least five of Lewis' books have been published in this country, two books have appeared about him, and an entire issue of *Hudson Review* was devoted to Lewis and his work. One of the universities has gone to considerable trouble and, I am sure expense, to assemble a collection of Lewis manuscripts, letters, first editions, sketches and drawings. None of this sounds like suppression, but the fact remains that he is little known, and has certainly not had the influence in this country his importance as a creative writer, thinker and artist would justify. I would be very surprised if, at the university which has assembled the Lewis collection, Lewis is assigned to students for reading, or much discussed or even read by members of the faculty. Having published four of his books, I have had some first hand knowledge of how much, or little, he is read and how



strongly antagonistic the small group feels toward him that to a large extent determines what Americans read, think, and believe.

When Lewis was living in Canada, desperately trying to find a way to make a living, no American college or university made him an offer, or so much as gave him the recognition of an honorary degree. When he spent several months in New York in 1939, one can be sure that he wasn't interviewed by the literary critics or besieged by publishers offering advances. Except for the help of a few friends, who were not members of the intellectual establishment, his situation would have been far more painful than it was. The witty, beautifully constructed novel he wrote at this time, *The Vulgar Streak*, was refused by the New York publishers on the grounds that it was critical of British society. *Revenge for Love*, which was published in London in 1937, did not appear in this country, as I mentioned before, until 1952, and a well-known reviewer couldn't even get a favorable review of the English edition published in New York.

When *Revenge for Love* was finally published in this country, there were a few favorable reviews, but on the whole, it was quite clear, the literary establishment had by no means forgiven Lewis for his opposition to sacred dogma. The *New York Times*, for example, put it as follows:

Mr. Lewis' prose flutters, often failing to roost. Some of his scenes are belabored and drained of significance. In tossing big ideas and words around, his aim frequently suffers from the fact that he stands upon a fairly rickety soap box. Quite a few of his most telling passages . . . have the reminiscent air of champagne the next morning.

Irving Howe in the *New Republic* went all out:

That Wyndham Lewis should be revived in England and published in America is another dreary sign of the times. Lewis may figure in 20th century literary history, but the notion that he is important as a novelist or, in the publisher's words, as a "prophet" must be put down to the recent turn to reaction by some rattled intellectuals.

Wyndham Lewis, at least the Lewis of *this* book, is one of those Pound-nourished intellectuals who delight in proclaiming their peevish contempt for "the mob," who arrogate to themselves the role of the shaggy He-man of Letters and preen themselves on being the Aristocrats of the Word in an era of democratic promiscuity.

Such reviews, obviously, are not criticism. They make no effort either to give the reader an idea of what the book is about or to come to grips with what the author has said. Their purpose is to prevent him from being read.

Some reviewers were more friendly. *Time*, for example, wrote: "Lewis became one of the first writers to bare the tyrannic fraud of Communism in a novel called *The Revenge for Love* . . . [it] so stung drawing room Leftists that the book was boycotted with silence in Britain, not even published in the U.S. Read with the hindsight of 1952, the novel remains a remarkable political satire, one whose plot ranks as prophecy and whose story blends into history." But after all this, *Time* couldn't resist adding: "What keeps *Revenge for Love* from sharing the same shelf as *Darkness at Noon* is not lack of skill. It is the moral lint from Lewis' erstwhile infatuation with Hitler."

Koestler, of course, was far more deeply involved with Communism, and for a much longer time, than Lewis ever was with Hitler, but this doesn't detract from the

worth of *Darkness at Noon* as literature. *Revenge for Love*, like any other work of art, should be judged on its merits rather than the alleged, or erstwhile, political views of its author. As Lewis put it: ". . . there are no literary reviews any longer—but political reviews masquerading as such. Everything is judged as politics, not as literature. And this is one of the major disasters of this period, for the writer who wishes to remain independent."

Another reviewer in the *New York Times* writing on Lewis' *Demon of Progress in the Arts* unwittingly gave himself away. With all the assurance of the Pope speaking *ex cathedra* on a matter of faith and doctrine, he makes the pronouncement: "Lewis' mind lost its vigor somewhere back about 1927 with *Time and the Western Man*." One can disagree with Lewis, but he who says that the mind that produced *The Apes of God*, *The Human Age*, *Revenge for Love*, *The Writer and the Absolute*, to say nothing of the great portraits, had "lost its vigor" either doesn't know what vigor means, or doesn't know Lewis. The real thing Lewis lost, of course, was his credentials as a member of the intellectual establishment—he had committed the worst of all heresies by attacking the dogmas of liberalism.

The guardians of the liberal status quo operate with a zeal and single-mindedness which Torquemada would have admired. Although Lewis died in 1957, the following excerpts from a review of a new edition of *Blasting and Bombardiering* appeared only last November 26th in the *Chicago Sun-Times* and October 26th in the *New York Review of Books*: "a deeply confused intellectual, striving to prove himself to his lower-class fellow soldiers," "profound stupidity and narcissistic affectation," "his

lack of moral integrity is everywhere apparent," "partly because he was less snobbish than other English officers, he was less opposed to Hitlerism," "a talented fool." How anyone could write such nonsense could feel justified in calling anyone a fool, least of all Wyndham Lewis, is hard to understand.

A librarian at the University of Chicago told me recently that he detected a revival of interest in Lewis among students. His explanation of this was natural curiosity, and the inclination of the younger generation to disregard the opinions and hates of the older generation of critics. I think that it is quite possible that younger people will begin to turn to Lewis—his wit, his intelligence, his scorn of phoniness, and his masculine style will appeal to them. I am confident that many of Lewis' books, at least, will survive. Anyone in the future wanting to understand the intellectual currents which dominated the period between the two wars will have to read Wyndham Lewis. Who wants to know what post-World War II England was like will find no better source than *Rotting Hill*.

What, finally, are we to make of this complex, many-sided figure who aroused such conflicting opinions and such strong reactions? Russell Kirk, in a very perceptive essay, places Lewis in the tradition of 19th century English liberalism, in the tradition that traces its origins to John Locke. His faith in reason and individual freedom, his distrust of centralized authority, his belief in private property, his confidence in the ultimate good sense of the English middle class and his distrust of aristocracy and the masses, are all, says Kirk, in the tradition of 19th century English liberalism. This is true

up to a point, but Lewis was much more than a nineteenth century liberal. He had an appreciation of the significance of art, of the aesthetic, which no mere rationalist would be capable of, and his sense of history, of the wholeness of things, goes far beyond classical liberalism. He believed not only in order, but in a beautiful order; to him, a society without art would be a society scarcely worth living in. "Yet the artist is, in any society," he wrote, "by no means its least valuable citizen. Without him the world ceases to see itself and to reflect. It forgets all its finer manners. . . . Deprived of art, the healthy intellectual discipline of well-being is lost. Life instantly becomes so brutalized as to be mechanical and devoid of interest." There is the following very characteristic reference to the role of art in *The Art of Being Ruled*: "As measure is the principle of all true art, and as art is an enemy of all excess, so it is along aesthetic lines that the solution of this problem [the problem of violence] should be sought rather than along moral (or police) lines, or humanitarian ones. The soberness, measure, and order that reigns in all the greatest productions of art is the thing on which it is most useful to fix the mind in considering the problem."

Lewis was not a religious man, at least not in a formal sense, but he was no village atheist either. He was often critical of Protestantism—the left-wing protestant pastor occupied his critical attention in at least two of his books, but he did at times show some partiality to Catholicism, probably because of its formality, structure, and sense of order. On a number of occasions Lewis speaks of the mysterious process by which a great work of art comes into being. I find the following from a letter

to the English Jesuit Father D'Arcy in reply to a letter from D'Arcy with which he enclosed his review of *Time and Western Man* particularly interesting and revealing:

When you say that you find a contradiction in my statements relative to (1) a non-imminent Deity and (2) experience of the Divine on earth, the music of Bach was my example, I can't help feeling that you associate the music of Bach too much with Bach, the Austrian[?] organist, and do not consider it enough as a great perfection existing as it were independently of its human creator. Also, I think that I should find it difficult not to believe that the great artist is in possession of an experience the equal, at least, of the mystic. Because it is incarnated for him in an earthly form—which only vulgarly bears his signature—it does not seem to me that it must be relegated to a plane beneath the mystical religious ecstasy.

Anyone who goes to Lewis looking for comfort in this time of disillusionment and collapsing values is not likely to find it. But he will find, as Russell Kirk says, some hard truths. He will, to be sure, find errors of judgment, inconsistencies, sometimes unkindness, but never cowardice or conscious betrayal of the calling to which Lewis felt committed: as writer, artist, philosopher, the searcher for the truth. He will find a man, finally, who understood our time as few others have, and recognized the forces that have determined its direction.

In several of Lewis' novels there are characters who seem to have much in common with their creator, who defy some convention, and end up disastrously. Vincent Penhale in *The Vulgar Streak* defies the English caste system, makes himself a gentleman, and marries an upper-class woman. His world crashes about him, and he hangs himself. The main character of *Self Condemned*, the Lewis-like Renee Harding, decides shortly before the out-

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break of World War II that he cannot remain both a Professor of History in an English University and an honest man, and emigrates to Canada. His life in a provincial Canadian town in war time is a modern version of purgatory. His wife, finally, in desperation commits suicide, and he, a completely broken, defeated man, accepts an appointment in an American university. Lewis went through a similar Canadian purgatory, but never surrendered. In spite of blindness and poverty, he remained Wyndham Lewis to the end. "The *true* image must be put down" is what he said, and what he always tried to do. He may not offer us much comfort but we would do well, in this time of synthetic consensus and self-delusion to take heed of the "hard truths" offered to us by Wyndham Lewis.

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING, THE TWENTY-SECOND OF JANUARY, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-EIGHT. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED COPIES WAS PRINTED FOR THE CLUB IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-NINE.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.