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THE NOVELS OF WYNDHAM LEWIS

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A Thesis submitted to the Arts  
Faculty of the University of  
Glasgow for the Degree of Ph.D.

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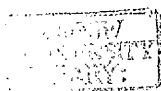
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## SUMMARY

The thesis attempts to re-examine the novels of Wyndham Lewis, emphasising language, style and general artistry in the novels.

The introduction looks briefly at some of the confusion which surrounds criticism of Lewis and makes the case for close textual criticism of his novels to balance the excessive tendency to value his novels in terms of his philosophical and political ideas. Lewis was always conscious of his novels as works of art and they often possess a balance which his polemics lack. It may be also that close textual scrutiny will shed a different light on some of his ideas.

After a general look at Lewis's first widely published ventures -- Vorticism and the publication of Blast, each of the novels is examined in turn, and an interpretation based as closely as possible on the text is offered.

Tarr is interpreted with more emphasis on the satirisation of Tarr himself than has formerly been the case and the implications of this satire are considered.

The Apes of God is seen mainly as a linguistic triumph, commanding admiration on every page, but failing to move effectively in several places. At the same time an examination of the language employed shows that the external approach of which Lewis boasted is not employed as exclusively as many have believed.

Snooty Paronet is completely revalued, seen as a satire on the main character, and the break which this represents from Lewis's earlier work is emphasised.

The Revenge For Love is assessed as one of Lewis's finest novels and the complexity of motif and imagery is looked at in some detail. The assertion of values not hitherto present in Lewis's work is also

discussed and this theme is pursued in

The Vulgar Streak, where Lewis's imagery appears in its most concise form. A strong contrast is made between the manner in which language denoting hollowness and falseness is employed here as opposed to the manner in which it is employed in earlier novels such as The Apes of God.

Self Condemned, Lewis's bitter post-war novel is similarly examined in terms of its language and the implications of severe criticism of the intellect are considered.

The Human Age, an incomplete tetralogy is next considered. The first part of this, The Childermass 1. was written in 1928 and the subsequent parts in the early 'fifties, so the work provides a useful opportunity to examine the ways in which Lewis's work had changed in the interim.

Lastly, The Red Priest, Lewis's final novel is examined. It is held to be inferior, though interesting, and while it makes intriguing use of some of Lewis's thematic ideas, it appears to have loose ends best explained by Lewis's blindness and ill-health at the time of writing.

Lewis had in fact been blind throughout the writing of Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta, the last two books of the existing parts of The Human Age but his writing in these is a model of clarity, contrasting strangely with the linguistic brilliance of of his early work.

In both cases, the early novels and the late, much important detail has hitherto been ignored and erroneous interpretations of Lewis's novels have become widely current. This thesis hopes to remedy some part of this injustice.

Conventions.

The Letters of Wyndham Lewis, edited by W.K.Rose, are referred to throughout as 'Letters'. Page references to quotations from Lewis's novels are generally given in brackets after the quotation. References are normally to the first British edition, but where a paperback edition has been available this has been preferred on the grounds of accessibility. This is the case with Tarr, The Childermass, The Apes of God, The Revenge For Love, Monstre Gai, Malign Fiesta and Blasting and Bombardiering. The Bibliography details this information.

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CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION.

## Chapter One.

### Introduction.

It is customary to commence any extended discussion of Wyndham Lewis by attempting to solve the 'riddle' of why he is not more popular with modern critics and academics, when his friends and admirers T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound have come to dominate the literature of the twentieth Century and the University courses which teach it.

It may be, of course, that Eliot and Pound admired Lewis excessively (for when he is not being sneered at, Lewis is often immoderately praised), but even Lewis's enemies usually preface their attacks with a gesture towards Lewis's talent:

"It would be ridiculous to deny that Mr. Lewis was a very considerable writer. If he were not so completely jaundiced that all colours, good and evil, seemed to him as one he would, indeed, have been a great one." 1

It would appear that, even if one were to accept the view of some of his enemies that Lewis is a 'near-miss' rather than that of his friends that he is a 'palpable hit', Lewis should be better known than he is. Several reasons have been advanced for this relative obscurity: firstly it is alleged that the many facets of Lewis's work make him difficult to 'pigeonhole' and that the narrow, specialist critic is afraid of tackling such a sprawling talent. Secondly, it seems fairly clear from a 'popularity-graph' of his career that Lewis found himself badly isolated in the thirties because of his political books - as the fashionable book-world moved leftwards, Lewis moved to the right. Hitler was particularly damaging as Lewis himself quickly realized:

1. Sitwell. E. Taken Care Of. p.99

"All I know is that my agents write  
 'Your Hitler Book has harmed you' - in a night  
 Somewhat like Byron -- only I waken thus  
 To find myself not famous but infamous." 2

Thirdly, - and this is the aspect about which Lewis complained most bitterly - there is the ostracism by Bloomsbury, the conspiracy of silence, 'malefic cabal', which Lewis felt existed against him among the ruling art-politicians of the London world. This quarrel went back before the first World War, to the so-called 'Ideal Home Rumpus' in which Lewis quarrelled with Roger Fry over a commission for an exhibition, allegedly mis-appropriated by Fry. The breach was never healed, and, whatever the merits of the original case, undoubtedly closed many avenues by which Lewis's work could have attained a wider audience.

Finally, there is the question of Lewis's personality; Lewis's intelligence was of a very penetrating kind, but it also tended on occasion to take a very personal turn: D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein all felt his satiric barb, but so also did his friends Pound, Eliot and Joyce. Lewis's explanations were always very ingenuous: "Once, in a moment of impatience, I used the word 'simpleton'....!"<sup>3</sup> and his friends remarkably forgiving: even the ego-centric Joyce, who became antagonistic to Lewis after the attack on Ulysses in Time and Western Man, later acknowledged that Lewis's criticism was the best 'hostile' one which had appeared.<sup>4</sup> But others felt the barbs more keenly: Hemingway nursed his grievance for 25 years before striking back in the most malicious fashion.<sup>5</sup> In all, Lewis's idea of uncompromising honesty must have cost him many friends who could have proved valuable in promoting his work, and his personality clearly still repels many critics.

2. Lewis. One Way Song. "If So The Man You Are."

3. Lewis. Blasting and Bombardiering. p.279

4. Ellmann.R. James Joyce. p.c08

5. Hemingway.E. A Loveable Feast.

Examples of conflict over the nature of Lewis's personality are easy to find: Michael Ayrton eloquently puts the case for the defence:

"Wyndham Lewis made a deep mark on his time and considerable pains have been taken to rub and polish it away.... To be too deep to be successfully ignored, too raw to be pleasing, like a blister on the veneer, has been Lewis's condition. He wrote too well and drew too well and was too clever by half..." 6

while Donat O'Donnell (nowadays better known as Conor Cruise O'Brien) simply quotes:

"Examine the breezy flow of Lewis's prose at any point and the vulgarity of the mind behind it is startling." 7

Against which I may quote Martin Seymour-Smith:

"He used thought where most literati slackly used fashion or facile emotion." 8

It is particularly instructive to note that all three of these quotations are taken from the same journal!

Clearly then there are substantial divergences of opinion over the quality of Lewis's talent, but perhaps this is not surprising in a man whose work spanned so many fields. Critical dialogue would take place at cross-purposes if one critic were discussing the paintings, another the novels, a third the polemics, a fourth the philosophies, a fifth the art-criticism, and so on. The trouble with this view is that critics do contradict each other on the same plane when they account for Lewis's imperfections or failure in their field of interest by referring to his activities in another medium.

6. Ayrton M. "Too Clever by Half." Spectator April 19, 1963 R502
7. O'Donnell, D. "Thou Art Pierpont". Spectator 199: 56-7 July 12, 1957
8. Seymour Smith, M. "Enemy in our Midst." Spectator 222 28 March, 1969. P.410



Thus, in spite of Lewis declaring the importance that he attaches to his prose fiction (ten times more important than my non-fiction, he says)<sup>9</sup> one critic can declare:

"When for example Lewis writes: 'I am an artist first and a critic afterwards' it is quite conceivable that he was classifying his entire literary output, novels included, as criticism: and that he regarded his visual work and nothing but it as 'creative'." <sup>10</sup>

Another critic, Anthony Burgess, is prepared to allow that the novels are creative, but believes:

"Had Lewis not been so good a pictorial artist he would not have formulated the literary theory he did. The theory came first and the books after. That's where the trouble starts." <sup>11</sup>

While the catalogue of the recent Lewis exhibition at the Mayor Gallery decisively states:

"Lewis's work as an artist often suffered at the hands of his writing." <sup>12</sup>

And another critic adds to the confusion by claiming:

"To be an artist of major achievement in two of the arts is the unique contemporary distinction of Wyndham Lewis." <sup>13</sup>

Even concentrating on the prose itself brings no satisfactory consensus: O'Donnell speaks of:

"... the worked up surface, the flagellation of adjectives, the effectiveness of a hatred deliberately provoked and undergone." <sup>14</sup>

And Northrop Frye, in one of the most powerful of the hostile approaches asserts:

"He cannot make words express a precise meaning: he showers his readers with a verbal offensive, with what the accurate schoolboy calls shooting a line.... one bores one's way along a deafening unaccented clatter of words until one can stand the noise no longer.... Words merely cover and congeal one scene after another; his writing is the opposite of his painting, a kind of literary pointillism." <sup>15</sup>.

10. T.L.S. Frid. Aug. 2nd, 1957. Front page. (465).
11. Burgess A. "Lewis as Spaceman" Spectator 20th May, 1966. P. 640.
12. Shone. R. "Wyndham Lewis" Introduction to catalogue. Lewis exhibition. Mayor Gallery May-June, 1974
13. Mudrick. M. Shenandoah. Lewis p. 54
14. O'Donnell. op.cit.
15. Frye. N. "Neoclassical Agony." Hudson Review 10, 592-8. 1957.

While T.S. Eliot believes:

"We have no critic of the contemporary world at once so fearless, so honest, so intelligent, and possessed of so brilliant a prose style." 16

Hugh Kenner calls Lewis's style "wonderfully expressive", "flexible, sensitive, and ebullient"<sup>17</sup> and Basil Taylor testifies:

"I believe he used the English language more originally than any other writer of his time and is our greatest portraitist for 150 years." 18

Lewis would appear to have collected a remarkable number of critical 'names' who cannot agree even on the qualities of his style! Indeed, even narrowing our range much further to look at assessments of the meaning of one novel fails to produce unanimity. One critic holds that self-satire is the greatest achievement of the satirist and declares:

"Lewis never achieved this. He never attained to that athletic ego which allowed Swift to be both a giant and a dwarf. The mirror that he held up to the world was without the most important Me of all - Percy Wyndham Lewis .... It does not include itself among its subjects." 19

This general point is made more specific by Paul West:

"After spending the war in Canada, Lewis wrote Self Condemned, a novel that shows his increasing garrulity and decreasing self-criticism." 20

Martin Seymour-Smith, on the other hand, calls Self Condemned:

"one of the most self-castigating novels of the century" 21.

and Walter Allen thinks it is:

"... the most sustained and the most deeply felt effort of self-confrontation in the fiction of our time." 22.

16. Eliot T.S. "Wyndham Lewis." Hudson Review 10. No. 2, p. 170-1957

17. Kenner. H. Wyndham Lewis p. 13-14.

18. Taylor. B. "Enemy of the Rose". Spectator 198, 349-50, March 15, 1957

19. T.S. op.cit.

20. West P. The Modern Novel. p. 69

21. Seymour-Smith. L. op.cit.

22. Allen. W. "Lonely Old Volcano." Encounter 120: 63-70, Sept. 1963

Raymond Las Vergnas believes that:

"Each of his books leaves one unsatisfied because of its virulent asperity, its obscenity and its lack of warmth." 23

While T.S. Eliot asserts:

"... in Self Condemned Lewis wrote a novel of almost unbearable poignancy." 24

And so on. There is no strong critical force, like magnetic north, to enable the student to take a bearing. There are other well-known 'major' writers in our century who may still be termed controversial, but surely none with such a large, accessible oeuvre assailed by such critical chaos.

Admittedly the bulk of these quotations are taken from review articles where criticism easily becomes journalism, but for this very reason they reflect accurately the impressions of Lewis which are spread abroad, among the wider public whose decision on whether to read a particular book or not is often made on the interest engendered by such articles.

Worse, the extent of this confusion has made it possible for journalistic criticism to evade the issue altogether. It has become easy simply to dismiss Lewis with an anecdote, illustrating his notorious paranoia (the misused word of our decade) or his fascism - or even those days, his male chauvinism - and to avoid discussing his work at all.

There was for example, a fairly animated correspondence in the Guardian <sup>25</sup> recently, sparked off by television coverage of the Vorticist exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. The correspondence did not concern the paintings on show there, nor did it reiterate the arguments over the responsibility for founding Vorticism which

23. Las Vergnas. R. History of English Literature. pl409

24. Eliot. op.cit.

25. Guardian: 26/4/74.; 1/5/74.; 6/5/74 Letters.

the exhibition catalogue had revived; rather this correspondence centred on the interesting question of whether or not Wyndham Lewis, Vorticist novelist and critic, had mad eyes! The final letter refuted this suggestion - but revealed the calibre of the real Lewis:

"Once over a number of plymouth gins... he did plan to kidnap the Literary Editor of the New Statesman but I'm sure that was only in jest."

Not all the stories are so entertaining, and occasionally examples of Lewis's paranoia stem from the critic's lack of knowledge. Frank Kermode, for example makes the point that:

"Geoffrey Wagner, who at the end of Lewis's life was writing his indispensable book about him, came under suspicion simply because of a family connection with Wadsworth." 26

This is not quite accurate. Lewis became suspicious of Wagner because:

"...in certain writings of Wagner I remarked errors re-regarding my work which seemed to me deliberate."

when he read some parts of the book before it was completed. Apparently casting round for some explanation for this, he remarks:

"He is, you know, a nephew of Fanny Wadsworth. He is a nice fellow but he may inherit family feuds." 27

Personally I rather doubt that Wagner would make deliberate errors in a work originally undertaken for a doctoral thesis, but there is no doubt that there are errors in the published text, and these almost certainly would irritate Lewis. 28

Not all misleading information is due to ignorance though; Quentin Bell contrives an erroneous impression of Lewis which should be examined very closely. Firstly, Bell is a nephew of Virginia Woolf, steeped in Bloomsbury traditions and academically

26. Kermode, F. Manchester Guardian Weekly, April 11.1963 p.10

27. Lewis. Letters, p.561

28.- c.f. comments on Wagner in the chapters on The Apes of God and The Human Age.

learned in the period. Moreover he has taught a course on writers and painters at Sussex which included Wyndham Lewis. He has also written an authoritative account of 'The Ideal Home Rumpus' referred to above.<sup>29</sup>

One might safely assume, therefore, that he knows a great deal about Wyndham Lewis; certainly he knows enough to disparage the idea that Lewis was ever persecuted by Bloomsbury, and to call Rothenstein's account of this persecution, "violent fantasies".<sup>30</sup> Knowledgeable as he is, he might be expected to know that Lewis greatly disliked being confused with D.B. Wyndham Lewis, the American biographer, and that as Hugh Kenner says:

"It is customary in writing on this subject to warn the reader against confusing the [two]" 31

Why then does Bell index all his references to Lewis under the name D.B. Wyndham Lewis?

Perhaps it is I who am now being paranoid. Perhaps Bell does not compile his own indices. A simple error; but consider the references to Wyndham Lewis in this book, a primer, intended as a guide to the not very knowledgeable reader. The only work of Lewis's which is quoted is Hitler, one of Lewis's worst books, certainly, as mentioned above, the one which has done his reputation most harm. Moreover this quotation is designed to prove a thesis which is fantastic to anyone who has read Lewis- namely, that Lewis has fallen prey to 'the charms of unreason' succumbed to the 'irrational' and the 'great unreasoning emotions of mankind.'<sup>32</sup> The final insult is that this 'attitude' of Lewis's is opposed to that

29. Chaplin.S. & Bell.Q. "The Ideal Home Rumpus." Apollo LXXX.No.32./

30. Bell. Q. Bloomsbury

31. Kenner.H. op.cit p.vii

32. Bell.Q. Bloomsbury. p.104

of 'he who thinks much' who, as Bell says 'is perforce a lonely man! Lewis's customary stance is stolen from him, and he is propped up as a second-rate D.H. Lawrence for the unsuspecting reader. Lewis would indeed be lonely in this company: if Bloomsbury did not persecute Lewis before, it appears to be starting now.

The antidote to all this (and this is an extreme case) is obvious. More attention must be directed to the actual text of Lewis's work. The critic can claim many functions, but surely one of the most valuable consists in directing attention to a neglected author, or to neglected aspects of an author's work.

A great deal has been done in Lewis's case in recent years. In particular the publication of The Paintings and Drawings<sup>33</sup> has been a major step forward, contributing to, indeed largely stimulating, the current re-assessment of Lewis's paintings - vide two major exhibitions this year.

There has been increased interest in Lewis's writings also, with Bridson's book on the politics, Chapman & Fox's collection of short stories, Chapman's critical book, and the publication of Lewis's squib-novel The Roaring Queen.

It is, however, fair to say that no really new ground has been broken in Lewis prose fiction criticism since Hugh Kenner and Geoffrey Wagner published their books on Lewis in the mid-fifties. Wagner's book, which has already been criticised, remains the most scholarly work yet done on Lewis. His bibliography while not complete, is the best which has yet appeared, and his investigation of the intellectual background to Lewis's ideas, and his tracing of

33. Michel. W. Wyndham Lewis : Paintings and Drawings.

how these ideas are worked out in Lewis's books, is so thorough and workman-like that no-one has yet challenged any substantial part of it. Yet, in Wagner's hands Lewis grows stale. The documentation kills the essential Lewis, and surprisingly, for Wagner is a novelist himself, the novels are dealt with very scantily indeed - Wagner's response to them seems hopelessly inadequate:

"with no more sound than a mouse makes and not much more sense of direction, Mr. Wagner scampers industriously up and acrobatically down the gamut of Lewis's work without apparently understanding the significance of any of it, or the insignificance of much of it." 34

This is exaggerated and cruel, but essentially true; one feels that Wagner's dead thoroughness has effectively stymied further research into the background of Lewis's ideas for some time to come.

Kenner's book on the other hand could hardly be more different. Much smaller, the book is packed with ideas, clashing them together so as to produce sparks of the most brilliant kind; at times Kenner's style seems to take on the qualities of his subject-matter, and something approaching an apotheosis of Lewis is achieved.

But again, by its very brilliance the book has conditioned later work on Lewis - for both Pritchard and Chapman tend to follow in Kenner's footsteps - and yet, partly because of its size, the book is very partial. Kenner takes his theme and develops it brilliantly - but he omits a great deal on the way. Unlike Wagner, it is seldom possible to actually say that Kenner is wrong on a specific point; it is more a question of what he leaves out - and I would like to suggest, what he fails to see in Lewis's value-system at various points in his career.

Such points have to be made in the individual chapters, here it must suffice to indicate and approach.

What seems to me to be missing from Lewis criticism, is the hard textual work, looking at how Lewis develops themes, how he builds imagery, and how he tests his own ideas in his fiction. We have enough, for the moment, on the ideas behind Lewis's work, we need to examine the novels as art, as objects with their own integrity, not as adjuncts to a philosophical system. Ideas will be examined, but mainly as they arise from the novel, not as they are imported into it. I shall try not to imitate those critics of Swift, who failing to find God in Gulliver's Travels, import God on the grounds that Swift is a clergyman.

I am conscious of two dangers in this thesis, One is that in the course of examining erroneous criticisms of Lewis's work, I should over-react and substitute indignation for genuine response. Lewis criticism is studded with those who have succumbed to this slough: I merely hope to have no more than flirted with it.

The second danger is more serious. This is that in the process of clue-hunting, head down over the text, I lose sight of the over-all perspective - find myself unable to see the wood for the trees. My excuse is that until the trees are closely scrutinised, we cannot know whether we are in an orchard or a jungle - as some of the above quotations illustrate.

I am conscious of having started many hares which I have not run to ground. Lewis had a habit of introducing elements - even heavy-handed hints - to his works, which I have spent much time tracing to unsatisfactory conclusions.

Max Stirner, Samuel Butler, Moby Dick, William Windham, John Ruskin, a copy of Middlemarch tossed overboard, haunt this thesis like peons in The Childermass - look too closely and they lose their reality. Withall they are all interesting and I hope I have provided more substantial fare as well as appetizers.



Naturally enough, some portions of the thesis make more claim for originality than others, and an over-all conclusion about Lewis's eventual world-view is reached.

This is dealt with most directly in the conclusion. The introduction is not the place for such things. It would be as if Alexander Pope were to place the line :

"One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right."  
at the beginning of his Essay on Man rather than at the end.  
Conclusions have to be worked for.

CHAPTER 2 : VORTICISM AND EARLY WORK.

First then, Vorticism. A great deal of recent work - Michel's Paintings and Drawings, Wees's Vorticism and the English Avant-garde, and of course the recent Vorticist exhibition at the Hayward Gallery<sup>1</sup> - has tended to revive interest in Vorticism, and in some ways it is Wyndham Lewis's best known 'period' as a painter. This is not surprising, for aside from its historical interest as the first real abstract/cubist movement in Britain, and the fact that both the 'Vortex' and the '-ism' have an appeal to art historians, Vorticism by the very stridency of its pictures and its propaganda still calls attention to itself with a remarkable urgency. The colour on the cover of Blast<sup>2</sup> may have faded a little, and its shock-effect is no longer what it was, but the oddly naive, exuberant self-confidence with which it proclaimed a new era has kept much of its appeal.

Commercially, Vorticism was a total failure, but in publicity terms it was an undoubted success. Lewis is guilty of only slight exaggeration when he says in Blasting and Bombardiering:

"no illustrated paper worth its salt but carried a photograph of some picture of mine or of my 'school', as I have said, or one of myself, smiling insinuatingly from its pages." 2

The commercial failure meant that much of the work produced at the time was either destroyed or lost - thirty-eight of the forty-nine Vorticist paintings at the first (and only) Vorticist Exhibition in 1915 are now missing<sup>3</sup> - but such was the stir around the movement

1. Michel, Walter. "Wyndham Lewis, Paintings and Drawings." Thames and Hudson 1971  
Wees, W.C. "Vorticism and the English Avant-garde" Manchester University Press 1972  
Richard Cork. "Vorticism and its Allies" Exhibition Catalogue Arts Council of Gt. Britain 1974
2. Blasting and Bombardiering. p30.
3. Richard Cork. *op. cit.* p.20.

that these missing paintings did not prevent the Arts Council from collecting more than four hundred and fifty exhibits for its recent Vorticist exhibition.

Ironically, the very massiveness of this effort points to the main danger now surrounding Vorticism, particularly with reference to Lewis's work, - not that Vorticism will be forgotten, but that it will be made too much of.

If this sounds surprising in the light of complaints I make elsewhere about neglect of Lewis's work, the paradox can soon be explained. I believe the reason for some of this neglect is, in fact, the very attention that Vorticism - seen as a movement rather than as an episode in Lewis's long career - has received.

Those who have written most on Vorticism, tend to see Lewis's progress beyond Vorticism as a retreat or a betrayal and to regard his later work - by implication at least - as inferior.

Wees, for example, sees Lewis's writing of Tarr in less experimental language than the Enemy of the Stars as a 'retreat' and 'the first step in Lewis's withdrawal from Vorticism'<sup>4</sup> while Richard Cork, speaking of the more naturalistic styles adopted by the Vorticists in their War paintings, says they

"all retreated towards a tame form of figuration  
which betrayed the precepts they had struggled so  
hard to establish in 1914" <sup>5</sup>

Cork even goes so far as to accuse Lewis's most ambitious war-painting "A Battery Shelled"; (called "a triumph of design" by Michel<sup>6</sup>) of 'stylistic schizophrenia'.

4. Wees. op.cit. p.199

5. "Vorticism and its allies." op.cit. p.26

6. Michel. op.cit. p.90 -

The painting in fact represents a remarkably dramatic blending of Lewis's earlier Vorticist style with a more naturalistic approach, designed to emphasise the conflict between the mechanization of war and the humanity of the men taking part in it. None of the figures in the painting is totally naturalistic - Lewis later called himself a 'super-naturalist' - all retain a formal element, but the further one looks into the landscape of the war the more 'vorticist', the more machine-like the figures become. The three 'naturalistic' figures in the left foreground, seem remote from the actual field of activity, but even here a distinction is observed - one man is looking directly into the battle scene, and his face is the most metallic of the three. One is facing towards the battle but seems to have his hat over his eyes - his face is more naturalistic. The third man - whose face is the most naturalistic in the picture - has his back to the violence and is gazing calmly and sadly away, out of the picture. The picture to me seems a remarkably successful attempt to make a conflict of styles work dramatically together, whereas for Cork, primarily interested in Vorticism, it represents a failure of nerve.<sup>7</sup>

Only Walter Michel, I think, seems to see Vorticism in the context of Lewis's total artistic oeuvre and to value it in its place and for its influence on Lewis's later work without according it an unjustly dominating role in Lewis's career. Undoubtedly this is because he has worked extensively on all of Lewis's painting to compile his monumental collection, and has better understood the variety of styles which Lewis employed before, after, and for some time contemporaneously with Vorticism.

7. A reproduction of this painting is in Michel op.cit. p.89  
Cork's opinion is in "Vorticism and its allies". op.cit.  
p.100

In spite of all this, such was the neglect that Vorticism itself suffered for many years that it might still seem churlish to complain about it now being 'elevated above its station', were it not for a more subtle and damaging effect which this tendency has had. I refer to Lewis's writing to which the term 'vorticist' is often applied. It cannot be denied that Lewis attempted to write 'vorticist' prose; he felt that Pound for example was failing to provide sufficiently 'vorticist' material for Blast<sup>8</sup>, and apparently decided to fill the vacuum himself. But if 'Vorticist prose' is to mean anything more than the staccato energy and explosive typography and layout of the Vorticist manifestos, it cannot, I think, be stretched much further than Lewis's 'play' in Blast No.1 - Enemy of the Stars.

Even here it should not be lost on the reader that Lewis rewrote virtually everything which he published before the war, and published it in more 'conventional' prose. Indeed even the first edition of Tarr was relatively conventional - hardly vorticist. Lewis later said that while writing Tarr he was an 'extremist', trying to produce a kind of abstract prose<sup>9</sup> but he quickly found this to be impossible, and rather than his Vorticist painting affecting his writing: "Writing - Literature - dragged me out of the abstractist cul-de-sac."<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, Vorticism is such a good label that it has tended to stick - often quite incongruously. Patrick Trevor-Roper, for example, writing on the potentially fascinating subject of "the influence of defective vision on art or character" begins an interesting speculation on the fact that both Milton and Lewis became blind from the same cause - a pituitary tumour.

8. Letters, p.491

9. Letters p.552

10. Rude Assignment, p.129

Instead of going on to make the point that while blind both Milton and Lewis dealt with similar subject matter - Satan and Hell - Trevor-Roper concludes rather sadly that more direct comparisons are impossible because Lewis's "vorticist prose" bears no relationship to Milton's Grand Style.<sup>11</sup> Giving point to this false argument is the Lewis drawing reproduced in the book - entitled 'Comcat No.3.' it was executed in 1914, thirty-seven years before Lewis became blind.

Perhaps more dangerous because more plausible, is the kind of interpretation based on Vorticism and the early work, which we frequently find applied to the later novels. A notable example occurs in the editorial of the Lewis special number of Canadian Literature,<sup>12</sup> unsigned, but presumably by the editor, George Woodcock.

Obviously unhappy at the 'bad likeness' of Canada in the novel Self Condemned, and a little baffled by the fact that "viewed from the naturalistic standpoint, it seems a strange mixture of heavy and rather amateur social documentation, authorial comment, and likely catastrophes heightened to a melodrama", Woodcock resorts to the proposition that Self Condemned is "a determined anti-novel".

He discusses Lewis's heroes as hollow men - dead inside thus satisfying the Vorticist concept of art: as explained by Tarr - "deadness is the first condition of art".<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to discuss Rene as the 'glacial shell' which he has become by the end of the novel and says this is

11. Trevor-Roper, P. "The World through Blunted Sight" Thames and Hudson. 1970, p. 130.
12. Canadian Literature. No. 35, Winter 1963, pp. 3-8
13. Tarr p. 279 (Calder & Boyars. 1968)

"a projection of the vorticist viewpoint that art only becomes real in the moment of suspended life."

He discusses the dead Hester and her image as graffito, claiming

"in other words she has undergone the same dislocation as life must suffer for the work of art to come into being; in Rene's mind she has become the equivalent of a work of art."

Woodcock concludes:

"the glacial shell with no content, accords precisely with the definition of the work of art in Tarr. Rene and Hester, and the world they belong to, symbolised by the Hotel, have all been received into the timeless and static world of art, the still centre of the Vortex, the dominion of the Enemy."

The full refutation of that kind of argument can be found in the chapter devoted to Self Condemned, here it is perhaps enough to say that this kind of argument ignores the fact that Self Condemned is a tragedy, in that becoming an art-object involves a tragic loss of humanity, and makes of Lewis a kind of diabolic magician, killing people to turn them into 'art'; is in fact the kind of misunderstanding that substantiates the charges of fascism used against Lewis.

The main point is that this argument plucks its premises from work done in 1914 and applies them to a novel published in 1954. However much Lewis was an enemy of time, his work - both writings and paintings - had changed a great deal in the intervening years.

Vorticism itself, as a movement, lasted less than two years: from early 1914 when Pound coined the name, to July 1915 when the second issue of Blast was published. Its most coherent expression is in Blast 1. in June 1914 and its only (and therefore definitive) exhibition was held in the Dore Galleries in June 1915. Blast 2 marked a decided waning in the movement's energy, and inevitably, the first world war, already claiming so many human victims, suffocated art movements in its stride.



However, short-lived as the movement was, it occupied a time which was later to seem highly significant to a great many people - the end of an era, the last few days of a distant ordered society which vanished with the advent of war. This is, of course, an over-simplification, and Wees's sketch of the background to Vorticism hints at a case to be made for Vorticism and all the excitement around it being more in tune with the emotions which greeted the war than with any peaceful, stable era which came before it.

The advertisements for Blast itself, proclaimed in Pound's phrase 'END OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA.'<sup>14</sup> and the Manifestos and 'Blasts' of Vorticism were clearly designed to shock pre-war society and to recognise it as one in which it had at least been possible for the artist to survive - something which he found increasingly more difficult after the war.

It is perhaps possible to see in the shock-tactics of Vorticism a much greater sense of security than is to be found in the more serious analyses of society's ills which Lewis undertook in the twenties, and Lewis recognised later, if not at the time, that in some respects he had been participating in a game:

"... there would be an article from my pen explaining why life had to be changed, and how. 'Kill John Bull with Art!' I shouted. And John and Mrs. Bull leapt for joy, in a cynical convulsion. For they felt as safe as houses. So did I." <sup>15</sup>

This provocative aspect of Vorticism is often overlooked in 'explanations' of some of Lewis's paintings of the time. Cork, for example, in his catalogue entry for 'Portrait of an Englishwoman' in the Vorticist exhibition at the Hayward Gallery 1974, wrote:

14. The Egoist. 1st April 1914. Back cover. Quoted by Wees. p.160

15. Blasting and Bombardiering. p.30

"This superb watercolour deliberately subjects the image of woman to the humiliation of a Vorticist abstraction, which banishes all feminine curves in favour of brutal angular forms." 16

Looking at the work in question, there seems nothing (beyond two shapes in the upper centre which a fanciful imagination might designate as eyes) to suggest that we are in fact looking at 'the image of a woman', any more than we are in a number of other drawings of the period called simply 'design' or 'composition'. I believe that Cork is approaching the picture from the wrong angle. Instead of the watercolour being a humiliation of the image of woman, it is the image of woman (i.e. the title "Portrait of an Englishwoman") which has been stuck on to an abstract composition in order to further outrage a public which was already loud in its protests against such incomprehensible art.<sup>17</sup>

This element of the outrageous should not, however, blind us to the genuine philosophical content of Vorticism - basically, the idea of geometric art looking back at Byzantine art, where God, not Man was at the centre of the universe, and art assumed permanence described by T.E. Hulme in "Modern Art and its Philosophy".<sup>18</sup> This philosophy of hard lines, a classical outlook and an external approach dominates all of Lewis's early work - and indeed his struggle to reconcile it with a concern for humanity dominates all of his later work - but it is not specifically Vorticist; in fact Hulme refused to associate himself with the Vorticists whom he thought were going too far.<sup>19</sup>

But specifically Vorticist or not, it was this aspect of Vorticism that Lewis usually chose to emphasise in later years.

16. Cork. op.cit. p77

17. The picture is reproduced (in black and white) in Michel. op.cit. plate 22.

18. Hulme.T.E. "Speculations" Routledge and Kegan Paul 1960, p73ff.

19. See Wees's chapter on Hulme pp73ff

In "Wyndham Lewis the Artist" from Blast to Burlington House, for example, he says of Vorticism:

"The promise of an intenser discipline, and less impermanent equivalents for our personal experience, was what attracted me. The cortex, massive and sharply outlined, not the liquefaction within, I have always regarded as the proper province of the artist". 20

He recognised his own extremism and justified it as a necessary tactic of the time:

"A direction was imposed by going to the end of the road, where the form of the artist becomes indistinguishable from that of the geometrician. My designs were no more arbitrary or absolutist than that." 21

And he tries to show the value of these exercises in his later work.

After the 1st war, he tells us, in Rude Assignment, :

"The geometrics which had interested me so exclusively before, I now felt were bleak and empty. They wanted filling. They were still as much present to my mind as ever, but submerged in the coloured vegetation, the flesh and blood, that is life. I can never feel any respect for a picture that cannot be reduced, at will, to a fine formal abstraction. But I now busied myself for some years acquiring a maximum of skill in work from nature..." 22

The fruits of this submerged geometry are perhaps best seen in the portraits, particularly those of the thirties; Lewis indicated this too, in Wyndham Lewis the Artist:

"Today I am a super-naturalist - so I might call myself: and I wished the reader of these Notes and Vortices to see what could be done by burying Euclid deep in the living flesh - that of Mr. Eliot or of Mr. Pound - rather than, at this time of day, displaying the astral geometry of these gentlemen. I am, as an examination of these plates will reveal, never unconscious of those underlying conceptual truths that are inherent in all appearances. But I leave them now where I found them, instead of isolating them in conceptual arabesques." 23

It is in this sense (and only in this sense) that Lewis can say of his 1938 portrait of Mrs. Meyrick Booth:

- 20. "Wyndham Lewis the Artist. p.23
- 21. Ibid. p.14
- 22. Rude Assignment. p.129
- 23. Wyndham Lewis the artist.op.cit. p.59

"Even an oil portrait like the Hedwig... coming as it does quite close to another convention, is nevertheless, in its massive design, a creature of the vortex." 24

and it is quite clear that, in retrospect, Lewis tended to extract this geometric idea of art from the rest of his vorticist attributes which he regarded as more ephemeral, and certainly less significant.

This is clearly what he means when writing to Lord Carlow, he claims of Blast No. 1:

"When you have removed all that is necessarily strident, much sound art doctrine is to be found in this puce monster." 25

W.C. Wees, however, quoting this, rebukes Lewis for attempting to separate the form of Vorticism from its content - the means and the ends, he claims cannot be separated.

On the other hand, Wees wants both to have his cake and eat it, for he later accuses Lewis of retrospectively claiming too much significance for Vorticism<sup>26</sup> - in other words he first refuses to allow Lewis to isolate those elements of Vorticism which he regards as valuable and insists that the whole movement should be seen as being of one piece; then when Lewis praises these individual elements he berates him for attaching more importance to the movement than it had!

In fact, however much Lewis stuck by the 'sound art-doctrine' in Blast, he was not in the habit of claiming, in later years, that Vorticism was a large or successful movement:

"It was essential that people should believe that there was a kind of army beneath the banner of the Vortex. In fact there were only a couple of women and one or two not very reliable men." 27

24. Wyndham Lewis. "The Vorticists" Vogue, London, Sept. 1956 included in Michel & Fox "W.L. on ART" Thames and Hudson 1969. p.455

25. Quoted in Norman, Charles. "Ezra Pound". Quoted by Wees. op.cit. p.195

26. Wees. op.cit. p.211

27. "The Vorticists." op.cit. "W.L. on Art" p.457.

It is easy to understand however, why Wees insists so much that Vorticism was an integrated movement, its doctrine indistinguishable from its form, for the symbol of the Vortex, the cone spinning on its axis, is highly suggestive and certainly implies the existence of a complex and coherent movement behind it.

But as Wees himself points out, the name 'Vorticism' was not adopted until at least April 1914<sup>28</sup> and indeed had to be added, rather hastily, to Blast. Michel, Wees's source, even says that Lewis appears to have considered calling the movement 'Blasticism' at one point.<sup>29</sup>

Even having adopted it, there were some differences about what it actually meant. Pound tended to emphasise the energy implied by the symbol: "every kind of whirlwind of force and emotion",<sup>30</sup> and in Blast: "The Vortex is the point of maximum energy." Whereas Lewis tended - classically - to emphasise the stillness; in Blast: "The vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest," and to Douglas Goldring: "You think at once of a whirlpool. At the heart of the whirlpool is a great silent space where all the energy is concentrated. And there at the point of the concentration, is the Vorticist."<sup>31</sup>

Goldring's comment: "Whatever else the Vorticists may have been, they were certainly not silent", goes to the heart of the matter. The image of the vortex was a piece of brilliant sophistry - perhaps it even deceived the participants; certainly the circular spinning and the still centre is a powerful image -

28. Wees. op.cit. 161

29. Michel. op.cit. p.152 (note 25 to ch.2.)

30. Letter to Quinn Letters of Ezra Pound p.74

31. Goldring, Douglas. "South Lodge" Constable & Co. 1943.p.65

Herman Melville and T.S. Eliot have made famous use of it - but it was never true of Vorticism. The energy implied by the spinning and the classical detachment implied by the still centre were in fact, in conflict, - a conflict which Lewis came increasingly to recognise, and which in many ways became his theme. Even in his last novel we find the violent contradiction which lies concealed here - in the shape of an intellectual boxer, a murderous clergyman, whose energy and intellect are incompatible.

By far the best thing in William Robert's attack on Lewis in The Vortex Pamphlets<sup>32</sup> is not the tedious and repetitive charges (which are useful in that they make Lewis look less paranoid) but one simple drawing of a smashed and shattered Vortex. Instead of a cone, with hard cold sides, spinning neatly on its axis, the broken sections of the cone revolve crazily, out of gear with one another.

This seems to me to represent clearly Vorticism's problems. Vorticism was violently anti-futurist, though many of its members, especially Lewis, had been involved with Marinetti, and 'Blast' was actually named by the futurist, Nevinson. A strong case can be made for the theory of the machine in art put forward by Futurism being totally different from that proposed by Vorticism; it can be claimed, fairly satisfactorily, that Futurism uses the machine as content and employs it to indicate speed and movement, while Vorticism uses the machine as form, employing its hard, clean lines and 'metalizing' non-mechanical forms, in the search for geometric permanence.

32. Roberts William. "The Vortex Pamphlets. 1956-8"  
London 1958. Privately printed, not paginated.

Lewis was, in fact, always a little cautious regarding the machine as content of. his poem One Way Song:

"I said (and I always say these things with the same voice)

'Say it with locomotives! Mark well that animal puff!'

....

'Well that's enough' at last I said 'You've put your backs into that all right.

You said it with locomotives honies! That will do I guess for tonight.' (Engine Fight-Talk).

So much for the 'art-doctrine'; but the form the movement took, the 'stridency' it employed, is Futurist beyond any question of a doubt. The manifestos, the blasts and blessings, the wild dogmatism, all were Futurist inspired, while at the same time the theories of Futurism were being denied. There was nothing insincere in this - Vorticism was not simply English Futurism, as so many people thought - but it does highlight an essential contradiction located mostly in Lewis's personality, to which Vorticism was subject; and of course for us this contradiction is of interest less for its effect upon Vorticism than for its effect upon Lewis.

If Vorticism provoked Lewis's first public splash, it also provoked his last. For the 1956 Retrospective Exhibition of his work at the Tate was unfortunately entitled "Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism" and included an insultingly token selection of works by 'other Vorticists'. Moreover, in his introduction to the catalogue Lewis complained:

"Some of the Art History relating to Vorticism which I have read has been unrecognisable."

and went on to assert, somewhat dogmatically:

"Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did and said, at a certain period." 33

33. Introduction - Catalogue "Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism" included in Michel op.cit. pp 443-4.

This can easily be read as arrogance, and William Roberts, one of Lewis's associates in the blast days, was incensed by this statement, the derisory representation of his own work in the exhibition (7 works) and what he felt to be prejudice against himself at the Tate, emanating from Sir John Rothenstein, and inspired by Lewis (an equivalent of the 'malefic cabal' which Lewis claimed was operating against himself, and surely something which helps bring Lewis's famous persecution complex into perspective).

Roberts subsequent Vortex Pamphlets carried the controversy on after Lewis's death, with Michael Ayrton, among others, defending Lewis's position.

The debate still continues, for in the Catalogue to the 1974 Vorticist Exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, the whole issue is raised again, Lewis's proprietorial assertion called 'a grossly inflated claim', and existence claimed for 'a growing acknowledgment that Lewis was not the legendary leader of derivative disciples he would have liked to have been'.<sup>34</sup>

Rebuttal of this requires, I think, two separate points. Firstly, Lewis was undeniably the main mover in Vorticism, and for this we have not just the testimony of such involved people as Ezra Pound, but also the evidence of sheer quantity of work: the seventy-five Vorticist works which were exhibited in New York in 1916 under John Quinn's sponsorship, included forty-five by Lewis - more than half the total exhibition!<sup>35</sup> Moreover, although there are only two Lewis paintings still surviving from the Vorticist period, the Hayward Gallery Vorticist exhibition clearly showed that Lewis was the dominant spirit of the movement,

34. Cork.op.cit.p5.

35. Wees. op.cit. p.207



and some of the best work by the other Vorticists - that of Helen Saunders for example - is clearly inspired directly by Lewis.

So, editor of its magazine, author of the bulk of its propaganda, and producer of most of its work, Lewis clearly has some justification for his claim, "Vorticism c'est moi!"

Richard Cork, however, while unwilling to acknowledge Lewis's hegemony among the Vorticists, is perfectly willing to blame the failure of The Rebel Art Centre (the home of Vorticism) on Lewis.

".. the main reason for the Centre's failure can be attributed to Lewis, for his paintings were always locked out of sight in a small back room to save them from would-be plagiarists. Such paranoic behaviour..."<sup>36</sup>

This is simply another part of the familiar smear - somehow it is always Lewis who is being paranoiac. Fortunately there is a letter of the time from Pound to Quinn which sheds light on this from another angle:

Lewis's "imitators grab discoveries so damn quickly and copy so shamelessly that he is I think sometimes impelled to spend his time experimenting when he should really be perfecting some system of forms." <sup>37</sup>

There are, it seems, still two sides to most stories.

The second point that should be made, centres not on whether Lewis actually was the mastermind of Vorticism, but on whether, in claiming this he was actually trying to aggrandise himself in any way. We have seen above that Lewis regarded his geometric theories of art at this time as useful but extreme. Outside this theory, it may be said that Lewis tended to underestimate Vorticism rather than otherwise. In the catalogue introduction which gave

36. Cork. op.cit. p.17

37. Letter from Pound to Quinn 15th March 1916. Quoted by Michel. op.cit. p.155

so much offence, Lewis also added that he had repudiated Vorticism's teachings after the first World War. In The Demon of Progress in The Arts he describes how he moved away from the extremism of his Vorticist period:

"...what I was headed for, obviously, was to fly away from the world of men, of pigs, of chickens and alligators, and to go to live in the unwatered moon sawed up into square blocks in the most alarming way. What an escape I had! " 38

And this was the book which Lewis recommended his readers to consult for his views on the abstract in art in the same introduction in which he claimed sole responsibility for Vorticism - clearly he was hardly trying to share in some of Vorticism's reflected glory!

The last two letters in Rose's collection of Lewis's correspondence are both concerned with this controversy, and Lewis's annoyance that Roberts should think that he (Lewis) is actually proud of vorticism - indeed in one letter to a London editor (not sent) Lewis proclaims:

"Vorticism....what does this word mean? I do not know. How anyone can get annoyed about it, I cannot imagine, but let me say I did not ask for this meaningless word to be revived at the Tate..." 39

Strangely enough, though Roberts was equally incensed that Lewis should suggest that Vorticism was not important, much of the information in his Vortex Pamphlets supports this view. He says for example that he was only ever in the Rebel Art Centre for a few moments on one occasion; that Lewis borrowed two paintings from him to hang in the Centre but that he never signed the Vorticist manifesto - he first discovered he was supposed to have done so when he saw Blast.

38. Demon of Progress in the Arts. p.3

39. Letters p.507.

Yet Blast No.1. does have his name added to the signatures to the manifesto and it does reproduce two works ('Dancers' and 'Religion') by Roberts - apparently the two casually lent by Roberts to the Centre. So we have the situation where Roberts is not a member of Vorticism yet is made to appear so by Lewis's manoeuvres - precisely the type of sleight-of-hand which Lewis later acknowledged was true of the whole movement.

Still, however confused or contradictory Roberts' pamphlets may appear to be, his painting of the Vorticists at the Eiffel Tower Restaurant, done from memory in 1961-2, shows the same intuitive directness that his drawing of the shattered Vortex had earlier done - for Roberts himself is the smallest figure in the group and Lewis - the largest and most central - clearly dominates the picture.<sup>40</sup>

The arguments about the relative importance of the participants in Vorticism are likely to go on for a long time - and to conflict as much as the evidence of the various 'eye witnesses' of the time. For the purposes of this thesis the main point is to get Vorticism into perspective, not to allow it to dominate our view of Lewis's later work and to realize the extent to which he later repudiated both the movement and many of its methods. Judging the extent of this repudiation may prove to be crucial in our view of Lewis's literary work of this period, to which we shall now turn our attention.

40. Reproduced in Cork's catalogue, pl10, and in Wees. plate 6.

Though some concession is occasionally made by critics to the change in Lewis's work marked by The Revenge for Love, we are frequently told that all Lewis's work is of a piece - that all his works in fact form one large work.<sup>41</sup>

Certainly there is a clear relationship between, say, the philosophical books of the twenties - The Art of Being Ruled and Time and Western Man - and some of the fiction of these years - most obviously, the debate in The Childermass - but it may be worth examining the fabric of some of Lewis's work a little more closely than has been done, to see if it is in fact all of the same weave - or indeed of the same material!

Hugh Kenner is undoubtedly the most brilliant exponent of the interconnections in Lewis's work. Seizing on certain recurrent themes - notably the attitude to Time, with its disavowal of history, the use of showmen, the surges of comic vision, and the opposition of Genius and Humanity, Kenner convincingly moves from book to book as if each work were an act in a continuing drama. He speaks for example of Arghol, the protagonist of Enemy of the Stars, as a 'principle of action' and is eager to apply this principle to other books:

"In The Lion and the Fox, a work of non-fiction in which the Arghol figure has read Machiavelli, manufactures colossi, and is named Shakespeare..."<sup>42</sup>

This description of an ostensibly critical book as a dramatic work is illuminating and suggestive - but before accepting its implications fully, I should like to examine Arghol a little more closely, and quarry some of the philosophy which went into his creation.

41. cf. Grigson, G. "Wyndham Lewis." Broadcast Talk 2/11/46

42. Kenner. Wyndham Lewis p.24

Enemy of the Stars Lewis's short, powerful and unstageable play occupies an important position in the Lewis oeuvre, is "important to any definition of Vorticism"<sup>43</sup>, according to one critic, while to another: "The most impressive performance in Blast..." and the conflict it represents is present in much of Lewis's work<sup>44</sup>. Published and probably written, in 1914, Enemy of the Stars employs a kind of cryptically poetic prose, much closer to "abstraction" than anything Lewis later produced. Naturally this experiment had some effect on the clarity of meaning - but not all the reviewers felt this to be a bad thing. Richard Aldington for example (admittedly not wholly disinterested since he had put his name - though apparently little else - to the Vorticist Manifesto) wrote:

"It stirs one up like a red-hot poker. Of course I don't 'understand' it, in the sense that I cannot tell you exactly what the characters looked like, what they dressed in or quite what they did. It doesn't seem to me to be necessary that one should understand a work of art in the sense that one understands a geometric problem, or a legal document. The important thing is that one should realize the artist's personality and undergo the emotions he intended you to undergo in the contemplation of his work.

I do perceive a strong, unique personality in Mr. Lewis's 'Enemy of the Stars'; I do receive all manner of peculiar and intense emotions from it....does not seem abstract to me. The parts I like best...are the sudden clear images which break across it - flashes of lightning suddenly displaying forms above the dark abysmal conflict." 45

Though couched rather too much in Aldington's own terms as an Imagist, this represents a brave attempt to come to terms with a work which is clearly difficult. If more recent criticism has been much more forward in claiming to understand the play, this

43. Michel and Fox. op.cit. p.23

44. Chapman, Robert, R. Wyndham Lewis Fictions and Satires. Vision Press Ltd. 1973 p.21

45. Aldington, Richard. Review of "Blast" The Egoist No.14 Vol 1, July 15, 1914.p.272-3.

is undoubtedly because Lewis himself lifted the veil a little by publishing in 1932 a revised and considerably expanded version of the play, with an accompanying essay "The Physics of the Non-Self" by way of a commentary. This large slim volume includes a note to the effect that the changes in the text are relatively unimportant but there is no doubt that they make the prose much smoother and the meaning of particular utterances much clearer. In quotation most critics use the Blast version, but equally they seem to have consulted the 2nd edition as itself a kind of commentary.

In brief, the play is the story of a relationship between two characters, Arghol and Hanp. They live in a wheelwright's yard, Hanp as Arghol's apprentice; but Arghol is no mere workman - he is an intellectual who has been to live in the city, and has returned to his place of origin with an apparent stoic resignation to the repeated beatings he has to endure from his uncle, the wheelwright. The motivation of these beatings is the very fact that Arghol is 'different', and the point that he thus brings the punishment on himself is especially laboured in the 2nd edition. Arghol explains his philosophical position to Hanp at some length, including his reason for not retaliating to his uncle's blows, but the explanation ends in a fight with Hanp which Arghol wins. He then falls asleep and dreams of his life in the city. Hanp meanwhile recovers and, enraged that Arghol has broken his rule of non-violence to defeat his apprentice, (and in the 2nd edition egged on by Hotshepsot, the uncle's daughter, who resents Arghol's indifference to her) he murders the sleeping Arghol (with a knife in Blast, a cleaver in the 2nd edition). Hanp then commits suicide.

Read carefully, most of the obscurity seems to lie simply in the descriptive passages, while the actions, the beating, the talk, the fight, the dream and the murder - suicide, are straightforward enough. The action reads persuasively as allegory: the opposition of mind and body, Genius and the Herd, the individual and the masses. All this fits Lewis's philosophy of the 'twenties, and the Arghol-Hanp partnership is carried on by Pullman and Satterthwaite in The Childermass.

However, such an interpretation ignores Lewis's repeated remark that he did not form this philosophy until after the war.

In particular, in Rude Assignment Lewis gives us specific details of his pre-war philosophy:

"During those days I began to get a philosophy: but not a very good one I am afraid. Like all philosophies it was built up around the will - as primitive houses are built against a hill or propped up upon a bog. As a timely expression of personal impulses it took the form of a reaction against civilised values. It was militantly vitalist." 46

Lewis goes on to explain in some detail the kind of primitive energy which he preferred (through, he says, superstition and arrogance) to so-called 'civilisation'.

"Even books, theoretically, were a bad thing, one was much better without them. Every time men borrowed something from outside they gave away something of themselves, for these acquisitions were artificial aggrandisement of the self, but soon there would be no core left. And it was the core that mattered. Books only muddled the mind: men's minds were much stronger when they only read the Bible."

Lewis claims this theory was probably connected with his personal circumstances - a lack of social ease which resulted in "experience with no natural outlet in conversation collecting in a molten column within. This trop-plein would erupt: that was

my way of expressing myself - with intensity, and with the density of what had been undiluted by ordinary intercourse: a thinning-out which is, of course, essential for protection."

Lewis goes on to indicate that he has abandoned this philosophy:

"The rough set of principles arrived at was not, I have said, a very good philosophy. Deliberately to spend so much time in contact with the crudest life is, I believe, wasteful of life. It seems to involve the error that raw material is alone authentic life. I mistook for "the civilised" the tweed-draped barbaric clown of the golf-links. But, as a philosophy of life, it principally failed in limiting life in a sensational sense. After two or three intermediate stages I reached ultimately an outlook that might be described as almost as formal as this earliest one was the reverse."

But the most interesting point is precisely when he abandoned it. Blast, for example, 'blesses' hairdressers ("He attacks Mother Nature for a small fee"), and Lewis at this time had his hair cut and took to wearing suits<sup>47</sup> - but this penchant for order did not oust the passion for primitive energy - Blast also blesses several boxers.<sup>48</sup> More specifically, while talking about his 'primitive' philosophy Lewis indicates:

"The epigraph at the beginning of my first novel 'Tarr', is an expression of the same mood, which took a long time to evaporate altogether. It is a quotation from Montaigne. 'Que c'est un mol chevet que l'ignorance et l'incuriosite?'" 49

I have been quoting Lewis at some length because the chronology of this philosophical attitude is quite important. As nearly as can be gathered then, Lewis was dedicated to this 'primitive' view while writing the 'Wild Body' stories in Brittany, and

47. Wees. op.cit. p.146

48. Cf. Wees. op.cit. Appendix B.

49. Rude Assignment p.117. Rosenthal translates the French as "Are not ignorance and curiosity a soft pillow?"



divested himself of it after the war. All the evidence of the Blast period indicates that he was at that time in one of the 'intermediate stages' he mentions in the quotation above; for, while much of his theory at this time stresses the need for order and discipline, much of his practice (and as we shall see, some aspects of his theory too) stresses the element of energy, the 'molten column within'.

According to this interpretation we must also consider the fact that the Lewis who revised Enemy of the Stars in 1932 had a somewhat different outlook on life from the Lewis who wrote the play in 1914. Martin Seymour-Smith for example, who attacks Pritchard for his lack of interest in Enemy of the Stars,<sup>50</sup> naturally sees the revision of the play as an attempt by Lewis to bring it more forward into the light, and he speaks in Agenda of "The careful 1932 revision of The Enemy of the Stars..."<sup>51</sup>

How careful this revision was, is open to question, and we have little external evidence on the subject. What there is, however, points towards Lewis finding the task somewhat uncongenial. In a letter to his publishers at the time, he speaks of writing a piece in verse;

"... further stimulated in that direction by the annoyance at having to toe the line marked out for me by this earlier work - and at being forced to operate in a woman's land of my own making between prosody and prose" 52

The earlier work is of course, Enemy of the Stars and though Lewis certainly clarified its meaning in revision he seems to have been careless about at least one detail of the revised text. An errata note in Blast says that the page bearing the legend 'THE PLAY'

50. Seymour-Smith, Martin. "Enemy in our Midst" Spectator 28/3/69. vol.222

51. Seymour-Smith, Martin "W.L. as an Imaginative writer" Agenda. p.12

52. Letters. p.210

appears in the wrong position; yet in the 1932 version he has not bothered to change this, and the legend (now with illustration) appears in the same position. Moreover, and much more significantly, the whole of page 55 in Blast, headed 'ADVERTISEMENT', which describes the scene, the characters and their dress, is omitted in the 1932 version. The problem this creates is that at the bottom of this page we find the line or stage direction "VERY WELL ACTED BY YOU AND ME".

That this line is to be taken seriously and not just for its shock value becomes apparent when Lewis describes the characters:

"Type of characters taken from broad faces where Europe grows arctic, intense, human and universal."

Lest this should jar with the reader as contradicting what has been said, Lewis continues:

"Yet you and me: why not from the English metropolis?"  
- Listen: it is our honeymoon. We go abroad for first scene of our drama. Such a strange thing as our coming together requires a strange place for initial stages of our intimate ceremonious acquaintance."

This 'explanation' is substantially retained in the 1932 version which reads:

"Yet you and me!" I hear you - What of you and me?  
"Why not from the English metropolis?" But in this mad marriage of false minds, is not this a sort of honeymoon..."

I personally find the revised version of this passage inferior, lacking the poetic power of the original, but this is a matter of taste. The point is that there is no reason to provide this 'explanation' in the 1932 version because the line "VERY WELL ACTED BY YOU AND ME" has never been used!

The omission of the ADVERTISEMENT page may of course be a printer's error, but since the pages of a book are neither printed nor bound singly, it seems to me impossible that this should not be

immediately apparent. It is much more likely that Lewis was simply revising a little carelessly, and bearing in mind the letter quoted above, it is possible that Lewis was simply providing the expanded version in response to a demand from his publisher for such a book rather than from any enthusiasm for the play. I would like to argue also that the accompanying essay "The Physics of the Not-Self," which was not written specifically for the book, but was a reprint of a 1925 article<sup>53</sup>, occupies the function of the Notes to T.S. Eliot's Waste Land: it fills up a number of pages but does not tell the whole story.

Certainly the definition of the Not-Self offered in the essay as the disinterested intellect which believes in 'objective truth' and is, therefore, an 'enemy principle' is an interesting one, but it suffers from the principal snag that the Not-Self is never mentioned in the play itself - the interpretation Lewis provides has all the hall-marks of a related but not entirely relevant afterthought.

What the essay does is state the principles of objectivity which Lewis claimed to adhere to as an artist and philosopher, and oppose them to the philosophy of the Self, which is stigmatised as egoism. The Not-Self is stationed at the centre of the intellect and operates in detachment - is therefore directly opposed to the self, which is a product of the will and totally subjective. This opposition of will and intellect is interesting - but we should not forget that in our examination of Lewis's philosophy in 1914 we said that Lewis's philosophy was still to some extent, in his own words, "built up around the will."

53. In "The Chapbook" (a Yearly Miscellany), Ed. Harold Munro Jonathan Cape No. 40, pp68-77

Critics have, I think, been too eager to take up the condemnation of the Self in Enemy of the Stars, demonstrating that by 'Self' Lewis means "the accumulated effects of the environment on the individual."<sup>54</sup> There is a convenient quote to illustrate this:

"Men have a loathsome deformity called Self: affliction got through indiscriminate rubbing against their fellows: Social excrescence.

Their being is regulated by exigencies of this affliction. Only one operation can cure it: the suicide's knife....

I have smashed it against me but it still writhes, turbulent mess."

This is spoken by Arghol, but we are specifically told he is speaking in "egotistic self-castigation", which may well undercut the value of what he has to say. In any case Arghol has already made some pronouncements on 'Self' earlier in the play explaining why he is persecuted:

"Self, sacred act of violence, is like murder on my face and hands. The stain won't come out. It is the one piece of property all communities have agreed it is illegal to possess. The sweetest tempered person, once he discovers you are that sort of criminal, changes any opinion of you, and is on his guard. When mankind cannot overcome a personality, it has an immemorial way out of the difficulty. It becomes it. It imitates and assimilates that Ego until it is no longer one. This is success.

Between Personality and Mankind it is always a question of dog and cat; they are diametrically opposed species. Self is the race that lost. But Mankind still suspects Egotistic plots, and hunts Pretenders."

In Lewisian terms, this is unqualified praise for the Self - though Self here does not appear to mean quite what it means a few pages later - in fact it seems to mean the opposite!

54. Wees. op.cit. p.184

The issue is further complicated by the fact that when Lewis opposes the Not-Self to the Self in his later essay he means Self (social excrescence) bad; Not-Self (intellect) good; while in the Blast Version he seems to mean Self (social excrescence) bad, Self (individual ego) good. Unfortunately by 1932 he is opposing the Not-Self (intellect) to the 'subjective' philosophies of the will: "The Self is the principle of force and fraud." (54) In other words, though the issue may seem obscure, Lewis's positive value of 1914 is his negative one of 1932.

The Individual of 1914 is the individual of the primitive will, the wild body, mentioned in Lewis's explanation of his early philosophy. In Enemy of the Stars, Arghol is this Individual and in accord with Lewis's 'uncivilised' philosophy he rejects books as "all parasites."

While Lewis does not change the events of the play in the 1932 version, he contrives by his accompanying essay to create the impression that the Individual is in fact the representative of the intellect, and he moves his previous, 'primitive' philosophy into the camp of Humanity and its subjectivity.

It will be apparent from this that I believe that the essay "The Physics of the Not-Self" only succeeds in confusing the meaning of the play; it tells us what Lewis now believes; it does not tell us about the play.

However, to return to the play itself, even without the importation of ideas from the appended essay, there are clear contradictions within the text itself, stemming from the two meanings of the word Self. I believe that this contradiction is inherent in the whole idea of the play, both deliberate and fruitful. Clearly Lewis is talking about the real Self (individual) and the

false Self (extraneous influences built up like stalagmites on the real Self), but he does not distinguish them by separate names because a certain amount of confusion inevitably exists between them - that is largely the point.

Arghol is an Egotist: "too vain to do harm, too superb ever to lift a finger when harmed." Action of any kind is beneath him, even movement from his place of birth seems unnecessary violence: "a man with headache lies in deliberate leaden inanimation." Life is a "grotesque degradation" and "Anything but yourself is dirt." Much of this could be used directly by Samuel Beckett (whose play Waiting for Godot is brought to mind) - and the question to ask Beckett is "With this world-view why do you bother to write, to try to create or express meaning?" Hanp, with the instinct of antagonism asks the crucial question:

"Why do you talk to me I should like to know?"

Arghol answers that it is because of his "social excrescence", the element of socialisation which he cannot get rid of. The implications of this grow in his mind and unsettle his indifference:

"Why do I speak to you?"

It's not to you but to myself. I think it's a physical matter: simply to use one's mouth....

I am amazed to find you are like me.

I talk to you for an hour and get more disgusted with myself.

I find I wanted to make a naïf yapping poodle-Parasite of you. I shall always be a prostitute.

I wanted to make you myself; you understand?

Every man who wants to make another HIMSELF, is seeking a companion for his detached ailment of a self.

You are an unclean little beast, crept gloomily out of my ego. You are the world, brother, with its family objections to me."

This realization results in Arghol dismissing Hanp, even offering him money, as he insultingly tells him to get out. Hanp, not surprisingly,

resents this and reacts violently, precipitating a fight - which Arghol wins.

The crux of the play is contained in this conversation and, in a sense, dramatically enacted in the fight.

For the extent to which Arghol and Hanp are the same person is what Arghol comes to realize. In his attempts to deny this he first tries to dismiss Hanp and then fights with him. During the fight however, their union is emphasised even more strongly:

"The attacker rushed in drunk with blows. They rolled, swift jagged rut, into one corner of shed: large insect scuttling roughly to hiding.

Stopped astonished."

Astonished presumably at finding themselves acting as one unit - an image also to be found in Lewis's 1914 'combat' drawings<sup>55</sup>, and used again many years later in an anti-war design of 1937 which shows Communism and Nazism as aspects of the same warring beast.<sup>56</sup>

This 'togetherness' is thematic throughout the play and is carried not just by the dialogue and action but also by much of the play's cryptic imagery - the idea of the honeymoon, with its intimacy; the kiss Arghol gives Hanp; the description of the yard:

"Rough Eden of one soul, to whom another man, and not EVE would be mated."

The imagery even provides part of the motive for the murder, for Hanp finds in Arghol a reminder of his hateful mother.

"How disgusting she was, his own flesh. Ah! That was the sensation! Arghol, similarly disgusted through this family feeling, his own flesh: though he was not any relation."

And if the idea of their close relationship disgusts Hanp, how much more it disgusts Arghol, whose whole world-philosophy is based upon his separateness and isolation.

55. Cf. Michel op.cit. p.53 and plate 25

56. Michel op. cit. p.123

This sequence - Arghol rejecting Humanity and its demands on him, yet coming to recognise that no such rejection is possible - is repeated in the dream, which we are told:

"...began valuing, with its tentative symbols, preceding events."

The scene is Arghol's room in the city, the symbolic scene of all he has rejected, disillusioned. Its untidiness of books and pictures is an

"Appalling tabernacle of Self and Unbelief."

The books of course, are "all parasites" because as Lewis explained forty years later in Rude Assignment (see quote above) they are artificial aggrandisement of the self and destroy the core of the personality.

One of the books in this room is mentioned by name, and its peculiar interest will divert us for a moment from the pursuit of our theme. The book is "Einige und Sein Eigenkeit" (or the Ego and its own) by Max Stirner, a book only slightly better known then than it is now, although it had enjoyed a vogue in Germany around the turn of the century - when Lewis was there. Stirner himself appears in the play, but he seems to Arghol a kind of alter-ego of Hanp, and they quarrel in an exact repetition of his quarrel with Hanp.

Lewis's attitude to Stirner would thus appear to be hostile, and this impression is reinforced in the expanded 1932 version of this scene where Arghol calls Stirner:

"That bad offshoot of the master of Marx in his prime" (38)

This is misleading for (while the master of Marx is presumably Hegel) it appears to place Stirner as a Marxist, and Lewis must have known this was not the case. Stirner and Marx were, in fact, violently opposed to one another and Marx devoted hundreds



of pages of The German Ideology to refuting Stirner's arguments<sup>57</sup>.

Stirner's book is in fact a remarkably powerful statement of the arrogant integrity of the individual, and is unmistakably anarchist, embodying a triumphant egoism with which Lewis, or at least Arghol, must have been in some sympathy. Only one critic has even mentioned Stirner in connection with Lewis,<sup>58</sup> and he manages to pretend that Stirner's appearance in the play can be easily integrated into Lewis's philosophy of this time.

However, this fails to take into account the fact that Arghol throws the book out of the window and fights with Stirner when he returns it.

It is indeed curious that this opposition between Stirner and Arghol-Lewis should exist. Consider the following quotes:

"the man whose theories were to make a tabula rasa of civilisation..... starved because of his pride....(he) hated the word Equality; he knew it was a lie, knew that all men are born unequal, as no two grains of sand on earth ever are or ever will be alike..... He preferred personal insurrection to general revolution; the latter he asserted, brought in its train either socialism or a tyrant...(he) calls us all hypocrites 'who self-illuded believe yourself to be disinterested'... Humanity, he says, has become the Moloch today to which everything is sacrificed.... Humanity is a convenient fiction to harry the ego."

Every word of this could be written about Lewis, indeed it is almost a paraphrase of what has been written about Lewis, but it was actually written about Max Stirner, and Lewis may well have read it. The quotations are taken from a book by James Huneker, called "The Egoists" first published in America in 1909<sup>59</sup>. Huneker was a friend of John Quinn the art collector, and as such was known

57. Bits of this appeared in 1903, though the full text was not published until 1938 and the English translation of that year omitted the attack on "The Ego and its own" Nevertheless merely by reading Stirner's text Lewis must have known it was not Marxist.

58. Wees. op.cit. p.185

59. Quoted from Essays of James Huneker. ed. by H.L. Mencken T. Werner Laurie. London 1930, pp. 328-333

to Ezra Pound. He thought that Quinn was too much under Pound's influence and warned Quinn against being lumbered with too much modern junk - almost certainly a reference to the Vorticist paintings which Pound was pressing on Quinn! <sup>60</sup>

It may well be, though I have no evidence for the supposition, that Pound introduced Lewis to Huneker's book shortly after he arrived in England. Certainly we should bear in mind not only that the subject matter would have interested Lewis (the book contained an essay on Nietzsche as well as Stirner and others) but that it was under Pound's influence that the New Free-woman was renamed The Egoist - and published Tarr!

In any case Huneker's work was the only essay in English on Stirner available at that time so, if Lewis was interested in Stirner he almost certainly would have heard of Huneker's book. He would have learnt there, or from French or German sources, that Stirner's real name was Schmidt and that he was brought up by his uncle. This may be the reason that Arghol lives with his uncle, whom he appears at one point to call Smith (the 1932 edition obscures this point).

The nickname 'Stirner' seems to have derived from his high forehead (Stirn - forehead) but may also, it has been suggested,<sup>61</sup> have suggested to the young Schmidt a romantic allusion (Gestirn - star)!

If this is so, and if Lewis knew about it, then Stirner's appearance in the play is certainly (as Joyce put it) "to the irony of the Stars."

60. Letters of James Huneker.....

61. Stirner Max. "The Ego and his Own" Ed. John Carroll, J. Cape. 1971

All this however simply makes it more obscure why Arghol should fight with Stirner when he appears. All of Stirner's philosophy is aimed at throwing off the false self imposed by Society, and reaffirming the true and independent self, yet Arghol sees him as a Hanp-figure and rejects him violently.

The only plausible explanation for this lies, I believe, in the contradictions which are at the centre of the play and which are further explored in Tarr. Lewis's mind was full of 'fruitful' contradictions at this time: the still centre and the whirling cone; the insistence on the dead quality of art and on the sloppiness of 'life', hand-in-hand with a criticism of Picasso for the dead static quality of his art, his use of 'nature-mortes' and general lack of vitality. The contradictions were, I have already claimed, at the heart of Vorticism. They attained perhaps their highest conscious expression in 1917 with the publication of "Cattleman's Springmate," where the egotistic hero who tries to cheat nature succeeds only in cheating himself, and they undoubtedly continued to occupy Lewis for many years.

In the Stirner incident I think we see yet another aspect of the contradictions from which Lewis produced such art:

Arghol comes face to face with the man who most nearly shares his ideas, the man from whom Arghol's ideas are probably derived. Yet because this man, through his book, is trying to influence Arghol, and therefore dilute his sacred self, he becomes another Hanp - anything but yourself is dirt.

The real problem however, to return to the main theme of the play, is deciding what is self and what is dirt.

How can a man discriminate between which thought, idea, self is his own, and which is derived from someone else?

In the dream Arghol plunges around throwing off his 'social' self. He goes up to a friend and asks to make his acquaintance, becoming enraged at the friend's smug certainty that they are already acquainted. Arghol sees another man, within the social self of his friend "imprisoned, with intolerable need of recognition." The real problem however, lies in how to separate the two:

"He was not sure, if they had been separated surgically, in which self life would have gone out and in which remain."

This is the crux of the problem but Arghol brushes it aside: "He repudiated Arghol nevertheless." He finds himself alone in the cafe - his erstwhile friends watching him as an alien (Stirner's experience with his friends, incidentally) and regarding him as mad. He returns to the wheelwright's yard.

The ending of the dream is unsatisfactory in artistic terms, because it solves the problem, or at least resolves it, too glibly, without giving the reader the kind of cathartic experience that the resolution would seem to demand:

"Suddenly, through confused struggles and vague successions of scenes, a new state of mind asserted itself.

A riddle had been solved.

What could this be?

He was Arghol once more.

Was that a key to something? He was simply Arghol.

"I am Arghol".

He repeated his name - like sinister word invented to launch a new soap in gigantic advertisement - toilet necessity, he, to scrub the soul.

He had ventured in his solitude and failed. Arghol he had imagined left in the city. - Suddenly he had discovered Arghol who had followed him, in Hanp. Always à deux! "

Is this a key to something? Has a riddle been solved? Arghol has discovered the tragedy of warring traits being married together in man. He recognizes these traits are inseparable, and he does not relish the recognition - his newly accepted social self is 'a sinister word' - there is no real sense of having come to terms with it.

Of course there is no reason why there should be. This was a problem that Lewis was to worry at for many years. It is present in the fight between Pullmann and Satters in The Childermass where Pullman knocks Satters senseless and abandons him - but returns to drag him to shelter and revive him - emphasising that his need of Satters is as great as the other's need of him. It is present also in the tension between the intellect and the body which so tortures Rene Harding and makes him "Self Condemned" - a carefully chosen title. Refusal to deal with 'the parasites' leads to the dissolution of his core - terms, which in spite of my arguments about change and progress in Lewis's work, fit exactly across forty years of his art. Even Lewis's last novel, The Red Priest, embodies this idea in a warlike clergyman.

My argument is that some kind of impression of a resolution is contrived at the end of Arghol's dream which does not in fact exist - because Lewis had not resolved the problem for himself. The other half of the story, the attraction and loathing which Hanp feels simultaneously for Arghol is more convincingly accomplished, because it was something which Lewis understood, and was fascinated by, from very early on.

Hanp hates Arghol's superiority which he expresses to himself as self-indulgence and self-centredness - interesting terms.

He is especially enraged that with this lofty superiority Arghol combines physical vulgarity - he won the fight and now he lies snoring. Almost hysterical, he stabs Arghol, relieving his hatred immediately:

"There was only flesh there, and all our flesh is the same. Something distant, terrible and eccentric, bathing in that milky snore, had been struck and banished from matter."

But as the hatred ebbs, despair flows. Hanp needs Arghol, however much he might hate him. If he resents Arghol's mental energy, he also feeds on it. Without him he is nothing. He commits suicide.

I return to my original point. The conflict between Arghol and Hanp can be seen as representing the conflict between genius and the herd, but it is perhaps more relevant in the context of Lewis's preoccupations at this time to see it as the conflict between the mind and the body, the individual ego and man's social needs. Containing the germ of Lewis's later politics, this is not in itself political and can do more to help us understand Tarr, than can a reading of Enemy of the Stars based on the philosophy evolved by Lewis in the twenties.

CHAPTER 3 : TARR.

There are four separate versions of Tarr, the first was that serialised in The Egoist - beginning on April 1st 1916 (April Fool's day!). The second was the book form of the novel which was issued by the Egoist press in 1918, and which contained only minor corrections and the addition of some passages omitted in the serialization. The third is the American edition of the novel which was published by Alfred Knopf more or less simultaneously with the 1918 Egoist edition. It is not generally recognised that there are any differences between the 1st British and American editions - in fact no one has commented on it, presumably because there is no reason why anyone should read both editions. There is however one strange difference, and one which is emphasised by the fact that Lewis's major critics, Kenner, Wagner, and Pritchard are all American and quote from the American edition.

Neither the Egoist serialisation nor their subsequent book has the idiosyncratic punctuation, the "=" sign, which is in Knopf's edition. Kenner calls this punctuation "yet another device to keep the prose from flowing<sup>al</sup>" but if it is as deliberate as this it is surely curious that Lewis allowed it to be omitted from the English versions. Lewis's letters of the period 1916-17 are full of examples of his apparently random use of this "=" sign, whereafter it fades away, but the fact that he seems to use it in place of a straightforward "-" gives rise to the thought that it may simply have been a habit of his holograph style at this time (or possibly a result of using a typewriter with no "-" key!) and not meant to have any special significance.

1. Kenner, H. "Wyndham Lewis" Methuen 1954, p.30.



Certainly its inclusion makes a considerable difference to the appearance of an otherwise fairly normal text without changing the meaning at all.

The fourth version and its differences from the others is the matter with which we shall concern ourselves most.

In 1928 Chatto & Windus published another edition of Tarr, and in the preface Lewis confesses that owing to his dissatisfaction with the form and style of the original edition he has thoroughly revised the text to give it "everywhere a greater precision". Lewis repeated his remarks about this lack of precision in the first version, in Blasting and Bombardiering

"I did not carry through the piece of work as well as I should. I was hurried.... Since I have had to rewrite every line of it." (86)

And he apparently spent some time on this rewriting:

"Merely rewriting 'Tarr', I recall, took longer than it did to write a book named 'The Diabolical Principle'<sup>2</sup>.

Though his dissatisfaction was doubtless real enough, Lewis would seem to have exaggerated the hurriedness with which he wrote Tarr. Certainly he was ill at the beginning of the war and anxious to complete the novel before he enlisted, but it is clear from the letters that he had been writing and rewriting versions of the novel for several years before the War, and Ezra Pound even goes so far as to confidently assert that the novel was finished before the war began - though admittedly this is an attempt to clear Lewis of the charge of war propaganda in his depiction of Kreisler.

2. Lewis. "Rude Assignment" p.196

3. Pound, E. "Literary Essays of Ezra Pound" Faber 1954 p.430

However this may be, the central question is whether or not the revised version constitutes an improvement, Lewis certainly believed it did, Hugh Kenner, his most pioneering critic, on the other hand, thinks that the smoothing out of the prose brings with it a weakening of its impact:

"...in the process of firming up the narrative, Lewis has inadvertently wafted much of the magic away. Not content with correcting a number of outright and annoying ambiguities, he has fussed in almost every sentence with locutions, which however reprehensible in detail, signify less when brushed off for the market than when streaked with the loss of the unconscious from which they were so hastily gathered,"<sup>4</sup>

and he quotes several passages in support. William Pritchard, however, though not over-prone to disagree with Kenner makes:

"the case for treating the revised text as superior."  
by quoting two versions of one passage and commenting:

"The revised passage is less abrupt and its rhythm more satisfying....he has become the novelist rather than the abstractist innovator in prose." 5

These statements, it will be noticed, are not incompatible, they simply represent different views of what is valuable in the novel, and perhaps in Lewis as a writer.

Ezra Pound, in his review of the novel, compared it in importance with James Joyce's 'Portrait of the Artist' but emphasised that while Joyce's book was "a triumph of actual writing", Lewis' was faultily written but was "the percussions of a highly energised mind",<sup>6</sup> thus making it clear what he valued in Lewis's writing. That Lewis later felt it so essential that he should revise the novel indicates perhaps that his own values as a writer had changed.

4. Kenner. op.cit. p.30-7

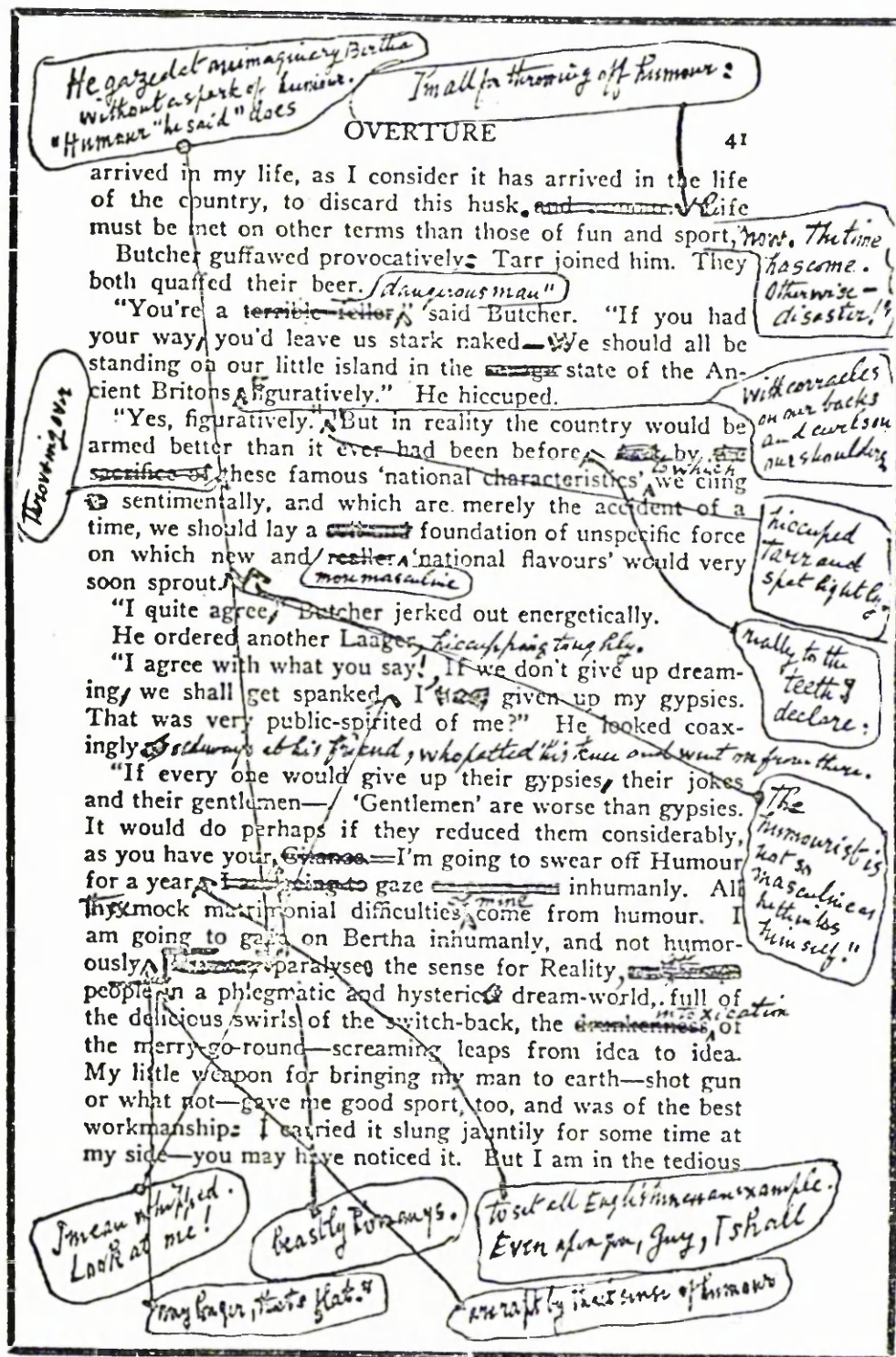
5. Pritchard, W. "Wyndham Lewis" Twayne. 1968 p.29-30

6. Pound. op.cit. p.425

# TARR. A novel by Wyndham Lewis.

Phoenix Library. Chatto & Windus. 3/6.

Entirely rewritten for new edition.



A specimen of the MSS. of the revised "Tarr."

In fact, however, Lewis himself tends to overstate the extent to which he has rewritten the novel. He has not "rewritten every line" or anything approaching it. Whole pages of the text were reprinted virtually untouched while many other changes were of the most fiddling and unimportant kind - similar to many of those which Lewis made between publishing bits of The Apes of God in Criterion and republishing them in the novel several years later.

The page from the Enemy No. 3 which precedes this page, reproduces a 'specimen of the Mss. of the revised Tarr' as an advertisement - presumably to emphasise how heavily revised the novel was.

While it is a fairly heavily revised page, its revisions are in many ways typical and give a reasonable idea of the thinking behind many of the changes. As many of the changes are directed at characterization, as at faulty style. Butcher calls Tarr a 'dangerous man' instead of a 'terrible feller', which alters slightly our impression of Butcher. National flavours are now 'more masculine', rather than 'realler', which is more precise and helps to reinforce a theme of masculinity in the novel. After "If we don't give up dreaming we shall get spanked", Lewis has added "I mean whipped. Look at me!" for no apparent reason - until we remember that Tarr is later faced with the prospect of being whipped by Kreisler.

There are more 'hiccups' in the scene - which makes it more a comic drinking scene, and the insertion before the word "paralyse" of the sentence; "He gazed at an imaginary Bertha without a spark of humour" (which is given a paragraph to itself in the printed version thereby gaining emphasis) is an example of Lewis withdrawing himself from Tarr a little (the identification of Lewis with Tarr is one of the problems of the novel), and objectifying

Tarr for the reader, enabling him to see the comic aspect of some of Tarr's pronouncements rather than simply accepting them literally.

I myself prefer the revised edition - but not for the minutiae of the revision where both gains and losses can easily be counted, but for the substantial additions which Lewis has made to certain scenes, considerably improving their effectiveness.

None of these alter the basic plot:

Tarr is an English artist working in Paris, bursting with art-theories and uneasily nursing an intermittent engagement to a German art-student, Bertha Lunken. His 'opposite number', who as Lewis himself acknowledged, dominates the novel, is Kreisler, a rather neurasthenic German art-student of the most amateurish type, who at the age of thirty-six and facing the cessation of his private allowance, determines to commit suicide rather than return to Germany and take a job.

The initial link between them is yet another German art-student, Anastasya Vazek, a self-confident young woman, amply blessed with intelligence and massively endowed with sexuality.

The plot revolves around the inter-action of these four characters: Tarr attempts to disengage himself (in both senses of the word) from Bertha while Kreisler incoherently pursues Anastasya. In the process a strange relationship forms itself between Kreisler and Bertha, eventually consummated by a rape, and Tarr, in his own ponderous intellectual fashion, takes up with Anastasya.

Kreisler's suicide is encompassed in a most dramatic manner: he kills a fancied rival for Anastasya in a vicious travesty of what would have been at best a whimsical duel; flees mechanically towards the German border, surrenders to the police, and hangs

himself in his cell. Tarr lives openly with Anastasya - but marries Bertha (now pregnant by Kreisler), oscillating permanently between 'swagger' and 'lumpen' sex.

The additions referred to above do not substantially change any of this, they merely add refinements. For example; in the opening scenes Tarr meets three separate friends on the way to see Bertha and delivers diatribes on art and sex to two of them. In the revised version, the first of these, Hobson, very much Tarr's butt, is given more lines - in order to break up Tarr's rhetoric and make Hobson seem more real. Solyk, the rival whom Kreisler kills, is also assigned a more definite role in the revision - he acts as an agent for selling Anastasya's jewellery - thus justifying his otherwise obscure relationship with her, and also enabling him to turn up for the duel in his new car.

Both of the major sex scenes in the novel are considerably revised and in both cases made more erotic. The first is the scene where Kreisler rapes Bertha (to which, basically, Bertha's breasts are added) and the second is the scene leading up to Tarr and Anastasya going to bed for the first time (to which, among many other changes, Anastasya's breasts are added.).

Perhaps the most successful addition, and the one which can be most convincingly ascribed to a maturity of technique in the later Lewis, is in the cafe scene where the details of the duel are arranged. The duel itself is one of the most successful passages in the novel and Lewis here improves the build-up to it with the development of a character who is only embryonic in the first version - Jan Pochinsky. In the first version this character is called Stephen Staretsky and he acts as the message-boy who arranges the details of the duel - a duel which an enraged

Soltyk actually wants to fight. In the second edition Jan is a much more positively malevolent character with obscure but definitely evil motives, who, in the manner in which he undertakes his negotiations, helps the fight to become a serious possibility.

In the first edition he actively - even passionately - tries to dissuade Soltyk from fighting, but in the second edition this part is assigned to a friend of Soltyk's called Peter Orlinsky, freeing Pochinsky for his more diabolical role. Again, in the second edition Soltyk is much more reluctant to accept Kreisler's challenge, and regards himself as rather betrayed by Pochinsky in the negotiations. This development of the character of Pochinsky/Starevsky is continued into the duel itself, where, while going through the form of trying to cancel the duel, Pochinsky positively enjoys the whole performance. All-in-all Pochinsky's development constitutes a definite improvement on the 1st edition.

Furthermore, we should not leave the subject of Lewis's alterations in the second edition without considering the omissions as well as the additions. The best example here is the scene where Kreisler produces a whip and brandishes it in the air to drive Tarr from his room. I shall say more about this scene below but the main point here is that although the scene was regarded as a success in its original form (cf. the review by Eliot considered below) Lewis has shortened and tidied it considerably, allowing the action to do more of the work. Some of the lines missed out such as:

"There was the ostentatious coolness of the music-hall comedian" (234, 1st ed.)

are actually a positive contribution to the theme of the novel and the reader might miss their inclusion, but Lewis clearly felt the passage was too heavy, and in general the shortening is an improve-

ment.

Contenting ourselves, therefore, with the second edition, let us turn our attention to some of the other questions raised by the novel. The most obvious of these is the identification of Lewis with his principal hero, Tarr. Certainly the prologue Lewis added to the first edition tends to encourage this identification - at least as far as most of Tarr's art-philosophy goes. "His message" says Lewis, "is the message of a figure of health" (p.xi. 1st ed.) and it is perhaps significant that this prologue was dropped in the second edition (along with some anti-German remarks which Lewis had also appended).

There is, too, the question of Tarr's appearance. Many years later, in Aude Assignment, Lewis acknowledged:

"In the physical description of the young Englishman, Tarr, may be seen a caricatural self-portrait of sorts, though not of course in his character or behaviour. The glasses worn by Tarr did not occur in my own case at that age; but I sat for some of the merely visual attributes..." (RA.151)

One could go further than this, in spite of Lewis's denial's about character and indicate that Lewis's own remarks about his youthful shyness, which are discussed earlier, accord very well with his description of Tarr; he shared Tarr's liking for wildness, while denying it is Rousseauism; and his description of Tarr:

"...he had no social machinery at all at his disposal and was compelled to get along as well as he could with the cumbrous one of the intellect. With this he danced about it is true: but it was full of sinister piston-rods, organ-like shapes, heavy drills. When he tried to be amiable he usually only succeeded in being portentous"(11)

could quite easily double as a description of the young "Wild Body" Lewis.



It is, however, only to be expected that a first novel - even as accomplished and confident a first novel as this one - will contain an autobiographical element, and indeed this element extends beyond Tarr himself. The name Guy Butcher, for example, is obviously a joke, playing on Lewis's friend and fellow-lodger in Percy Street at this time, Guy Baker; while Butcher's fondness for gypsies is probably derived from another old friend of Lewis', Augustus John. Moreover Bertha's repeated remark that she is "a bout de force" is taken from Madame Strindberg, who ran The Cave of the Golden Calf - a cafe in London frequented by the Vorticists and decorated by Lewis - and whom Lewis remembered as repeating this remark.<sup>7</sup>

While such details are interesting, it seems to me to be more important to look at the portrayal of Tarr in the novel itself and decide on his character from there, rather than import our idea of him from what we know of Lewis and his philosophy at this time. For I believe that if we do this we will find that there is an edge of satire surrounding and directed at Tarr, which casts doubt on his whole approach to life. Self-satire on Lewis's part it may be, and only partially worked out, but it is definitely there, and is best regarded, I believe, as yet another stage in Lewis's exploration of the limitations of the intellect discussed in relation to Enemy of the Stars.

The satire of Tarr takes innumerable small forms - from his linguistic habits - we are told that he would "repeat sotto voce one of his own sentences" (14), and that he did not argue, only "repeated things arbitrarily" (15), to his appearance - while he is inveighing against Hobson's style of dress we are told:

7. Lewis. Rude Assignment p.124

"Tarr's white collar shone dazzlingly in the sun.  
His bowler hat bobbed, striking out clean lines  
in space as he spoke." (24)

And there is surely an element of satire in the careful  
detail of Tarr having to adjust his glasses after kissing Anastasya(277)

There is satire too, of his intellectual pretensions, shown in  
his idea of himself as the Pasha (page 48) and in his courtship of  
Anastasya where, while both of them really want to return to his  
flat and make love, Tarr almost ruins the whole relationship by  
becoming drunk and more and more bellicose about his philosophy of art.

We have already been told that Tarr's:

"...intellect had conspired to the effect that his senses  
should never be awakened..."by sex (192),

and in order to begin making love to Anastasya, he has to make use  
of his intellect:

"The backwardness of his senses was causing him some  
anxiety: his intellect now stepped in, determined  
to do their business for them." (270)

Thereafter when his senses do flare up his intellect objects:

"...his senses indeed had flared up in such a way that the  
reason had been offended and exercised some check at last.  
Hence a conflict: they were not going to have the credit-!(271)

But his intellect and his art-theories lead him to an expensive  
meal, a drunken quarrel and a breach with his lover. Were it not  
for Anastasya's much more direct woman's wiles - stealing his key  
and waiting naked in his flat for his return, allowing sex to take  
over - Tarr's intellect would leave him with nothing but a hangover.

The satire is at its more effective, however, when it is dealing  
with Tarr's ideas on humour, in theory and practice.

Certainly, in the prologue to the first edition Lewis associated  
himself with all that Tarr said on the subject of humour, but the  
point is that what Tarr says and what Tarr does are two different  
things - and herein lies the satire.

Accepting Tarr's theories and actions as consistent can lead to some strange contortions. Chapman, for example, in order to reconcile Tarr's diatribe against humour with Lewis's obviously comic vision, differentiates between different kinds of humour; quoting some of Tarr's attack, 'swearing off humour' he continues:

"This concept of humour is far removed from the mind-sneezing "bark of delight" with which Kerr-Orr greeted absurdity. His philosophy of laughter was not an evasion, but rather a recognition of a more profound reality: he glimpsed the depths of the abyss and saw "the grin upon the Deathshead" to which the natural reaction is a convulsive spasm of the intellect.....

At this level, "laughter" is the most fundamental of all philosophical statements, and totally removed from the peculiarly English stiff-upper-lip, grin-and-bear-it attitude, which Tarr terms "humour"" 8

Again, there is some justification for this distinction in Lewis's own work - in Blast No.1 he Blasts Humour "quack English drug for stupidity and sleepiness. Arch enemy of REAL..." and shortly afterwards Blesses it:

"It is the great barbarous weapon of the genius among races." Moreover, in Blasting and Bombardiering he draws attention to precisely this contradiction and 'explains' it:

"An example of English 'fairness'!" (38)

The point presumably is that Humour is capable of being both a drug and weapon, and we can accept this easily enough. What is more difficult to swallow is the idea that this distinction is operating in Tarr. For much of the point of the novel is that though Tarr 'swears off' humour, he never actually succeeds in giving it up - and Tarr's brand of humour is not of the 'grin-and-bear-it' type, but rather is, or is meant to be, "a recognition of a more profound reality".

The trouble is that recognising this more profound reality often paralyzes Tarr's capacity for action on a level which the rest of the world will recognise.

, It is the failure to recognise this which lead Chapman into absurdities:

"Once Tarr decides to replace humour with "indifference" his affairs with Bertha take on the simple inevitability of a syllogism. The insidious "lymphatic" attraction that Bertha had for him - suggesting a strangling biological grasp - is rationalised out of existence. In the light of reason all Tarr's difficulties vanish; the clear-cut lines of logical propositions with their neat Q.E.D.s cut through the slop and romance of his relationship." 9

This, of course, is precisely what does not happen! Tarr's much-vaunted "indifference" - "this famous feeling of indifference" does not last five minutes in Bertha's presence; instead Tarr 'backslides' into humour, has "an access of stupid brief and blatant laughter" (61) and leaves, having resolved nothing.

Chapman sees a clear structure in Tarr's actions - hence the idea of the syllogism in the quotation above - and he believes Tarr's ideas are logically followed through:

"The novel opens with Tarr meeting Hobson and talking; meeting Butcher and talking; seeking out Lowndes and talking. Gradually formulating his decision to leave, he finally delivers his ultimatum to Bertha. The whole process is diagrammatically structured in clear hard-edged lines." 10

"Hard-edged lines": the carry-over from Vorticism is clear - but it is not accurate. However energetically Tarr throws himself about, his resolutions are far from clear-cut. His 'programme' for that particular day' is not to go near Bertha (40), in fact he is on his way to look for a new studio, and his progress is far from direct. He lingers outside a florist's:

9. Ibid. p.71

10. Ibid. p.72

"He hung on in front of this shop before pushing off as a swimmer clings to a rock, waving his legs." (39)

Eventually Tarr decides to go and see Bertha because, in his intellectual pride, he feels it is absurdly easy not to go to see her! - a pattern of thought in which Tarr repeatedly indulges. Moreover, having arrived at Bertha's, Tarr's resolution disappears completely - not only on this occasion, but throughout the novel. In fact, even without any other evidence, Tarr's failure to deal with Bertha would be enough to make him a comic figure. Consider. In his efforts to sever relations with Bertha, Tarr proposes a complete separation. Bertha agrees. However, because of his humour, because of his "recognition of a more profound reality", Tarr is helpless in the face of her acquiescence, recognising in it Bertha's feminine, clinging wiles. Twice he sends her letters telling her he is leaving Paris. On neither occasion does he do so, fooling himself into thinking that it is so easy for him to stay away from Bertha that a mere move across the city will suffice to keep them apart. Finally, Tarr himself recognises what Chapman does not: that he never meant to leave Bertha at all: "He had just been playing"(288). All his rationalisations have been mere sops to his idea of himself; his course of aversion therapy, and his role of chaperone to Kreisler and Bertha have merely been means of concealing from himself his inability to leave.

And having decided that, having finally decided that he will leave Bertha, what does this logical character, this "thing that will succeed the Superman"(288) do? - He marries Bertha! For all his intellect, Bertha outsmarts him. Only after he has solved the problem of his engagement, by marrying her, is Tarr able to disengage himself from Bertha, and then only temporarily.

for, it is made clear, another Bertha looms in Tarr's future. And so on. At least Tarr's senses recognise his weakness as they assault his decision to marry:

"Dirty practical joker, dirty intellect...." (292)

The truth is that Tarr never manages to renounce his humorous view of the world, and worse, his humour has very definite limitations. These limitations stem from the way in which Tarr side-steps the issue of applying his own standard to himself. This issue is first raised by Hobson at the beginning of the novel when Tarr is attacking Hobson as a parasitical spectator:

"The right to see implies the right to be seen.....  
you must offer your own guts, such as they are - !" (22)

Hobson makes the natural response that this is a case of the pot calling the kettle black, but Tarr simply brushes this aside.

The point is a valid one, however, and where humour is concerned Tarr has one weakness which is immediately apparent - he does not like being laughed at; Tarr's sense of humour is all one way. We get an early example of this, when Butcher laughs at Tarr and stops the flow of rhetoric in its tracks:

"Butcher filled his pipe, then he began laughing. He gave high-pitched crackling laughs, throwing his head backwards and forwards, until Tarr stopped him.

"What are you laughing at?"

"You are a bum! Ha! ha! ha!"

"How am I a bum, Butcher! Ever since you've worn that pullover you've employed that jargon."

Butcher composed himself theatrically.

"I had to laugh! You repent of your thoughtlessness: your next step is to put things right. - I was laughing at the way you go about it. Ha! ha! ha! I like the way you - ! Kindly but firmly you set out to break off your engagement and discard the girl: that is very neat. Yes. Ha! ha! ha!

"Do you think so? Well it may be a trifle overtidy: I hadn't looked at it from that side." " (34)

This is a very different Tarr - alarmed that he is doing something laughable, fastidiously concerned that his actions are overtly - he suddenly discovers the time: he must leave!

There is a similar incident later in the novel when Tarr seeks Kreisler out in the Cafe des Sports Aquatiques, expecting to provoke a quarrel. When he sits down at Kreisler's table he notices a group of Poles who are looking in his direction and seem to be rather amused. Immediately he assumes that they are laughing at him. He flushes and feels much more like picking a quarrel with them than with his intended adversary, Kreisler. It is, of course, Kreisler whom they are laughing at, and Tarr does not even know them - but clearly the idea that he may be being laughed at is enough to enrage him.

The most significant incident pointing the limitations in Tarr's humour is the scene in which Kreisler threatens Tarr with a whip. Tarr has been treating Kreisler as a fool, chaperoning his relationship with Bertha, even though he has ostentatiously given up his own claims to her, and unwittingly enraging the German still further by courting Anastasya.

Treating Kreisler as a tame pet, Tarr goes uninvited to his apartment and encounters an unexpectedly aggressive Otto.

When Kreisler orders him out Tarr starts to go, albeit reluctantly, painfully aware of his position as intruder.

However, as he goes to the door Kreisler produces a whip, which he cracks in Tarr's face before slamming the door.

Tarr now feels humiliated: he appears to have fled in the face of Kreisler's aggression, and his pride is badly dented. Typically he begins his self-analysis:

"There was something mean and improper in everything he had done, which he could not define. Undoubtedly he had insulted this man by his attitude, his manner often had been mocking; but when the other had turned whip in hand, he had - walked away? What really should he have done? He should, no doubt, having humourously instituted himself Kreisler's keeper, have humourously struggled with him, when the idiot became obstreperous. But at that point his humour had stopped. Then his humour had limitations?" (221)

Of course it has limitations, the chief of which is that it leaves him unprepared for the real world when it threatens to whip him. Tarr's reality may be more profound, but it does not help him cope with surface reality when the object of his humour turns on him. Tarr examines his own mistakes, as Lewis points out early in the novel, but his remedies are purely strategic, and not 'deep seated:

"His unreadiness, his dislike for action, his fear of ridicule, he treated severely in turn: he laughed at himself: but it was no good. At last he surrendered to the urgency of his vanity: plans for retrieving this discomfort came crowding upon him." (221)

Tarr decides to play the fawning coward to the full, and when the enraged Kreisler again threatens him, he will fight. Only now can Tarr laugh, for now in Tarr's terms he has turned the joke on his enemy - so he laughs aloud. Lewis catches his sophistry neatly however, and as Tarr exults he comments:

"The curse of humour was in him, anchoring him at one end of the seesaw whose movement and contradiction was life." (222)

All this in the character who renounces humour at the beginning of the novel! Of course none of this satire means that identifications of Lewis with Tarr are fruitless, but it does indicate that like Tarr's humour, they have their limitations.



A similar point should be made with regard to Kreisler, who is normally seen as the exact opposite of Tarr in every respect, the antithesis of the logical intelligence, a bad artist drowning in the vortex of his own emotions. All this is true enough, and confirmed by Lewis himself in Rude Assignment<sup>11</sup> but again it is not the whole story; in some respects the similarities between Tarr and Kreisler are as telling as the differences. Some of the parallels between the two have been pointed out by Hugh Kenner:

"Solyk is to Kreisler as Hobson is to Tarr."<sup>12</sup>

he says, and claims that Kreisler smacking Solyk is Tarr knocking off Hobson's hat. Solyk frustrates Kreisler's lust as Hobson frustrates Tarr's creativity. Kenner also remarks that

"Tarr's euphoria and the clammy psychic atmosphere of Kreisler's romantic nihilism are more closely akin than Lewis perhaps intended." 13

The question of intention we shall leave to one side, for if discussing what an author did intend is difficult, discussing what he did not intend is doubly so, - suffice it to remark that I think the similarities are so evident in the text that doubts about Lewis's intention should never arise. The main point is that Kenner feels that there are strong similarities between the two, Tarr and Kreisler.

Perhaps the similarities can most conveniently be shown by looking at Kreisler's attitude to humour. For he too, having decided to end his life, sees life as absurd - the basic requirement for comic vision - and he is even described in terms that are to echo and re-echo through the later fiction, most of which

11. Lewis. Rude Assignment. p.151

12. Kenner. op.cit. p.40

13. Ibid p.38

is built on Lewis's perceptions of the absurdity of life, that is Kreisler, hiding behind his 'solemn laughter-in-action, is described as "a very stormy and concrete nothingness" (142)

Kreisler's comedy has much in common with Tarr's. Both treat other people as puppets and are in a sense 'playwrights'.

Tarr is conscious of playing a part in his 'scenes' with Bertha, and when she cries we are told of her tears:

"They had not been very far back in the wings." (50)

Whereas of Kreisler we are told:

"Womenkind were Kreisler's theatre, they were for him art and expression; the tragedies played there purged you periodically of the too violent accumulations of desperate life. There life's burden of laughter as well might be exploded." (93)

Kreisler's sense of the absurd has him indulging in comedy at least as much as Tarr. His actions at the Bonnington Club, for example, are all desperate farce and the description of him as he undertakes them could almost be applied directly to Tarr:

"All his errands showed the gusto of the logic of his personality: he might indeed have been enjoying himself. He invented outrage that was natural to him and enjoyed slightly the license and scope of his indifference." (141)

That famous feeling of indifference again! Then too, like Tarr, Kreisler sometimes indulges in humour to the point of losing contact with the real world. The duel is the best example of this. From beginning to end the whole episode is ridiculous: as one of Soltyk's friends says in the cafe "The whole affair is pour rire." (240). Kreisler himself cannot take the duel seriously and almost laughs when the idea of the closeness of his death occurs to him. His humour destroys the duel.

He laughs at Soltyk's 'jujubes', his humour turns against his over-anxious second Bitzenko, and, obsessed with his own joke, he even tries to kiss Soltyk. However, when Soltyk, in natural fury, leaps on him and commences strangling him, he is at a total loss as to how to deal with this sudden jump back to physical reality - just as Tarr was when Kreisler threatened him with the whip. For both Kreisler and Tarr humour is a weapon which easily becomes a drug.

Kreisler also shares with Tarr the sensitivity to being laughed at, which we have already looked at in Tarr's case. Kreisler, as much as Tarr, is enraged at the idea of himself being an object of fun. At the Bonnington Club, for example, although he has nerve enough to molest half the young women there, and to deal with Fraulein Liepmann, he is very upset when Anastasya burst out laughing at his actions:

"When Anastasya had laughed Kreisler's inner life had for a moment been violently disturbed." (144)

He becomes very self-conscious:

"Inactive, he was ridiculous: he had not reckoned on being watched. This was a fiasco: here he was posing nude for Anastasya and the Russian." (148)

The laugh obsesses him:

"He allowed her laughter to accumulate on his back, like a coat of mud" In his illogical vision he felt her there behind him laughing and laughing interminably. Soltyk was sharing it of course. More and more his laughter became intolerable." (148)

A real laugh behind him feels like a blow - waking Kreisler from his nightmare - and hurling abuse at Fraulein Liepmann, Kreisler leaves. Lewis drives home the point with a final irony: when Kreisler is sitting in the cafe preparing to challenge Soltyk to a duel it is "a contemptuous laugh of Soltyk's "that brings him to his feet"(244).

Truly, Lewis's heroes are not to be laughed at!

Both men are gross egoists - in the Stirner mould. Both are extremely self-conscious and self-analytical (though they may analyse in different terms) and both are supremely indifferent to the feelings of others.

In spite of his concern to make his indifference 'humane', Tarr has no great respect for Bertha's feelings, in fact he seems to find difficulty in believing that she has any, while Kreisler, though he is infatuated with Anastasya, has no doubt about his ultimate aim in possessing her:

"He must tread her woman-body in a masterful rutting debauch, and of course subsequently spurn it having used it." (113)

Tarr is prepared to sacrifice himself in marriage to Bertha, but more because of his perception of the 'humour' of the situation than out of any concern for her feelings, just as Kreisler is prepared to abase himself in abject apology for having raped Bertha, purely to satisfy his own desire to see her.

So both men are egoists, the difference presumably being that Kreisler's ego is centred around sex and is destructive while Tarr's is centred more round art (the novel is partly about his failed attempt to exclude sex) and is creative.

A further interesting feature which the two have in common is their concern with, and the use and abuse they make of 'convention' - though it is not always clear if this concern and contempt is part of their egoism, or merely an exploration of the theme by Lewis.

At the very beginning of the book we find Tarr challenging an accepted convention:

"Why cannot most people, having talked and annoyed each other once or twice, rebecome strangers, simply?"

and yet bound in by convention, unable to put this into operation

with Hobson, whom he dislikes. Coincidentally or otherwise Kreisler is infuriated ~~when~~ Vokt renegues on this convention with him: "with his little obstinate resolve in the obscurity of his mind no longer to be Kreisler's acquaintance." (106)

Tarr sees his engagement as obedience to a meaningless convention:

"Fiancée! - observe how we ape the forms of conventional life in our emancipated Bohemia: it does not mean anything so one lets it stop." (21)

Meaningless on one level it may be, and ridiculed by Tarr, but it holds him. Presumably marriage is another meaningless convention - and it is through believing this that Tarr gets married! Tarr, for all his contempt for conventions, fits into them very adroitly - as when he appoints himself as Bertha's chaperone. At first he is outraging a convention - the old lover showing the new over the property with no sign of jealousy - but he soon slips into the more conventional role of Bertha's protector - another role from which he cannot extricate himself.

Conventions occur easily to Tarr: his first thought on the idea of being himself challenged to a duel is that he could safely decline on the grounds that "Englishmen do not duel", and however contemptuous he is of bourgeois attitudes, he is very open to ridicule from Anastasya about his attitude to women, whom he prefers to keep in their place.

Kreisler is equally concerned with convention; he too takes advantage of it where possible, and outrages it when it suits him - and since most of the action falls to him his outrages are usually more spectacular than Tarr's.

We are told that Kreisler sees people:

"... not with the flexible breadth of the realistic intelligence but through conventions of his suspicious irony." (86)

Later we find him:

"thirsting for conventional figures" (140)

so he tries to ascribe to Soltyk the definite role of rival for Anastasya, and one of his frustrations at the Bonnington Club is that:

"Conventional figures of drama lacked: Kreisler had in fact got into the wrong company" (141)

By the time he gets to the duel it is all very "conventional" in Kreisler's eyes (247) - with stock insults, a beautiful woman, a rival in love etc., and this satisfies some kind of need for Kreisler. In a sense all his outrages on convention are the product of frustration. Consider how hard he tries to get his 'frac' out of pawn so that he can attend the Bonnington Club properly dressed; only when all his efforts fail does he veer to the other extreme, deliberately make himself look more disreputable and outrage the entire company.

Frustrated also in his attempts to obtain Anastasya, Kreisler makes use of another convention - that of the artist and his model - to get Bertha to undress; then he outrages that convention also by turning the occasion from an artist's sitting into a sexual encounter.

Kreisler, we are told, is a snob: which basically seems to mean that he insists on the conventions which we can make use of. His insistence on duelling, for example, necessitates maintaining the convention that he is a gentleman - thus all the rigmarole with slaps, cards, seconds and so forth.

Yet, denied his duel because he ceases to act like a gentleman, he resorts to desperately criminal means of keeping his foe upon the 'field of honour'. Even Kreisler's suicide is conventional - and even it moves him onto a lower social plane than he had intended.

For originally he plans to shoot himself, but in the end he hangs himself with his own bootlaces.

Conventions are interestingly explored throughout the novel, but a feeling persists that much of the exploration is due to Lewis's own consciousness of and interest in conventions - such as he was outraging at the time as a Vorticist.

The other major area where a blurring exists between Lewis's own personality and the demands of the novel is in the use of language. There appears to be some attempt at differentiating the kind of language which is used to describe the thought processes of Tarr, Kreisler and Bertha (we are never really shown Anastasya's thought processes at work).

Tarr, for example, tends to think in aphorisms, and both his thought and his speech are full of metaphor of the most brilliant kind. Whilst holding onto Bertha for example:

"A complicated image developed in his mind as he stood with her. He was remembering Schopenhauer: it was of a chinese puzzle of boxes within boxes, or of insects" discarded envelopes. A woman had at the centre a kernel, a sort of very substantial astral baby: this brat was apt to swell - she then became all baby. The husk he held now was a painted mummy-case, say. He was a mummy-case too. Only he contained nothing but innumerable other painted cases inside, smaller and smaller ones. The smallest was not a substantial astral baby, however, or live core, but a painting like the rest. - His kernel was a painting, in fact: That was as it should be!" (51)

The word 'say', indicating that Tarr is working out this image in his mind as he goes along, bearing in mind that a woman is clinging to him demanding "Say that you love me," is a measure of Tarr's detachment from the human feelings of other people, and this is reinforced a few pages later when Tarr invents an extended metaphor, (characterising their emotional relationship as a commercial transaction) which so carries him away, giving him so much pleasure in its extension and refinement that he rather loses sight of the object of his conver-

sation: communication with Bertha:

"Tarr felt that she too must, naturally be enjoying his points: he forgot to direct his exposition in such a way as to hurt her least. 'This trivial and tortured landscape had a beauty for him he was able and keen to explain, where for her there was nothing but a harrowing reality.'" (59)

Tarr in fact frequently employs imagery as a form of sophistry, sometimes, as here, to create a mood in which he can perform otherwise painful surgery (severing his relationship with Bertha) sometimes to convince himself of the rightness of his actions. This is frequently the case when Tarr argues from art to life, as he does at the beginning of the novel, where he is discussing his attitude to sex, and as he does near the end of the novel where he is convincing himself that he is sacrificing nothing by marrying Bertha instead of Anastasya:

"Such successful people as he and Anastasya were by themselves: it was as impossible to combine or wed them as to compound the genius of two great artists. If you mixed together into one whole Gainsborough and Goya he argued, you would get nothing" (293)

This may well be true as regards Gainsborough and Goya, but what relevance it has for the difference between marrying and simply living with Anastasya is rather less clear. However, Tarr manages to convince himself, and that is clearly the function of many of his metaphors.

The snag, of course, is that believing his own publicity, as it were, Tarr takes his own imagery rather too seriously. Thus his role as comedian, as we have seen, prevents him from taking effective action at various places in the book; and his belief in the efficacy of his metaphors leaves him carrying on great tracts of conversation which are totally lost on Bertha. He is, in fact, possessed by his own metaphors - giving a "hasty glance at his 'indifference' to see whether it were O.K." (44)



immediately after meeting Bertha, and interpreting her appearance "by its light".

Tarr's imagery, in other words, starts off as an intellectual construction and ends up as an emotional habit of thought.

Bertha and Kreisler are meant, of course, to be the opposite of logical - emotional thinkers to the core - the soft core.

Bertha, we are told:

"always opposed to Tarr's treacherous images her teutonic lyricism, usually repeating the same phrases several times." (58)

When Tarr is launched into his rhetoric against marriage, all she picks up is the notion that he has been philandering with marriage, and she seizes on this idea, excluding all the rest. Bertha has, as a girl, garnered an image of the kind of man she will love:

Tarr fits that image:

"So her senses were presented with the image that was to satisfy and rule them. They flung themselves upon it as she had flung herself upon Tarr." (47)

Clearly Bertha thinks with her emotions rather than with her intellect and the language surrounding her seems intended to reflect this. Nevertheless the odd metaphor peeps through in Bertha's thinking also; she arranges her life by analogy with her furniture for example and she thinks of Tarr:

"Tarr's absences were like light: his presence was a shadow. They were both stormy." (49) ,

and yet Bertha's character seems slightly out of key with such thoughts. This tendency is in fact even more pronounced in Kreisler. He too lives in a welter of his own emotions. He too picks an odd metaphor out of a conversation and allows it to run away with him; for when he is talking to Anastasya and she mentions acquiring a dog to guide her, he seizes on the image and projects himself into the role:

"What had she meant? However, he grasped at the dog: he could regain possession of himself in romantic stimulus of this figure. He would be her dog! Lie at her feet! He would fill with a merely animal warmth and vivacity the void that must exist in her spirit. His imagination, flattered, came in as an ally: this, too, exempted him from the necessity of being victorious. All he asked was to be her dog! Only wished to impress her as a dog!....

The sense of security ensured him by the abjectness of this resolution caused him to regain his self-possession. Only it imposed the condition, naturally, of remaining a dog." (95)

A moment later and he is speaking in "hardly a canine whine, but the deep subservient bass of the faithful St. Bernard." Clearly Kreisler falls an easy prey to the emotional interpretation of imagery, but again, as with Bertha, there is another aspect to Kreisler's thinking. His opening words to Anastasya would do credit to Tarr himself for their witty imagery as he compares each list on the menu to a dervish performance, becoming wilder and more confused as it progresses. (90)

Moreover, he is capable of using metaphor for self-analysis with something approaching Tarr's precision:

"He compared himself to one of those little nursery locomotives that go straight ahead without stopping; that anyone can take up and send puffing away in the opposite direction.." (109)

After such complexity, what conclusion? Well, a case can be made for some attempt at differentiation in the use of language by the characters, but by the time we read an extended metaphor on Fraulein Liepmann's lover as a general investing her, we should recognise that there is a luxuriance of metaphor throughout the novel and brilliant as it is, it is somewhat indiscriminately sprayed, as liable to strike an object as a person. T.S. Eliot, in many ways Lewis's most perceptive critic, offers an explanation for some of the novel's peculiarities of style in his 1913 review

review of the novel in The Egoist<sup>14</sup>, and it is one of the ironies of Lewis criticism that this is probably one of the most misused quotations ever lifted from Eliot. The form the quotation usually takes on the dust-jackets and in the publishers' blurbs is "Mr. Lewis is the most fascinating personality of our time".

In fact, of course, no one could expect Eliot to see personality in literature as an unqualified good; the full quotation reads:

"There can be no question of the importance of Tarr. But it is only in part a novel. For the rest Mr. Lewis is a magician who compels our interest in himself; he is the most fascinating personality of our time rather than a novelist."

Rather than a novelist! Not often quoted fully; yet Eliot has understood something very important about the early Lewis, iconoclast and self-publicist. A writer anxious to write great literature, a painter anxious to change the face of British painting, everything Lewis did in his early career seems larger than life. His first three novels are all self-conscious attempts at creating masterpieces, and to some extent they all suffer from this. Tarr is highly energised language and action, and the form suffers slightly. The Apes of God is top-heavy in its linguistic brilliance - a masterpiece which many find difficult to read; while the breadth of imagination shown in The Childermass bogs down in language and dialectic - flaws which are exposed all the more starkly by the sequels.

Each of these novels is 'a work of genius', - but none of them is as good (as Lewis recognised) as the less stridently brilliant Revenge for Love. But then, by the 1930s Lewis could afford to be more relaxed: his career might be in eclipse, but his personal confidence in his achievement was much more assured and his novels benefitted.

14. Eliot T.S. "Tarr" (review) The Egoist Vol.5 No.8

This is not to condemn Tarr, for though the novel might not stand the closest possible scrutiny unscathed, it is still a most remarkable novel, deserving its relative popularity on University courses on the novel because of its enormous vitality and its stretching of the conventions of the form.

The parts that stand out are almost all highly comic. There is a tremendous self-assurance about the comic sections of Tarr, a confidence which carries conviction. It is this, I think, which makes Kreisler's outrages completely successful - they are almost breath-taking. When Kreisler starts adjusting the breasts of the young girls with whom he is dancing at the Bonnington Club, the reader is, for a moment, genuinely shocked - and then delighted. Not at the action so much as at the unexpectedness. This is social outrage done as a work of art, highly accomplished madness.

Similar effects are achieved, though seldom with the intensity of the Bonnington Club adventure, when Kreisler rushes for his whip to chase Tarr, when he arrives at Bertha's door after having raped her, and (most successful of these) when he demands the kiss during the prelude to his projected duel.

Tarr's comedy works on a different level. The reader is never quite sure how seriously he is taking Tarr - and the real moments of comedy occur at the moments when it seems almost impossible that Tarr should be taking himself seriously.

When for example, he delivers his lecture to Hobson on how Baudelaire commenced beating a beggar who asked him for money, until the beggar leapt up and retaliated: Baudelaire was delighted - He had achieved something! Although Tarr refuses to elevate Hobson to the status of the beggar, he acts on a spontaneous analogy with this anecdote and knocks off Hobson's

hat - rushing off down the street without waiting to see whether or not Hobson will have a sudden access of self-respect and strike Tarr. Tarr declares that Hobson will not - but he does not wait to see!

Similarly, because we believe that Tarr has left Paris, we are a little shocked when he turns up again, as though it were perfectly natural - indeed the most rational thing in the world - for him to change his mind - like this. The final blow is near the end, when surveying Anastasya's legs he sternly reminds her that the eye alone sees only conventional phantoms - Anastasya stretches - expanding her breasts - "So long as we understand each other - that is everything" (276)

Can Tarr really believe in this orgasm by cerebral command business that he seems to follow? In any case, his poker-faced faith counterpoints Kreisler's antics nicely.

The point where the novel really breaks down is in the tidy conclusion. Lewis has been successfully maintaining structure without ever being overly precise; attempting to give us a structured ending - Tarr oscillating between sexual alternatives forevermore - is too phony. Lewis poise vanishes and he concludes the novel in a manner that (like Tarr's apathetic endearments to Bertha) is too perfunctory

Some things remain. Kreisler, with his desperately energetic rush to destruction, furious at all who do not adapt to his whims, is an enduring creation whose outrages combine comedy and tragedy more powerfully than anything I can recall; while Tarr, the intellectual egoist, seeking in his women empty vessels to flood with his vitality, adds both wit and weight, remaining comic, serious and enigmatic all at the same time - one of the most original characters of twentieth century fiction.

The problems raised here too, principally concerned with how the intellectual comes to terms with the absurdities of reality are further explored in Lewis's later novels - in an exploration which had not ceased even forty years after Farr first appeared in the Egoist. Some of Lewis's ideas modified in the interim, as I have been at pains to explain in this chapter, but his central concerns remained the same and are reflectedly with remarkable profundity in this, his first novel.

CHAPTER 4 : THE APES OF GOD.

The Apes of God clearly occupies an important place in Lewis's career. A prolific writer, Lewis was never noted for the brevity of his works - but The Apes of God is by far the largest single work he ever produced, filling 625 pages and weighing nearly five pounds in its original edition.

When he published the novel privately in 1930 Lewis launched himself into a publicity campaign claiming that the book was being denied the attention it deserved by prejudiced periodical editors, and publishing a pamphlet, Satire and Fiction containing the account of a suppressed review of the novel written by Roy Campbell, and quoting from dozens of favourable reviews or impressions, making the case for the novel as a major work of Art.

It remains to this day Lewis's best known work. People who have never read Lewis respond -- 'Oh, The Apes of God?' when they hear his name, possibly because, as a kind of literary scandal, references to the novel have crept into many literary histories of the modern era, and also of course, it was the first of his novels to be published as a Penguin Modern Classic.

Curiously enough, however, Lewis himself did not praise the novel particularly highly in later years, writing in a Vita in 1940:

"The Apes of God is hardly a novel, though people remember the name of that best. It is a very long book (actually longer than Ulysses) and was portentously large in its original format. It is in its third edition. In England it was even financially a successful book." <sup>1</sup>

While in Rude Assignment, while he is concerned to declare the merits of The Revenge for Love Lewis says of The Apes of God:

"W.B. Yeats, who has a great liking for Satire, and who showed much appreciation for mine, told me that I would be stopped, for in England that was what had always happened. He seemed under the impression that I was embarked upon a career as a satirist.



But that was far from my intention. Indeed I should be very sorry to have nothing but that mode of expression to my credit, as it is not my favourite one... I was a dropper of molten iron but once, and winged my way elsewhere, never having regarded such an occupation as more than a gigantic episode.

The Apes of God is the only one of my books which can be described as pure satire...." 2

A year or two later in fact, Lewis issued a mild rebuke to Hugh Kenner for comparing Tarr with The Revenge for Love, classifying as his 'later novels' everything written after The Apes of God.<sup>3</sup> It would seem that Lewis lost interest in satire to some extent after The Apes, and though there is an element in satire in all of his remaining novels, other elements come to predominate, as we shall see in later chapters.

In a sense The Apes of God presents a rather similar case to that of Vorticism, in that its notoriety has tended to overshadow aspects of Lewis's work which he would rather have highlighted, in this case his later novels. Part of the reason for this notoriety of course, lies in the fact that a number of famous literary figures were satirised in the novel, and to some extent the guessing game of making identifications assumed more importance than the novel itself.

Yet Lewis himself has attempted to discourage this speculation, claiming it has been ill-founded:

"The social decay of the insanitary trough between the two wars is its subject, and it is accurate. However, it is magnified and stylised. It is not portraiture. a new world is created out of the shoddy material of everyday, and nothing does, or could, go over into that as it appeared in nature."

Many people have asserted that they are the originals. All these claims are invalid. There is, as an illustration of this, a figure called 'Dan, who is described as a ravishingly beautiful

2. Ends Assignment. p.51-2

3. Letters p.552

young man: like the St. John of Leonardo, a male peach. This character suffers from nose-bleeding in my book - by no means an uncommon thing in youth. Someone who was young at that time, but whose intense physical beauty I had never, for my part, noticed, told me one day that he had recognised himself. I said how - who? He said Dan! Then he reminded me that his nose sometimes had bled. At which I sternly pointed out that Dan, in the book, was an authentic naif - in fact a simpleton. It made no difference at all: and this man - for he is now a big hairy man - is still persuaded he is Dan." <sup>4</sup>

Lewis has received some support in this line from Ezra Pound who, though he believes that the novel will 'gain with time' as we are distanced from the personalities involved, also says:

"It is not, even, in its main aspects, a roman à clef, a novel depending on the reader's identifying the fictitious characters with people known to the author."<sup>5</sup>

However, it would seem that Lewis tended to be less than ingenuous in this matter, for he wrote to C.H. Prentice in 1926, denying that he was satirizing specific personages:

"As to your believing that you detect a likeness in some of my personages to people in real life, in that you are mistaken. I have here and there used things, it is true that might suggest some connection. But the cases you choose are not the ones I could, I am afraid, remove from my picture. If the bodies I describe fit the morning suits of real people and they thrust them in and lay claim to them, however much the clothes fitted I should not countenance the wearing of such misfits by any of my characters, to all of whom I supply suits to measure from my own store." <sup>6</sup>

presumably because he was afraid of the libel suits which dogged much of his career. But some of the characters in his novel are transparent satirisations of real people - in particular, the

4. Rude Assignment, 199

5. Pound, E. "Augment of the Novel." Agenda p.52

6. Letters. p.167

Sitwell family Osbert, Sacheverell, and Edith. Various other characters are more or less easily identifiable - Violet and Sidney Schiff; Richard Wyndham, Roy Campbell, Edwin and Willa Muir, James Joyce (rather over-identified with Ratner by Wagner) and even (in Zagreus and Dan) aspects of Roger Fry and Duncan Grant.

Some of the people involved reacted in different ways: Roy Campbell proclaimed that he was the model for Zulu Blades with every evidence of pride.<sup>7</sup> Richard Wyndham reacted to the portrait of himself as Dick Whittingdon by advertising several of Lewis's paintings in the agony column of The Times at insulting prices; Sidney Schiff, on the other hand, who had given Lewis substantial financial help in the early twenties, was apparently not deterred from helping him again later, by his star turn as Lionel Kein in the novel.<sup>8</sup>

The recent publication of The Roaring Queen, however, has served to underline the sterile confusion which can result from such identifications. For Walter Allen's attempts to identify various characters in the novel were widely attacked in the press reviews - almost to the exclusion of the novel itself.<sup>9</sup>

In both novels the process of making identifications may be very interesting, but it is surely more relevant to consider them as novels, not as dramatised gossip about characters of varying fame and importance.

7. Campbell, R. "A note of W.L. Shenandoah Vol.IV Nos.2-3 1953. p.75.

8. Cf. Letters. p.212-3.

9. Cf. Walter Allen's introduction to The Roaring Queen Also: Cyril Connolly "Chronicle of Creative Hatred". Sunday Times July 29th. 1973. p.36

Roy Fuller "Lewis's Libel" Listener August 1973, p.192

H.G. Porteus "Lewis's Libel" (letter) Listener August 23rd, 1973, p.250

The Apes of God has generally been well treated as a novel.

Richard Aldington wrote to Lewis:

"The Apes of God is the most tremendous knock-out ever made. And the most brilliantly witty piece of writing, merely as writing, which I have ever read. You needn't doubt that you have added something permanent to European literature." 10

T.S. Eliot, when he saw the first fragment, "Mr. Zagreus and the Split-Man" late in 1923, wrote to Lewis:

"I think this will be a great book - don't let anything interfere with it....Zagreus is a masterpiece. Want Apes at once." 11

On receipt of a second fragment - the first draft of The Encyclical - he wrote:

"You have surpassed yourself and everything. It is worthwhile running the Criterion just to publish these. It is so immense I have no words for it." 12

Certainly The Apes of God is immense - both in conception and execution. It is satire on a grand scale - nothing attempted by Orwell or Huxley for example, can touch it for sheer scale. Each constituent part is somehow epic - even when it is a relatively short section such as the tea party at Pamela Farnham's. Indeed the book is not so much a novel as a series of gigantic satiric scenes, loosely strung together by Dan's progress through the book. Dan is a moronic, handsome young Irish boy, adopted as a protégé (one of a succession of protégés) by Zagreus, an apparently rich albino art-dilettante who undertakes to educate Dan by exposing the antics of artistic-rich-bohemian London to him in a series of social visits round the homes of The Apes of God - the inhabitants of this sham world. In the process Dan finds himself seduced (by a woman!) stripped, beaten up

10. Quoted in Rude Assignment p.200

11. Letters pp 135. & 139

12. Ibid. p.140

and intoxicated. He recovers to find himself supplanted in Zagreus's favour by a Jewish rival, a great deal sadder, but certainly no wiser after his epic education.

The very immensity of the finished novel is precisely its problem however. Taken in individual sections it is indeed a masterpiece, a stylistic tour de force, but the most widespread and damaging criticism levelled at it is simply that it is too immense a work to take trivia as its subject, that it is essentially limited by the smallness of its target. Even Eliot realised this:

"Mr. Wyndham Lewis...often squanders his genius for invective upon objects which to everyone but himself seem unworthy of his artillery, and arrays howitzers against card houses." 13

Or to put it another way, the famous Lewis gun, like the German gun in Blasting and Bombardiering, finds itself chasing a couple of puny individuals through the mud.<sup>14</sup>

There is a great deal of truth in this criticism, but the case is perhaps overstated. Firstly, insignificant targets are not altogether unusual in satires. Dryden, Pope and Swift all attacked groups of people now remembered only as targets of their satire and not in their own right: the Dunciad is perhaps the most outstanding example of this, and the targets in it include not only forgotten writers of no significance, but Daniel Defoe, who we would now regard as unfairly satirised.

Also, it is of course, partly because of the triumph of the satire that the targets seem so insignificant. In terms of their social importance on the London literary or artistic scene they were not insignificant: that is precisely the book's complaint.

13. Eliot T.S. Selected Essays p.445

14. Blasting & Bombardiering p.16 ff

And of course the book is more than just a satire on individual members of that society; the ideas of the society are attacked also - and they are ideas which Lewis attacked through-out his career, ideas which he regarded as rampant everywhere and badly needing condemnation.

Yet these ideas - the cult of youth, amateurism and exoticism in art, diletante socialism, moronic democracy, the worship of the small and insignificant, the exaltation of the subconscious, the pandering to homosexuality etc. - are attacked through the medium of people, their manners, and frequently their personal appearances.

Lewis was fond of the label he was given after the publication of The Apes of 'Personal Appearance Artist':

"I do not suppose a book has ever been written in which so much attention has been given to the externals - the shell, the pelt, the physical behaviour of people, as the Apes of God." 15

Certainly this is very much a painter's novel, each character located and defined by the eye, sometimes with a cold objectivity which produces satiric visions similar to Swift's. For example, the section titled THE BODY LEAVES THE CHAIR, near the opening of the novel:

"A local briskness, of a muscular nature, was patent, in the depths of the chair. The massively-anchored person shook as if from the hidden hammerings of a propellor, revolving at the stern, out of sight. A determined claw went out and grappled the alpenstock. It planted it at a forward cant to obtain the preliminary purchase.

Without fuss the two masses came apart. They were cut open into two pieces." (28)

All this laborious feat of mechanical engineering, naturally, 'without fuss'. This nerve-straining performance (for the reader as well as for Lady Fredigonde) drags endlessly on - from one tough to another, as Lewis puts it - until:

"she realised the tones of a muted fog-horn to exclaim -  
'There will come a time Bridget when I shall not be  
able to move about like that!' " (29)

This moves easily over into burlesque (if it has not become that already) with for example, the first appearance of Dick, happy as a sand-boy, awkward, mechanical and childishly obtrusive as his Bugatti. He possesses a bronzed, beaming boyish face, a big cleft of a bull-dog chin, the dogmatic self-confidence born of stamping around a big house, pursued by servants and looking out upon your Bugatti, and - of course - a complete lack of intelligence. Movement to him is dislocation, and every dislocation is engineered by Lewis to express his total condemnation of his personality and life-style. Geoffrey Wagner offers an incredible reading of this in one of his surprising misreadings of Lewis.

Calling The Apes 'more satiric than tragic' he goes on:

"...but the work does show us the tragic fall from high estate. To cling to my original example, Dick Whittington is brought on to the stage as an admired, successful wealthy amateur artist, and with his servants, motor cars, and leisure we might excusably envy him..." 16

But Dick is a totally grotesque creation from the moment that he staggers into our view, and it is clear that his physical characteristics are meant to correspond with his personal ones, as he awaits the death of Lady Fredigonde:

"As Dick reached the stair-head a strident tearing sneeze crashed in the room he had just left. A slight smile of self-understanding, comfortable and private, came into his face. When they sneezed like that - it was not far off! Another sharp winter would do it! A second sneeze shrieked out behind him. Cocking one eye to the ceiling he stood still and in quick succession released two rasping snorts from his anus. A third sneeze screamed with a stupid violence as he relaxed from the cocking position." (43)

It is this concentration on the particular, this venomously precise observation that draws the charge of triviality, that the

satire lacks universality, is aimed too much at individuals, or is spoiled by 'the peeve'.. What does the polished blue stubble of Dick's great cleft chin matter? If I read Lewis correctly it matters a great deal. The physical manifestations of his characters symbolise for him accepted norms, the guises of the ruling puppets, which have assumed the status of obligatory fancy dress, if, to employ the novel's implicit metaphor, you wish to be admitted to the party. Lewis sees these guises as shallow and false - but all dangerous. Accordingly they are satirised mercilessly.

It may be objected that moral corruption cannot be assumed to manifest itself physically in this way: good men have deformities, nervous tics, big feet or misshapen noses.

Lewis himself is perfectly aware of this. In his short story, "The Bishop's Fool" he describes the mouth of the main character, Rymer, in unpleasant terms and then acknowledges that he reads verse better than anyone he ever knew, and that:

"he knew the weight in Heaven of every word in the dictionary."

He speaks of assessing at their proper value the disfigurements associated with eloquent verbal discharges, and elsewhere in the same story he speaks of the advantages of telling the reader what Rymer would have done before introducing the man himself, because that way:

"you are introduced not to the-man-in-the-flesh with all his physical irrelevancies, but to disembodied action"

So Lewis is aware, indeed he emphasises that physical appearance is not everything. But he chooses in The Apes, and indeed elsewhere, to invest that appearance with symbolic value. This kind of technique is by no means unusual. What does it matter in real



terms after all, if Frank Churchill, in Jane Austen's Emma, should leave the door open when he goes out of a room? Yet for Jane Austen this is a potent symbol of moral corruption and she works out the significance of such symbols relentlessly.

So too does Lewis articulate his symbols, and this is surely what matters: not that we agree with the system of symbols as applied to the real world, but that the system employed is worked out effectively within the novel itself. Lewis's later work has many examples of such symbols - where a hunched back, a dwarfish appearance, a small moustache, or a hirsute beard, have moral significance; but nowhere is such a system applied as comprehensively as in The Apes, from the decrepitude of Lady Fredigonde, the awkwardness of Dick and the effeminacy of Margolin, to the costuming of Ratner as the split-man, and of the albino Zagreus as a snobbish purveyor of recondite symbols.

Then too, this necessity for the hard unflinching look at the outside of things reflects back on the eye itself; it must be hard and bright, not soft, wet and sentimental.

Thus when we meet Matthew Plunkett the description of his eyes is as good as a character reference:

"Head lazily rolled to one side he considered it - with staring swimming eyes and moist pink muzzle, pulpily extended - plum locked in plum." (66)

After this we are not surprised to find that Matthew is a collection of all that Lewis satirises - down to being the dupe of a Freudian psychiatrist, determined to find someone small enough to indulge his Gulliver complex - hence his girlfriend.

As he observes his shells and rambles in his imagination, he becomes a callow schoolboy kicking his heels on the beach; if we did not already know Lewis's views about the sentimental youth complex, the pointers would be there in any case as Matthew surveys the scene, "fixing his eyes in a big subaqueous Bloomsbury stare." (86)

This of course, conditions all he sees, whether in his imagination ("though none the less actual") or in reality ("but for that none the more actual"), and the syntax of the long rambling sentences stamp Lewis's judgment all over him.

Matthew ends up watching the impending meeting (in his line of vision on the window pane) of an insect and a cloud. This "measured rapprochement" drags his mind away from the sandy beach to wait for this imminent event, and he forgets all about his sea-shells, involved as he is with his new game - "gazing into the mysterious shadow of Time, dark with 'events'." (87)

This pastime is disturbed by the door-bell ringing:

, "It was the finger of Betty that touched the button. He disappeared through the open door and the insect merged with the cumulus upon the Bloomsbury pane." (87)

The fire and the rose are one!

Dan's eyes too are tellingly described:

"Dan...at the word 'God' veiling his lustrous swimming honest-to-goodness eyes of Abie's Irish rose."

In this case the description does not merely characterise Dan but also the dewy-eyed, hard-faced, romantic, pseudo Irish siren, Melanie. Lewis, in fact, has a knack of using the external descriptions as a kind of visible manifestation of the interior monologue; and he uses the effects of the interior monologue itself far more often than he likes to pretend.

For examples there are not only Lady Fredigonde and Dan (who is almost all interior monologue since he seldom speaks) but the passage of Dan's seduction by Melanie, where the narrative or Dan's thoughts or whatever the vehicle is, is distorted by the increasingly Irish character of Melanie's 'keening' until the passage reads like a parody of Bloom's roman-candle orgasm while watching the girl on the beach in Ulysses:

"Stop he insisted in rich tones of righteous anguish but Melanie was not after stopping - she was after going right on to the bitter-sweet end of it, and it would be an explosion if she did for he would plainly burst with shame, in one big banging red blush - the virgin victim.

Off with your lips the harlot-woman! Off with the sticky and shameless mouth of you!" (116)

Clearly this is more than the hard outside narrative of observation; it is (if only in parody) an attempt to convey feeling rhythmically, and it is used, at least in connection with Dan, frequently through out the book:

"Dan was simply as exultant as a swan and his throat half-burst with rapture: he sprang to his feet: he plunged out of his apartment, the letter and the manuscript flourished in his fist, and he burst headlong into Mrs. Blackwell's studio in the garden." (134)

This is not Dan's interior monologue, but the supposedly objective narrative catching and reflecting Dan's mood and character. The technique here is obvious, yet it is capable of great subtlety. Take for example the bar-maid in *The Distillery*:

"She was hit full in the buttock by a rushing body. She drew in her muscular hinny, and over her shoulder she discharged a scented simper that was both sensitive and sweet after the rushing body. In the dispatch of their respective duties bodies must, in the intemperance of the involuntary motions, genteelly collide, that being one of the laws of nature which ladylike bodies spent their time circumventing, alas with incomplete success." (84)

The first sentence here is a neutral statement. It immediately contrasts with "muscular hinny", which is not neutral but conveys the slightly crude concrete reality of her body. The rest of the paragraph is a beautifully encapsulated characterisation of the pretensions of the waitress: beginning with a long series of 's' sounds including the weighted word 'simper' moving into over-dignified circumlocution, and including a fair smattering of pretentious words (genteelly, ladylike, circumventing, alas) which catch exactly her aspirations. And of course, the word 'spent' would be ungrammatical if it were the author speaking

in his own voice; this has to be what her manner implies to him.

The whole book shows this kind of work. For example, in the first few lines of *Mr. Zagreus and the Split-Man*, there is a line which reads: "The nails softly guided the cold hair... smoothing so as to cloak a slight calvity in the centre."

The word "calvity" was queried by R. Cobden Sanderson at that time publisher of The Criterion where this section first appeared.<sup>18</sup> The word means "baldness", and according to *OED* is 'rare'. Lewis insisted on its retention and it duly appeared in The Criterion for February 1924 p.124. However, clearly a doubt had been sown in Lewis's mind for in the published book the sentence now reads:

"The nails softly guided the cold hair...Smoothing it so as to throw a thin mist over the baldness in the centre." (343).

In other words Lewis did not merely replace "calvity" with "baldness" but changed the wording slightly to retain an alliteration while keeping the sense of 'disguise'.

There are many neat examples of how Lewis likes to take a metaphor and develop its implications comically: For example when Zagreus and Dan are waiting outside the door of Lionel Kein's apartment Zagreus looks at their two shadows striking the door:

"Were they inside the door as well, in further projections of still less substance -- their stationary presences multiplied until they stretched out like a theatre queue?" (249)

Zagreus continues thinking in this vein, and the 'neutral' narrative picks up the theme:

"'We should have brought camp stools' said Zagreus to the rest of the queue, shifting from one foot to the other as one man." (249)

There are occasions however when one feels that the material is overworked as, for example, in the reference to Swift in the section

'Blackshirt explains Ratner. Ratner Blackshirt!' which seems a little contrived even if Lewis does use Swift frequently throughout his work as a kind of touchstone for truth and effective satire. Ratner is explaining how fond he is of Pierpoint, a process, as Lewis explains, which is the inevitable prelude to stabbing him in the back. (This incidentally is meant to comment backwards on the declarations of fondness of the Keins). Lewis goes on: "Hence was to be seen that air of wisdom from-the-horse's-mouth - but whose fangs when it was Ratner's mouth precluded the idea of the presence of a real horse still less a Houyhnhnm - and since it was always the thing that is not that came out of those jaws, that was as well." (536)

The passage begins typically enough with a cliché (Bonamy Dobree says Lewis never uses clichés but this is not true. He simply never uses them without a comment or an irony of some kind<sup>19</sup> and the circumlocution for calling Ratner a liar might be amusing enough, but the connection is more contrived and literary than one expects from a Lewis writing as powerfully as he is in The Apes).

Perhaps this seems unfair. Taken by itself the passage seems innocuous enough; but there is a definite feeling that the book is in some way overworked. The page is often repellent to the reader, the action seems to clog. A picture may be worth a thousand words; some of these precise and masterly pictures occupy much more than a thousand words, until static areas in the book begin to weary the reader.

Part of the trouble possibly lies with the hero, Dan. Lewis works hard at keeping him alive, but such moronic stupidity

19. Dobree. Bonamy. Modern Prose Style. p.51

is capable of little variation, and the fact that he is hardly ever capable of speech limits him even further. He is a kind of Gulliver, a device trailed through the book, to attract the Apes and bring out the various points the author wants to discuss, but Gulliver at least displays intelligence and independence of action and though inconsistent to meet the whims of his creator he is ultimately far more interesting than Dan.

Dan is consistent - one wishes he weren't! He acts like a solid brick wall for most of the book off whom ideas and attitudes are bounced for the sake of the reader. There can be humour in this, and Lewis makes the most of it: Dan thinks he is being sick when he is having an orgasm - "The biggest blush of all!" (110).

He mishears and misunderstands things to some degree comically (though by the time he mishears 'lampoons' as 'shampoons' that is, 'shampoos' pronounced with a heavy cold, the humour is rapidly vanishing). He blushes while his nose is bleeding, thus sending haemoglobin spurting down his nose (though this palls when Lewis repeats it after 'the vanish'). He gets trapped naked by a lesbian artist, molested indecently while dressed as a girl, and bleeds all over the stage at the party, but he is still undeniably tedious.

Of course much of the tedium may be deliberate, but the question should be not is it deliberate, but is it effective?

Lewis says very wittily at one point "Dan, to cut a long story short said nothing at all." But Dan's silence quite frequently is not conducive to brevity, and is often frustrating for the reader.

This is, however, mainly true of the earlier scenes in the novel: the later scenes operate at a faster tempo - partly because of the manner in which they are divided into short scenes, and partly because the logic of the action begins to

interest the reader in the sense of making him want to know what is going to happen next, rather than simply hurling him from one linguistic trapeze to the next, as so often happens in the earlier sections. The inertia displayed by Dan and the broadcasting of Blackshirt are much better integrated into the action when there is a great deal happening to sustain our interest. There is also, in the culminating scenes, a resolution of many of the images which have been running through the novel -- where everything is borrowed, plagiarised or stolen, everything is in some measure sham. At a gaudy fancy dress party in a room with a stage, arranging a play and performing a conjuring show while all the guests are being robbed, the principals in the novel are manifesting concretely the nature of the reality which underlies their every action.

As a coherent expression of this shallow reality, this hollow existence, The Apes of God has probably no equal, though it seems to me to be a totally negative work -- and I suspect it was the increasingly positive qualities in Lewis's later work that dissuaded him from assigning it a higher place in his canon.

For Lewis solves the problem of the place of the Intellect in the world in this novel by evading the question altogether, behind multi-layered personae. At least in Tarr the intellect was also subject to satire because it manifested itself physically; in The Apes this is never true -- everyone in the novel is satirised -- but Lewis's values are not.

Almost any satire can raise fascinating questions as to precisely what are the satirist's intentions and what is his own viewpoint.

Some readers, according to Wagner have seen a satire of Lewis in Zagreus, but this seems to me a patent absurdity -- Lewis was hardly likely to paint himself as an albino, homosexual, youth-worshipping liar, in fact it seems to me central to the point of the book that Lewis is not init, since authors who put themselves in their own books are one of the objects of satire.

Hugh Kenner has perhaps a more pertinent point when he questions the superiority of Pierpoint.<sup>21</sup> Surely, Kenner argues he is as deserving of satire as anyone in the book because he bothers himself debating with them all. There is a truth here but it would deny Pierpoint, Lewis, or for that matter Swift their "savage indignation" which regardless of how they feel about mankind or particular sections thereof is natural to them being men themselves. Besides as Lewis says of God in Malign Piasta, the most remarkable thing about him is that he cares about man. So whether you believe Pierpoint is a God-like figure or whether you believe he is an object of satire there is no logical inconsistency in his being involved with the corrupt characters in the book.

In my opinion the whole question is, in any case, irrelevant to what Lewis is doing in The Apes of God. By a somewhat ingenious technical feat he has created a double persona behind which he can entrench himself and blaze away with his Lewis Gun in perfect safety.

This technical feat is, of course, the introduction of the double relaying device of Lewis-Pierpoint-Zagreus. In the version of the Encyclical which appeared in Criterion (see above), the Encyclical was sent by Zagreus to Dan. In the novel itself, the Encyclical was actually written by Pierpoint, and relayed to Dan by Zagreus. It may well be that when the first version

21. Kenner. H. Wyndham Lewis p.102-3



appeared Lewis had not yet conceived the subtle advantages that such a multiple person would have in effectively removing the author from the scene of the action, yet allowing his ideas to filter through.

Pierpoint is apparently Lewis. At least he says all the right things to be Lewis. He defines the artist (in the Encyclical) as "that rare man born for an exacting intellectual task, and devoting his life unsparingly to it." He also claims to appeal less to passion than to reason(133-4), Lewis's constant claim; he uses a typical Lewisian pun: "Bloomsbury is really what is called 'old Bloomsbury', which is very moribund - the bloom is gone," (124) and he holds a typical Lewisian/Swiftian view of altruism:

"These people" (rich playboy artists) "are not likely to be of very much use to the art of which they become not a supporter but an exponent. For who ever heard of one artist helping another his competitor?"(133)

But most important of all he attacks all the right things. All the attacks on this society stem from him. If his standards are not correct then the book cannot be a clear and effective satire.

Pierpoint, of course, was the name of England's hangman for many years - and Lewis has seen the satirist's function as simply that of the public-spirited hangman performing his duty.<sup>20</sup>

In any case Lewis does not commit himself. This Lawgiver's name is Pierpoint, not Lewis - even if He can be faulted Lewis remains in the clear. But all the criticisms of Pierpoint are made by unreliable people, characters who are satirised themselves. This is hardly surprising since all the characters who actually appear in the book are satirised mercilessly - even Blackshirt, whom Wagner finds sympathetic apparently because of his hard eyes. Yet he is portrayed as brutal and given to sudden acts of violence, seen as jealous of Zagreus and the freedom with which he can use

Pierpoint's laugh; he objects that all Zagreus's tricks are borrowed from Pierpoint, but so for that matter are his own. Zagreus is said while in Mein's to be broadcasting Pierpoint's views, but at least he adds little bits of his own. Blackshirt is broadcasting all the time. He seems incapable of independent action unless it be violent.

When Dan suddenly starts drinking endless glasses of champagne he is at a complete loss as to what to do - simply because he had never thought to ask what to do in such a situation. Having no specific instructions from Pierpoint he simply does not know what to do - is as moronic as everyone else. He criticises Pierpoint's financial ability and boasts about his own - which is in turn criticised by Ratner, and he is continually talking about "we" in a self-aggrandizing manner. His main functions, aside from those of thug and stage-hand, are to replace Zagreus as Dan's guide and commentator while Zagreus has to be elsewhere and, incidentally, to undermine Zagreus in the eyes of the reader in case Zagreus has not managed to do that sufficiently clearly himself. Like Zagreus he mouths all the right opinions, but only when he is quoting Pierpoint; he simply provides an alternative spokesman to Zagreus.

Wagner, while seeing Blackshirt as a sympathetic character, says he is mildly satirised because: "He denounces Zagreus, who, however, proves an obedient Party disciple in the letter he hands to Dan; this is filled with lies and accuses Dan of the Democratic conceit, of wanting to be 'no-bigger-than-anybody-else'" 22

This letter reads in part:

22. Wagner. Op.cit. p.250

"it is no joke to have you on one's hands when you are demented with drink. It is excellent to have a giant's strength - to use it like a giant is another matter and causes one to be unpopular..... The als ob doctrine of a sportsmanlike average, that is the perfect democrat - rather aim at that you follow me! I may still be permitted to advise you. You are not asked to regard yourself as a pigmy: on the other hand it is expected of you to contrive to give the impression of being-no-bigger-than-anybody-else. Woe to you if you don't! If you do not acquire this simple democratic habit of make-believe, there is no place for you in contemporary life - you may take this from me," (b34)

And this is Zagreus supposed to be accusing Dan of the Democratic conceit!

As I read it (and it does not seem to me to be a difficult reading) the letter ADVISES Dan to be no bigger than anybody else, or at least to pretend to be. With incredibly heavy irony on Lewis's part he is told by this so-called spokesman of Pierpoint's to conform to urbane life within the herd, to the democratic average, to be small. A giant who behaves like a giant is a bully, Zagreus warns him! In other words Zagreus is not being "a good party man" as Wagner puts it (with its implication in party man that Pierpoint is a fascist) but is in fact uttering a complete heresy - which he tends to do every time he acts on his own initiative for the simple reason that he is still an Ape at heart.

Zagreus is the real creation of satiric genius. It is undeniably a masterstroke on Lewis's part to put all his opinions into the mouth of one of the most satirised characters in the book in such a way that the opinions themselves are not undermined.

The effect is that of a clown coming onto a stage and reeling off a sermon of vigour and brilliance, before stooping over, squeezing his hands between his legs and saying, "Aren't I clever? I remembered it all!" This in fact is almost precisely what Zagreus does on occasions. A homosexual albino, he appears to have learned nothing whatsoever from Pierpoint outside of the

of the arguments he can repeat except how to use these arguments and such power as he derives from the money he either has or pretends to have, to spit in Ratner's face, and to indulge in the worst aspects of the Youth Cult, elevating young morons into geni for homosexual motives.

There is something very prophetic about this picture of a disciple who regards Pierpoint as a genius, who soaks up every word and gesture of his master, and spends his time rehearsing and imitating them yet absorbs absolutely none of the spirit of the teaching, and in his every independent action is the living contradiction of all he has been taught.

More than 20 years later Lewis, in Rotting Hill, writes of just such a man. With a remarkable lack of bitterness he recounts how an ex-army sergeant turned art-teacher (under the politicians' theory that it does not take long to become anything: because politicians are professional amateurs), visits him full of enthusiasm for his early pamphlet 'The Caliph's Design'. In this Lewis proposes that London should be rebuilt from the ground up, and that it should be rebuilt by artists and sculptors working with imaginative architects so that art would be an immediate object of apprehension to everyone in the streets. Wherever one went one would see beauty, and the arts would once more become meaningful in the life of the community - a process which would inevitably revitalise the arts.

Certainly this is an exciting vision - though for Lewis I think the emphasis is on the good which this would do for the artist, rather than for the people, but it is certainly a very positive and imaginative work.

This art teacher, however, as Lewis quickly realises has no real interest in art at all, no interest in rigorous training

or in discipline, but is concerned only to get people excited about something like The Caliph's Design to produce a Revolution.

He is, in other words, a kind of art racketeer of the type that Lewis had been fighting all his life, a kind of Zagreus. As Jesus, and presumably Pierpoint, had already discovered, disciples can have their drawbacks.

So there we have the elusive Mr. Wyndham Lewis sheltering behind Pierpoint who in his turn shelters behind Zagreus who does the dirty work of taking Mohammed to the morons and is heartily detested for his pains, whereas he would clearly be well liked by this group if he stuck merely to stealing doors and vanishing bleeding transvestite bodies. As an ultimate irony Lewis makes Zagreus deliver one of Pierpoint's lectures on satire. He uses it to score points off Lionel Keim as he points out how afraid he would be of being exposed to the truth of a satirist like Swift, as opposed to the gossip-column editors who pass for satirists in London society, who flatter more than expose, and who use a mask of impersonality to be more personal than ever in their cheap gibes. Zagreus puffs himself as 'the hero' and repeats, clearly identifying himself strongly, "What we call 'great' - what we call "great" - that is the reality.!" (274)

"truth", he says, quoting Pierpoint, "used as a weapon only... must lose its significance." (266). Quite so, and Zagreus never uses it any other way; certainly it has no significance for him. It is entirely fitting that as the General Strike starts, and Dan is despatched to the safety of his pseudo-Irish seductress, (while indeed his latest boy-genius waits downstairs), Zagreus finds the dead body of Sir James, and agrees to marry the decrepit epitome of the whole society who, closing her eyes with virgin-rapture at his kiss, collapses in his arms, the final love scene of a

of a vicious albino homosexual and a dead society.

CHAPTER 5 : THE ROARING QUEEN.

The Roaring Queen as a novel, will require little more than a short note here. Originally scheduled for publication in 1936, the novel was withdrawn by Cape for fear of libel actions, and eventually published only 1973: when most of the putative targets could be presumed dead. Its importance seems to me to be mainly in its interest as a historical curiosity, rather than as a novel, for The Roaring Queen, funny as it occasionally is, does not stand a qualitative comparison with any of Lewis's other novels. It has been said, in mitigation of the novel's poor quality, that Lewis himself had a poor opinion of the novel, but that he was desperately in need of funds at the time, and sold the novel purely for the money.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand it is apparent from Lewis's letter to his publishers, protesting at their fears over libel, that he regarded the sum of money he was to receive for the novel as paltry in the extreme.<sup>2</sup>

Lewis's opinion of the novel was, of course, likely to be lost beneath his indignation that the novel was 'suppressed', and he included The Roaring Queen in a list of his books at the end of Rude Assignment - as one of three which were suppressed.

Apart from this however, he seems to have said little about the novel and I rather doubt if he was very sorry that the novel never appeared, for it would have done nothing to enhance his reputation.

The novel itself is a pleasant enough skit on the book-world of the late twenties, with Arnold Bennett, seen as a fat old book-dictator, as the main target. There is some nice comedy, centring around the habits of this circle - habits of plagiarism, puffing bad books, discovering seven-day wonders, and of course, declaring

1. Porteus, H.G. "Lewis's Libel" (letter) Listener 23rd 1973 p.230.

2. Letters p.240-41



a book to be a work of genius without ever having read it. The comedy remains light, never dragging in the way that it can occasionally be said to do in The Apes of God, but this is partly because it never at any time attains the degree of consequence of the other novel. The scene is set at a country house book-party, held to stage the discovery of yet another instant genius, Donald Butterboy, an Oxford gossip, who is vaguely engaged to the hostess's daughter, Baby Bucktrout. The latter is one of the livelier characters in the novel, mainly because she is a nymphomaniacal disciple of D.H. Lawrence.

We meet the various characters as they travel to and assemble at the house, and we are treated to satirical chunks of their vacuous conversation - even shown their pained reaction to the accidental mention of the name of Wyndham Lewis.

Eventually, late that night, several shots are heard, and we discover that Butterboy has been murdered in his bed. We are meant, apparently, to guess that Butterboy has been murdered by an Oxford friend, Osorio Potter, so as to prevent him from receiving the Book of The Book Club Award from Bennett (Samuel Shodbutt). Needless to say, after all the foregoing satire, the reader is more likely to wish that Potter prevented this award from ever being made again by murdering Shodbutt instead of Butterboy - but of course Potter would like to win the award himself.

The murder is apparently not a very serious event: more an opportunity for dozens of assembled crime-fiction writers to concoct ingenious theories. A private detective is (rather implausibly) called in and he proceeds to interview Potter, - suspecting him immediately, because Potter and the detective are personal friends and Potter had propositioned the detective to

to commit murder only hours earlier!

Potter however, outmanouvres his detective friend in the most amateurish fashion, and shift suspicion onto Shodbutt, who is immediately accused of being a murderer. And at this point the novel terminates, for the hostess, Mrs. Wellesley-Crook will simply not allow her guest of honour to be accused of such crimes, and she throws the detective out. The murder is left unsolved, although everyone seems to know that it was Potter, because, I think, Lewis wished to deliberately frustrate the structure of the detective novel, where the murder is solved in the last chapter.

Although it is not a tedious novel, The Roaring Queen is in no sense an important book, nor does it ever give the impression of aspiring to be. From the point of view of this thesis however, the date of composition of the novel is of considerable importance. It seems to me that The Roaring Queen is a harmless splinter from The Apes of God, and the argument of my thesis is that increasingly, after The Apes Lewis came to adopt a different view of humanity which is reflected in a change of style and content in his work. The first example of this seems to me to appear in Snooty Baronet, dealt with in the next chapter. But Snooty Baronet was published (and probably mostly written) in 1932, whereas The Roaring Queen was scheduled for publication in 1936. If Snooty predates The Roaring Queen this part of my thesis becomes extremely doubtful, for it is unlikely that Lewis, if he intended the kind of satire which I believe <sup>is</sup> in Snooty, would revert to The Apes a few years later.

Fortunately, however, the publication of The Roaring Queen brought a letter to T.L.S. from Victor Cassidy, a scholar currently working on Lewis's biography in America:

"Sir, I write in reference to the review of The Roaring Queen (Aug.3). Your reviewer's instincts are remarkable. He believes The Roaring Queen 'was written well before 1930 - it was. In the Lewis collection at Cornell University there is a letter dated 1930 from C.H. Prentice (of Chatto & Windus, Lewis's publisher in those days) refusing The Roaring Queen for fear of libel action. There is another letter written during the same period by a personal friend of Lewis asking to read the book.

The idea of writing this satire may well have come to Lewis in 1927 when Bennett published an unfavourable review of Lewis's magazine, The Enemy, calling it over-combative and occasionally petty. Lewis replied with a letter to the editor which urged less politeness in literary criticism. He seems not to have forgotten the matter." 3

It must have been pleasant for that reviewer to discover how remarkable his instincts were. It was even more pleasant for me to find a lynch-pin of my thesis substantiated when the publication of The Roaring Queen had severely threatened it. I would like to thank Mr. Cassidy.

CHAPTER 6 : SNOOTY BARONET.

100.

Snooty Baronet is a perplexing novel. It comes after The Apes of God and before The Revenge For Love, both now Penguin Modern Classics, and the first edition in fact outsold both of the others;<sup>1</sup> the novel itself occupies more than three hundred pages of prose which has been described by Hugh Kenner as 'loosely brilliant' 'finally machined' and an 'impressive efflorescence'.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the novel has been treated with an embarrassment and silence second only to Lewis's last novel 'The Red Priest'. The reason for this would appear to be that the novel appears to have little or no point and looks in danger of being an inconsequential bore.

There is general agreement with Kenner's claims for the brilliance of the language - though no apparent agreement as to in what this brilliance consists - Richard Mayne for example asserts "Lewis's 'Vorticist' prose reappeared for the last time in Snooty Baronet"<sup>3</sup> while Julian Symons calls it an 'adaptation of his original style' and groups it with, The Revenge For Love and The Vulgar Streak, the three novels of the 'thirties which he thinks have their own distinctive style'.<sup>4</sup> Yet a comparison of Snooty with either the prose of Blast or that of The Revenge for Love will reveal no real similarities with either; Snooty is unique among Lewis's novels in being written in the first person singular and the style is correspondingly unique: casual, off-hand, yet capable of both depth and articulation.

There are moments when Snooty's chatter suddenly becomes grimly meaningful:

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1. Julian Symons. "The Thirties Novels" Agenda 8.1. p.33
  2. Hugh Kenner. "Lyndham Lewis" Methuen 1954. pp91, 93 & 112
  3. Mayne, Richard, "Bloomsbury's Sete Noir" New Statesman 50:721.226 1955
  4. Symons. op.cit. p.40

"These are exceedingly hard and heavy times - hard in every sense. They are times of great and wonderful profusion and plenty and of technical powers of limitless production beyond man's dreams. But upon all that plenty and all that power to use it, is come a dark embargo. It is all locked away from us. By artificial systems of great cunning this land flowing with milk and honey has been transformed into a waterless desert. There all the nations of the earth come in tremendous masses as if afflicted with the pestilence that follows famine. From being skinned and fleeced, we shall at last have nothing. And it is not nature but it is man who is responsible for this. That is why I have thrown in my lot with nature - that is why I break the social contract, and the human pact. Yet when we, children of these conditions, in our turn show ourselves hard and insensible - ever armed to the teeth, never with our guard down, darkling and vigilant - we are loudly denounced as inhumane. But pace! pace! We are only scouting upon the fringes of this. Here we do not embark upon those questions." (113-4)

Such moments are generally marked, as here, by an increased formalism of language, and we recognise here some of Lewis's ideas on Social Credit from his book on Hitler. But the prose is not normally on this level, rather it is marked by parentheses and yawns, and instead of appearing densely packed the impression is of vacuity - indeed there are times when the words seem hardly consequential enough to interpose themselves between the spaces on the page.

Faced with this, most critics content themselves with telling the story: The hero of the novel is one Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, a very snooty Baronet with a wooden leg who lives on his war pension and the income from his books on behaviourism - field studies of people seen as animals. His aging principal mistress Valerie Ritter, a dated Chelsea gossipier, wishes to take him abroad on holiday while his literary agent, the absurd Captain Humphrey Cooper-Carter (Humph) wishes to take him to Persia to study the Mithraic bull-cult and arrange a false kidnapping to publicize the ensuing book.

So, bickering and quarreling, all three set off for Persia, Snooty trying to play the other two off against each other - with uncertain success. The first stop is France where they hope to

recruit Rob McPhail (Roy Campbell, thinly disguised) bullfighter and poet; however, McPhail after a few unpoetic conversations, dies fighting a bull, much to his friend Snooty's annoyance, and the trio have to go to Persia alone.

Persia itself is a slow bored procession of quarrels and brothels until the Chicago-trained Persian brigand who arranges such kidnappings hoves in sight. Amid a certain amount of confusion Snooty calmly shoots Humph 'on impulse' and then cheerfully pretends that nothing has happened. Val catches smallpox, which ravages her already disintegrating features and Snooty, considerably enriched by all the publicity, sets up house with a Persian prostitute happily justifying himself on the grounds of his consistency.

That, then, is the plot. In my view it has very little to do with what the book is about. Unhappily even resumé's of the plot contain mistakes. For example Julian Symons<sup>5</sup> says that after being kidnapped Snooty is rescued and returns to London. In fact the brigand releases him and he does not return to London but goes to the Bosphorus.

These are minor, if obvious errors but they are typical of the way that this apparently inconsequential (or 'skittish' as Wagner calls it<sup>6</sup>) novel has evaded close scrutiny, and mistakes have been made too in the evidence on which critics have based their assessment of Snooty himself, and this assessment is crucial to the meaning of the novel.

It is worth quoting rather extensively from Hugh Kenner's criticism of the novel for not only is it a brilliant half-truth but subsequent critics who have not merely evaded the question of

5. *ibid.* p.39

6. Wagner, Geoffrey, "Wyndham Lewis" Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957 p.256

the novel's significance have in fact adopted Kenner's view. Kenner then, sees the novel as the last of Lewis's "puppet-fiction" - "replete with snags unforeseen in the days of the easy Hanp-Arghol schema".<sup>7</sup>

"By Snooty Baronet the style has reached its most impressive efflorescence, and the matter...a fragmented nullity that doesn't redeem some very lively pages. A brilliant array of techniques for articulating the carapaces of the unreal may be observed in Lewis's middle period in pursuit of a subject to complement its own vitality" 8

"Time and Western Man had argued that the Behaviourist, in reducing the person to a set of predictable gestures was insulting the human race. In the same year Lewis was producing a body of fiction on the premise that people were nothing else. This fiction started by being satire employing the strategy of appearing to know no more about the character than a set of behaviourists tests would reveal. Lewis gradually came to doubt if there were in fact any more to know...came to accept the satiric premises as truth.

The only person the behaviourist had insulted, it appears, was Wyndham Lewis. In Snooty Baronet, the last of the automaton novels the author's persona and first person narrator becomes, with only partial irony, an avowed behaviourist doing field-work" 9

Here we should note the crux of Kenner's whole argument, without which his interpretation of the novel falls flat - he identifies Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, Snooty himself, as 'the author's persona' as Wyndham Lewis. Other critics have not been slow to take this up. William Pritchard for example, while conceding that Snooty has "more life than the figures surrounding him, and he therefore wins our amused partisanship",<sup>10</sup> goes on to attack Lewis for identifying too much with his hero.

There is a stumbling block to this interpretation. On April 6th, 1932 while still working on the book Lewis wrote to Roy Campbell to apologise and explain his inclusion of a Campbell-persona in the novel.

7. Kenner. op.cit. p.91

8. Ibid. p.93

9. Ibid. p.107

10. Pritchard, William "Wyndham Lewis" Twayne, New York 1968 p.111



He calls Snooty 'preposterous', an ill-mannered and lunatic puppet', and 'one of the most objectionable puppets it is easy to imagine.<sup>11</sup> Moreover he twice disclaims identifying himself with Snooty's interpretations of events: "But for heaven's sake do not consider that what my behaviourist puppet hints at is a reflection of anything that could ever possibly cross my mind"<sup>11</sup>

Pritchard's response to this is in the mode of 'methinks the gentleman does protest too much' -- he dismisses the letter as being merely that of a man placating his friend and persists in his view that Lewis identifies with Snooty.

Far from believing that Lewis has become a behaviourist, I believe that examination of the novel will show that Snooty is himself an object of satire, and that Lewis is consciously exposing the dangers of viewing people as objects.

Kenner has a glimmering of this when he discusses the incident of the Hatter's dummy. Snooty is reminded of Humph by this automaton in a shop window, but while thinking of how unreal all the rest of the world is, he catches a glimpse of himself as also unreal and he finds this frightening. For Kenner this is Lewis beginning to realise the problems of creating a real character in the midst of all this puppet-fiction -- "He is not unaware of the vacuum he has entered"<sup>12</sup> But for Kenner this is just the beginning of Lewis's insight; he believes that it is not until 'about the mid-thirties' (after One Way Song, for example) that "Lewis grasped...that the wild body has lurched into a blind alley" and accordingly for Kenner the humanised prose of The Revenge For Love is the "incalculable" happening -- like stumbling across the Persian desert to an oasis.

11. Letters. p.205-6

12. Kenner. op.cit. p.111

Such has been the novel's treatment. In a sense it has never been looked at for its self. As Pritchard puts it : "A performance so curious and, at first glance, so desperately trivial should be pressed for what it may yield about the state of Lewis's fictional soul after it had suffered The Apes of God"<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary it seems to me it should be pressed for what it may yield about its meaning, and I believe the yield may be unexpectedly high.

Before analysing the novel however, I should like to pick some curious features out of it. These are Snooty's identification with Samuel Butler, William Windham, and Moby Dick. A considerable amount of the novel's space is given up to discussion of, or reference to these characters yet no critic has written a word about them.

Samuel Butler is, I think, the most important of them. Snooty spends a great deal of his time pretending to be Samuel Butler. Butler first appears on page 14. and we learn of Snooty's fascination with Butler's habits with women. We then learn that Snooty has a Butler smile which all his friends hate because it makes them uncomfortable and a Butler laugh which does not seem to be quite so effective as the smile, but nevertheless the two serve Snooty virtually as weapons, along with his other weapons which appear to be yawning and acting bored. These too, we gather from page 20, Snooty associates with Butler. The Butler smile and laugh reverberate through the pages of the novel and of course the yawning never stops - clearly Butler is important - at least to Snooty. Why?

13. Pritchard. op.cit. p.108

It is easy to see why Butler should appeal to Lewis. There was in fact a Butler revival in the 'twenties, with the publication of the collected works and a great deal of criticism, but Lewis had clearly been reading Butler long before that. In 1904 he wrote to his mother asking her to send him a copy of Butler's "Seven Sonnets and a Psalm of Montreal" published in that year<sup>14</sup>, and thirty years later writing to Naomi Mitchison he speaks of sowing the seeds of suspicion in the young: "Lane's Arabian Nights, Swift and Samuel Butler ought to be put into their <sup>LITTLE</sup> hands as soon as possible"<sup>15</sup> considering his high opinion of Swift this is praise indeed. Lewis's own work also displays a fair knowledge of Butler's work as for example when in The Lion and the Fox he says "Whether Homer was written by a woman or not I think Shakespeare was."<sup>16</sup> he is clearly referring to Butler's book "The Authoress of The Odyssey" Tarr parodies Butler when he exclaims: "Oh Sex! Oh Montreal!" (from the Psalm of Montreal - O God! O Montreal!) and Butler's Notebooks are quoted on page 1. of The Art of Being Ruled. Lewis's interest in Butler was also very much up to date. Indeed the references to Butler's sex life in Snooty Baronet together with the mentions of Butler's account of his friendship with Pauli (Snooty p.15) could only have been drawn from the issue of Life and Letters of October 1931, which was dedicated to Butler, and where these details were first published. Considering the Snooty Baronet was published in September of 1932, Lewis must have read the magazine and worked the details in quite quickly. Indeed it is possible that the use of frequent parentheses as a stylistic device in Snooty derives from the relative proliferation

14. Letters. p.16

15. Ibid. p.216

16. Lewis, Wyndham, The Lion & the Fox U.P. Methuen 1955 p.154

of them in Butler's account of his relationship with Pauli in that issue.

In the light of all this one wonders if Lewis had Butler in mind when he wrote Self-Condemned (Butler wrote the line 'O God, O Montreal', after all). For Butler in one of his letters to Miss Savage condemned George Eliot's 'Middlemarch': 'I call it bad and not interesting: there is not sweetness in the whole book... a long-winded piece of brag... singularly unattractive.'<sup>17</sup> It is of course, this same book which Rene hurls overboard on his way to Canada.

However such speculation to one side, there are definite elements in Butler's life and work which are calculated to appeal to Lewis.

A sentence from Butler's Notebooks: "God is not so white as he is painted, and he gets on better with the Devil than most people think." is, to judge from The Human Age, precisely the kind of line which Lewis liked. Butler would appeal to him as the 'portmanteau man' - a painter and musician as well as writer, a translator, poet, satirist and scientific-philosophic theorist. Lewis would certainly have agreed with the spirit of his objections to Darwinism -

"Always he disliked the idea of a mechanically determined universe; and the Darwinian doctrine of natural selection alienated his sympathy because it seemed to make an end of Free Will as the director of Human affairs." 18

In fact the careers of the two men are remarkably similar. Both for example meddled in specialist affairs (Shakespearian criticism) and though producing interesting books both got sneered at by the specialists for their pains; and both suffered from a partly justified persecution complex, finding their books ignored by influential sections of the community because they flowed against the zeitgeist.

17. Quoted by G.D.H. Cole "Samuel Butler" p.79 Home & Van Thal Ltd. London 1947

All this explains why Butler would appeal to Wyndham Lewis, but why would he also appeal to Snooty, assuming that the interests of author and hero are not identical?

Snooty takes Butler as the bored, amused, detached satirist commenting in a superior fashion on other people, and indeed in Butler's assertion that Miss Savage bored him and that she wanted to marry him (he had a horror of marriage) there are elements of Snooty's attitude to Val. Yet Lewis must have known from reading Butler's account of his relations with Charles Pauli that he was obsessed by the idea that he bored other people rather than was bored by them - and the idea never penetrates Snooty's skull that he is boring other people. The point I think is that Snooty essentially misunderstands the people he professes to admire (as when he admires D.H. Lawrence, yet is a clear believer in white supremacy). The crux of this is in Snooty's view of other people as machines - which I think is the subject of the novel.

Butler's most successful book (discounting the posthumously published "The Way of All Flesh") was "Erewhon", a kind of Gulliver's Travels later imitated by H.G. Wells in The Time Machine. Much of the latter part of this book is taken up with what purports to be a translation of a book found in the kingdom of Erewhon (Nowhere). This is The Book of the Machines, and is, I think very important in interpreting Snooty Baronet. To quote Cole:

"The Book of The Machines is in substance an onslaught on the false use of analogy. (Butler) had a deep distrust of analogical argument.... He was fully convinced that the notion of human beings, or indeed of any living things, being "just like" machines was all wrong" 19

In other words the book is an attack on the principles which Snooty holds most dear!

Leonard Woolf (a writer Lewis surely read!) wrote in 1927 that "Erewhon" "remains in many ways the queerest satire that has ever been written. It is extraordinarily unemotional... what can be more disquieting than a humorist who is never amused"<sup>20</sup>, and he speaks of Butler being 'believed' - that is of people mistaking his deadpan expression for seriousness, and taking him seriously.

Desmond MacCarthy also commented on Butler's 'divorce of flesh and feeling' with his kept woman (in the issue of Life and Letters referred to above) and this is an aspect of Butler which Snooty dwells jealously upon.

Out of all this welter I believe Lewis has created a hero who mistakes unemotional satire for viciousness, and taking Butler's name in vain, behaves viciously to the rest of the world.

I also believe that Lewis draws on The Book of The Machines for elements of Snooty Baronet. The idea of machines having stomachs and of stomachs being machines is used when (p.160) Snooty refers to his bread-basket, and the idea of mechanical limbs assumes some importance: (machines are here being defended):

"A machine is merely a supplementary limb; this is the be all and end all of machinery. We do not use our own limbs other than as machines; and a leg is only a much better wooden leg than anyone can manufacture." <sup>21</sup>

This may be one reason why Snooty has a wooden leg (and a silver plate in his head); he is already part-machine. Indeed the plate in his head will not allow him to have sex without being sick.

There are, however, other limbs mentioned. There is the idea of communal limbs - trains for example. Snooty objects to being

20. Leonard Woolf. Essays 1927. L & V Woolf. London 1927

21. Butler, Samuel "Erewhon" p.270-1 Fifield. London 1908

"boxed up with a hull-full of morons" on his atlantic crossing but of course communal anything is anathema to him. The idea is put forward of telephones as limbs - one of the limbs used to distinguish between levels of mankind; for while the poor have their souls 'clogged and hampered by matter, which sticks fast about them as treacle to the wings of a fly'<sup>22</sup> (we remember Rene and Hester in Self Condemned described as flies in treacle) the rich can defy all material impediment with their additional limbs.

Lewis makes great play of the telephone mannerisms of both Val with her terribly finished telephone act (which she overdoes when she put the telephone in the butter) and Humph with his busy impresario act, while Snooty disdains to own a telephone at all - he uses the one in the local pub.

Oddly enough if Snooty Baronet is intended as a protest against seeing men as machines, a very prominent book which does exactly that had been published by the Publishers of Snooty (Cassel) in 1931, just before Lewis began to write Snooty. It was called The Science of Life by H.G. Wells, Julian Huxley and G.P. Wells (H.G.'s son). This included chapters such as "THE BODY IS A MACHINE", "Why we call bodies machines", "THE FUELLING AND CLEANSING OF THE BODY-MACHINE", "THE MACHINERY OF SENSATION," "THE WEARING OUT OF THE MACHINE AND ITS REPRODUCTION "; and, even more oddly, it contains an experiment about the heat produced by the human body very similar to one described in The Book of The Machines.

While discussing possible contemporary stimuli for Snooty Baronet it is worth mentioning another possible reason for Snooty having an artificial leg. Lewis's series of articles in 1931 in Pime and Tide

22. Butler. op.cit. 272

on the Youth Cult (which later became his book The Doom of Youth) were followed by two articles on the same subject by G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton said of Lewis that he was "The surgeon who does not know whether he is cutting the leg off the man or the man off the leg."<sup>23</sup> With Snooty the question is whether we have a machine attached to a man or a man to a machine, and there may well be a Lewisian joke here.

When he is not 'doing' Samuel Butler, Snooty seems to want to be William Windham - not the baronet by that name, but the politician disciple of Burke, 1750-1810. In his own words "If I had to pick out of our annals a figure to explain myself by, I could think of no better one than...William Windham." (110). The reason for this is by no means clear, but since Windham is first mentioned on page 6 and later has several pages devoted completely to a discussion of his life, ending with Snooty's claim; "...I feel in a certain measure that I stand or fall with Windham - bull-baiter, Apostate, Weathercock and Flirt! (112) then presumably it is of some importance. We are left with the invitation. "That is all I have intended to say. It rests with you to turn to the "Papers" if you wish to." (112) No one seems to have actually done this. Or perhaps they have and found nothing relevant. Certainly it is hard to see what Snooty thinks he has in common with Windham (not over-looking the fact that this may be a joke on Lewis's own name as is the reference to a Lewis-gun on page 203).

Consulting "The Windham Papers"<sup>24</sup> we find that Lewis has been quoting extensively from the Earl of Rosebury's short introduction yet there is little of obvious significance to Snooty. The aspect

23. Chesterton G.K. Time and Tide 8/8/31

24. "The Windham Papers" Herbert Jenkins Ltd. London 1913  
(2 vols)



of Windham which appears to fascinate Snooty most is his flirtations with women (as with Butler the fascination is also his sex-life), yet Rosebury is diffident about these flirtations saying merely: "We may be sure that Windham's flirtations were unconscious, honourable and innocent."<sup>25</sup> None of this could be said of Snooty's! The reason for the flirtations too, "the snare of conversational charm," would hardly apply to Snooty. Snooty raises the subject, however in connection with his 'capacity for sacrifice' and friendship, a rare quality which he thinks he has, though in the light of his behaviour towards Rob McPhail he certainly has not. Butler has this quality, as witness his long allegiance to Pauli, Windham had it too as we learn from his steady support for Burke and the account of his attendance at the death-bed of Dr. Johnson and his grief at his death - which contrasts sharply with Snooty's reaction to McPhail's death.

Windham's capacity for sacrifice in friendship is also shown in the incident which led to his own death: he rushed into a friend's house to try to save his library from a fire, and in the process injured his hip (Snooty's wooden leg?), an injury which eventually killed him. Snooty on the other hand, unlike Gulliver, whom he also admires, wouldn't cross the street to urinate on a friend who was on fire, and is most unlikely to injure himself trying to help anyone else. Windham is, I think, like Butler, a character whom Snooty misinterprets to justify his own actions.

Moby Dick is more confusing still, as Snooty's fascination for the idea of the whale against man as the One against the Many occupies considerable space in the novel and the idea of himself

25. Windham Papers p. XVI.

as Leviathan even occupies Snooty's dreams in Persia. Some of the complications arise because some of Snooty's arguments (about the herd against the individual) are Lewis's while his conclusions are fiercely anti-man- which Lewis always insisted he was not. We have a one-legged man certainly, in Ahab, but Snooty sees him as the enemy Herd and sides with the giant, solitary whale.

Yet what does the whale represent? Moby Dick enjoyed, as Snooty says great popularity in the 'twenties, and while the first book on Melville was not published in England until 1926<sup>26</sup>, D.H. Lawrence (greatly admired by Snooty and detested by Lewis) had published an essay on it in 1923<sup>27</sup>. This saw the whale as "our deepest blood-nature...hunted by our white mental consciousness... the last phallic being of the white man....Hot blooded sea-born Moby Dick. Hunted by monomaniacs of the idea."

It need hardly be said that Lewis would be more inclined to side with the mental consciousness, with the idea, than with the phallic being. The small brain and large spine which appealed so much to Melville would not appeal to Lewis.

I think, therefore, we can assume that Snooty's opinions part company with Lewis's once more in his admiration for the whale, but there are one or two other odd circumstances to look at. One is the significance of fire.

"The fire" figures twice in the novel, and on both occasions it is in a sexual scene. The first time (p.47) Snooty has just gone to bed with Val, and in line with the novel's concern with space and place ("Will you pass over the Atlantic with me as quickly as possible, please (5)") the reader is left standing in the main room while Snooty and his mistress disappear beyond our view.

26. Freeman. J. "Herman Melville" Macmillan, London 1926

27. Lawrence D.H. "Moby Dick". Selected Essays. Penguin 1965

"The room where we had been eating and conversing was empty at last, except for the robust solus behaviour of the coal-fire. That still discharged an occasional round for luck (and to prove it was still there and independent of our consciousness) at the high georgian ceiling, or sent up a flickering violet flare. (How well I understand the unique position of the carbon atom in our Mysterious Universe)".

The idea of an object not being independent of our consciousness is repeated in Lewis (e.g. Self Condemned - of Hester) and also of course Snooty refuses to believe that Humph is independent of his (Snooty's) consciousness. But the last sentence is really rather odd and its meaning obscure. However fire occurs again on page 128. Here Snooty is about to have sex with Lily his kiosk - tobacconist mistress. He specifically tells us he marches her like a mechanical dollie through to the room where the fire is, until they stand in front of it. When she is undressed:

"I was looking down at her, my left arm stuck our stiff and straight as if it had been a wooden one, and rivetted to a shot-off shoulder stump, and my hand stuck in stiff too, up under her right arm-pit, while the fire roared in the grate behind her as if it wished to devour her as well as me. And she erect between us, was like a flame of snow." (128)

The precise significance of this is difficult to determine, but Melville certainly had a preoccupation with fire and Lawrence quotes in his essay the incident of the dying whale turning his head towards the sun: "He turns and turns him to it; how slowly, but how steadfastly, his home-rendering and invoking brow, with his dying motions. He too worships fire..."<sup>28</sup> While another aspect of Melville's view of fire is also revealed in a quotation from the Lawrence essay. Lawrence is quoting the description of the second mate, Stubb: "Fearless as fire, and as mechanical."

28. Lawrence op.cit. p.256

It may well be that Snooty is more mechanically involved than he realises.

There is one final point before we leave Moby Dick. The structure of Humph's body, which Snooty describes with meticulous contempt - ENORMOUS head, large trunk, hardly any legs, is, like Hamlet's cloud, 'very like a whale'. This may be coincidence of course, but it would fit in with Snooty being what he continually sees other people as being - a mechanical puppet.

To turn to the workings of the novel. Snooty is introduced to us as a mechanism; "Numbers clicking up in its counting box, back of the retina, in a vigesimal check-off." (1) but many of his initial performances are reminiscent of Lewis's own - "(Caps. for the First Person Singular)".

On the problem of introducing himself:

"I could hardly say "The taxi stopped. I crawled out. I have a wooden leg!" Tactically, that would be hopelessly bad. You would simply say to yourself, 'This must be a dull book. The hero has a wooden leg. Is the War not over yet?' and throw the thing down in a very bad temper cursing your lending library." (2)

Here the manner (and the humour of assuming the book will be borrowed, not bought) is very much Lewis's - and there is the added unconscious irony that the book was in fact banned by Boots Lending Library!

The whole opening proceeds in this fashion, with a comical self-consciousness about language and novel-writing:

"My God I had forgotten. I suppose I have to describe her for you. That is a bore. I had forgotten about it." (17)

"I rose from what an American would undoubtedly describe as a davenport - and if you are an American that is what it was." (18)

Snooty has the Enemy (& the Tyro) characteristics of large teeth - "my pack of visiting cards" (14) and in fact on page 19 Val is watching his movements "as if they had been those of a

rude and incalculable enemy."

As his interview with Val proceeds we come to realise that he is rude and incalculable - and completely insensitive to Val's feelings. Pritchard makes the point that we are never allowed to feel sorry for Val and this is probably true, but we do begin to wonder what Snooty is doing there at all since he so obviously detests her. The answer is, of course, sex, but it is not an altogether satisfactory explanation, because later in the novel it seems that Snooty is almost completely sexually indifferent to her - in fact he claims in Persia that he slept with her only to keep her happy!

In The Apes of God Lewis hides behind Pierpoint who in turn hides behind Zagreus precisely because the satirist cannot mingle with the herd without becoming one of the herd himself. No such precautions are taken here and Snooty destroys his own standpoint of superiority by his commence with the objects he derides.

It is soon clear however, that this is not a tactical error on Lewis's part, but a deliberate device used to satirise Snooty.

We discover as early as page sixteen where Snooty uses Einstein's Theory of Relativity to evade the responsibility for calling on Val, that Snooty is not a type of Lewis, for it is precisely this kind of pseudo-scientific sophistry that Lewis spent so much of his energy combatting.

There is a certain amount of ridiculing of convention which is Butlerian in its inversion. For example our attitudes to women are not shared by Snooty - "Women and children last!" (8) - as can be seen from the fact that Snooty regarded his intervention in a fight between a man and a woman - in order to hit the woman - as a chivalrous impulse!

But it becomes clear that the one thing Snooty will not ridicule, in spite of his comments about himself as ponderous and slow, is his self-esteem. Snooty for example, does not kiss. He bestows an accolade. And while he blames Val for depressing him "with a mannikin-parade of all her poshest social attitudes and a whole wardrobe of complexes" (44) he is not free of posturing himself. For example while he mercilessly satirises other people for their telephone 'acts' his own carefully negligent handling of the telephone (page 53) is just as much of an act designed to create a petty impression, though, of course Snooty treats it as a triumph.

Snooty introduces us to Humph in a similarly heavy-handed, pro-Snooty manner. "The chap is all chin" (57) "If faces were made of wood...then the spring-worked cache at the bottom would be used by this idiot for carrying despatches, on that I'd stake my life."

"Humph is absolutely like a big carnival doll...his brow is one of those meaningless expanses of tanned wood." (58) He is an "animal" and "a lousy little automaton". Humph is not real. I may not myself be very real.... but Humph is twice as bad.... This man is a puppet..." (59)

Snooty is also critical of Humph for acting as someone else - "one of his best-selling heroes doubtless" (73). Yet this is precisely what Snooty is doing throughout the novel with his Butler act. This is not the last time, as we shall see, that Snooty finds insufferable certain elements of other people's behaviour which he finds admirable in himself.

There is, of course, considerable amusement in the way he plays with his 'puppets', as when he pretends to admire Humph's

escapades with his young female writers - before suggesting that they are lesbians (144); but his penetrating vision, in spite of all he says, does not apply to himself - his idea of himself is often absurd, and revealed as such by the novel's action.

For example having attacked Val over her precious telephone and demonstrated his own superiority in every way, he comments:

"Val was very quiet. She was very subdued. But she was too quiet I considered. She was watching me I thought too closely. It was with a novel interest I knew, and of course respect. There was great respect, that went without saying." (53)

It turns out that Val is considering asking him to come on holiday with her - as her kept man! Snooty ascribes this to her 'disgusting resilience', but never sees it as a reflection on himself.

Then too, while he is in some respect Lewisian, he can start with a Lewisian statement and pursue it to a completely opposite conclusion. It might be said he distorts Lewis as he distorts Butler and William Wyndham. For example page 108: "I am to a high degree logical....I do not reason - I intuit.... To feel, I take it, is to live .... You cannot, however much you try, separate thinking and feeling."

Here the initial statement is very Lewisian and everything which follows contradicts it.

Snooty's insensitivity to the feelings of others extends beyond his immediate protagonists, Val and Humph; for example when he meets Lily's 'uncle' he says to Lily in a loud whisper:

"We can get rid of the old boy afterwards! Let's give him a square meal first - he may remember you in his will!" (117)

The uncle over-hears this and seems rather annoyed - Snooty's comment on this: "I agree that the 'square meal' was a little

patronising and tactless".! The truth is he is incredibly rude, and too selfishly short-sighted to even question the truth of Lily's introduction of her 'uncle' and 'cousin'.

Snooty's view of other people as machines is steadily built up:

"But these people I regarded strictly as automata to be quite frank. It would be like going to Persia with a couple of rag-dolls.." except, he adds, that their talking mechanism cannot be turned off.(101)

Talking to Val gives him "an uncanny sensation - a sensation that I have often experienced in talking to persons of a low reality." (102). A few pages later, when he sleeps with a model it is because she is part of his field-work and he calls her a "dummy" and "it".

Snooty feels he is entirely consistent in all this. He claims the book is written to vindicate himself - not as 'the Baronet' but as a 'Servant of Truth'! (112) At least, he claims, I am not a shirker.

"I do not hide behind the waving arms and nodding heads of my marionettes. Anything but - why, I will dance a pas de quatre with the worst of them, and I will pick myself to pieces for the benefit of the Public as soon as look at it!..... But enough of this. My destruction of 'the Baronet' is not a Punch and Judy show after all." (113)

The reader could well be forgiven for doubting this last statement at least! So we are dealing with 'the destruction of the Baronet.', by which Snooty means the role of the Baronet in which other people have cast him. He hates these roles - the critics have also seen him as 'the artist' and 'the douanier', indeed the whole book, for Snooty is a struggle against being 'typed' as 'the Baronet' - something Humph seems determined to do. We remember Snooty's annoyance with Val when she produces (40) the newspaper clipping headed BARONET GOES SAMURAI, and of course



one of the ironies of the whole story, for Snooty at least, is that the king refuses to accept Snooty's attempt to give up his Baronetcy, advising him to enter a nursing-home for a month or so instead!

Snooty is clearly against the role prescription forced on him by 'the Baronet', it makes him into something mechanical; but the fact of the matter is, it is a role which he plays to the full, in which he actually revels. In France for example, he describes himself to the hotel-keeper as a Baron - and a captain - in order, apparently, to command respect, and in England too, he reacts mechanically in his role of Baronet. When Lily finds out he is a Baronet for example, he gives his Butler laugh for the first time in her presence, 'wrestles' with his 'snootiness', and finally concludes:

"My darling, my fleur-de-lys, had been blasted forever at this contact with 'Snooty' - Baronet."

Here we see Snooty being 'snooty' apparently involuntarily - he is as much a puppet reacting to strings as anyone else in the novel! Indeed the theme of Snooty as puppet comes to dominate the book - and to haunt Snooty himself.

The realization of the possibility comes in the scene with the Hatter's dummy. This scene has been highlighted by critics as being important - but its importance has never really been explained. Certainly it is crucial. It occurs at the mid-point in the novel, and for anyone who misses its significance when he reads it, Lewis as ever, provides a useful pointer at the end of the novel, when Snooty says he has supplied the motives and circumstances of the 'tragedy' "down to my encounter with the Hatter's automaton, which was a turning-point." (308)

What kind of turning point? Well let us read the scene and we shall see.

Snooty starts off, as always, regarding the other people as the machines: "These disagreeable puppets should be given rope with which to hang themselves....As to me in the charge of these machines..."(152) But he realises that they are treating him as a machine - indeed this is what so infuriates him: "They desired me to be their automaton! I would in the end become their Frankenstein!" (153) In this mood he comes upon the hatter's dummy, which he insists has as much reality as a real person. He sees the ridiculous aspects of the puppets appearance (large chin, trunk etc.) as reminiscent of Humph, but he is also aware of a bystander who is looking at the partly mechanical Snooty rather than at the dummy.

Snooty begins to reflect that Humph is a dummy too. And that the man standing beside him is also a puppet. Unfortunately this chain of thought leads him in an unaccustomed and unhappy direction: the thought strikes Snooty that he too is a puppet.. Here his real absurdity is mercilessly exposed, for even as, in his most honest moment Snooty sees himself as a puppet, he sees himself as "a very thoughtful and important puppet" (159-60). Nevertheless Snooty has a most uneasy moment. He has been 'caught' as it were, acting in unison with this puppet, placing his hat on his head. He moves uneasily between his own sense of the real and the unreal - a moment Lewis is able to catch very well: "I shifted uneasily up and down upon my real leg and my false leg..." (160)

Snooty turns the attack back to Humph, emphasises his unreality; but he is very much aware that "'Behaviour' had as it were turned round upon me as well. As the man at my side

observed me putting on my hat, I was for the first time placed in the position of the dummy." (163)

The realisation is fully expressed:

"I knew that I was not always existing, either: in fact that I was a fitful appearance. That I was apt to go out at any moment, and turn up again, in some other place - like a light turned on my accident or a figure upon a cinematographic screen. - And must I confess it? I was very slightly alarmed. I saw that I had to compete with these other creatures bursting all over the imaginary landscape, and struggling against me to be real - like a passionate battle for necessary air in a confined place. And as a result of all this I said to myself that, in my absurd conceit, I was giving Humph far too much rope. To hang himself - that was the idea. But would he not hang me, perhaps?" (163)

As he turns away Snooty sees a sign in front of a cinema:

"THE MAN-MADE MONSTER" and beneath the name "Frankenstein."

The impact is important.:

"Was this an accident? Had I not said, as I emerged from the Adelphi, 'I will in the end become their Frankenstein?'" (164)

There is an interesting point here. Are we talking about Frankenstein the creator or Frankenstein the monster? The confusion of the two in the popular mind is common today, but at the time when Lewis was writing it would have had particular point, for in a sense it was just beginning. To quote from a recent book on Frankenstein:

- c "Frankenstein... is above all a film... Its progress may be traced from 1931, when the original Frankenstein film was made in Hollywood, incorporating elements from the Yiddish tale of The Golem. In this first screen version the actor Boris Karloff played the Monster and fixed on the public mind not only an appearance that obscured all his other roles but a permanent image (which is in fact a copyright one) of a man-made being, a mixture of machinery and flesh and blood." 29

Remember that immediately above Snooty realises: "I was apt to go out at any moment...like...a figure upon a cinematographic screen." This is the crux of the book. Snooty finds himself insecure in his self-appointed controlling role, as liable to

be the monster as the creator, having, as he puts it, to compete for his reality; and compete he does, viciously and ruthlessly, throughout the rest of the novel, whenever he feels in any way threatened.

The first example of this is in France where Snooty goes to persuade Rob McPhail to accompany them. McPhail is 'a lord of language', one of the few people Snooty respects. Snooty continually classes himself with McPhail -- when McPhail spits, Snooty spits in sympathy! Yet Snooty's approach is one of "Duty First". He is there to proposition McPhail and involved in this act he becomes a kind of puppet. We realise this only gradually as we move through the carefully banal conversation: "GOOD LORD A LITTLE LAWN" (189) and find Snooty, our self-proclaimed extremist, extolling with McPhail the virtues of compromise. Gradually we realise that we are witnessing a role reversal -- McPhail is doing to Snooty what Snooty usually does to other people -- stringing him along in inane conversation while giving away nothing. The roles become clearer as Snooty himself begins to realise: "...I cleared my throat as Captain Cooper Carter would have done before proceeding with this difficult operation, to lasso a poet." (194)

And for those who do not realise what is happening, Lewis provides his usual pointer at the end of the chapter when Snooty comments:

"He looked at me mistily with a queer cock of the eye, as he tightened his belt up. He knew perfectly well I was not delighted at all. I suppose I showed I was taken aback. In his lack of all appearance of resistance he might almost have been taking a leaf out of my book." (198)

This sort of treatment is, of course, a challenge to Snooty's reality, so it is hardly surprising that he displays such a manifest lack of sympathy when McPhail is injured in the bull-ring.

There is a farcical caricature of Snooty's values in these scenes. As the crowd gathers round the stricken McPhail, Snooty's sole concern is to deny their voyeuristic pleasures - and in the process of blocking their view he actually stands on McPhail's chest - an action for which he expresses no regret whatsoever but rather blames on the doctor, whom he manages to delay in his anger. His lack of human feelings is blatant here, and it is almost incredible that previous critics have been able to identify Lewis with Snooty in the light of such obvious satire.

Snooty sees McPhail as a talking-machine, finely attuned to himself, and views his injury as an amputation (perhaps an idea picked up from The Book of the Machines) rather than with any sympathy. Yet he still practises his incredibly insensitive snootiness: his attitude to McPhail's wife and her sister is almost contemptuous - he even accuses them of being deficient in feeling!

But again there is that fine theme of the Hatter's dummy to keep us on the right track and leave no doubt as to the interpretation intended by Lewis:

"She smiled, standing in the doorway, as I left, raising my hat. - Why did I raise my hat?" (222)

It is indeed Snooty's reality which is in question - not McPhail's or his wife's. Snooty returns to the village to Lord it as smoothly over Val and the rest of the village. It is as though he has to assert their low level of reality in order to bolster his own; increasingly he has to compete.

We are then treated to a postscript which attempts to provide a philosophical justification for this lack of sympathy for McPhail - we cannot marry people who are dead - how then can we like them?

The humbug and self-deception reaches its highest point:

"Expect nothing out of my mouth, therefore, that has a pleasant sound. Look for nothing but descriptions out of a vision of a person who has given up hoping for Man, but who is scrupulous and just, if only out of contempt for those who are so much the contrary." (233)

Powerful lines - but totally undermined by the pretentious puppetry of the speaker.

And so..... on to Persia attempting to reassert himself as the puppet-master, seeing Val and Humph as "my two big puppets"(240) but nothing goes right. Snooty fails to play Val and Humph off against one another as he had hoped, but finds on the contrary that he is manoeuvred into being polite to Val because of the extent of Humph's rudeness to her.

Snooty realises with horror and rage what Humph is doing to him: "In short he had become Snooty. He had usurped my snootiness (And what was worse he was growing snooty with me too).(246) Clearly for a man competing to assert his reality this is intolerable. Snooty's 'snootiness' is his principal method of asserting his superiority, he cannot allow it to be usurped.

From Snooty's point of view things get worse and worse. He acts the puppet with Val (page 252) but finds to his fury that like McPhail she is using Snooty's own method of counterfeit submission against him - and he hints at future retaliation.

Snooty in fact finds the situation getting beyond his control and he burst out:

"We are all crazy right enough. You and Humph have proved that just now, for your parts. And I'm as mad as a Hatter, I'm a match for you both." (265)

The Hatter again. Clearly Snooty is increasingly disturbed by the image. He goes to bed and dreams of being hunted, but then he indentifies again with Moby Dick and finds peace - presumably in a scheme to ensnare his hunters.

This is followed by a curious incident, presumably designed to demonstrate yet again Snooty's ludicrous pretensions, and warn him to guard against identifying with his view-point. Snooty is reading Omar Khayyam and says he has reached the little known couplet:

"A book of verses underneath the bow  
A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou,"

The couplet is in fact, very famous, but Snooty misquotes. The two versions read:

"Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough  
A flask of wine, a book of verse, and thou."

and:

"Here with a little bread beneath the bough  
A flask of wine a book of verse - and thou."

However this may be, the end is nigh. They head across the desert, Snooty still trying to assert his reality:

"I sat there between them - like some miserable showman bursting with snootiness - with these two heavy animals slumbering on me as if I were a mechanical passenger stuck there for the convenience of the others. What a brace of puppets truly .....

I welcomed the fact that these two offended and snoot-ridden dummies at least kept their mouths shut! (272)

So he continues, being impossibly rude, yet objecting for example that Val does not answer everything which is said to her (277) - while of course he himself is frequently guilty of the same thing.

His revenge on Humph for these indignities comes totally unexpectedly. When the brigand attack he simply shoots the departing Humph on impulse - automatically, as he says himself (290).

This leaves Val. As prisoners of the brigand, awaiting the arrival of the ransom money, Val tries to assert her power over him as a witness to his murder of Humph. She suggests he should make

his kidnapping more authentic with the help of a self-inflicted wound:

"I got up from my chair looking her straight in the eyes with a full minute's steady contempt. This was very bad indeed! The old girl was actually being snooty - just as Humph used to be, the insolent puppet! She was stealing my thunder. She wished to convey (what else could it mean) that she had the whip hand! I was in her power, as she saw it." (301)

Prompt action is required. He asserts his reality here by the simple expedient of threatening to kill Val if she ever speaks to him in that way again, and as soon as he can, he arranges to leave the brigand's castle, leaving Val behind with smallpox.

Thus all three of the people who threatened his reality by being as snooty towards him as he was towards other people, are disposed of - McPhail and Humph dead, Val ravaged by Smallpox.

The novel ends with Snooty's defence of his actions as being entirely consistent with his ideas on behaviourism:

"I have been freely described as mad and a liar. This book is my answer to that. If it is mad to be a Behaviourist, then certainly I am as mad as a hatter, as mad as a Hatter's Automaton if you like."

Even here, we find an almost paranoid concern that he, Snooty, must be treated as a person rather than as a machine. People think, he says: "I have been unhinged (that is the expression, as if I were a door)" (308) and "It is clearly most unjust that I should be publicly whitewashed (as if I were an object, unable to give an account of myself)" (309) and the novel ends with the conclusion that all behaviourists must behave as snooty has behaved.

Considering that Snooty's behaviour has been rude, absurd and murderous, the reader can presumably draw his own conclusions.

The novel is a satire on Behaviourism and marks the end of Lewis's puppet-fiction. In a sense he deliberately takes the method to extremes, and, having exposed its absurdity, abandons it.



There follows a pause. The old mode exhausted, it cannot merely be satirised forever. We get the reworking of Enemy of the Stars, some literary criticism, a long poem, but no major creative work until 1937 with the appearance of The Revenge For Love. According to Kenner as quoted above, this new explosion is 'the incalculable' happening; on the contrary I believe Lewis was working to make it happen ever since he decided the old puppet-fiction was too limited after The Apes of God and began casting round for alternatives.

In 1932 in his preface to his exhibition of 'thirty Personalities' in the Lefevre Galleries (later published by Desmond Harmsworth) he asserted his right to move from experiments to more traditional art:

"I move with a familiarity natural to me amongst eyeless and hairless abstractions. But I am also interested in human beings" 30

Lewis had already published a brief satire of himself as The Enemy in the Daily Herald May 30, 1932, called "What It Feels Like To Be An Enemy:

"He calls himself 'Enemy' for instance. Why not? As good men - or almost as good - the present writer have made war upon society all the days of their life."

and:

"After breakfast, for instance (a little raw meat, a couple of blood-oranges, a stick of ginger, and a shot of vodka - to make one see red) I make a habit of springing up from the breakfast table and going over in a rush to the telephone book. This I open quite at chance, and ring up the first number upon which my eye has lighted. When I am put through, I violently abuse for five minutes the man, or woman of course (there is no romantic nonsense about the sex of people with an Enemy worth his salt) who answers the call. This gets you in the proper mood for the day." 31

30. Michel Walter Wyndham Lewis, Paintings and Drawings Thames & Hudson. London 1971. Appendix 1. p.439

31. Michel & Fox. Wyndham Lewis on Art. Thames & Hudson. London 1949 p.200-7.

Enough, I think to show that in 1932 Lewis did not indentify himself quite as closely with an anti-humanist enemy as some critics would have us believe. Snooty Baronet is a complex satire, and Lewis is clearly prepared to satirise some of his own methods.

More to the point perhaps Lewis is prepared not just to re-examine, but to change, his methods. The later fiction still uses mechanical imagery, but it uses it in a completely different way, not to deny the humanity of his characters, but to point the tragedy of the manner in which their humanity is so often denied. Denied not by Lewis, but by the evil forces in the world to which Lewis was opposed.

Lewis's next novel was not his last attempt to express this problem, but in some respects it was his greatest.

CHAPTER 7 : THE REVENGE FOR LOVE.

Wyndham Lewis displayed considerable anxiety about the fate of The Revenge For Love, addressing (though perhaps not sending) an eloquent appeal to his publisher a few months before the novel appeared:

"It is appearing under auspices of the most black and disheartening kind. And yet as I was reading my proofs I realised that the book which is thus about to be contemptuously flung upon the market is probably the best complete work of fiction I have written.... here is a book that it is indecent to smother." 1

This concern continued, through <sup>r</sup>stressing, perhaps with a salesman's eye, the art in the novel:

"Very naturally, a page of a novel, such as The Revenge For Love, takes me as long to write as twenty pages of a Blasting & Bombardiering" 2

later that year, and with the writing to a publisher eleven years later, recounting to him the story of the 'political' rejection of a review of the novel by Partisan Review.<sup>3</sup>

This story is repeated in Rude Assignment along with Lewis's claim that the book was ignored largely because of its politics. Lewis pleads that the book is not primarily political at all:

"Some day....people will take it up and read it as a novel - not glare at it with an eye inflamed by Politics...." 4

Certainly the book was 'smothered' when it first appeared - it sold only 2389 copies<sup>5</sup>, less, even than Snooty Baronet; but while part of the reason for this was Lewis's unpopularity with the left-wing, there were other factors involved.

1. Letters. p.242
2. Letters. p.247
3. Letters. p.463
4. Rude Assignment. p.215
5. Symons J. Azerda. p.38

The novel was written in 1935<sup>6</sup>, before the Spanish Civil War had broken out, but did not appear until May 1937, by which time (as D.G. Bridson points out)<sup>7</sup> its tale of a minor gun-running episode was something of an anti-climax when compared to full-scale bombings and tank battles.

However that may be, at this distance from both the war and its politics, the inflammation has largely died down and it is easier to look at the book 'as a novel'. It was reprinted in 1952 by Methuen and paperbacked in 1972 by Penguin - making it probably the most widely available of all Lewis's books at the moment.

General critical estimation has been high - all the major Lewis critics (Tomlin, Grigson, Kenner, Wagner, Rose, Pritchard, Bridson, Chapman, Holloway, Allen and Symons) praise the novel, some regarding it as his best work, and any judgement that Lewis's reputation is still under a cloud because of his politics (partly true) has to go hand in hand with the fact that his most directly political novel is also the most widely available and universally praised.

Part of the reason for this, undoubtedly, is that while The Revenge For Love is full of politics it is not a political book, in spite of the strictures of some critics.

Wagner for instance claims:

"In 1937 we reach the peak of Lewis's interest in Fascism, and it is necessary always to read the The Revenge for Love, his principal political satire, against the background of these sympathies." 8

6. cf. Letters p.235

7. Bridson. D.G. The Filibuster p.100

8. Wagner. op.cit. p.84

And a Marxist critic, briefly reviewing the Penguin edition, says: "The novel is basically an exposé of Stalinism... and, mostly by implication, of Stalinist machinations in Spain".<sup>9</sup>

It is no part of my intention to defend Lewis's politics, explain away his interest in Fascism or justify his interest in Fascism, or justify his opposition to Communism. His political writings have been adequately summarised and placed in their context by D.G. Bridson in his recent book on Lewis's politics.

Nevertheless certain points have to be made. Firstly, The Revenge For Love was written nearly two years before the book which appeared almost simultaneously with it - Count Your Dead: They are Alive! or A New War in the Making, one of Lewis's sillier political works. Secondly, by no means all of Lewis's references to Hitler in the thirties are laudatory ones: in One-Way Song he said Hitler was a product of 'sunlessness' and in The Old Gang and The New Gang he called Hitler a Youth-Politics racketeer and a 'military archimandrite'. Thirdly, there are relatively few references to Hitler in The Revenge For Love and most of what there is, is distinctly critical of Hitler; as for example when Tristy describes the somewhat violent Victor as being very like the Third Reich, this is condemnation rather than praise. Most of the Hitler references are in fact concerned with Nazi anti-semitism, a policy which Lewis, even in his first Hitler book, consistently denounced as absurd.

Surely it is no longer necessary to argue that the novel should be assessed in terms of what it says rather than through the medium of spurious politics imported into it. The dangers of Wagner's reading of the novel 'against the background' of

9. Relich. M. "Ideology and Spanish Civil War Novels".

Scottish International. Vol.5No.5.May'72 p.33

Lewis's fascist sympathies become apparent in a certain sloppiness. We find Wagner claiming, for example, that Tristy, the artist, defends Picasso "in the face of the attack on Picasso made by the politically conscious artist, Victor Stamp, and the pretentious Semitic art critic, Peter Wallace or Reuben Wallach."<sup>10</sup> In point of fact this is nonsense. The point is repeatedly made in the novel that Victor Stamp is not 'politically conscious' (cf. the conversation in Part 7 between Margot and Hardcaster, regarding this), and in fact it is Victor who attempts to keep politics out of the discussion on Picasso ("Let's leave everyone out except Picasso", he says), and appeals beyond their ideologies to the actual reproduction of Picasso which is hanging on the wall. (158-9).

Wagner completely misreads this, thereby demonstrating Lewis's point about the politically inflamed eye being unable to focus properly, and ultimately seeing something which is not there at all!

Altogether, the critic might find it much more rewarding to observe the growing humanism of Lewis's paintings in the 1930s and his explanation of this: "I move with a familiarity natural to me amongst eyeless and hairless abstractions. But I am also interested in human beings",<sup>11</sup> and to relate this to the unprecedented human sympathies which Lewis displayed in The Revenge For Love, rather than to insist on political exegesis.

Political bogies apart, it is natural enough, considering the critical favour in which this novel is generally held, that The Revenge for Love has been 'explicated' reasonably well. I

10. Wagner. op.cit. p.123

11. Michel. Paintings and Drawings. p.439 Preface by W.L. to 1932 Exhibition. Lefevre Galleries.

have little to offer by way of interpretation which can claim to be revolutionary. On the other hand, it is surprising that many of the novel's main themes, even the most obvious one of 'false bottoms', have never been fully worked out, and one may feel that even now the depth and complexity of this, Lewis's most widely acclaimed novel, is underestimated.

The plot itself is straightforward enough and clearly structured: divided into seven sections, the novel begins and ends with Percy Hardcaster, a communist activist, in a Spanish prison; the most central section (Part 4) is largely concerned with a party given in London in honour of Percy, who, as the only activist among them, is seen as a martyr/hero by the parlour pinks with whom he associates.

The other four sections are devoted to the introduction and development of the characters involved in this London circle - Victor Stamp, an Australian, struggling, mediocre, potentially violent, but non-politicised artist; Margot Stamp, his common-law wife, devoted to his well-being; Sean O'Hara, one of a group of apparent left-wing sympathisers, but actually a vicious Capitalist gun-runner, leeching on other people's causes; Jack Cruze, a childish comic accountant (therefore Capitalist), whose dominant traits are his sexuality and his ruthlessness in pursuing it; contrasted with him is Gillian Phipps (Jack and Will), also called Gillian Communist, the parlour-pink par excellence, who plays the left-wing game to the full, but combines it with vicious snobbery and deep contempt for the working-classes; Tristan Phipps, her husband, a more talented artist than his friend Stamp, irrevocably middle-class, but rather more genuine in his Communism than Gillian.



Each of these characters is capable of being as much a 'type' as anything in *The Apes of God*, but Lewis prevents them from becoming so by successfully integrating character and plot. Hardcaster returns from a farcically failed attempted jail-break in Spain, which cost him his leg, but got him repatriated, to find himself lionised in London by the left-wing sympathisers there. He takes full advantage of this with a string of invented atrocity tales, and, weakened as he is, proceeds to make love to his most fervent admirer, Mrs. Gillian Phipps. During one of these love sessions he foolishly tells Gillian the truth about his Spanish adventures, thereby shattering her illusions about his heroism. A bitter quarrel follows in which Percy attacks the absurdities of her snobbish communism and compares them with working-class realities. Jill rewards him for this by egging her Capitalist pet/boyfriend on to beat Percy up. Jack promptly obliges, kicking the one-legged Percy in his severed stump, while he lies helpless on the floor.

Understandably disillusioned with this London life, Percy, when he has sufficiently recovered, sets off for the Spanish border and a gun-running enterprise organised by O'Hara and his partner Abershaw.

This pair have already inveigled Victor Stamp into working for them in an art-forging business from which he eventually walked out; they now employ him as a message-boy for Hardcaster in the gun-running scheme. Both Hardcaster and Stamp are being duped, however, for unknown to them, the cargo of 'guns' which Stamp drives into Spain is actually a cargo of bricks, and Stamp is being sacrificed as a decoy while the real guns are taken in by someone else. The only person to suspect this - intuitively

rather than logically - is Margot Stamp, but her efforts to save Victor fail, and he and Margot plunge over a precipice attempting to recross the Pyrenees, while Hardcaster, who deliberately allowed the trap to spring on himself rather than Victor, ends up, once more, in a Spanish prison.

The fundamental object of attack in the novel is not Communism or Capitalism - although the ethics of both are involved - but falsity, duplicity and deceit. This is worked out through various linked metaphors, the best known of which is that of false bottoms.

False Bottoms was, in fact, the original title of the novel, but Lewis experienced some difficulty with his publishers over some of the more robust passages in the novel, and though he refused to change these he did allow the title to be changed - mostly because of the fear that the book would be banned by Boots Lending Library, thus losing an immediate 500 sales.

At least one critic has seen this symbolic metaphor as a flaw in the novel:

"Other incidental pieces also waylay the novel....the continuous jokes on false bottoms (reminding us of the true title) and the clumsy symbolism of O'Hara's party room with its false panelling." 12

Far from being merely a continuous joke, some kind of running gag, the theme of false bottoms is invested by Lewis with a considerable moral significance, right from the start of the novel.

On the first page we find Don Alvaro dogmatically telling his prisoner Hardcaster that a man is free only once in his life: "When we gaze into the bottom of the heart of our beloved and find that it is false - like everything else in the world!" (7)

We should take our clue from this. False bottoms does not just refer to objects, but also to ideas and situations; it is concerned with the basis of things - what they are like at bottom. Of course there are false bottomed objects in the book - almost immediately we find a food basket which has a false bottom in concealing an escape note for Hardcaster. It is because Don Alvaro finds it, too, that Percy loses his leg. In a sense this is a double false bottom because while Percy believes it has deceived the warder, Don Alvaro uses it to deceive him. Seraphin, the guard who is helping Percy to escape, suspects that something is wrong:

"There was something at the bottom of it. Aqui hay algo!  
But what was the hidden spring?" (38)

Because he is unable to find it he loses his life - it is, if you like, a double-double-cross, a double false bottom.

The most central false bottom - occurring as it does at the mid-point in the novel - is O'Hara's party room:

"Margot had felt that she was moving about the inside of an immense box. It was a box that had false sides to it as well as a false bottom." (164)

In point of fact the room does not have a false bottom, but has a false side - a large concealed cupboard in which Margot discovers Victor's name being forged by Abershaw and O'Hara - but again the implications of false bottoms is wider than merely objects, it extends to everything about the place - the atmosphere, the conversation, the people:

"She was conscious... of a prodigious non-sequitur, at the centre of everything that she saw going on around her - of an immense false bottom underlying every seemingly solid surface on which it was her lot to tread." (165)

And of course the most ironic false bottom of all is the one in the bootlegging car which Victor is given to smuggle the guns into Spain. This has a false bottom built into it to

accommodate such contraband, but again we have the double-double-cross - the false bottom does not contain guns as Victor had supposed, but bricks - unfortunately before discovering this Victor has killed a Civil Guard in his efforts to escape.

There are other physical false bottoms - Freddie Salmon's face is described (rather like Humph's in Snooty Baronet) as having a bogus jaw, a 'false bottom' four times in all (pp.256, 259, & 269), but the idea spreads out and is used more metaphorically than this.

For example Percy's character is described in terms of a basket: "This basket was not in reality of simple manufacture. It was most of it honest false bottom (54) and, as we shall see, Percy's inability to properly distinguish between the true and the false, the real and the unreal, and his growing awareness that a gap of some kind exists, constitutes his real 'problem' his tragedy.

People are called false bottoms - Fenians for example:

"who were a bunch of false bottoms one and all if ever there were!" (137)

and situations:

"The creatures who had crept out of that False-bottom beneath all things were taking an interest in Victor"(181)

"this particular underworld of art - this particular false-bottom to the dream of Beauty..."(270)

"the false bottom underlying the spectacle of the universe and making a derision of the top..."(270)

Of course the key words do not always occur together, and each is used separately, still suggesting the same idea.

We find, for example, during an argument between Percy and a fellow-patient that both of them, in their communist work, use 'false names' (41), and immediately afterwards another communist (who had helped to arrange the abortive prison escape) accuses

Serafin, the prison guard who helped with the escape and was killed in the attempt, of being 'false'... 'a false guard', and like all of his kind 'double-faced'. (62) Needless to say this accusation is itself false.

Several characters in the novel exhibit 'fauxbonhomme' (107, 130, 259), and Margot, when she first steps onto Spanish soil, feels that:

"Here was nothing but a false and deceptive surface....  
She felt she had engaged upon the crust of something  
that concealed a bottomless pit..." (292)

This, of course, becomes literally true, for at the end of the novel Margot and Victor are deceived by the surface of the Spanish soil and plunge over a precipice.

It might be remarked that almost the only things in the novel which are not false are the bottoms of the women - the Spanish peasant girl and Jack's secretaries - who make a brief appearance, and it was presumably this inference which so worried the publishers about the original title. But the word bottom is capable of many other meanings as becomes apparent very early on.

Even on page 12 the theme is being enlarged as Don Alvero thinks of England and Spain: "two countries going rotten at the bottom and the top." On page 60 Percy, in a lame attempt to win his argument, accuses Virgilio, his fellow-communist of being "an Anarchist at bottom", and later (343) he himself is accused, in a similar argument, of being "at bottom an individualist". This section of the novel is very concerned with the bottom of things. In Spain, it seems, even a drink has a cloudy bottom. (301)

When, for example, a letter arrives signed by Victor's forged signature, Victor and Percy argue about getting 'to the bottom' of the matter - a phrase used five times (317).

Eventually it is suggested that the letter is part of a plan

to make it appear that Victor is "at the bottom of all this arms smuggling business" (357) which is in fact the intention. But of course this is yet another false bottom for though he may appear to be at the bottom of it, Victor is the duped message-boy rather than the controlling mastermind.

Later, when Margot's determined effort to save Victor from walking into the Spanish trap only pushes him into a more desperate situation, she thinks to herself that:

"She, Margot, was at the bottom of this adventure!  
It would have been better if she had been false" (368).

Even as we first see her, Margot is blaming herself for Victor's situation, seeing his misfortune as a visitation of the anger of the Gods on one who was dearly loved:

"It was the way that she had loved that was at the bottom of the matter." (70).

Part of the point of the novel is that in spite of all Margot's limitations, her sham-culture and her mechanical emotions, in spite of all Percy's and Mateu's arguments about the quality of her love for Victor, ultimately that love is the one bottom which is not false. Margot's love is real, and as Percy sees at the end, it is very, very important.

Other images are used to build on this idea of falsity, one obvious example being the use of play or theatrical images, perhaps more fully worked out in Lewis's next novel, The Vulgar Streak, but continually used here also.

Characters "attend to their entrances" (204), police and jailors act in "dumbshow" (300 & 378), everybody acts.

Don Alvaro acts enraged in the prison to prevent Percy from finding out why the peasant girl is crying; Percy is very conscious of his ludicrous part when he is escaping:

"Percy thought of Bates in the Wood: and seeing that he was the one that was broad-in-the-beam, he supposed that he was cast for the Principal Boy! But Serafin did not share his matinée memories; and, far from feeling that he was participating in a Christmas pantomime, he had all the air of a person called upon to play his part in a melodrama so utterly boring that he could not even smile as he said his lines." (43).

Percy, we are told, "having learned a part....really played it con amore." (54). Later on, when Percy is being beaten up by Jack we are told that even then he reels "a little theatrically." (215) Everything is fake to Percy: "In Percy's professional make-up he never quite knew what part of bluff went on to what part of solid belief." (54). This is why he accuses Margot of "acting the devoted wife" (341) in her concern for Victor, and in a metaphor implying she is a temperamental actress, says:

"It makes me feel like a theatrical impresario." (338)

Victor, of course is shamming from the moment that we see him - pretending to be asleep; he play-acts the role of the Australian, especially when a little drunk (174) and of course, he play-acts the hero, where Margot is concerned - for example comforting her when she is upset by the dwarf they encounter on their first trip to Spain:

"As the benevolent giant he could now play his part" (304)

Victor is naturally most aware of being an actor when he is involved in Abershaw's devious schemes. When, for example he paints a bad picture at the art-forgery-factory, he is "the villian of this piece" (202) and quite aware of it - he puts his foot through the canvas and announces: "I'm out of the cast now." (263). Later, in France, Victor elaborately deceives Margot into believing he is going to spend the day painting

in order to escape from her on his smuggling expedition into Spain. This he later explicitly recognises as "a lousy performance" (350), for though Victor is essentially honest he is caught up in the falsity of everything around him.

Other characters act: Jack for example, plays the art-patron - "He played it like a proper actor" (122) while Jill watches him argue with her husband, sitting down: "like an audience to watch them from the stalls" (122) and Tristy tries to laugh him out of his offer: "Our Jack is play-acting for us" (122), but Margot is the actress most reluctantly cast in her part, most helplessly caught up in the play and forced into untypical roles.

When Margot first speaks (71) we are told her speech is an artificial composite speech; she has been forced to speak out of character, as it were, by the circles in which she moves, and appropriately enough her speech is "flavoured with American talkie echoes" (71). This is referred to again at the parlour-pink party where Margot thinks briefly of speaking "in the accents of Shoreditch to Notting Dale... 'in character'" (163). The inevitable result of this artificiality has been to make Margot herself appear a little artificial: "her voice had gone a little hollow with the constant effort to shape the words correctly" (71).

So Margot is caught up in the whole 'sham-culture outfit', but she plays her role reluctantly, always struggling to disentangle Victor from the illegal schemes he is involved in. Symbolic of her reluctance in her role is her encounter with the dwarf in Spain. The dwarf makes of Margot a "dramatic mother" (296) and indulges, with his endless wailing in a "ghastly comedy" and "expressive pantomime".



This "mediaeval farce" greatly upsets Margot, but she "hadn't got the heart to alarm Victor" and sees no alternative to suffering in tortured silence: "There was no escape, she must play her part." (299). Margot has in fact a near fatalistic attitude to her role - even when she perceives quite clearly that she is in fact playing a role in some kind of unreal play. When for example, she is lying by the mountain stream in France, her perception of nature (so long admired through books) is poisoned by her 'obsession' "with the actors for whom the pastoral sets were the incongruous backgrounds" (309).

Like Percy immediately before his prison escape, Margot is struck by the lack of harmony between objective nature and the ideas and actions of men, but perhaps more important here, is her perception of external reality in theatrical terms to suit the 'drama' which is being played out around her.

Reading her favourite Ruskin (Sesame and Lilies) Margot rather ironically ponders what she would be like were she merely a character in a book and falls to considering Ruskin's appraisal of the great female roles of the past.

Suddenly afraid that she is, like Ophelia, a weak heroine who fails her hero, Margot rushes off, determined to try to play a more active part in the proceedings and to prevent Victor becoming further entangled. Her struggle to do this imposes a considerable strain upon Margot - turning her face into the kind of mask it formed when she was being beset by the dwarf (320) and we are specifically told: "It was not easy for her to play this part" (328)

Later she recognises that her attempt to play the "grand roles of this life" have led only to disaster - and here we find another use of the play-image, for Margot uses it to

make bearable to herself an otherwise unbearable reality.

Trying to come to terms with the fact that they have just killed a civil guard she reviews all the events of the killing in slow-motion in her mind's eye until she can accept them:

"Slowly, almost slothfully, within her mind, this novel background for Victor and herself took logical shape. She admitted, a fragment at a time, the components of the scenery for this new Act. The reality which had been shut out would have compelled her, by its maddening pressure, to give it admittance, if she had not met it halfway. So, successively, all the facts that went to make the complete event she allowed to pass inside. She even assisted in the setting up of this sinister back-cloth." (367-8).

Complementing all this play-imagery is a good deal of imagery concerning films - a natural extension, particularly useful in suggesting the two dimensional aspect of affairs - as when Margot sees the killing of the civil guard in entirely flat, two-dimensional terms.

Victor, for example, has (like Vincent Penhale in The Vulgar Streak) a 'Clark Gable smile' and this is indicative of the shallowness into which he is continually falling:

"A mellow light was seen in his eyes. He reached over and hooked her towards him, dragging the small weeping creature up against his chest - reared up upon the edge of the bed, rampant as a figure in a frieze, all in two dimensions." (78)

So film is used to express the two-dimensional - Tristy, for example, is said to be wearing his red Communist Party badge "like the star of the film-sheriff".

And its language is used in a similar way to that of the stage - for example when Margot begins crying on their first trip into Spain, she does so: "Flinging herself against a great panelled door, like something out of a Hollywood set." (303)

Film, like play, is used to represent unreality:

When Margot is assessing the people at O'Hara's party for example, she feels they are "big portentious dolls, mysteriously doped with some impenetrable nonsense, out of a Caligari's drug Cabinet,..." The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari was a famous German Expressionist film made in 1919, and its mention is highly appropriate in The Revenge For Love, because, like the false panelling in O'Hara's party-room the sets of the film were obviously false and made of cardboard, backgrounds being purposely distorted, with light and shadow crudely painted on them.

The unreality of the people at O'Hara's party is however, suggested still more directly:

"As she clung to Victor she felt that what he had said was true, and that they were not in fact very real at all, the people with which this room was packed. They were a dangerous crowd of shadows, of course, that hovered over them. But if you stood up to them, if you called their noisy shadow-bluff, as Victor would be able to do if he so desired - if it came to a showdown, between a shadow and a man of flesh and blood - they would give way. She could see that they would move off, chattering, but admitting their ineffectiveness. They could not really bear you down. They could only browbeat you like a gramophone, or impose on you like the projections on the screen of a cinema. Spring up and face them, and they would give way before you. For they had no will. Their will to life was extinct, even if they were technically real." (178)

But film is also used to hint at something more far-reaching than simple shallowness of personality:

"'What is it, my honeyduck?' he asked in a Clark Gable growl. 'Aren't you well, peachie?' But the honey-duck only nodded in answer, and continued to grin like a honey-duck exposed to the effect of a non-stop wisecrack - like a Walt Disney honey-duck, cut out for life in dumb-show, upon a more expressive plane than that of humdrum spacetime." (301)

This reaching out towards a more profound meaning for his metaphors is something which Lewis continually does and some of the links by which this is done are further explored below; in

the meantime we should look at a third system of images which contribute to the theme of falseness and deceit, and this is Lewis's use of the idea of conjuring and magic.

Conjuring for Lewis clearly implies deceit. In The Apes of God he has Zagreus perform a conjuring act at the party full of sham-socialites. And conjurors, of course, make more use of false bottoms than almost anyone else. Dan Boleyn, we remember, is vanished and reproduced during Zagreus's conjuring act, by being placed in a large cabinet and concealed behind a false rear panel - where his nose starts bleeding.

As Lewis says in The Writer and the Absolute:

"All politics are more like a conjuring trick than anything else - innumerable silk stockings coming out of a top hat..."<sup>13</sup>

Lewis incidentally displays a fair knowledge of the conjuror's arts - which were of course much more alive in the 'twenties than they are today.

The theme of magic crops up repeatedly in The Revenge For Love - the civil guards for example are "up to their tricks" (300), Freddie Salmon "put away childish things as if by magic" (263) even Margot's head, when she is thinking about Virginia Woolf, is "thaumaturgic", she is a "self-consecrated Bloomsbury priestess" (236). But almost invariably there is an element of evil in the magic, whether simply from the evil intentions of straight conjuring tricks or the darker implications of real magic.

Abershaw for example is seen as a conjuror of evil intent: when Margot surprises him trying to forge Victor's signature he tries to conceal a piece of paper from her:

"with a suggestion of the manipulative deftness of the conjuror, pokerfaced and lightning-fingered." (166-7)

Exactly a page later, in his dealing with Jack, O'Hara is seen in the same light:

13. The Writer and the Absolute p.119

"Jack looked over his shoulder at O'Hara with the rustic craftiness of Hodge in the booth at the Fair, who has been requested by the conjuror to hold the silk hat and keep his eye skinned, that nothing should escape from the performer's rolled-up sleeve undetected." (168)

There is even a marriage of the imagery of the cinema and the conjuror - when Margot is hurtling along in the car with Victor and the image of each passing object is being hurled onto "the picture-house of the senses" (354):

"Like a card-world, clacked cinematographically through its static permutations by the ill-bred fingers of a powerful conjuror, everything stood upon end and then fell flat. He showed you a tree - a cardboard tree. Fix your eye upon this! he said. Then with a crash it vanished." (353-4).

Frequently however, there is a suggestion of genuine supernaturalism in the references to magic. When Margot is horrified by the imperturbability of nature in the face of the danger threatening Victor, for example, she feels that:

"The powers of the earth and air...had rattled their empty box of tricks in her face." (313)

and she rushes down to the town where her calm arrival among the men:

"had the appearance of a trick, and helped to intensify the impression of a magical interloping on her part." (318)

Then too Margot's fears of Spain are reflected in the choice of image when she first sees the Spanish town they are approaching. To her it looks:

"like a fragment of fairyland but probably the headquarters of some evil magician." (295)

Again O'Hara, when he is being introduced to us, is described as a magician (or another age would have thought him one) because of his attitude to birds as objects to be manipulated. Margot, as we shall see later, is most often described in terms of a bird. This metaphor is capable of considerable articulation when Margot is desperately struggling to prevent Victor taking part in any

gun-running schemes she comes to see Hardcaster as her enemy:

"Everything had become involved in this brutal invasion of the external plane by the internal plane. Percy Hardcaster even had become for her as it were a wicked dwarf or an evil magician." (324)

Margot has, of course already been badly upset by a malicious dwarf, who we remember forced her to role-play his mother - but the significance of the dwarf goes beyond this, for O'Hara (returning to where he was introduced to us as a magician) is described as "dwarfish and dark" and we are specifically told (in a metaphor which links up again with play):

"This stunted body came bang out of the repertory of a sagaman - where the physical assumes a symbolic importance." (133)

So we have here a hint of the complex relationship of some of these images of magic, of dwarfs and of the symbolic use of physical characteristics.

The interweaving of such images is highly complex and it is almost impossible to do full justice to it, considering the length of the novel. For example the idea of the physical having a symbolic significance occurs when Tristy is talking about toucans:

"They're jolly beasts. Their personalities are so romantic that I can never see them without feeling that it is lucky men's characters are not expressed externally, in that hard and fast way" 'Aren't they? I think they are, 'Victor' laughed, aggressive and short like the crack of a whip." (92)

But toucans are not the only birds to have symbolic significance. Tristy is apparently unduly interested in birds - he is out sketching humming birds while his wife is dallying with Jack; most of the birds however are not real birds at all. Margot and Victor at one stage march in 'goose-step time' (303), while the forgery-factory is called an 'illicit nest of fakers', and Victor demands of Tristy after his interview with Abershaw and Salmon:

"What did those two birds want you for?" (205)

Characters are regularly compared to birds: Percy, for example is "as vain as a peacock" (187), while Gillian is always comparing Jack to some kind of bird - an 'ostrich' (196) a 'turkey-cock' (195) and a 'rooster' (194). This last is the most interesting, for Gillian repeats the comparison a few pages later, when speaking of Jack's eye, she says it is "rather like/a rooster's"

"Jack thrust out his neck and suddenly gave forth a tremendous and deafening crow.

"The escaped cock! Gillian laughed pointing at him. 'The escaped cock - well, I'm damned! Have you read Lawrence? What a good sound that is! Do it again.'

Seeing that this accomplishment was well received, Jack crowed again, two or three times." (202)

Of course, the whole point of this crowing is that while Jack is certainly the rooster type, he is being continually outmanoeuvred and frustrated by Gillian - he has nothing to crow about. We are told that later on Jack realises this and then "his empty crowing appeared symbolic"(202)

An even more interesting image of the rooster is used in the introductory description of Sean O'Hara, parts of which we have already looked at. This character is not only a dwarf, he is something of a hunchback:

"His spine was not as straight as the spine of an honest man should be. A tell-tale crook made an arc at the top of it, on which his head hung - instead of standing up stoutly on his shoulders, like a rooster on a dung-hill in the act of crowing." (133)

In this context it is interesting to find Percy justifying his fabricated atrocity stories to Gillian with the propagandist's credo:

"Look at it this way. Lies are the manure in which the truth grows." (207)

Even Percy eventually realises that when you deal in such manure, it is always characters (or roosters) like O'Hara who get to the top of the dunghill.

But the character who is most often described in terms of a bird is a sympathetic one - Margot. We first see her in her 'love-nest' (69) and the image is repeated so often as to be unmistakable:

"Her head was of a small wistful seabird, delicately drafted to sail in the eye of the wind, and to skate upon the marbled surface of the waves - with its sleek feathery chevelure, in long matted wisps - arched downwards on its neck to observe Lord Victor....She hovered over him...Her eyes were almost popping out of her skull in the intensity of her desire to settle - to skim down and settle: to ride there and to be at rest! (71)

The image is flexibly used by Lewis to suggest Margot's timidity and fragility, but also her mothering instinct, as she combines a bashful determination to watch over Victor with an inarticulate helplessness.

For Victor, Margot reminds him

"always of that lovely and strange-plumaged bird that had floated down into the water, covered by his gun, but he could not fire on it because it seemed too mild a thing to bludgeon with a bullet..."(81)

and he does not wish to let her down:

"just as you would not willingly betray the trustfulness of a bird that makes its nest against your window."(81)

There is a nice contrast between Margot and Gillian when they collide at O'Hara's party:

"The face of Gillian Phipps still wore the mask of a moody hawk, that it had acquired while she listened to the account of Harcaster's ordeal by bed-pan. And now it was as a hawk - which had surprised perhaps a peewit in the act of carrying a worm to its young - that she stared down angrily at Margot Stamp." (162)

The mother-bird image is used to stress Margot's simplicity:



"Margot has started off upon as uncomplex an errand as a bird that quits the nest at an unexpected promise of fresh worms." (175)

but also with a lively awareness of the incongruousness of Margot's maternal instincts towards her giant lover:

"Margot watched over him, with the maternal patience of a tiny bird mounting guard over a giant cuckoo foisted upon it, which she loved more than the child of her own humble egg." (184)

Once again though, we find that Lewis can use such images to reach towards more profound ideas. For example, although he is frequently quoted as despising 'interior monologues' and the psycho-analysis of characters, he makes effective use of such devices on occasion, particularly with Margot, and the image of birds provides him with an excellent opportunity for delving into the normally despised 'submerged tenth' (303).:

"She was convulsed from head to foot. Great cries came from her. Settling in against a sculpted jamb, Victor drew her round, and supported her head against the big twin-pillow of his chest. There he gripped the agitated body of her skull, stroking the wings of her soft hair, as he might have secured a wild bird that had come to some harm, and have attempted to reassure it. Her head was no bigger than the body of a seagull, he was extraordinarily small and light." (303).

This was the honey-angel he had got in touch with, where it had been beating itself against the walls of some dark pit out of sight." (304).

Lewis invariably selects his physical details to reflect some feature of the inner person. With Margot this method perhaps works so well because he is prepared to expose more of the inner person directly, and the external features therefore become more meaningful.

There is considerable play on O'Hara's attitude to birds, when O'Hara is first introduced to us, and this is seen in both word-play -- a problem is "much of the calibre of a spug" (131) and a lapse in conversation is "a longish interval of intent

sparrow-watching and of sparring-without-speaking." (139). - and of direct references to O'Hara's absent-minded malevolence towards the birds and their "not altogether irrational distrust" of him (131). While speaking on the telephone he "watched the sparrows returning, with an evil brilliance in his eyes"(132) and this seems to reflect the casual violence which he does to Margot's little world. It is interesting that the sparrows in this chapter are referred to as 'toy airplanes' (131) for Margot, while attempting to flee from Spain with Victor, comes to detest the car in which they are travelling and to dream of the smooth speeds of flight in an airplane. This we are told is "the difference between the bird and the quadruped" (354) and while she, the bird, would prefer flying, Victor, who is "in collusion" with the rushing car, is clearly the animal, the machine, preferring "power and effort, frankly prebavian". We have seen Victor accused of being like Germany, and Margot herself has felt sympathy towards a blackshirt because she recognises something of Victor in him. Shortly after the airplane passage I have been quoting Margot comes to realise that Victor is in fact a symbol - just as the horse and lion are symbols, and though she is not clear about precisely what Victor is a symbol of, it is clearly something basically animal, something which she can only articulate as "The Kipling Man", by which she seems to mean a kind of modern-day neanderthal specimen (much like Augustine Card in The Red Priest, and afflicted with the same faults).

There are other images - a large number of references to the devil (beginning with demoniacal cries disturbing the birds on the first page) which tend to tie up with Margot's ideas about evil magic affecting Victor and herself in Spain;

"She felt that she had engaged upon the crust of something that concealed a bottomless pit, which bristled with uniform demons, engaged in the rehearsal of a gala Third Degree, to be followed by a slap-up autodafe, for the relaxation of Lucifer."(292)

also a number of references to people wearing masks - the type of thing Lewis uses repeatedly, but here linking up with the theme of play; and a very large number of references to the colour 'red', often with a jocular purpose and political connotations: the politicians in prison with Percy at the beginning of the novel have been caught 'red-handed', British nationality in Spain has become like a 'red rag to a bull' and most obviously perhaps, Percy at the party is 'a red patriach', sitting in red cushions, on a red settee, surrounded by 'red herrings' and mopping his brow with a red-spotted handkerchief; Victor even 'tosses red blocks with the Devil for his life! (90)

There is however, one exceptionally curious idea running through the novel, an idea which runs through much of Lewis's work from Blast to The Red Priest.

I have remarked in an earlier chapter that Samuel Beckett might well have lifted his philosophy directly from Enemy of the Stars, and its emphasis on the absurd; we find the word 'absurd' occurring with great frequency in novels as far apart as Tarr and Self Condemned. At the end of The Red Priest Augustine's second child is named 'Zero' and like his father we are told he is 'fated to blast his way across time and space.' Again in The Demon of Progress in the Arts, his last work of art criticism, Lewis is continually repeating his convictions that extremism in the arts takes us to the edge of zero.

This idea of absurdity, of zero, runs through The Revenge For Love also, in the form of the theme of 'nothingness!'

This nothingness means an absence - an absence of reason and an absence of order. It is the nothingness of insanity or absurdity. As Don Alvaro says to Percy at the beginning of the novel: "Where should we be without law?...anyone... dispenses with law at his peril. He substitutes his private law for the law of man only if he is mad. And the mad always end up by being put under lock and key....(9)

Percy, of course, argues throughout the novel for subjective law, for expediency to take precedence over truth - and he ends up back in prison. In the process however he seems to learn something about values, about the absurdity he is involved in.

The word nothing is used repeatedly in the early part of the novel, and its value is defined in the thoughts of Don Alvaro about England and Spain:

"Two countries going rotten at the bottom and the top, where the nation ceased to be a nation - the inferior end abutting upon the animal kingdom, the upper end merging in the international abstractness of men - where there were no longer either Spanish men or English men, but a gathering of individuals who were nothing" (12)

Nothing is a word applied to situations which are inexplicable - the fight with Don Alvaro over the Spanish girl bursting into tears - it is 'a lot of bother over nothing' (though the reader knows better.) What has Percy done to make the girl cry?:

"Haven't I told you nothing? NOTHING! Is that good enough or not?"(37)

The expert at saying 'nothing' is Serafin - he uses the word at least eight times in five pages (40-44) and his style of saying it is recalled afterwards when Percy is a sadder and slightly wiser man:

"Why, you are a different person! What for? What is it for?"  
Percy shrugged his shoulders..  
'For nothing.'

Serafin himself could not have said nothing with more feeling for the false bottom underlying the spectacle of this universe, and making a derision of the top - for the nothingness at the heart of the most plausible and pretentious of affirmatives, either as man or as thing. And that his nothing meant nothing, just that, not more and not less, but a calm and considered negation, caused Tristy to stop abruptly and look away." (276)

Again, at the very centre of the novel, the scene at the party where Margot in her inarticulate fashion goes right to the heart of the sham-culture in which she finds herself, the word occurs again:

"Her mind strained, in an inward tension, to seize exactly what it all might mean, or might portend. But it was no use at all. It seemed to register nothing - or just nonsense. They recited to each other, with the foolish conceit of children..... out of textbooks... for the amusement of an insane orphanage." (165)

Note again the idea of madness close to that of nothingness. We find the idea too, in conjunction with those of magic and film, when Margot goes into her near-trance because of the goading of the dwarf:

"her grimace was deeply grafted, and directed outward at nothing in particular - or at the nothingness which is all that is there, unless you conjure things up for yourself, and furnish this white screen with your private pictures."

This perhaps helps to bring the image of play and film into focus - for they are not only images of the essentially false but also of the unreal, the meaningless, the nothingness.

But there is a great irony in this nothingness. Percy and Mateu appear to agree in their low estimate of Victor, their idea that he is nothing; and Percy even declares that he would rather be a fascist than nothing, Mateu responds that of course a fascist is nothing (343), yet at the same time when Margot tries to dissuade Victor from the gun-running escapade, and argues with Percy that 'arming the reds means nothing' (329) to Victor or herself, and that Victor is merely being used, Percy knows that this

outburst has doubly secured Victor's help:

"He didn't see how it could be otherwise. It was like daring the Digger to risk his skin - for nothing! It was just that nothing that must do the trick" (333)

This nothingness dominates the novel - "the nothingness at the heart of the most plausible and pretentious of affirmatives" (276) the false bottoms, the fake paintings, the false action, the false ideologies, the false hearts.

Perceiving the false heart of our lover, we are told on the first page, is the only thing that sets us free: certainly there are many false hearts in this novel, but they do not produce freedom - only a negation of values, if that is freedom. The Abershaws and Salmon's of this world are 'hearty pals' (257) and exclaim 'heartily' (257 & 260) and of course falsely, Victor's heart is not in his work' when he is working in the forgery-factory, while Tristy rationalises and excuses his forgery by saying that he is attacking patent rights which are "the very heart of the problem' (260). At the end of the novel we discover that even in the corrupt Spanish prisons conditions are becoming tougher because in Madrid "people were hardening their hearts" (376). Margot's heart is naturally the object of most attention; her heart is 'dully-beating' (69), 'breaking' (309) and 'registered a regretful pang' (309) and she does not have the heart to disturb Victor even though the dwarf is 'snapping' her heart-strings' (300) and forcing her to play the 'hard-hearted mamma' (298)

Victor may well be only 'her private screen star really' (341) as Percy claims, but to Margot he is her 'Richard Coeur-de-Lion' (358) and though this is a false romanticism, though her heart is inevitably affected by the falseness of everyone else, though the reader may convict her of sentimentality in her love for Victor,

she has an essential belief in "the sublime innocence of their hearts" (292) which provides a note of affirmation in this picture of nothingness. Her love may seem false to others, but it is real to her, and though she and Victor step off the edge of a precipice into nothingness, death for Margot is 'The Heart of the Sunset' (70) and however maudlin and romantic, however hollow and sham, her voice, from beyond the grave, strikes even Percy as being terribly real.

This is perhaps the first note of affirmation that Lewis ever strikes in his novels, and he strikes it in an inferno of falsehood and deceit. The wasteland of the Apes of God and the sterility of Snooty Baronet, will never give way to facile optimism, but amid all the absurdity, deceit and negation, Lewis struggles towards something of value, something which may be founded on shifting sand, something which is definitely not based on intellectual values, but which nevertheless is infinitely precious, 'dear beyond expression'.

The novels which follow are all concerned with how a man may follow the dictates of his intellect (often merely a cloak for the will to power) to the point where he loses whatever is of value in humanity and finds himself in a hell of his own making. Whether this hell is in a hotel room in Morocco or the literal home of Sammael is irrelevant, what matters is the ultimate, painfully reached realization, that however irrational and stupid mankind may be, God values him, and this is what Pullman and perhaps also Lewis for much of his life, failed to take into account.

Percy's realisation of precisely this truth is accompanied by a sudden spasm of self-pity, and one sudden tear. The pity

is for himself, and the tear is grudged, but the crack in the shell is there, however, slight, and the recognition of a value which cannot be circumscribed by a political ideology is unmistakable.

The presence of a great deal of carefully worked out symbolism or elaborately interlinked imagery, while it may be able to underscore the complexity of the author's vision or deepen the reader's imaginative grasp of the situation, is not by itself any guarantee of a great work of art - or even of a readable novel. Indeed the continued reiteration of a theme through imagery can be obtrusive or tiresome and certainly counter-productive. Of all Lewis's novels, The Revenge for Love is the one which has been least subject to this charge, but Peter Dale, at least, feels that it is applicable:

"In The Revenge for Love the obvious intention is to satirise old-school-tie, drawing-room socialists by confronting them with a working-class socialist who had suffered for his beliefs in putting them into action in Spain. In the course of this, however, Lewis's magpie vision is distracted by other bright ideas. Several things hinder his purpose. Firstly his habit of making all characters "objective" by continuous satirical comment and authorial intrusion renders every character ludicrous. The confrontation occurs between characters neither of which command any respect of sympathy. Hypocrisy is everywhere and everyone is stupid - except the author." 14

Apart from disagreeing about 'the obvious intention' and the rather interesting question of authorial intrusion to which I shall return later, it seems to me that Dale has allowed his exasperation with the reiterated theme of falseness - hypocrisy - and his feeling that every character is ludicrous, to lead him to an unsubstantiated conclusion: "every one is stupid - except the author". This seems to me an ideological hangover from The Apes of God (though even there as we have seen, the author is in a curious relation to the novel) but in no sense can I understand it being applied to



The Revenge for Love. There are in fact only two references in the novel which I can directly connect with the author, and both are self-satirical. The first is the continuous reference to the impoverished Tristy as a painter, dressing, talking and acting like a genius: a self-conscious imitation of the picture we have of the young Lewis, while as part of the satirical scene with Agnes Irons we read of a piercing shriek:

"...it was only a whistling kettle, announcing the climax of its activities; where discreetly out of sight behind a screen, it had for some minutes been subjected to a relatively intense heat. Agnes laughed ruggedly and swung over to the centre of the disturbance. It was a kettle with a sense of humour, such as Agnes approved of, that's why she had bought it. It sang out with a good hearty shriek, when it approached the boiling point, and, like the pukka sport that it was, kept down the gas bill." (240)

This is loaded with satire of the Agnes 'type' which the kettle is made to represent, yet E.W.F. Tomlin includes a remarkable detail in his description of Lewis's studio:

"At the opposite end, but partitioned off, was a small kitchen, where Lewis forthwith set the kettle to boil. This by a device novel at the time, would pour forth a vigorous whistle when ready, and tea would be served on the low square table." (15)

This is dated 1937, and may well represent one of Lewis's private jokes against himself.

However that may be, there are no traces in this novel of the author as some kind of superior puppet-master mocking his creations. The only direct 'authorial intrusions' occur in relation to Jack Cruze, where they serve a rather special function (which we shall look at in a moment).

Of course any satire or use of irony implies some standpoint of superiority - not just in the author, but frequently in the reader, who after all must have the intelligence or common sense to share in the joke. There is an obvious danger here that this will produce complacency, - the very opposite of almost any intention that the irony may have. The novels of Jane Austen, for

example, seem to me to be open to this criticism, but commonly one finds that the author takes pains to avoid this danger by occasionally discomfiting his reader, who suddenly finds himself the subject of the satire. Swift is perhaps the best example of this, but Lewis also avails himself of the technique. We find for example that while we are having a knowing chuckle at Jack, the natural man, who responds to sexual bait as a dog responds to a bone - leaping excitedly around, wildly wagging his tail - Lewis suddenly turns on us and in his 'authorial voice' (which has an assumed tone, and contains at least one ironic lie, for Jack is a thug) says:

"It's a fact that where girls are concerned Jack's been a hot customer, there's no use denying that, I'm afraid. More than once this man had been called thug (entirely without reason); he's also been called hog. So put hog next to thug - a hard name or two's not going to bother Jack! A pretty lot of names this precious fellow of yours gets himself called, or calls himself, I expect you'll be saying. But it isn't Jack that does the calling. I'm telling you what he's called by others and I'll let you judge for yourself. But how about the beam in your eye brother? How about all those shame-making 'undies' that gorge the shop windows? But enough! Let's confess that our Jack's no little tin saint and leave it at that." (116-7)

The fact is that, considering the seriousness of the novel and its tragic climax, the character of Jack is one of Lewis's most daring and successful experiments. For in a novel which otherwise takes no liberties of form, Jack is treated in a unique way and the whole tone of the novel changes to accommodate this Falstaffian figure, whose primitive sexual energy will simply not sit quietly on the page.

And yet although the reader is made to laugh at his antics, say, at O'Hara's party, and sympathises with him for the way he blunderingly contradicts the Party-orthodoxy of Gillian's friends, nevertheless Lewis shows us a darker side to Jack's naive, natural impulses in the fight with Percy, the character who, physically,

is so much Jack's counterpart.

Here the heroism is all Percy's as he refuses to be bullied, and handicapped as he is, swings at Jack with his crutch.

The vicious motivation behind the fight is, of course, Gillian's but Jack, inspired by his sexual jealousy, exhibits astonishing brutality, repeatedly kicking Percy in the stump of his missing leg.

If this is Jack Capitalist, Lewis invests Jill Communist with life in a totally different way. There is much to be said for seeing Gillian as Lewis's most remarkable female character - she is certainly the most unpleasant.

A totally real and instantly recognisable type, her dangerous vindictiveness yet render her remarkably individual, and there is even something in a topical touch in the way that she can deride Jack for seeing her as a sex object, a piece of property or a possession (200) in the best liberated woman manner, and yet when quarrelling with Percy can rail at him for being so 'cheap' as to insult a woman, and can avenge herself by setting one tame lover (Jack) onto another (Percy) not so tame.

With her vicious temperament, her sexual flirtations, her one-way honesty, her manipulation of her husband, and her snobbish communism, Gillian is an unforgettable portrait of a hard brilliance quite unequalled in any other female character of Lewis's.

Both Jack and Jill could be called 'stupid' as Dale claims, but the reader is not driven to compare their stupidity with the cleverness of the author in the way that Dale implies - The Revenge for Love is simply not the kind of satire written to demonstrate the superior standpoint of the satirist. The linguistic brilliance of The Apes of God which did tend to imply this standpoint (hence the Zagreus-Pierpoint-Lewis hierarchy)

was honed down to self-conscious sterility in Shooty Baronet, and has now been largely replaced by a much more casual surface, beneath which Lewis's verbal fireworks can flicker less intensely but more flexibly.

This exhibits itself very variously: from interior monologues of characters as disparate as Don Alvaro and Margot to descriptions of the Spanish girl Josefa or the warder Serafin, intended to work both literally and symbolically:

"He parted with a terrific wink, displaying his full complement of teeth, which could bodily have gone into a dental museum as a model of superb canines, and which suggested, in some roundabout manner, all the comforts and advantages of extreme corruption of a moral order as well" (24)

Lewis uses the same effect of stasis in this novel as he employed in The Apes of God - but much less rigidly, less often, and usually to more specific purpose: the agonising slowness with which Don Alvaro gets up from the table for example (20) is done less as a comment on mankind, which it would have been in The Apes of God, than as a device for heightening the suspense; the slowness of his rise is agony not just for the reader but for Josefa, caught with an escape plan concealed in her basket, waiting to hear her fate: Don Alvaro's slow deliberateness is mirrored exactly in the language.

Lewis exhibits too, a casual ease in his usual ironic circumlocution:

"He stalked away along the ambulatory, his lips moving as if in prayer; but such litanies as are appropriate probably to the celebration of the Black Mass, not to the offices of the catholic and apostolic church." (10)

Here the irony is caught largely by stretching the rhythm of the end of the sentence and according the church its more formal title. This same facility in using formal language to add a comic cloak to the more vulgar actions of men is common in Lewis:

"Growling remarks over their shoulders which were the coarsest libels upon the fine body of men the republican government of the middle-classes employed to restrain idealists and dreamers, the Sindicalistas suffered themselves to be turned back for the present into the paths of peace by Don Augustin..." (38)

Lewis here is a writer supremely self-confident in his use of language, and even if some of his metaphors - such as the images of lions and bulls scattered through the book - become a little self-conscious, it remains true that the language of The Revenge for Love, while creating its effects, is much more relaxed and natural than anything in the earlier novels.

This change in style marks a transformation in world-view; for perhaps the most astonishing aspect of The Revenge for Love is the nature of the characters in whom Lewis now feels able to invest his glimmering of positive values. Margot and Victor are lovers - and between them they embody almost all the qualities which Lewis despised most.

Victor is a bad, lazy and miserably failed artist, with good looks, an Australian drawl and a tendency to violence; while Margot has an unintellectual hazily romantic mind, a tendency to wallow in her love and misery - and is even a disciple of Lewis's arch-bogey, Virginia Woolf!

Lewis allows us to nurture no illusions as to the quality of ideal nature of their love, and in the few pages introducing us to them he paints a vivid domestic scene with a sharp stiffening of reality:

"She stamped a series of impulsive little kisses upon his chin and cheek. Then his arms parted - there was a vacuum, a chasm, where there had before been a plenum: and the small girl stiffly stepped out of bed backwards as debutantes withdraw from the presence of their sovereign." (72)

"Margaret was in no hurry to move off. They both sat silent over the empty tea-cups, she with a droop and

he with a sag, mutually deflated, not a word suggesting itself to either, each avoiding the others eye." (76).

"She bent down and kissed him as she was about to go, and he took her small round head in his hand with the action of a man warming his fingers upon a teapot."

'Do you love us, Margaret?'

'You know how much I love you Victor!' she whispered precisely, dipping her head to say it with the action of a ceremonial dipping of a flag." (77)

This use of the mechanical viewpoint is light but effective and ensures that the reader is unlikely to idealise either Margot or Victor.

Having accomplished that, Lewis proceeds to lighten the picture with the positive qualities of each character. Victor is engagingly direct and honest; he may be a bad artist but at least he is honest with himself about his failings and he has no time for the sham-culture which so many of his acquaintances are involved in. He refuses to be taken in by ideologies, and though an inferior artist to Tristy he sees the realities of the art-forgery racket much more clearly than his talented, but vague friend. Victor, we are told repeatedly, is like Nazi Germany, and what Lewis later said of fascism, that it was against all the right things but had no positive qualities, also applies to Victor. Victor knows what is wrong with his paintings, but he cannot correct the faults, he sees through the sham-culture world, but he does not disengage himself from it. At best, all he can do is put his foot through a forged painting, and it is this ~~is~~ penchant for action, this tendency to violent resolutions which leads him to his death.

Margot too has considerable redeeming qualities. She is inarticulate and often irrational; her imagination exists in a world of fairies and demons, and Victor is her god, her Apollo

and her knight in shining armour. Yet irrational as they are, all her perceptions are essentially correct, and there are hints that this slightly hysterical intuition amounts to second sight. In any case her love, real or otherwise, is very intense and she is prepared to take action and sacrifice herself for that love. Objectively Percy is probably right about the quality of Margot's emotions, but his denial of the genuineness of Margot's love comes to seem irrelevant when he realizes that he has assisted in the destruction of something precious.

Considering his attitudes, it is surely a considerable achievement for Lewis to take two such characters and make of them something valuable, make it criminal to write them off as cannon-fodder as do the spiteful, gun-running, art racketeer Communist/Capitalist gangsters who are responsible for their deaths.

Victor and Margot learn something before they die - Margot especially sees the joke, the irony of the false bottom on wheels and we leave her laughing, on her way to her death.

But however much sympathy Lewis came to have for humanity, the focus of his attention always remained on the plight of the intellectual and the effect that his intellect has on his sympathy for humanity. Rene Harding is an eminent professor and Pullman was the foremost writer of his age - Lewis is at his best when dealing with problems which one might infer are closest to his own.

So Lewis has to make the point in a further way - it has to be grasped intellectually as well as in Margot's intuitive fashion. Percy Hardcaster is a necessary counterpart to Margot and a more active and satisfying central character than she could be. He is a worthy object of attention for the society pinks because he

because he is more real than they, but his situation is tragic because he is still false and he comes to realise this. Percy is an activist of working-class background and this, and his lost leg, makes the society pinks 'feel small', though at the same time it reinforces their determination to 'remain the brains of the revolution' (150). On the other hand Percy's posturing 'I am the man who pulls the trigger' (210) is equally false for we have been told that Percy is 'a brass-hat in the class-war' (45) and his freedom in the Spanish prison is contrasted with that of the 'true gunman' who are kept locked-up (26). This dichotomy is a very useful device: Percy's reality enables us to see the London fellow-travellers as what they are - ridiculous; and his argument with Gillian is a searing exposure of this, with a hard core of communist truth which commands respect as it dismisses Gillian; but his unreality - his posturing, the element of lying which he claims is essential to his trade, but which we have been operating in his relations with other communists (e.g. in hospital) to the point where lying is such a matter of convenience that Percy no longer believes anything himself - his unreality, enables Lewis to explore more thoroughly this question of overriding adherence to a creed.

Percy himself realises the disparity between the real world and his own subjective version of it, but as he begins to question things under the pressure of circumstances - being shot, being beaten up - he finds himself becoming discredited in the Communist Party - presumably for indulging in too much reality when he should remain in bluff.



He therefore joins the gun-runners as a 'business' rather than political venture, but even here he is not successful.

Still caught up in his creed he goes along with the game, not realising the significance of the forged signature implicating Victor until it is too late.

When he does find out he sacrifices himself to save Victor, and ends up in prison in Spain, back inside his bluff with his copy-book pose:

"THE INJURED PARTY (model for militant agents in distress)"(380)

But he has just learned from a Spanish newspaper that Margot and Victor have walked off the edge of a precipice.

From the beginning of the book he has sensed the disparity between the objective, natural world outside and the system to which he adheres; the first has a nasty habit of making him forget the second. He has just been setting up his sham defences again when this little piece of reality hits him:

"Meanwhile a strained and hollow voice, part of a sham-culture outfit, but tender and halting, as if dismayed at the sound of its own bitter words, was talking in his ears, in a reproachful sing-song."(380)

We remember Margot's artificial, hollow voice - so carefully described by Lewis when she first appears.

"It was denouncing him out of the past, where alone now it was able to articulate; it was singling him out as a man who led people into mortal danger, people who were dear beyond expression to the possessor of the passionate, the artificial, the unreal, yet penetrating voice, and crying to him now to give back, she implored him, the young man, Absalom, whose life he had in his keeping, and who had somehow, unaccountably been lost, out of the world and out of time! He saw a precipice. And the eyes in the mask of 'THE INJURED PARTY' dilated in a spasm of astonished self-pity. And down the front of the mask rolled a sudden tear, which fell upon the dirty floor of the prison."(380)

And the man who thought men were free more than once in their lives, but who till this instant has never fully separated the sham and

the real, finally gazes into the bottom of the heart of his  
beloved - his beloved cause, his beloved creed, his beloved  
self - and he finds that it is false. O the mind, mind has  
mountains; cliffs of fall; Percy sees more than one precipice.

CHAPTER 8 : THE VULGAR STREAK.

The Vulgar Streak has had a curious, equivocal, even embarrassed reception; and for a book which was never published in America, has never been paperbacked, and was handled in England by only one publisher, even the bibliography is a matter of some confusion. Wagner gives the date of publication as December (on the strength of evidence in T.L.S.<sup>1</sup>), while Pritchard gives it as September (1941) without giving any source for his information<sup>2</sup>. Possibly his source is Lewis's letter to Geoffrey Stone, dated September 3, 1941, in which he says:

"My novel is published this month in London (The Vulgar Streak it is called)<sup>3</sup>.

Yet Lewis, caught in America, clearly has little effective contact with his publisher and does not know when the book is published. We find him writing to John Crowe Ransom saying the novel is published in October<sup>4</sup>, and to J. M. Dent & Son, Ltd. in November saying the book "should be out by now"<sup>5</sup>. Confusion about the date of publication however, is insignificant when compared to the total uncertainty about the fate of the novel. As recently as February, 1972 Pritchard could say it was never reprinted<sup>6</sup>, yet the copy I used (in the Scottish National Library) was a reprint - a second impression. This copy said "1st published Gt. Britain 1941. Reprinted January, 1942".

Hugh Kenner in his book on Lewis makes an eloquent plea for the book to be reissued, representing it as still-born because most of the copies were bombed in the warehouse<sup>7</sup>, yet this would seem to be contradicted by Lewis's letter of April 30th, 1942 to Theodore

<sup>1</sup>Wagner, G. Wyndham Lewis, p.330

<sup>2</sup>Pritchard, W. H. Wyndham Lewis. Twayne. (Bibliography.)

<sup>3</sup>Letters, p. 297

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 303

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.310

<sup>6</sup>Pritchard, W. H. Wyndham Lewis, Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.100

<sup>7</sup>Kenner, H. Wyndham Lewis, p.139

176.

Spencer<sup>8</sup>, in which he says the novel

'was as successful as could be expected at such a time'.

Julian Symons, investigating the sales of several of Lewis's novels<sup>9</sup> found that the publishers had no record either of the sales or the bombing. On the one hand the evidence of a quick reprint and the fact that the National Library holds a reprint rather than a first impression, which as a copyright library it would normally expect to receive, would support Kenner's statement. On the other Kenner gives no source for this information, and if the source was Lewis himself then it seems to me suspect, for it represents rather a fantastic coincidence.

For in April of 1941 Lewis wrote to his publishers:

"I have named it The Vulgar Streak. - If things are not too utterly disorganized - if a bomb doesn't hit the printing works just as the sheets have been stacked up to go to the Binders - it should be helpful to the firm of Hale..."<sup>10</sup>

Whether it is a confusion of this letter which forms Kenner's source, or whether it was a genuine piece of prophecy of Lewis's part I do not know. The novel (as Kenner says of many of Lewis's characters) seems determined to keep its origins obscure.

The novel's place in any 'hierarchy' of Lewis's work is similarly obscure. Kenner calls it 'a superb novel', a 'classic of our time',<sup>11</sup> while Julian Symons, an equally sympathetic critic, calls it 'a minor work', a 'failure'.<sup>12</sup> Yet both critics seem anxious to qualify their judgements. I get the impression that one thinks it is good but lacking something, whereas the other thinks it is not good, but 'has something'. Thus while Symons thinks it is minor, it is important 'in the Lewis canon'; and while it is a failure,

<sup>8</sup> Letters, p.322

<sup>9</sup> Symons, J. "The Thirties Novel" Agenda, Vol. 7, No. 3. Autumn-Winter 1969=70, p.38

<sup>10</sup> Letters, p.287

<sup>11</sup> Kenner. op.cit. pp. 132 & 139

<sup>12</sup> Symons. op.cit. pp. 46 & 48

it is 'one more valuable than the successes of lesser writers'. And while Kenner likes it, he is clearly uneasy about a certain thinness of style, for he calls the book 'smoothly written' and Lewis's 'most rapid and functional writing'. Wagner, typically, manages to discuss the novel without passing judgement on it, but elsewhere in his book we glean that he thinks it 'slipshod' and 'a minor satire'.<sup>13</sup>

Pritchard, too, discusses the work at some length yet adds little that is new. We feel, for example, that he is only echoing Kenner (see above) when he calls the novel 'Lewis's smallest, most economical, and most schematic piece of fiction'.<sup>14</sup> None of the criticisms amount to much more than plot resumé's, with the draft of Lewis's letter to H. G. Wells<sup>15</sup>, explaining the novel as a critique of action and the English class system, frequently being invoked.

Only one symbol is pointed out (by both Wagner and Pritchard) - the spectral easel, "a great futile easel, like the skeleton of a prehistoric bird" which stands significantly unused, dominating Vincent's room, and even this is totally unrelated to any of the other bird-symbols in the book, like the characterisation of April (now dead) as a gull-lover, or Vincent's remark that he would like to be an owl and go mousing, or a parrot and make witty remarks - two occupations which presumably he could have utilised his easel for, while at the end of the book:

"He felt uneasy in his exposed position - like a parrot up in a cage, making loud remarks he did not understand, but knowing he did not understand them. A most luckless sort of parrot". (217)

It is omissions or partial perceptions of this sort that make

<sup>13</sup>Wagner. op.cit. pp. 251 & 254

<sup>14</sup>Pritchard. Twayne. op.cit. p. 130

<sup>15</sup>Letters, pp. 332-3

one feel there has been an evasion of any real critical analysis of this novel. I challenge strongly Pritchard's statement that 'the novel demands not so much explication - its outlines present themselves clearly - as an articulated impression of its peculiar strength and modesty ...' We have enough such 'impressions' - they have their value, but in this case they have been used as a substitute for looking at the novel itself. In the draft letter to Wells, Lewis speaks of class as 'another pattern woven into my book', but no one has picked up the hint and examined the book in terms of its "patterns". Lewis also wrote to Hale "the novel is extremely carefully written"<sup>16</sup> so surely any critic labelling it 'slipshod' should want to examine what Lewis meant by 'carefully written'. It is this omission I intend to correct - by a careful examination of the novel's style and structure.

As a kind of prelude to the main body of this examination which is mainly concerned with how the images and incidents build up the themes and force of the novel, I should perhaps note the rather curious parallel between the first part of The Vulgar Streak, and the theme of Thomas Mann's Death in Venice.

In both books one character falls in love with another and stays in Venice to pursue that love in spite of imminent danger. In Death in Venice the danger is from disease, whereas in The Vulgar Streak it is from war, but Lewis characterises war as disease:

"War had seeped into every subject one touched...The Germans had released...gases that spread outwards over the European capitals...the infected linen left a taste upon the mouth. The very clothes men wore seemed to secrete its stench". (P.71)

The disease, of course, has a moral reference, implicit in Death

<sup>16</sup>Letters, p.287

in Venice, made explicit by Lewis: Vincent says we live in an unhealthy condition - "We need a storm to clear the air" (17).

And the imminence of war spreads like a disease: "As the day wore on the atmosphere became at every moment more opaque with war." (70).

The dense clouds of smoke from Martin's pipe are twice mentioned as a fumigating agent (pp 64 & 79). The second time in conjunction with the idea that he can have Venice to himself - an idea which occurs to Aschenbach; while the first refers to fumigating the hotel room after Vincent has left it. Here we see Vincent characterised as the disease. As Lewis talks of the disease seeping over Europe he adds:

"The only person who seemed completely immune from these influences was Vincent Penhale." (71)

In flirting with him April could be said to be flirting with death itself - not simply because Vincent is later identified with Hitler and Mussolini, but also it is because of him she becomes pregnant, because of him she miscarries, and because of him she dies.

Aschenbach, too, dies because of his love for Tadzio, and as he lies dying in his chair on the beach, he looks out towards the sea where Tadzio is standing on a sandbank and sees his lover as Death beckoning to him.

There are also such minor parallels as the boatman who takes Aschenbach out to the Lido against his wishes, and two separate passages in which April associates Vincent with their boatman (41) and feels Vincent is leading her out 'into deep water' (15).

There is, too, deserted Venice in both books, and a satire on Age aspiring towards Youth - Aschenbach's rouge and dye at the hotel barber's, April and the lies about her age.

Mann's use of the interior monologue, interest in Freud, etc. can hardly have been other than anathema to Lewis - but the parallels between the two novels are quite remarkable.



100.

The Vulgar Streak begins in a straightforward enough manner.

Two men out walking stumble on the novel's first symbol: a painting by Guardi for which Vincent has apparently been looking. Guardi is best known for his views of Venice, radiant with colour and light, but I have seen one drawing of his, done in Paris, which does show mysterious, cloaked figures such as Lewis describes:

"A sinisterly darkened lofty apartment, into which a crowd of small masked figures had just poured themselves, gathered in a dark palaver. They had gone inside into this empty room in some tarnished palace, to set up a dark whisper. Then later, when the maskers had dispersed, probably in a moonlit salizzade or streetlet, a long dagger would flash, a little masked figure would fall, crumpling up like a puppet. Expectant and intent, they crowded their masked faces together." (11)

It should be clear there is no murder in the painting - only a sinister impression which suggests the murder to Vincent. The only sensation he feels is fear.

"He felt personally involved in the plots of these masked and nameless beings of disintegrating pigment, as if they had been plotting against him." (11)

The images suggested by this painting occur again. Just after the love scene between Vincent and April in the gondola, when the two return to the hotel, Vincent catches a glimpse of two Italian detectives in the hall behind a fussy mock Byzantine pillar. In his mind's eye he sees

"an ante-chamber in some tarnished palace into which, cloaked and masked, a group of the dark little beings that belonged to Guardi and his times had moved, to engage in one of their sinister palavers - probably concerned with the destruction, in a treacherous ambushade, of a friend. It was the print in the shop window...which had come down like a painted curtain, to intercept his gaze." (52)

This is not just a repetition to establish the malevolence of the Italian detectives, it is part of a symbol which provides the key to the whole book. We learn of Vincent's insecurity, seeing himself as a small masked figure crumpling under attack, and the ideas of the mask, crumpling, disintegrating pigment, and for that matter the painted curtain, recur with increasing force throughout

the book. Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate the extent and complexity of these figures is to run through the novel pointing out where they occur.

Vincent, we learn, is an actor and painter; he has even combined the two activities, designing stage costumes for the theatre. Immediately after seeing the Guardi print in the shop window he catches sight of April Mallow, an attractive, fairly well-off young woman he is apparently pursuing. Already we find Vincent being set up as a stagy figure. There is "something of the player about him" (13). He reminds April of a beach minstrel, and she sees him "as if making his bow to his audience". He puns on 'Führer' and 'furious'; she speaks of malaprops, and he of 'playing with words'.

It is made clear that Vincent is not the only actor. April has a 'mental cinema' in which she casts herself in the role of nurse, tending the wounded Vincent (20-1). Then too, while Vincent is making his 'confession' to Martin, the collapse of Martin's facade is described: The Bellocia personality suffered a disintegration. Some spring had been touched, as it were, and the whole set-up had begun to drop to pieces." (31).

And further down the same page:

"Martin had distinctly the feeling that he was being unmasked as well. There had after all been two actors upon the stage. If one insisted on stripping off his properties, that left the other in an invidious position."

But while there are other actors in the novel - in one sense everyone in the novel is an actor - Vincent is the star.

Twice Martin tells him to stop 'playing the fool', but Vincent goes on driving home his domination of their relationship, and attributing it to his superior looks and build (32). There is a nice piece of "camera work" here - Martin looks away:

"His eye was upon a woman who was about to empty a pail of garbage into the waters of the canal. Where did it all go to anyway? She heaved it over with the rhythmical disinvolution of a figure of Tintoretto. The ritual of cloaca. The Italians still had the repertory of gestures that made up the grand style. His eye ran down the vista of beautiful rose and russet dilapidation. Odd to have an architectural paradise established upon a sewage-farm. He sighed - it was a dismal wheeze. Nature makes one pay for one's illusion! By associating beauty with bad smells. But Vincent's voice went on, gathering zest as his theme grew more (as it seemed to Martin) gruesome." (35).

The scene works very effectively, conveying not only Martin's rather embarrassed fading out of his friend's unpleasant monologue but also undercutting Vincent's speech and, of course, setting his false situation in its perspective - beauty and bad smells!

Vincent indicates that his act has taken him over: "The actor who plays all the time the Prince of Denmark is in the end more Hamlet than anything else...I am by now what I seem." (37).

Vincent sees everything in terms of acting - he declines to do any sketching because he does not feel like 'performing' (38).

His courtship, too, is stagy and sham. He turns on his Clark Gable smile to the extent of a leer, administers "another turn of the screw to her melting vanity" and over-acts:

"I'm through!" There was pathos in his gasp, disarming modesty in his words. "One has to be a youngster... to go doing that!" (39)

The act is strained, even April becomes suspicious, and Vincent too is not unaware that he is 'hamming' it:

"He returned her V.A.D. gaze with a comic tension, as if at any moment his solemn mask might break down and give way to unseemly mirth". (45)  
(my italics)

Lewis uses the shallowness of 'painting' imagery, together with a certain parody, to undermine their love-scene together:

"The gondola, that snail-like craft, in defiance of Time only pretended to move. Its glistening trail was only painted no more, upon the dark green waters.

To April it seemed that they had been painted too, Vincent and she, as neither moved, their faces going dark like the faces in old pictures. The red mist of the defunct sunset impended above the ivy-green of the red-tipped waves..." (48)

And so it slushes on. Vincent's hand, descending on her shoulder like a leaf (a hot leaf) is a "painted hand", and we get a long description of their passionate kiss - by this time completely undermined by the falsity of Vincent's behaviour: "This was what life had been for."! (49)

The ecstasy is short-lived, however, for Vincent is escorted from the hotel by the two detectives who remind him of the Guardi painting, and as he pales under his tan, the impression of a mask is reinforced.

"She would never see a tanned male face again without feeling it was somehow phony." (54)

The next relevant reference is a rather curious one. The Italian host of their hotel uses the expression 'lift the veil' twice, in connection with the Munich crisis and the threat of war. The colloquialism seems to displease the group, by this time the only four foreigners left in the hotel. Perhaps this is not surprising, for Vincent has staged his own little dinner, during which he reveals that the threat of war is over.

The acting aspects of this are especially emphasised. On the way to the restaurant Vincent hurries on ahead with April, "playing the faust for all he is worth", while Martin is saddled with Mrs. Mallow, landed in the role of undertaker's mute. (83) Undertaker's mutes reappear later in the novel at the funeral of Vincent's father, but a mute is also "an actor on the stage whose part is performed only in dumb show" (OED.) and it is in this role that Martin is cast. Martin now recognizes that the confession in the gondola was "staged" (85) and the similar staging of the dinner as a prelude to seduction annoys him even more:

"...on top of all that, Vincent's elaborate pantomime, gave Martin the sensation of being seated upon a stage in a theatre, rehearsing with the actor manager some stock farce." (87).

Here too, we find another of the references to birds which gives more point to the bird-like easel dominating Vincent's studio later in the novel; for here we have Vincent at the height of his powers, about to produce the news of peace like a conjurer producing a rabbit out of an empty hat, successfully stage-managing his seduction of April, and generally being a success, but as the party grows increasingly drunk, the waiters judge it safe to drop their act of servility and gather in a scowling ring like birds of prey. (89)

The seduction is successfully carried off and Vincent acts the playboy, careless of April's feelings. But he has to some extent alienated Martin who declines "to have anything more to do with Vincent's vainglorious theatricals". (93)

Martin speculates on the streak of vulgarity in Vincent:

"Vincent was nothing if not ingeniously dramatic.  
It was the vulgar streak coming out." (96)

"That his friend had the makings of a great actor Martin was positive", but we learn something curious about Vincent. He does not like references to his acting. He has told April he acted in an amateur capacity only, and he "frowned whenever Martin inadvertently mentioned the stage". (96)

Back in London, we meet Vincent's sister, Madeleine Morse, and the theme of the face as a mask, concealing the emotions and any vestige of personality behind the actor's facade is expanded. Madeleine's face is described: it is statuesque and expressionless; she: "stood back with the same absence of expression, almost wooden - but withal sensitively carved". (104)

She is trying to break the news of their father's death to Vincent: "The impassive bloodless face began to writhe a little at the mouth, then suddenly it broke up and went to pieces". (105)

And a careful contrast is made:

"For a few moments Vincent's face was strikingly like his sister's. It became wooden: white and stately, but with the lips thin and tight. Then ever so slightly, just as his sister's had, it began to writhe in the neighbourhood of the lips. His nostrils dilated. But it did not break up as had his sister's. It began to go harder still instead."(105)

Vincent and Madeleine wear the same mask - though Vincent's is the tougher of the two. The point is driven home a moment later:

"She took the compact from her bag and began to repair the effect of the tears."

We learn that Maddie is a model:

"She always gave the impression of someone posing, and constrained under penalty of dismissal to keep quite still."(106)

And the relationship is stressed:

"In some ways, however, this mask of a girl, with her static face, served as a key to her brother... [he] went suavely smiling through his mortal part..." (my italics); but "he was born to the tragic roles as much as she."(106)

Here the actor's role they both fill is made still more explicit.

Maddie is rarely seen in terms other than her mask:

"She still kept her impassive, rarely smiling, mask"(107)

When she tells of the doctor being rude to her when she complained that her father is not receiving proper attention:

"Again, the heroic, beautiful mask showed signs of breaking up."(110)

When she learns of Vincent's sudden marriage she is upset, and her face shows it:

"Its surface commenced to writhe."(112)

But there is an acceptance of their role:

" 'How hard you are, Vincent'. A single stately tear descended the pallor of her cheek. She spoke without reproach."

And the necessity for the role is made apparent a moment later:

"Willis [a manservant] opened the door."

'The taxi is there, sir', he said, his face as much a mask - and for the same reason - as that of Mrs. Morse."(112)

At the funeral Maddie's "white mask writhed"(126), and later as Vincent rebukes her: "The perfection beauty, hearing itself denounced as barren, broke up its features in to a hideous mask of grief."(166)

It should be noted that Maddie is treated as a thing rather than a person in the foregoing passage.

Yet it would be wrong to assume that this is just another instance of Lewis's world view of people as things, as many have done. Lewis's early stories - and his major satire, The Apes of God - describes people as objects as part of a satiric vision; but his later works do not use this 'thingness' of people in the same way. Where it is used, as here, it is to point the tragedy of people doing this to themselves, the tragedy of people turning themselves into things. As we shall see, it is later made quite explicit that this is what both Vincent and Maddie have done, and Vincent comes to realise the fact.

The same argument, I think applies to the attention paid to the lips. Wagner points out the attention Lewis pays to the mouth as 'soft, wet, mushy, pulpy',<sup>17</sup> and says for Lewis the mouth is representative of the lower senses. Again this is true of the satire, but here the mouth is the one place that genuine human qualities assert themselves, threaten to break through the mask, and I do not believe that Lewis is attacking the mouth of Madeleine for its weakness. These are not minor points; they are part of a significant shift away from a purely satirical view of mankind towards a more compassionate one, a shift which is clear in The Revenge for Love and which I think I have shown first manifests

<sup>17</sup>Wagner. op.cit. pp. 273-9

itself in Snooty Baronet - in other words as early as 1932.

Thus we find in the same quarrel referred to above:

"Maddie's mask began to wriggle at the lips...she placed her face in her hands, as if to hold the stern mask together."(168)

Later too, the point is made that it is Vincent who has made her like this. With the police gathering evidence which will almost certainly lead to Vincent's rearrest for forgery and possibly murder, he tells Maddie:

" 'Sink or swim together - well I'm sunk'. The mask began to writhe at the lips...He saw the sister he had loved so much and worked on like a sculptor with his clay, breaking up beneath his eyes, as a result of his assault upon her dream."(232)

The characterisation of Vincent as a man acting his way through life continues too. We find April reflecting on a certain strangeness in Vincent and Maddie - their vulgar streak in fact - and explaining it in terms of their artistic tendencies: in fact, she thinks, one might almost think they were the children of a famous actor(149).

Then too, when Vincent runs out of money, and April is asking her mother for a loan, Mrs. Mallow suggests that Vincent should go back to the theatre - not so much as an actor, rather as a playwright - she's sure he would be good at that.(173) This ties up interestingly with Martin's earlier impression of Vincent as an actor-stage-manager, and the idea of Vincent in the role of writer/manager/sculptor (of Maddie) underlines the responsibility Vincent carries to others, as well as himself, and the effect his phoniness has on others.

The acting metaphor extends further and further, becoming more and more involved with life. Bill Halvorsen, the left-wing forger for whom Vincent exchanges counterfeit money, protests:

"You're not my boss, although you've always acted as if you was."(193)

And as Vincent leaves Halvorsen's office in the company of the police



who have come to arrest Halvorsen for murder, Lewis comments:

"There was a professional glitter in his frowning eye. It was a most creditable exit."(201)

April, too, is drawn into the structure of the play. She sits at home brooding on the tragic scandal which now fills her life; she recalls the golden days in Venice:

"And now all this - like fate unmasking itself, with hideous insults."(206)

"Her gentle mind, of which the gentle contours of her face were the outward expression, was not shaped to receive a content such as this...such a drama as had begun to be played all round her - with herself forcibly recruited as one of the case - could only be entertained by her inside an asylum."(206)

Vincent returns home filled with a consciousness of what he has done to destroy her happiness:

"The wilful watchful mask, its eyes closed, against which he pressed her head as she spoke, started to writhe and to break up."(208)

Notice how Maddie and Vincent 'cracking up' is always described in the same terms - emphasising the mechanical sameness of their masks.

Dr. Perl, Vincent's psychiatrist, describes Vincent's case as "a tragedy" in which the "villain of the piece is class", and Vincent too comes to see his life as a play. To April he says:

"I'm terribly sorry for the part you have been forced to play in this story."(214)

In his last dinner with Martin he explores the inter-action of his acting and his life. He begins by seeing himself as a good actor - he supposes he should have thought more about acting and less about living; but he also reflects that the stage is "choked with deadly snobs", and a thought strikes him:

"Have I all the time been just a very typical actor-man...? Nothing but that? Oh, dear."(231)

All this is done in what is called his 'Adelphi manner' but he discards this:

"His unmannered self was back - and he did not even seem to be thinking of the dramatic value of the unmannered, that was the disturbing part of it."(231)

Vincent tries to take stock of himself, and finds it a very unpleasant experience: "Why did I act like this? Why have I always acted like that?"(232) He links acting and action.

"My main trouble is that I am all made up of action."(233)  
 "The arch-type of that sort of man who is all action... is to be found in Berlin - or that bloody little jack-in-the-box up in his balcony in the Palazzo Venezia. That is obvious enough. Our epoch finds its highest expression in those dynamical puppets - with their little names full of stupid percussions, like Hitler. Our time will go down branded with those six letters."(233).

The link is made too, with Napoleon and Stendhal's hero Julien Sorel.

Vincent says:

" 'No one has believed more in action than I have...if I stop acting I die.' "

Martin responds:

"That is why you have been an actor - you cannot help acting."

Vincent pounces on this correspondence:

"There's more in it than you think, it's not just a pun...my acting is a form of action - not of make-believe. I have attempted to act my way out of my predicament...I have never been a real actor." (234-5)

He protests he is solemn - if Martin does not think so then he has been fooled by "the gambler's mask":

"I reflect - I have reflected what is biting Europe... I have proved...upon my personal little stage that force is barren." (235)

There is only one mask left - the death mask. Vincent's servant Willis is twice described as gazing 'fixedly' at it - probably because he wears a mask himself - and Vincent hangs there, his face a 'hideous mask' and his tongue sticking out. Perhaps after all there is more than one mask, for Vincent has always regarded his body as one of his major props, yet at the end in his self-discovery he says:

"As a matter of fact I know so much about Vincent Penhale that it makes me quite uncomfortable to be

here any longer, right inside the fellow!"(233)

Thus, pinned to the body is a note giving it to anyone who wants it - signed, its former occupant.

There are other themes, usually linked to the main one. There is, for example, the constant suggestion that Vincent suffers from a kind of madness. Discussing the war with April at the beginning of the book Vincent provides us with our first clue in this respect: April says: "We all seem a little mad, if you ask me".

" 'I'm completely batty!' he announced with disarming pleasantness, but with a vibration in the voice that caused her to look up rapidly to see what was wrong."(16)

Later, in another conversation with April, as Vincent talks of being an owl or a parrot - predator or wit - April reflects on how this conversation would strike one of her 'normal' acquaintances:

"If Major Hoskyns were listening in to this, thought she, he would certainly conclude that they were both batty!"(43)

Yet Vincent does not appear 'strange' only to the class whom he is trying to impress. Halvorsen accuses him of being mad too:

" 'Are you right? Ought you to see a specialist?'"

he says as they leave the Venetian hotel together.(79) Martin reflects on how Vincent was almost sent mad by the bread and butter work he had to do when he was poor.(97)

Perhaps most damning of all, Vincent's family seem united (except Madeleine) in believing him mad. This is because of his insistence on their bad accent and grammar. Every time he starts on this subject (and he does so obsessively) they recoil from him and reject his ideas:

" 'Are you quite all there?' Harry asked him roughly. 'No, he isn't!' Minnie said, getting up and going towards the bedroom. 'Don't take any notice of him 'Arry. 'E never was like t'other people. 'E's wrong in 'is upper storey.' "(141)

And when he starts again: " 'Oh, you're crackers. You're nuts.' "

And on the following page:

"Harry made a gimlet-like movement with his forefinger at the side of his temple, as he was passing into the door, to illustrate the strictly cerebral seat of his poor brother's trouble."(143-4)

And the source of his madness, it is becoming clear, is his obsession with his act. It is the 'false notes' in his act that cause April and Halvorsen to look at him twice, while it is the open explication of it (false accent, etc.) that makes his family think him mad. The theme recurs when Maddie tells him that the elocution lessons he subjects her to in order to rescue her from the working classes, give her headaches:

"Vincent bit his nails and stared away out of the window. Was he nuts, as Flo said he was? he asked himself quickly."(165)

The answer comes when Vincent, at the behest of April's mother does in fact 'see a specialist' as Halvorsen puts it - he consults a psychiatrist. Dr. Perl tells him that all people involved in the class system are mad: "And you, Vincent" he added softly, smiling, "You are a little mad too." (184)

But, of course, we should have known this all along. We are told even by the characters' names. Führer is punned on to make 'furious'(14); Hitler epitomises stupid action in his name: "full of stupid percussions"(233). The point is made about Vincent's own name meaning 'conquerer' (making a conquest of April (42)) redolent of victory - he thinks this an irony or mockery (32), and, of course, there is the name of his sister, who has 'made it' in America and has a negro butler - Victoria. Vincent comes to see her triumphal letters as empty. But perhaps most telling of all is the sister who follows Vincent most closely, whom he has moulded in his own image, who is said to provide the key to Vincent herself - Madeleine. It should be no surprise to discover her family nickname - Mad.

There are other themes bound up in this - like the behaviouristic

bias of Vincent's class transformation. Vincent sees the differences between the classes as a matter of accent, grammar and clothes. He describes his father (whom he likes) as "an old evil-smelling aitchless and g-less serf." (29) And he describes voice and appearance as transforming agents for him. His obsession with elocution lessons for Maddie, and with constantly correcting the grammar of his relatives - which he does most obnoxiously - has already been referred to. Ironically the relatives and neighbours in the slums see this more clearly than Vincent. As a neighbour says of Maddie: " 'She doesn't seem happy do she, for all her dolling up and puttin' on the talk?' " As Flo, Vincent's sister, puts it with an unconscious aptness: "Madeleine wasn't brought up to act like that' " (119)

It is this over-emphasis on the external details, the behaviouristic aspect of class that is part of Vincent's madness. It also emphasises the extent to which his class mobility is an act, a 'repertory of gestures' (as Martin thinks of the Venetians). Needless to say the point is that this concentration on the outside has left the inside empty. (This should provide food for thought to those who believe that Lewis is always "dogmatically for the great without".)

Just as when, in Self Condemned, Lewis speaks of a cemetery of shells, he is not praising the value of a shell's hard exterior (as he could perhaps be argued to be doing in The Aces of God where Matthew Plunkett is obsessed by shells), but rather he is concerned by the hollowness, the emptiness within, so too, in The Vulgar Streak Lewis is concerned with what Vincent has done to himself 'inside'. He still avoids describing the inside (at least mostly) because his views on the difficulty of doing this without sliding over into a shapeless flux are largely unchanged, but nevertheless the concern is with the inside.

Thus as Vincent leaves his family after the funeral he reveals what he had done to his personality:

"I'm afraid, Mad, I'm wanting in something... essential. I can't quite define it. As I was looking out of the window just now I almost saw myself. Almost. Then it all became muddled and blurred again - just as I thought I was going to know what I was really like...Mad, my dear: I wish I knew what I was really like!"(144)

Indeed much of the geography of Vincent's neurosis looks like a sketch of the map of Rene Harding's journey to emptiness in Self Condemned. Like Rene, Vincent finds himself in a cell of his own making. The physical cell in The Vulgar Streak is real enough, while in Self Condemned it is the room in the Hotel or the 'cell' at the College of the Sacred Heart. But the cell too is Vincent's own room, and it mostly a mental thing:

"This was a cell of his own making: full of cold hard sunlight, like a symbol of his mind. The cheerless glitter meant nothing. It was like the frosty smile of a death's head."(217)

As Eliot had put it some years before:

"We think of the key, each in his prison  
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison"<sup>18</sup>

The prison is in the man as much as the man in the prison, Rene is battenning emotions down within himself; Vincent too makes his own prison, and like Rene, expresses a consciousness of it physically:

"He paced up and down in front of her, as if seeking some path to action - some path out of the despondent maze; but turned back every few feet, met by insuperable barriers."(109)

Vincent's emptiness is discussed in his interview with his psychiatrist, Dr. Perl. Perl tells Vincent he suffers from an excess of will - he has for example willed himself to be a gentleman, but that the necessary effort has left him empty. Vincent concedes that he often feels empty but asserts that he is not really a snob, that 'itches' don't really matter to him - he is only concerned with getting on top, natural enough in an underdog. Perl's answer

<sup>18</sup>Eliot, T. S. "The Waste Land". Complete Poems & Plays, p. 74

seems to me crucial:

" 'Of course. But did you get on top? No, you identified yourself with your oppressor.' "(181)

Perl defines the madness, the excess of will which is the base of the modern European - and North American, and Vincent, though he struggles to reject Perl's conclusions on class, does achieve some kind of recognition of his own 'disease', which he calls the 'mal du siecle'.

Clearly much depends on our interpretation of Dr. Perl. Psychiatrists would hardly number among Lewis's favourite people, and he has attacked Freudians on several occasions. Again, though, I feel that much criticism of Lewis proceeds out of habit rather than observation. Lewis is pigeon-holed as a writer who is anti-pathetic to psychiatrists, therefore when a psychiatrist makes an appearance he must be an object of satire. Thus Wagner says that Perl is "decidedly reminiscent of the delightful Dr. Frumpfsusan of The Apes"<sup>19</sup> yet any direct comparison of the two makes nonsense of this.

Frumpfsusan revels in his inferiority-complex regarding his Jewishness, drivels jargon, lapses into German (taking Matthew with him) panders to Matthew's infantilism, and the cult of 'smallness', and of course extorts large sums of money for doing so:

" 'That will be one thousand and fifty Swiss marks'. The doctor flung himself back in his chair. He put his fingers, grown fat in subnormal-pulse-palping and after that complex-catching, into his black beard - put his head on one side, and bit his principal hand-nail, while Matthew made out the cheque. 'It is worth it' said Matthew as he handed it to him. 'It is worth it if you do what I tell you!' Dr. Frumpfsusan thundered, with a furibund eye-roll, placing the cheque carefully in a drawer of his desk.

<sup>19</sup>Wagner. op.cit. p.258

'I shall be most careful to take full advantage of all your advice' Matthew replied.

'Ausgezeichnet!' crashed the doctor, <sup>20</sup>banging the drawer in and turning the key."

The element of satire is never in doubt here, the eye for detail is merciless, the language approaching burlesque rather than satire.

Compare then, Vincent's view of Dr. Perl:

"He liked this Viennese exile, placidly analysing away with his inquisitive brown eye, while social systems were crashing about them." (179)

And the adroitness with which the doctor points out that Vincent, by dismissing his ideas about class on the grounds that he is a foreigner, is contriving to put him outside the pale as a kind of defence-mechanism: he is the only man who spots that Vincent's aggression is defensive - though Vincent admits this to Martin. At least the Times Literary Supplement review of the book at the time<sup>21</sup>, in spite of other manifest errors (see below) called the interview with Perl a class diagnosis of "searching brilliance".

In any case the conclusions that Vincent reaches about his cult of action and his emptiness at the end of the book are precisely those suggested to him by Dr. Perl, and I see no reason to take him other than seriously. Perl's idea of Vincent's personal dictator inside him driving him on fits beautifully with the other 'political' links (Rene Harding too has such a 'demon'), and the idea that his will is steeled almost out of human semblance fits well with the mechanical aspects of the action cult.

This point is made too by the way the characters cry. When Maddie learns of Vincent's wedding she cries "A single stately tear", but she, of course, is not as rigid as Vincent and can later burst into tears. Whereas when Vincent cries later in the book, he drops

<sup>20</sup>The Apes of God, p.91

<sup>21</sup>T.L.S. "Cult of Class" December 27th, 1941. p. 653



a single tear, and even this he inadvertantly catches in his hand. Then too the dissociation from his body mentioned above emphasises the emptiness he feels.

Only two major points remain. The forgery and the working-class background. The forgery confused the T.L.S. reviewer. After calling the novel a fierce and provocative performance, he says Lewis is led to

"confuse his own vehement case through lack of imaginative discrimination. Vincent is as he confesses, never quite real to himself... [understandable in the circumstances thinks the reviewer]...But unless the plea is that only crime cancels out privilege why mix up forgery and its penalties with all this?"<sup>22</sup>

The plea is not that crime cancels out privilege at all - in a sense the story is a critique of that philosophy. Certainly crime does seem the only way out to Vincent. We find a passage expressing this during Maddie's account of the indifference of the panel doctor:

"Their eyes both held a consciousness of the same injustice...for which there was no help - unless one could obtain it by fraud or force. Both had tasted for too long the hopelessness of rebellion."(111)

Yet it is precisely this use of fraud or force which represents the excess of will. Vincent comes to feel that rather than try to gate-crash the superior party (as he had tried to do by fraud) one should try to blow it up (crime?) or better still, recognise it for what it is and then forget it.

The fraud is involved, both in the whole falseness of his position (for example Vincent describes his lies to April as "counterfeit stuff" - the forgery he cannot forgive himself (215)), and in a much more direct manifestation of 'will'. Bill Halvorsen,

<sup>22</sup>T.L.S. "Cult of Class", December 27th, 1941. p. 653

after all, is much more the man of action than Vincent is. His language is crude, his manner blunt. He stops short of nothing - even murders unreflectively. His voice is described:

"Like a can-opener. It was an instrument of will. He forcibly burst things open with it when they stood in his way. It could still be heard gouging away..."

It is he who lures Vincent into a life of crime. But Vincent is already leading a sham existence; if his language is a counterfeit stuff it is but a small step to passing forged bank-notes - in a sense Bill is simply instrumental to Vincent's aspirations. But the forgery has wider implications - implications which would virtually require a tract on economics to explore. Halvorsen's explanation to Vincent of how banks work, issuing credit - cheques and other slips of paper (bank notes) for which they have no adequate security, not even gold, (banks can extend credit up to twelve times greater than the amount of gold they hold, as part of accepted practice), all this sounds less 'red' (as it is described) than the philosophy of the Social Credit Party. The importance of the ideas of Major Douglas for both the poetry and politics of Ezra Pound can hardly be over-estimated. What perhaps needs pointing out is the extent to which they apparently influenced Lewis in his support for Hitler in 1931. Hitler's opposition to loan-capital looms large in Lewis's Hitler, as do other aspects of Social Credit. Such as the idea that poverty is caused by the banks and the credit system, that people are starving in the midst of plenty because of a corrupt money system.

Pound's conviction of the truth of this theory led him to support Mussolini even after war had broken out. Lewis shied away from Hitler before that (in fact as early as his original book, praising Hitler, he said Hitler was wrong about the Jews), but his basic conviction about the money system causing poverty and war remained

unchanged. Rene Harding hints at it in Self Condemned. These are matters which will have to be dealt with elsewhere; our concern is with what use Lewis made of Social Credit's ideas about money in The Vulgar Streak.

Basically Social Credit feels that money is a forgery anyway, and it is this aspect of money which Halvorsen puts to Vincent. Also Social Credit is against loans, and the interest charged on them - while Vincent is clearly fascinated by the account of Hire Purchase arrangements which Mr. Herb gives him; (Mr. Herb, says Vincent, is a man of 'sterling worth')(152). It appears that large numbers of 'rich' people live simply as swindlers, compelling more honest people to pay higher rents and more interest on their H.P. in order to balance the deficit. Interestingly, here too, it is not the individual who is to blame -- all the new flats are owned by the banks (through some 'man of straw') and they charge very high rents. The whole of London, we are told, is like a house of cards - but, of course, according to Douglas so is the whole monetary system, kept afloat on a rising tide of debt.

A final point. Douglas's basic unit of value was not 'the price that could be obtained for an article (capitalism) nor the labour put into the article (Marxism), but the time-energy saved on an article, or more precisely: "real credit is a measure of the reserve of energy belonging to the community"<sup>23</sup>. A work of art, according to Pound at least, was energy-giving, part of our 'cultural inheritance' in Douglas's sense of the phrase, meaning all those things which we inherit from history which make our life a little easier.

This sets a value on a work of art rather higher than that of the contemporary commercial market (normally, at least), and

<sup>23</sup>Douglas, C.H. Economic Democracy, p. 121

clearly this was a major attraction to Pound, and likely to be one to Lewis also. What has all this to do with The Vulgar Streak? Well, when Vincent meets Dougal Tandish, the man Halvorsen eventually murders, and the capitalist/fascist/villain of the story, Tandish haunts him with a forged note which he has apparently caught Vincent passing (though he himself, as an oversized capitalist is presumably also a sham-man) and asks Vincent what has happened to a portrait Vincent once painted of Tandish. Vincent replies that he has painted it out, and Tandish says that he would have offered him a tenner for it (commodity value). Faced with the fact that it has been painted out (and presumably it was part of the bread-and-butter work which almost drove Vincent mad [above]) Tandish says it seems rather a "waste of energy".(159) It is important to recognise the significance of this scene following after the scene in which we hear of London as a financial 'house of Cards', for at the end of that scene Vincent says: "If you see a fat man in London today you may be sure he's a rogue!"(153) Tandish is the first fat man Vincent meets.

Nothing has been said by other critics about the presence of this economic theory in The Vulgar Streak. Commentators have not been slow, on the other hand, to comment on the working-class background. The T.L.S. review merely says "the description is done with hard and almost malicious gusto."<sup>24</sup> While Wagner sees it as nothing less than a full-blown attack on the working-class, whom, he claims, Lewis attacks much more than any other class<sup>25</sup>. Julian Symons, much more sympathetic, nevertheless regards the book as a failure because the working-class environment is rendered unsatisfactorily: "This brilliant idea fails to come off, primarily because Lewis had little knowledge of the way in which working-class people think and talk"<sup>26</sup>. This is clearly an argument not easily

<sup>24</sup> T.L.S. op.cit.

<sup>25</sup> Wagner, op.cit. p. 37

susceptible to empirical evidence. One can arraign the various anecdotes of Lewis spending much of his time, in the poverty of the twenties and thirties (Lewis's poverty), standing in seedy pubs listening to conversations; one can quote various critics expressing their admiration for Lewis's 'ear' for dialogue. One can quite validly ask if Julian Symons really knows any more about working-class people than Lewis does, I could even throw in my own credentials as a railwayman's son (Vincent's father works on the railway), and add my memories of Manchester slums. All this would be irrelevant.

What I can say is that the scenes in Vincent's parents' slum home, do not seem to me to be false or strained in their portrayal of a section of the working classes, and I can point to the 'devices' Lewis uses to render the situation precisely.

Briefly, the situation is one beloved of modern sociology - the strain that develops between the working-class child who has 'got on' and the rest of the family left behind. Lewis highlights this most economically with a single symbol - "the boss". Vincent is identified with the boss-class from the moment he enters. His large wreath is matched by only two others - both from former employers of his father. Each time he enters the main room there is a hush "as gossip in a work-room is extinguished by the entrance of the boss".(122) Vincent's way of acting, seeing himself as a judge in one outburst (quickly picked up by his family), chatting idly to the curate in a patronising way, indulging in what his family see as 'classy humanitarian invective' (not their phrase - their feeling), and of course his accents of embarrassing refinement: "all others had to do was to close their eyes - to believe they heard the boss speaking".(132)

This provides a rationale for the meanness displayed by some of Vincent's family, notably the women, while Harry, the brother,

though satirised is not, by Lewis's standards treated severely. Perhaps the final eloquent touch is Vincent's alcoholic mother making pathetic attempts to 'put on the talk' and in the process making herself ridiculous - she is, after all, only a parody of Vincent himself.

There are other, smaller points; the repeated image of a dying workhorse during the funeral of Vincent's father - too crude I think, to be effective; a recurring suggestion of incest (spiritual at least) between Vincent and his sister Maddie; and, of course, Vincent's moustache.

The moustache makes a late appearance, and seems rather pointless. Vincent is discovered, talking with April, fingering his new moustache. April wishes he would cut it off. Next scene, Halvorsen also objects to Vincent fingering his moustache. Again with April after his release on bail, Vincent is tugging at his moustache as if he wants to pull it out. April again asks him to cut it off - "I don't know how to put it...villains have moustaches." (211); the moustache is said to give a wolfish appearance to the cheek-bones (212), and lastly, as he reads the letter from Maddie's husband with its implication of incest, Vincent is tugging at his moustache. What does all this mean? By now we should be sure it means something.

"Villains have moustaches" suggests it is theatrical. A 'Colonel Blimp' as Halvorsen describes it, perhaps suggests some of Vincent's pretensions; but I believe it was Lewis's intention to establish a link (a reluctant link - Vincent acts as if he wants to tear the moustache out) between Vincent and the most famous small moustache in the world at that time - that cultivated by Adolf Hitler.

One wonders, incidentally, if Lewis attended John Heartfield's exhibition at the Arcade Gallery at the beginning of 1939, entitled 'One man's war against Hitler' (or saw Heartfield's work in the magazines of that time). For there he would not only have found

the third Reich portrayed as a house of cards (in photomontage), but he would also have seen a photograph of Hitler with his features transformed into those of a wolf. Vincent's moustache, we recall, gives him a wolfish appearance.

There is one further point. An appreciation of positive human values for which Lewis is seldom given credit. Both April and Martin are satirised in the novel. Yet Lewis recognises both as 'good' people. Martin hides behind his pipe, his Bellocian personality, even his Catholicism. He affects a stammer in a fashion deplorable to Lewis. He is even said to be in the habit of feeding off Vincent's vitality. Yet he is there at the end, upset by the absence of whisky, but genuinely concerned about his friend, and anxious to help.

April, too, is an object of some ridicule. Her romantic dreams, her conception of herself as nurse, her idea of the kiss as the ultimate experience, her youth complex, all are objects of derision. Yet like Margot Stamp, in The Revenge for Love, she loves her husband, and will sacrifice everything for that love. Love transcends her superficiality and her snobbery - it does not, ultimately, matter to her that Vincent should come from the working classes. Like Margot, her love kills her, but it is a positive quality, which Lewis admires.

Is The Vulgar Streak, then a great novel? One hesitates. There is an uneasiness, mentioned at the beginning, among both admirers and detractors. To quote from the T.L.S. review (which made it the book of the week):

"It is an intense, angry, pointed, but curiously uneven piece of work. The passion and the penetration of Mr. Lewis's social criticism are always telling, and the characteristic mixture of the ribald and the mordant in satire likewise has its effect. Nevertheless Mr. Lewis's headlong rush is a little

too much of a good thing. It gives...too pronounced an air of amateurishness to his novelist's way of writing, so indifferent is he to intellectual consistency on the one hand and to finish of style on the other"<sup>27</sup>

I hope this chapter has already answered most of this, but the 'headlong rush' or the 'rapid and functional writing' as Kenner calls it, needs explanation. Certainly there is a 'no nonsense' approach to technical problems. Vincent's mother's bedroom is briefly described: "all bed and no room". April's first meeting with Halvorsen is abruptly handled: "April saw Halvorsen for the first time under circumstances that startled her considerably. This happened in the following way. The hotel was..."(73)

This is in many ways typical. Yet there seems to me a simple reason for all this, and it is suggested by the central image of the novel - a play. There are few passages of 'dense' prose in the novel, few passages such as Martin's brooding on Venice as a sewer, yet such passages are very common in all of Lewis's other novels. The effect is that the novel could be transposed almost directly to the stage (even more directly to the screen).

The idea of a novel which could be transferred directly to the stage is not new - John Steinbeck wrote three such novels, the first of which Of Mice and Men enjoyed great fame in the late thirties, yet it is not simply this that Lewis is doing, for after all, the central metaphor of his novel is of an 'act' and some of the lay-out of the novel is calculated to extend this metaphor.

Scene after scene reads like a stage play - scenes in Gondolas in Venice, in the restaurant, on the beach. In London, scenes in Vincent's house, like the one in which he is giving Maddie elocution

<sup>27</sup>T.L.S. op.cit.



lessons and which could easily read 'enter April; enter Halvorsen'. There is the scene where April is asking her mother for money and Vincent 'phones. We are given only one side of the telephone conversation - the side an audience would hear; this reads exactly like a telephone conversation in, say, Inadmissable Evidence.

It becomes easy to see how much of the book is made up of such 'scenes' (with the psychiatrist, with Tandish, with Martin over dinner), and how little of it requires movement with dialogue - requires anything which would strain the resources of a theatre: even the swimming scene all takes place just after they have stopped swimming, while all the 'action scenes', tackling the pickpocket, the murder, disposing of the body, the suicide, even the wedding, take place "off-stage".

The scene in Halvorsen's office is designed for maximum dramatic effect, with the police hammering at the door outside, while Vincent disarms Halvorsen and urgently tries to talk some sense into him. This is, of course, seen as a dramatic scene - Vincent makes a 'most creditable exit'.

There is even an epilogue, the brief, almost enigmatic scene at the end which shows Maddie returned to modelling, and carrying on the act begun by her brother. It is a glimpse, no more, but it perpetuates the folly.

Seen in such a way the novel's 'bareness' is explained, and Lewis's remarks about 'pattern' and the novel being 'extremely carefully written, become clear. The conception is startling, but the execution precise, and many of the ideas started here are worked out even more fully in the more conventional novel form of Self Condemned.

One last thought: it is interesting how Brecht shows Arturo Ui being transformed from a buffoon into a terrifying dictator by a few simple acting lessons...Jimmy Porter learns a lot too.

CHAPTER 9 : SELF CONDEMNED.

Self-Condemed is a big complex novel which raises problems which are central to all of Lewis's work and indeed to Lewis's life. The most significant thing about it is perhaps that the problems and questions are being raised by Lewis himself.

Not that all the critics would agree with that. A remark, that Hugh Kenner made about 'Larr' to the effect that the success of the Kreisler section, like many of Lewis's successes, has a fortuitous air about it, seems to have become the critics' bible!<sup>1</sup> It enables you to pick out the bits you like and admire them loudly without having to commit yourself to saying that Lewis was a great writer.

Thus Peter Dale in his article on Self-Condemed in the special Lewis issue of Agenda states simply:

"Lewis's sympathies are with intellect and the will. Harding has his emotions rigidly under control. Consequently, Lewis often holds Harding up for sympathy intellectually when, emotionally, we are already involved with the other person in the dialogue, the loyal if limited McKenzie or, more often, Hester. The novel seems more the tragedy of Hester than of Harding because of this conflict."<sup>2</sup>

And of course, he says, it is this 'mistake' of Lewis's which gives the novel its strength, the novel only really works when it gets beyond the control of its author.

Apart from the fact that this seems to me a gross misreading of the novel, I find it astonishing that critics continually imply that Lewis could not see in his own novels the good points which they locate with relative ease.

Though of course not everyone agrees on what the good points are. Kenner writes:

1. Kenner. H. Wyndham Lewis p.35
2. Dale. P. "Self-Condemed" Agenda p.30

"Self Condemned is not a well-made novel but a slow and terrible wind, gathering force for 400 pages, dying to occasional doldrums in whose hush the novelist carries on out of habit." 3

Whereas Dale asserts:

"Whatever its failures, the quality of the writing and the level of interest is maintained consistently throughout its length." 4

And Geoffrey Wagner confesses:

"I could in all honesty find little of interest in Self Condemned [which he condemns for] "its total lack of creative surprise and inventive vigor".

A lack which Wagner is apparently determined to remedy himself, as when he says of Harding:

"...both he and his wife Hester know that this ultimate, indeed sepulchral, unorthodoxy is a symbolic gesture, a last vale: 'Both of them knew that this was the last year of an epoch, and....that as far as that quiet intelligent, unmolested elect life was concerned, they were both condemned to death.'" 5

Hester of course is completely innocent of all this 'knowledge', in part that is what the book is about. The nonsense which Wagner is talking only becomes apparent when we realise that while his 'both' refers to Harding and Hester, the 'both' of his quotation from the novel refers to Harding and Robert Parkinson - Rene's friend Dotter - a fact which Wagner is at pains to conceal!

John Holloway reveals a rather better grasp of what is happening:

"In the first third of the book, Rene poses as the superior man, the intelligence in a world of nitwits, and his wife seems silly, sexy, and slightly nasty. By the beginning of the Canadian section, one notices that Hester's frilly charm is less in evidence than her preventing care: it is she who refuses to be nostalgic or to give way. As time passes, it is she who sees that Rene is making the adaptation to New World life at the price of himself, and who remains a thin though authentic source of human feeling and spontaneity." 6

3. Kenner. op.cit. p.153

4. Dale. op.cit. p.30

5. Wagner, G. Wyndham Lewis. p. 204. The passage from Self Condemned which is quoted can be found on page 78-  
~~and has been~~ deliberately cut to conceal the fact that it does not refer to Hester.

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This at least acknowledges some of the complex changing relationship that Harding has with his wife. But it is far too simplistic. Holloway seems to equate Hester with Margot Stamp in The Revenge for Love, and in this, frankly, his judgement is dwelling in the wrong book. This is clear when he sums up:

"Harding in fact settles for a living death. Hester lives with a true if modest life."

This is true of Margot, certainly not of Hester. It leaves out of account her hysterical loathing of Canada, her unstable mental condition after the fire and the 'neuropathic duet' which she and Rene act out.

All of the criticisms I have quoted are, I think, badly misleading (and bad misreadings) because they make simplistic gestures towards a plot précis, or skeleton keys to the meaning which are inadequate to the complex reality of the book itself. This happens because of the way in which criticism is forced to deal with the novel. The poem, after all, we can analyse word by word, with continual cross referencing to how each word is modified in the context of each of the others. The analogy of a crossword puzzle is perhaps appropriate (if not too shocking) both in terms of attention lavished, and complexity recognised.

The criticism of a poem is frequently much longer than the poem itself and this is treated as perfectly normal because we have come to expect complex compression of the poem and a prose explication will clearly demand considerable expansion.

Criticism of the novel on the other hand takes exactly the opposite course. It is treated as a big, complex, more or less loosely organised body of prose, and the critic can do little more than indicate the structure, themes and tensions, in the way that in a brief survey of the human body one can do little more

than indicate the bone structure, perhaps a few of the main arteries and one or two fundamental functions.

The danger of course is that with all the necessary simplifications we form a picture of a stiff-jointed inarticulate robot which bears no relationship to the complex flesh and blood reality.

Of course I am not suggesting that we devote our lives to a word by word scrutiny of every novel we come across. Though such a scrutiny may turn up information of interest (look for example at Rene's conversation with his mother:

"The ailments of the cat were not forgotten: and as their indolent chat moved along, gently playing with absurdity after absurdity"

- is this a pun in a foreign language such as Lewis criticised Joyce for? Certainly it would fit in with the themes of animals and the Absurd which pervade the book) it is hardly universally practical.

But I do believe that Self Condemned has suffered from oversimplified commentaries, and very often the critical methods themselves produce distortions.

Peter Dale for example, in the article referred to above, analyses the novel in terms of its techniques and devices, and some of the results seem to me lamentable. He sees Rene's trips round his family at the beginning of the novel as a series of devices for establishing Rene's credentials as a historian, and complains that the visits become tedious. If that was all that these scenes accomplished they certainly would be tedious, but they do much more than this. In the shape of the brothers-in-law they show a variety of reactions to Rene's resignation, and more important we see Rene's reactions to his family, which I hope to demonstrate later are a telling pointer to his tragic

situation.

Dale's narrow view of these episodes as simple devices leads to such critical aberrations as:

"The clash with the church in the form of a reverend brother-in-law is unachieved as they are allowed to differ mainly on temperamental grounds." 7

Which is to tell Lewis what he should be doing, and then to accuse him of not doing it.

Dale's central thesis is that Lewis fails to establish Harding's credentials as a historian, and he promptly blames on this failure all the parts of the book that he does not understand - for example he sees the rejection of Canada as being on patronising, colonial grounds rather than intellectual ones.

But Lewis does not create scenes merely to establish Rene's credentials, though he does make Rene's opinions abundantly clear. We accept Harding because all the arguments he advances are real, (the arguments Lewis has been using all his life, the arguments that pervade all his work) and not devices concocted to establish credentials. Harding, as historian of his own time, as political and philosophical writer is real because his creator was all these things himself, and he puts a lot of himself into Harding. There is no question of his credentials having to be established. The question is where his reality lands him.

For Lewis is putting many of his own ideas on trial in this book. Even the ambiguity of the title indicates this: Harding not only condemns himself and his wife to exile, but he condemns his 'self' (as opposed to the not-Self, in the Enemy of the Stars) and this shows in all the physical awarenesses and embarrassments to which Harding is prey (as was Lewis). It is the situation into which this attitude, at once uncompromising and inconsistent,

leads Rene and his wife which constitutes Lewis's indictment.

I believe that Self Condemned conveys its meaning by action, image and symbol, combining to produce a total work of art of a complexity and significance which has so far been underestimated and certainly deserves a great deal more attention.

The plot of the novel is based on Lewis's experiences in Canada during the second World War, when he spent six years moving between Canada and the United States, and lived for some time in a hotel like the Hotel Blundell, which was, like the fictional hotel, burnt down in the middle of winter. From his 'real-life' experience Lewis has fashioned an intense moral drama. His hero, Rene Harding gives up his post as a history Professor because he can no longer honestly teach his subject. He consults with a number of his relations - succeeding only in straining such friendships as are there - before leaving for Canada with his wife on the eve of the outbreak of War. Once in Canada a kind of living, buried Hell sets in, with Harding enduring poverty and humiliation before he is burnt out of his hotel and breaks into the exclusive University society of Monaco. Hester, his wife - named apparently with 'Hysteria' in mind (and the womb principle) - goes gradually insane in Canada, and in the face of his refusal to consider returning to England, she commits suicide. Rene too has been going insane, in a more rigidly controlled way, and in order to cope with all that has happened to him - and to rationalise the death of his wife, he destroys the remnants of his genuine human feeling. Somehow he finds himself able to teach again, and he becomes a successful academic; but he hovers on the borders of lunacy, and everything valuable in him has been lost.

Self Condemned begins quietly, sets the scene, the time, the



people. Appreciation has been showered on the prosthetic plumber, but the detail about Rene, Hester and their situation is very important, and careful reading here will keep the reader on the right track throughout the book. Hester's face and eyes such a source of irritation to Rene, are described; she drops into 'the mulish trance of childhood' quite readily, but Lewis says the 'natural wide-openness' is 'not disagreeably exploited' (3)

Rene is a "very abstracted man. He seldom saw his wife in full focus, but behind, or through, something else." (7) He has a separate flat for a study, prefers the dressed to the undressed, and secret~~as~~ things (the telegram) from his wife. Their house Rene regards as designed either by an imbecile or an Eskimo; he calls it, as he calls many things "absurd" and Lewis paints a picture of this microcosmic chaos which in effect is very little different from the Hotel Blundell which the Hardings later inhabit in Canada.

The first chapter closes with a proleptic passage, jolting the reader away from the very matter of fact tone of the descriptions into the war and the house catching fire (an important parallel with later happenings) and into the rather strange and hysterical view of Rene:

"Professor Harding's comment (on being told about the fate of the house) was that the House that Jack Built was always built in the same way. And its destiny was in accordance with its architecture. Some houses built by Jack attracted incendiaries, some did not. But it did not matter whether they did or whether they did not. All in the end had wild cats in their cellars, for civilisation never continued long enough to keep the wild cats out - if you call it civilisation, Rene Harding would shout." (14)

"There are sign-posts here; fire and animals as the enemies of 'civilisation' and the hysterical note to Harding's comment which should help to distance the reader from him slightly - it is important that the reader is not identifying with Rene when he makes his judgements on his family, particularly on his mother, in

the next few chapters.

The whole question of the extent to which the reader is allowed to sympathise with Rene's view point is very interesting.

Rene, as I have said, holds many of the views which Lewis held and proclaimed all his life. Yet he is certainly not treated uncritically. His attitude to his family, for example. Certainly his brothers-in-law are objects of satire, but the same can hardly be said of his mother. Late on in the book it flashes through his mind

"how his belief in blood, in the Family, had taken him, in the crisis of his life, to a lot of strangers beginning with his mother." (238)

But this is Rene's judgement, not Lewis's. Rene is very close to his mother. This closeness is emphasised very heavily when we first see them together, as, in graphic visual terms is the way the family shrinks together ~~when~~ adversity threatens. Rene does not just talk with his mother, he communes with her. Yet when in the face of his half-explained 'heroic' gesture (resigning etc.) she asks:

"You are not by any chance a fool my son?" (20)

Rene cuts himself off from her completely. He sees her as an ignorant ~~womanly~~ old woman. Her sister questions his motives and is typed as "the best woman in the world, but completely deluded".

In the chapter called "How much can we afford to jettison" he goes even further. He can refer to "one's old bitch of a mother and he honestly believes "What these duty-calls had done was to destroy a school-boy picture of a circle of loving-hearts. That junk, at least, had been got rid of for ever" (42) For Rene this is true, the news of his mother's death leaves him unmoved. But Lewis undercuts Rene's judgements continually. "That junk"

ties the opinion to Rene in the same way that the use of the word "limey"(370) in the police office types the officer thinking it. Lewis often uses Americanisms in this way, as a kind of alienation device, to objectify, and slightly put down the thought of whoever is using the phrase. "one's old bitch of a mother" is in the same category - not the objective thought of the academic Harding is supposed to be. Rene himself knows that his

"heightened perceptivity was capable of distorting, and even of transforming facts." (141)

And too, Lewis speaks of his critical frenzy, and critical fiend; and there is more than a trace of irony in the way in which he presents Rene's thought. For example when Rene leaves his mother, he theorises on the absurd - to diminish the shock his mother has given him - and as he does so Lewis suddenly withdraws from presenting Rene's thoughts to describe the taxi moving through London with Rene inside "hot on the scent of the absurd." (30)

Rene is not quite what he wants to be. He overestimates Percy's stupidity, for example, and over-estimates his own control of himself especially in arguments (with his wife when he tells her of his resignation for example). Then too he is continually crushing down his natural impulses. He regards not only his home and situation as absurd, but also his own body and the process of birth and copulation.

This idea of the absurd rebounds on him to some extent. It is used by two other characters. By his wife when he accuses her of being more concerned with her family and friends than she is with him, and perhaps more importantly by Rotter, who summing up Rene's work says,

"So this is not merely a reform in the writing of history that is in question, but an implicit proposal for re-valuation, moral and intellectual throughout society. Which is absurd." (95)

Rene's problem is that his perception of the Absurd gets between him and other forms of reality. For example as they leave Europe he has a moment of genuine feeling for Hester but it degenerates (and for Rene it is degeneration) into sex and "The effect of that, too, upon Rene was devastating, mocking as it did, his momentary glimpse of a human reality." (147)

He is unable to come to terms with himself. Intellectually, he is anti-body, but he is very susceptible to physical things -- food, wine and sex. He keeps the body and the mind in separate compartments and is of course, sexually obsessed.

As a result of this he is mortified out of proportion when he is fifteen minutes late for a luncheon appointment with an ex-colleague, because he was having sex (the absurd was happening) with his wife. He is acutely embarrassed by what he regards as Hester's "bedroom eyes" (150) on board the ship. Hester at breakfast table makes him feel he is in a nudist camp, he sees marriage in sexual terms: as he tells his sister (Janet): "If you marry a gutter rat you should study the mentality of your - bedfellow." (109). He sees things in visual sexual terms: when Mr. Starr says Furber was born with his beard, Rene promptly replies - "What an accouchment" (251) Part of his rejection of his mother is an examination of her bowels and sex life. Even when he is enjoying sex with his wife, the expressions used are clinical to the point of disgust -- he has not so much had sex as emptied his glands. (32)

This physical awareness has other aspects too: he objects to being brought in personally to Potter's essay on his theories --

possibly because the man contradicts the theory, and he has an habit of suddenly focusing people physically, usually when they have upset him and he wants to criticise them - he suddenly becomes aware of them physically.

This battle between his intellect and his body extends to his conflict with his wife, for she of course is the body, Erotica, the woman "always on the side of the lousy world".

There are nice parallels of feeling and image to point the opposition of the two. When Rene leaves his mother, feeling cut off from all intellectual sympathy we read:

"So he picked his way among people who could not see; dealing in this way with the blind produced in him sometimes the sensation of being an Invisible Man; at others of being brutally concrete in an unsubstantial universe. During this period he began to acquire a consciousness of his physical presence which was extremely disagreeable. He thought of himself as an animal among delicate and vapourish humans." (29)

This is a reaction to an intellectual problem. There is a parallel passage about Hester, but her problem is a social, physical one:

"The classic conundrum as to whether the cow is still there in the field when you have walked away from it, is apposite. For the analysis of Hester's new look, she felt like the cow in the field which is no longer observed by any human eye...She had been a violently self-conscious woman - she was a cow in a field excessively conscious of being observed; and for whom to be observed was to be. But it was so long now since she had been under human observation - for she did not regard her present environment as human - that self-consciousness had left her: and the ghost also stared at in the wall half-way between the kitchenette and the bathroom was the remote phantom of those people in England for whom, long ago, she had been the self-conscious object."

These are parallel cases but they emphasise the differences between Rene and his wife. The animal imagery too provides a telling opposition. Rene, we are told, is "like a big dog that is caressed" (24) when he is talking with his mother at the beginning

of the book, yet, as we have seen he cuts himself off completely from her when she questions his judgement. Hester when she first meets Laura McKenzie disagrees violently, hysterically, with her; yet after she has been bitten by the black fly she is so grateful for her physical help that she becomes like a big dog to Laura. The idea is quite explicit. (349) Rene withdraws himself, and Hester gives of herself, the one for intellectual (or so he thinks) and the other for physical reasons.

John Holloway, I have quoted above, speaks of Hester's "preventing care" and implies that Canada makes her a stronger person. I do not think this is true, but there are definite pointers from Lewis to indicate that Hester is not quite as stupid as Rene thinks she is. Her intelligence is not given to ambitious flights but functions on a useful level. Thus we have her controlling masterstroke when Rene is incensed at Dr. Abbot on board ship: "We must be careful to avoid jokes, I think. I had better say that I have received a cable to say that poor Rosa is dying." (57)

Then too, when Rene has been attacked in the Beverage Room, Hester bursts into tears - then dries her eyes and phones the doctor. And paradoxically, late in the book when Rene follows her into the bedroom after a quarrel, it is she who looks with dread on the use of sex to resolve a conflict. If only, she sighs, Rene would not confuse sex with logic!

Having said all that I do not believe that Hester is a touchstone of sense or genuine feeling in the book. The only instance of her "protective care" which springs to mind is her concealment of a suicide in the paper, and this is done, I think, less to demonstrate her care than to point the irony of how badly Rene misjudges her - he would not bother to conceal such

reports (in fact he pounces on them with glee), and it is after all, Hester who commits suicide. The protective care tends in fact to operate the other way. Hester repeatedly collapses (on the ship, sea-sick; after the black fly) and it is Rene who patiently looks after her. Hester is used not so much as an alternative point of view as an object of sympathy or compassion. She is made real enough for us to be able to judge Rene when he distorts her reality, and it is one of the great ironies of the book that the one moment in the book when Rene decisively recognises Hester's positive reality (which he does, significantly in family terms -- he sees her as a sister), is also the moment in which he cuts her off from what she most desired: return to England. (238)

Rene's view of reality is crucial to the book. Though it corresponds closely to the world view that Lewis held all his life, it seems to me that the book is critical of this worldview, or at least is intent on exposing its limitations. Perhaps the best way of illustrating this is through the book's central image of fire.

The fire in the Hotel Blundell is prefigured several times in the book: there is not only the fire in the House that Jack Built, but we are also told of the fire precautions in the hotel, and that if "Rene had lost his reason he would have burnt down the hotel." More important than these however is the way in which the fire is seen in microcosmic terms. For Rene the way the world is being run has issued in the conflagration of World War II, and he sees both the hotel as a microcosm of the world (aided and abetted here by Lewis in his own voice) and fire as a microcosm of world violence.

Thus we are told that leaving Europe is:

"like people making a frenzied exit from a building which is on fire (140)

and Lewis speaks of

"Europe on fire again."

And Rene sees the assault on him in the Beverage Room in micro-cosmic terms of the same order - it is he says "A baptism of fire" and "It is an astonishingly violent place, but no more violent than the world of which it is so perfect a microcosm." (231)

If the hotel is a perfect microcosm then the fire in the Hotel is a perfect re-enactment of what is happening in the world outside. One can see Mr. Martin as the quiet little man who exudes respectability - yet has astonishingly murderous tendencies.

He is of course also the man financially behind the scenes. Apparently one of the guests, he is the man who controls this little world. He is the man who rules with his money, and who sets the world on fire. There is the mysterious Indian, apparently under the control of Mr. Martin (or at least dominated by him) who sees the fire but stays in the furnace room where it is warm.

And of course there is Affie, the woman who reads the teacups, and the letters she shouldn't, who sets up as a prophet and who is killed by Mr. Martin for seeing too much.

Affie is a direct analogue of Rene in all these respects (the historian who sees behind the manipulative facade, and finds himself ostracised for seeing (and saying) too much and perhaps Affie's craze for killing cockroaches is not irrelevant to the state of mind into which Rene works himself.

Rene himself recognises this affinity (if you'll excuse the pun); when he sees Affie's body:



"Here was something which was not in conformity with a waking reality. It was what was absurd in himself, that he had suddenly been confronted with. Affie... had understood the absurd." (289).

The fire then is a sustained and complex analogy with Rene's situation and world view - it is he who after the fire calls the rulers of countries "firebugs". But the fire is not just an external thing to Rene. Throughout the book he has been leaping exultantly on any evidence of such violent microcosms. He suffers as Lewis says from a critical frenzy which tears his friends, family and, of course, himself apart. Ultimately he announces the truth himself: "I see a fiery mist wherever I direct my eyes. But the fire is not outside me, the fire is in my brain." (397)

The focus of the book is on the effects of the fire. When the Hotel burns down the chapter is called "The Microcosm Becomes an Iceberg." and this is precisely what happens to Rene. His original critical outbreak sent him off to Canada - an icebox, as it is called. After the fire he thinks it would have been more fitting if Affie had been encased in the iceberg, and he is outraged by the socialised form of her funeral. And of course there is the magnificent scene where Rene stands in the burnt out frozen shell of the hotel which mirrors so exactly what he is to become.

There is a brief prefigurement of what is to come as we watch Rene's relationship with Hester sour again:

"This glass which never rose to celebrate, but which got emptied all the same, in toasts that were undivulged, at last chilled this Christmas Party" (363)

and this freezing process is of course accelerated after Hester's death. In the hospital Rene's mind is called a "frozen surface" and in the College of the Sacred Heart, Rene finds himself able to converse rationally, to carry on life "but still in a kind of frozen way, the ultimate issue not decided." (383). Even in the chapter "Return to normal" we are almost immediately told that

the frozenness remained. Even his view of history "had all frozen into a freak anti-historical museum," his very delight is "frigid", and at the end of the book he remains a "glacial shell of a man".

There are of course, other parallels, other 'microcosms' in the book. There is a half-realised one concerning the ship. This is called 'a leviathan' and a 'whale' and remembering the discussion on *Moby Dick* in Snooty Baronet (as representing the one against the many, the individual against the mass), one wonders if this is a parallel with Rene's behaviour, this evasive action that brings with it storms and the threat of icebergs. Hester<sup>n</sup> suffers a collapse under this storm just as she does because of Rene's actions later, and we are told "All the movements of monsters sicken the parasites" (159). Hester is stigmatised by Rene as a parasite ("my little sparrow") later in the book. In this context Rene's criticism of the captain for ridiculously over-reacting would be ironic in that he is parallelling this action himself, and this whole line of thought is lent credence by a later passage about the Hotel Blundell. Lewis says: "As the ocean liner is a microcosm so is the hotel", and a few pages later: "The hotel was like a ship whose engines stopped every night about ten. It was like a ship becalmed, this dusty old passenger ship,...the ship was on her way again, the good ship Blundell." (197)

To make all this work, however, we have to <sup>SEE</sup> Lewis's flat statement "The big ship is the only monster of which we have any experience" (159) as somehow ironic, and to realise that we are in fact saying that the ship is like Rene, and the ship is a microcosm; i.e. Rene is a microcosm. This case can certainly be argued, but I don't think Lewis goes quite as far

as this - which is why I say the parallel of the ship is a half-realised one. There are other, smaller, and therefore more fully realised parallels. Such as the escaped budgerigar, the odd man out in the crowd, repulsed by the other birds, and eventually recaptured:

"Back to the cage, buddy! said Rene 'To die in captivity'"

Rene is sympathetic to this 'loner' as he is not to the sparrows and squirrels, accusing Hester of sentimentalising them because they are pretty, whereas they are in fact parasites. Hester is kind to them as she had been kind to Mrs. Harradson as if she had been a squirrel. Rene actually calls Hester a sparrow when he is angry with her and after her death when he is mentally alienating her memory he reflects viciously on how pleased women are when you call them a little squirrel or rabbit. It should be noted that Rene in spite of his attitude that he would not care if Hester left him keeps her as a parasite. He prevents her from amassing the money necessary to leave him, claiming he needs it for books. As Hester puts it: "I cry because I have no money of my own."

I should perhaps say a few words here, about some other aspects of the book, to avoid giving the impression that I see it merely as a geometrical structure. The novel contains many of Lewis's 'old' virtues - such as a capacity for vividly realised comedy--expressing themselves more humanly than usual in the minor characters in the hotel for example, together with ample evidence that, blind or not, Lewis has not lost his scalpel-like objective eye: "Once or twice, on the last day of the voyage, Dr. Lincoln Abbot had found himself being stared at with such intensity that it made him feel hot under the collar. Had he put his tie on inside out, had he forgotten to shave his upper lip, or was it B.O.? The first time he encountered this scrutiny, Dr. Abbot hastened to his cabin, and examined himself

carefully, from head to foot, removed his jacket and sniffed at his armpits, but was unable to discover anything amiss." (164)

Then too the remarkable quality of stasis which many of his word-pictures create, and which indeed mars much of the Apes of God, in that it is an exhausting comic effect, finds, its greatest 'objective correlative' in the creation of 'The Room'. Here stasis is the order of the day, this is the frozen moment the congealed minute, the interminable day. The boredom and frustration of the three years in the Room is beautifully conveyed, and at least one of the devices used too do this is of unusual interest.. On page 181 we read:

"Monday morningness was an unmistakable something that entered the room as Bess came in at 10.30 with her sheaf of towels and sheets. She was swollen with a sense of accumulated wrongs - during the week-end all the insults of the week had time to mobilise and organise inside her, in her lonely room, and on Monday morning she discharged these humours as she passed from room to room."

For thirty pages we hear about the Room and Canada until on page 213 we read:

"But this was monday morning; she entered the room with clean sheets and pillow-cases, and swollen with a sense of accumulated wrongs - as though on Sunday all the slights of the week had time to mobilise and solidly invest her in her lonely room, following her into church and acting as a pressure group in the rear of her prayers. On Monday morning she worked off these humours, as she passed from apartment to apartment."

This is a remarkable device. I have only seen two such parallel passages in one other author. Kingsley Amis in One Wat Englishman repeats a paragraph which he had used 10 years earlier in Lucky Jim. But with Amis the device is a throw-away joke for 'in-people', the product of a bankrupt vitality; with Lewis the effect is much more pointed. The second passage strikes a chord in the reader. He need not remember the first passage, but the parallel, both of meaning and phrasing is such that he cannot help feeling he has been here before, he gets a feeling of repeated pattern which mirrors

precisely the situation existing in the Room with its patterns of boring repetition.

It is this careful creation of this stagnant period of the Harding's lives that makes the delineation of their "neuropathic duet" so powerful. The original ostracism is an act, the necessity of which we have to take for granted. Harding himself, argues unceasingly that it was necessary, McKenzie remarks wryly of Rene's views that they have driven him to Canada, and Lewis himself consistently supports and never undermines this view. Nevertheless this self-imposed exile never grips the imaginations as a necessary act. It is clearly suicidal, and Lewis never attempts to disguise this, and he makes it clear that it is Rene's attitude rather than the nature of Canada that makes it suicidal; of Canada he says:

"For others of course, it was home. For quite a few it was 'the land of possibilities'. But to Rene the closer this land closed in as they advanced, the tighter the knot seemed to be drawn about his neck." (161)

He remains in this mood during their three years in the room, living a "semi-animal existence" which produces at least some measure of sympathy between him and his wife (though this should not be over-estimated: just as he kept a separate study in England, and locks his wife out of his study in the larger hotel they eventually move into in Canada, so in the Room he erects a barrier behind which he can do his work.) The physical separation from friends and family produces strains on Hester the validity of which Rene will not admit - he himself, of course has cut himself off from all such ties. Nevertheless, it was suggested in the chapter with Rotter, that ultimately Rene only writes books for the attention and praise which he receives for them; Rene has cut himself off from his cultured readership and this undoubtedly

affects him too. He spends much time persuading Hester that they are in fact living in a violent microcosm of a violent world: "We have got into a rather brisk little microcosm. But " - he looked at her placidly - "It is not brisker than the nations of Europe."

Hester of course does not believe this. But when the reality strikes in the form of the fire it unhinges them both. Of Rene Lewis says: "...something did find its way into his thinking which was insane". And of Hester (after she is bitten by the black-fly):

"In Hester's case there was a poisoned mind enormously complicating the problem of a poisoned body."

What deranges Hester is partly simply the shock of the fire coming on top of the social deracination which she has suffered in Canada, but mostly it is her mind shying away from the recognition of the microcosmic significance of the fire started by an Englishman: she becomes obsessed that Martin was not, in fact, English.

What shakes Rene is his identification with Affie and her recognition of the absurd together with a determination to escape the demeaning squalor in which he has placed himself.

Rene's mind has always been closely linked to his body. His thought is frequently described as violent. He strides about the room chasing ideas, following them over to the window. After the fire and the recognition which it involves he is no longer prepared to face the physical consequences of his intellectual suicide.

Hester's answer to the problem is to return to England; Rene's is to make a new academic career for himself in Canada, and those incompatible pathological determinations drive them

apart until Hester commits suicide.

If one of the flaws of the novel is the failure to make credible the ostracism from England, one of the major success factors is that the novel does not end with Hester's death leaving Rene wallowing in guilt, remorse and self-pity. We see Rene, in a way that is entirely consistent with his behaviour throughout the book, gradually anaesthetise yet another area of personal involvement until he has objectified the situation out of all resemblance to human reality.

The process by which he does this is skilfully etched by Lewis -- from the daring objectivity with which he described his collapse:

"As he felt it had been his object to seize the head and carry it away with him. To examine his legal right had been his last clear act of consciousness." (371)

to the retreat to the College of the Sacred Heart.

"This was as much a negation as the Hotel Blundell. It was his second withdrawal and suspension of the intellectual processes." (385)

"He had buried his reason in the tomb of his wife as an expression of remorse, or so he once put it to himself." (386)

This last phrase - "or so he once put it to himself" - points the crucial thing about Rene's withdrawals: they have none of the finality of Hester's suicide. He suffers from "a will-to-success of the most vulgar type" as Lewis puts it and his integrity destroyed by his three years of deprivation in the Hotel Blundell, his critical frenzy is even more selfishly dehumanising than before. Even before Hester's death Lewis says his mind is functioning on a new, low, mechanised level, expediency counting far too much with him.

Now he systematically destroys his memories of a warm living Hester in order to restore himself to a frozen academic imitation sanity. He has, by his critical analysis jettisoned everything,:

"... which only an exceptionally creative spirit, under very favourable conditions, can afford to dispense with." and the conditions are far from favourable. By the time he has reduced his relationship with his dead wife to the level of sex between a dog and a bitch he is ready to resume his academic life but there is only half a man inside the shell; and his critical faculties are such that he glimpses even this terrible truth.

As we learn in the College of the Sacred Heart: "You cannot have peace on any terms but obedience to law." Rene has always chosen intellectually, to live outside the law. But, as Robert Zimmerman said: "To live outside the law you must be honest". Rene is not prepared to take the humiliation of his ostracism and lives outside the law dishonestly - he goes over to the fashionable "Superman" party and so his history joins his analysis of personal relationships as an expedient sham.

Other men recognise his physical needs - Lewis is surely not being casual when he says of Rene's leanings towards Catholicism:

"And it was not long after this that he began to experience a change of heart or a change of mind."

Heart and mind are two things that Rene himself would never equate. Ironically it is a not unwordly priest to whom Rene confesses his mental obsession:

"There is no peace for me I should tell you. I see a fiery mist wherever I direct my eyes. But the fire is not outside me, the fire is in my brain."

The priest blinks and in place of spiritual solace back comes the answer: "You had a bad break Rene. You ought to see a physician."! (397)

To all his impulses Rene simply reacts with greater physical severity crushing his sexual instincts 'battering' (a nautical image, hearkening back to the ship) down his hysteria, caging himself (remember him passing the zoo, wondering where his natural



habitat was) in a way that society never caged him.

The novel finishes as he leaves Momaco tearing himself away from the last friend (he calls McKenzie a brother at one point) to further his career. He ends up back where he started, as an eminent historian - minus his integrity and everything which gives a man stability.

There are flaws in the novel: from the problem of the apparent wilfulness of Rene's self-imposed exile to the small detail: how can Affie do teacup readings when we are told in detail that the Hardings use teabags? (!) With all Peter Dale's talk about establishing credentials there is one credential which we are told is established yet which we are never given - namely the foothold (or ~~toehold~~) of positive value "intact and undiluted in the vortex of slush and nonsense". We are told that Rene in his conversations with McKenzie finds this. We are never told what it is. Perhaps the novel itself is Lewis's foothold.

If that is the case then it is a dramatic value, evolved through living through the novel (or reading through it) rather than an easily encapsulated moral value. The things that Rene rejects are called (by Lewis) "illusions", yet the novel is concerned with the recognition that it is not easy - perhaps impossible - to live without them. Rene destroys himself trying to do so, trying to live solely on his intellect, and finding his intellect itself perverted in the process. This loss of humanity is tragic - both in personal terms and because the destruction of genius is always tragic. The finer points of his intellect, we are told, shrink from the brutality of his withdrawals, and we are left feeling that we must find some other way to reconcile, or at least face, the contradictions of man.

Self Condemned is a great novel, both as a great moral drama, and as a picture of the author struggling to come to terms with himself.

CHAPTER 10 : THE HUMAN AGE.

A case has been made, as this thesis progressed, for the existence, and the increase of 'humane' values in Lewis's work, and examples of Lewis's sympathy with non-intellectual, oppressed human beings have been cited. Nevertheless, it is still possible to see Lewis as a 'negative' writer, and to point out that even in the more compassionate novels - The Revenge For Love, The Vulgar Streak and Self Condemned, the main characters all end up either dead (Victor, Margot, Vincent), crippled, jailed and disillusioned (Percy), or reduced to a mere shell of their former selves (Rene). All of Lewis's heroes, in short, are crushed in his novels; Pullman, in The Human Age, is the only one whose fate remains uncertain: and even here we know that in the original radio version Pullman was in fact killed, crushed underfoot as negligently as an insect by one of Sammael's angels.

The Human Age, with all its graphic horrors, its descent into Hell and its attempted destruction of the Divine, has been seen by several writers as one of the more complete expressions of Lewis's negative values. One or two of these views are worth examining here, for the variety of their interpretations is instructive.

William Empson, in his introduction to Harrison's book The Reactionaries produces an interpretation so contorted as to amount to a smear. Speaking of "the Sammael of Wyndham Lewis" he says:

"It is pleasant to find the author expressing tender admiration for the first time, in his old age, even though he knows it is for a devil. He assumes that his mind can realise that Sammael is greater than mankind, and that the minds of his reader's can too; apparently he also meant them to realise that Sammael's policy was wrong. But at both stages they are to 'measure' him. Very likely there are states of being too high for us to conceive, but then we had better not pretend to talk about them. The result of pretending, as one can see in T.E. Hulme as well as Lewis, is to imply: 'Because all men are infinitely below God, some men ought to be free to bully others - the ones who are on God's side, like I am.'" <sup>1</sup>

To treat the argument seriously for a moment, it is interesting to observe that Julien Benda (whom Lewis admired) in an essay in

<sup>1</sup> Empson. W. Introduction. Harrison, The Reactionaries p.10.

Criterion<sup>2</sup> (a journal which Lewis certainly read) had taken the premise 'all men are infinitely below God' to prove exactly the opposite! His argument ran that because God is infinite, and all men are infinitely below God, then hierarchical structures placing some men above others have no validity, at least in God's eyes, since all points are equidistant from infinity and so all men are an equal distance below God.

But to treat the argument seriously is to enter into realms of irrelevant abstraction. Empson's whole argument is a non-sequitor. Why does talking about Sammael leave Lewis free to bully people? And why drag T.E. Hulme in - unless it is to prevent the reader wondering too closely where Lewis ever suggested he should be allowed to bully people, or even realising that most of Lewis's work is a protest about the way in which people everywhere are bullied.

Lewis himself, understood very well the significance of being called a bully on such a basis. Indeed he has Zagreus define the term in his final letter to Dan:

"This term used by the English to describe a giant who insists upon behaving like one - refusing to accept the necessary conditions of urbane life within the herd - is very useful as a term. But it is abusive."<sup>3</sup>

Of course it is abusive - and the abuse is not even veiled with logic.

Other criticisms have to be taken more seriously. Wagner, for example, says that when we read of how badly run Third City is, and are told that this is because of the bored indifference of its angelic governor, the Padishah:

"We realize with a jolt that Swift cared, and that Lewis no longer does."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Benda. J. Criterion

<sup>3</sup> Apes of God p.634

<sup>4</sup> Wagner. G. Wyndham Lewis p.304

Now the whole question of comparisons between Swift and Lewis is very interesting, and one that Lewis himself enjoyed. I occasionally even wonder whether the biographical similarities between the two (both deliberately obscured the country of their birth - each insisting he was English when he was not; each falsified his age making himself two years younger than he was; and each appears to have deliberately concealed his marital status) are not the result of deliberate engineering by Lewis!

However this may be, it is indeed ironic that Swift, who has frequently been condemned as nihilistic, should be cited as caring more about man than Lewis.

The only God-like pronouncements Swift makes on man in Gulliver's Travels are that of the Giant-King in Brobdingnag that man is "the most pernicious race of odious little vermin that nature ever suffered to crawl upon the face of the earth", and the Houyhnhnms' judgement that man is inferior to the Yahoos because he is not only animalistic but uses such reason as he has to corrupt still further his natural squalor.

Lewis, by comparison, is a raging optimist! Certainly he castigates man's personal appearance as energetically as Swift, and equally he matches him in satirizing man's greed and will to power; but like Swift also, Lewis's guns are essentially trained on the exploiters of mankind - lawyers, doctors (an unusual bête noire in the 20th Century - but cf. Lewis's story "The Rebellious Patient"), politicians, and, in Lewis's case, art-politicians and press-barons. Swift would surely have agreed with Lewis that teaching people to read has been used as an instrument of their enslavement, and that the trumpeters of universal freedom herald the advent of even more universal slavery. Nowhere is Lewis more Swiftian than when he declares that George Orwell's 1984 is naive - because the proles of London are left in relative peace:

"It is unlikely, in a regime such as Orwell describes that the millions of ordinary people will be left unmolested, treated as though they were not there. The appetite for power involves the maximum interference with other human beings."<sup>5</sup>

But with all this Lewis asserts one truth which Swift -- that is Swift as Satirist, not Swift as painful sermonizer -- would never assert: that is that "God values man".

It is unthinkable that Swift would say this, yet this is what Lewis says in The Human Age -- or at least what he forces his hero to recognize. It is the logical end of the compassion for dumb creatures which has been present throughout the later novels, and Lewis, though he has to drag his hero into Hell, finally arrives at it.

Precisely how and when he arrived at it is a matter of some importance. Hugh Kenner, who tends to stress Lewis's nihilism, sees it as a late arrival indeed; he points out that in the radio version Pullman is killed at the end, and claims that the change of ending is indicative of a change in Lewis himself:

"At the age of 73 he commenced to re-examine, at long last, the premises on which he had conducted all his writing."

Kenner, a Catholic, seems much taken with the idea of Lewis's near-conversion to Catholicism, almost on his death-bed. Tomlin, however, sees much of his work as Christian,<sup>7</sup> and as early as 1927 James Joyce, in response to some comments on Catholicism in Time and Western Man, prophesied that Lewis was "preparing to make a clamorous conversion".<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately this fond image of a last minute conversion forces Kenner to underplay the manner in which the theme of Pullman's recognition of the reality of God is developed in the novel. Conceding

<sup>5</sup> The Writer and the Absolute. p.190-1

<sup>6</sup> Kenner. H. Appendix. Malign Fiesta. p.234

<sup>7</sup> Tomlin. E.W.F. Wyndham Lewis: an Anthology of his Prose. p.8-9

<sup>8</sup> Ellmann. R. James Joyce p.607

only that "there are traces of it in the book we have", Kenner projects all the religion into the unwritten fourth book and concentrates on Lewis's fascination with the diabolic. He speaks of the "sympathy and fascination" out of which Lewis created Sammael and itemizes Sammael's destructive attitude to mankind, adding:

"And Pullman disagrees with none of this. Genius, it seems is vulnerable to such arguments; the genius of a satirist - a Lewis or a Swift - is even apt to frame them. Sammael is not cheap as the Bailiff and his ilk are cheap. He and genius can understand one another. Genius, it seems is not really human."<sup>9</sup>

The idea of a writer being fascinated by his satanic creation is familiar from Milton, but not, I think, fully justified here. Certainly Sammael is a remarkable figure, but he is skeptically viewed and has little of the indomitable courage which characterizes Milton's creation; he is even, to take a simple matter, more obscene than his distinguished antecedent. Kenner's argument about Genius however, has a certain validity:

"The function of genius, apparently, is to reduce to zero, by sheer penetrating intellection, the value of the order of beings to which genius cannot but belong. For if genius is not human in essence it is human in condition."<sup>10</sup>

But the conclusions he draws make a false assumption:

"And either this is an extraordinary mistake on the part of the creator, or the whole Lewisian system of values is wrong."<sup>11</sup>

The false assumption, of course, is about the Lewisian system of values. Certainly Lewis is writing from the standpoint of Genius; certainly his preference is for the cerebral. But we have seen throughout our examination of his novels that he continually subjected this standpoint to the most searching scrutiny and frequently satirized its limitations.

<sup>9</sup> Kenner. Malign Fiesta p.234

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.



I believe that The Human Age is, in fact, the culmination of this process and not a sudden about-turn in Lewis's thinking.

Kenner's interpretation, however, leads him into a bad misinterpretation of a letter which Lewis sent him outlining his plans for the fourth book of the tetralogy. The letter reads in part:

"The Bailiff is, of course, not Divine. Then the same situation is repeated in Malign Fiesta, only even more tragically, and the figure in that case is Divine, though Diabolic. In the last book of all the hero, Pullman, is at last in Divine Society. He favours the Divine. I favour the Divine .... Pullman is, of course, an adherent of the Divine, not of the Diabolic."<sup>12</sup>

Clear enough, one would think; but Kenner's gloss begs to differ:

"He favours the Divine'. He does not, that is, favour the Bailiff, who we remember is not divine. But Sammael as well as God is divine, and it is not clear that Sammael's repudiation of the human was at variance with anything Pullman's intellect told him. Certainly when he was writing Malign Fiesta much of Lewis's energy flowed into Sammael, in passages that he passed for publication well after he had decided to compose the sequel. For Lewis had much invested in Sammael; if the Bailiff is all that in the old days Lewis had opposed, Sammael is very nearly the Lewis who had opposed it, ..."<sup>13</sup>

Since Sammael's operations bear a striking resemblance to some of Hitler's, this is a very dangerous thing to say! But there is no point in repeating that Lewis favours the divine, and pointing out that Sammael is divine. Lewis does not allow any ambiguity to arise on that score. Sammael's divinity is diabolic, and this is not the kind of divinity he (Lewis or Pullman) favours: a point Lewis repeats for emphasis.

Kenner's misreading of the letter is thus, I think, clear. But for a more satisfactory judgement as to whether or not he is equally incorrect in assigning Lewis's withdrawal of sympathy for Sammael to a last minute change of heart we shall have to look more closely at

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.238. Also Letters p.562

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.238

the novel itself.

The Human Age has many claims for being treated as Lewis's major work, not the least of which is the span of time over which he wrote it. The Childermass was apparently begun in the early 'twenties along with The Apes of God and Lewis's major philosophical works, Time and Western Man and The Art of Being Ruled, all these books coming within Lewis's original scheme for a treatise called The Man of the World.<sup>14</sup>

When the book appeared in 1928, it was announced as the first volume of a trilogy, the remaining parts of which would shortly be forthcoming. In spite of a legal action by his publishers for his failure to produce the sequels (the papers are in the Cornell collection) and the fact that Lewis himself regarded The Childermass as part of his major work, the novel remained uncompleted.

In 1940 Lewis wrote: "The Childermass when it is finished will be my principal work in fiction I suppose (if you can call it fiction)" and as late as 1948 - 20 years after its publication - he is still writing about his dream of finishing the novel.<sup>15</sup>

In Rude Assignment Lewis again laments not completing the novel,<sup>16</sup> and in the same year he wrote to I.A. Richards:

"The fact that it has remained unfinished all this time has grieved me a great deal and my feelings of frustration do not diminish as the time draws near when such work will be beyond my powers."<sup>17</sup>

A grant from the B.B.C. finally enabled Lewis to undertake his task in relative financial security and parts 2 and 3 of The Human Age appeared in 1955. Inevitably, however, in the course of thinking about the book for many years, Lewis's conception of the work had changed,

<sup>14</sup> Letters. p.137

<sup>15</sup> Letters. pp.273 and 468

<sup>16</sup> Rude Assignment. p.199

<sup>17</sup> Letters. p.536

and, enemy of Time as he was, Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta clearly show the marks of the quarter century which has elapsed since Lewis wrote the first section of his huge work. Moreover, The Human Age was still not completed; for Lewis now projected a fourth part, destined to take place in heaven, but never written because of further postponements and then the author's death.

What remains is an enigma; for both 'halves' of The Human Age have been highly praised, but there is general agreement that the pieces do not quite fit - that the separate books fail to form one satisfactory work.

The original volume, The Childermass I, has certainly found its supporters. Yeats, for example, wrote to Lewis saying: "There are moments in the first hundred pages which no writer of romance has surpassed ..." and finding the early sections "as powerful as Gulliver",<sup>18</sup> while Roy Campbell called it a masterpiece imbued with "immortal grandeur".<sup>19</sup>

Even within this first volume though, some parts have been more praised than others. Yeats clearly prefers the first half, while David Garnett in a letter to Lewis is clearly uneasy about the book as a whole:

"It has very fine things in it - but I don't like it as a whole ... altogether there is too much bailiff ... I like the first half best."<sup>20</sup>

And I.A. Richards is able to speak of "this great and dismaying and entrancing book" while at the same time acknowledging:

"... - to an agonizing degree we are not allowed to know what it is all about."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p.181

<sup>19</sup> Campbell. R. "A Note on W.L. Shenandoah. vol.1V nos.2-3 1953. p.75

<sup>20</sup> Letters. p.178

<sup>21</sup> Richards. I.A. Agenda. Lewis no. p.16

The later volumes however have been praised in terms which tend to decry the achievement of The Childermass. Carter for example, in his long review of The Human Age found that:

"The Childermass, seen from this distance, is a brilliant, exasperating curiosity. The Human Age ... is a serious, even profound work of art."<sup>22</sup>

While the anonymous reviewer of the T.L.S. was even more direct, calling the later volumes:

"two new fantasies that were good enough to make their point of origin, interesting though it is, look silly by comparison."<sup>23</sup>

The work as a whole, however, has been greatly praised; Penelope Palmer calls it "an incredibly rich imaginative work",<sup>24</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith finds it "a classic", "a great work", "a masterpiece" and opines:

"It will be many years before this work is seen in its true light as one of the most remarkable in English Literature."<sup>25</sup>

And Carter claims: "even in its excesses, it helps put our lives in perspective."<sup>26</sup>

Clearly an important work then, in the Lewis oeuvre, and traversing his career as it does - The Childermass is his second novel, Malign Fiesta is his second last - it is of great interest to us in our study of the progress of ideas and attitudes in Lewis's work.

The work, briefly, concerns the activities of two dead men, Pullman and Satterthwaite, old schoolfriends (or rather Satters was Pullman's fag) now reunited and struggling to cope with the bewildering variety of states of Life-after-death in which they find themselves. Encountering each other on the shores of what appears to be the Styx

<sup>22</sup> Carter. T.H. "Rationalist in Hell" Kenyon Review. Spring, 1956. p.326-7

<sup>23</sup> T.L.S. August 2nd. 1957. Front page.

<sup>24</sup> Palmer. P, Agenda. op.cit. p.30

<sup>25</sup> Seymour-Smith. M. "Enemy in our Midst" Spectator. 28th March 1969. (vol.222) and Agenda op. cit. p.10

<sup>26</sup> Carter. op.cit. p.336

(the expression 'what appears to be' is a constant companion of almost all statements of fact that the critic can make about the first volume), encountering each other then, Pullman and Satters quickly resume their former relationship on earth, with Pullman leading his companion around in mysterious mists where time perspective and reality appear to constantly shift, while Satters, alternatively pathetic and aggressive, whines and complains. These perambulations occupy about an hour and rather more than a third of the first book. The arrival of the Bailiff, the proceedings of his court, and his debate with Hyperides - to all of which Pullman and Satters are merely spectators - occupy the rest. The Bailiff's function is analogous to that of St. Peter - he holds the key to entrance to the city on the other side of the river, the city which most of the occupants of the river-side refugee camp regard as Heaven. But the Bailiff's activities are unlike any envisaged for St. Peter. He runs his 'court' as a Punch and Judy show (with himself as Punch, and even occasionally Judy) and alternates protestations of seriousness with crude farce and mob oratory, as various appellants come before him. The book ends with a debate between the Bailiff and an opposition group styling themselves as Greek in appearance and behaviour, and headed by an orator named Hyperides.

Monstre Gai opens on the other side of the river, with Pullman and Satters, having smuggled themselves across, lying exhausted on the steps leading up to the city. They are accosted by the returning Bailiff and led into the city.

They quickly discover, however, that 'this is not Heaven' and that they are in a degenerate half-way house to Heaven run on the lines of a vulgarised welfare-state. The administration of the city is nominally in the hands of an angelic governor, The Padishah, but his apathy towards his charge has allowed the Bailiff - now revealed as a sort of celestial Al Capone - to usurp much of his authority and establish thriving

rackets in alcohol, tobacco and pornography. The Women's section of the city, completely cut off from the men's, is organised in the most ruthless manner by the Bailiff's accomplices and the resulting scandal is gradually forcing the Padishah to align himself with protesting forces such as the Catholic church in the city, and act against the Bailiff. The situation is complicated by the apparent imminence of an invasion of the city from Hell, and several aerial bombardments by dragons and demons are experienced.

Moreover, the Bailiff seems to have an alliance of some kind with the inhabitants of Hell who help him to retain his power. However, when the Bailiff uses these demonic accomplices to murder Hyperides - now within the city and leading his overtly fascist gang - the Padishah is compelled to act and the Bailiff has to flee.

Pullman, allowed into the city by courtesy of the Bailiff, has found himself more and more identified with his patron, and cannot disentangle himself when the Bailiff falls from power. He, therefore, flees with the Bailiff - knowing that he is going to Hell, and not reassured by the Bailiff's bland reassurances that Hell is no longer as bad as it is painted.

When Pullman, Satters and the Bailiff arrive in Hell, in Malign Fiesta, the truth quickly becomes apparent. Tortures of the most appalling kind are systematically practised in Hell - though not by the fallen Angels.

The torturers are in fact the rather Jewish race to which the Bailiff belongs, and the angels live an idealised American suburban life, unconcerned with the tortures perpetrated in Dis, the main 'hospital' of the place. Only the Angelic leader, Sammael, administers the operations of Hell, and he, although he hates Man, and in particular Woman in the most viciously puritanical manner, is tiring of obliging God by running His Hell for Him.

Sammael conceives a far-reaching plan for humanising the Angels, believing that this destruction of their Divinity will enrage God. Pullman, as a great writer and intellectual, naturally commends himself to Sammael as an ideal aide in this scheme and he is installed, nominally as a teacher in the new angelic University, but actually as Sammael's right-hand man, devising and executing the devious schemes which most of the fallen angels are too naive to conceive.

At the end of the novel Heaven invades Hell to prevent the consummation of these schemes and Pullman, who has been increasingly more afraid of God's vengeance and regularly indulging in secret prayer, is borne off to Heaven by two angels.

The fourth part, unwritten, was to represent a debate in Heaven on Sammael's proposals and Pullman's gradual acclimatisation to Divine Society: it is not surprising that Lewis never completed it, for it was surely a massive task.

The three parts which have been completed are remarkable enough in themselves. Clearly any novel dealing with life after death presents great problems, particularly if it is intended to be taken seriously, and it is interesting to see how Lewis deals with the various problems which he meets.

In The Childermass, the question of what life after death is really like is met by a series of tactical devices, which both beg and answer the question. The question is begged because of the shifting transitory nature of everything in the landscape - including time. Trees, scenes and people are all apt to disappear; the mountains are only half-real: there only if not looked at too hard, and the city itself appears to advance and recede in a random manner.

Yet the question is answered, also, because it becomes apparent that 'reality' in the after-life is as real or as unreal as whoever controls it wishes. Things fade or become concrete without warning and

have to be accepted as they are. In the actual camp itself relative stability reigns; but the chaos in the outlying areas makes everyone aware that they themselves exist, as it were, only on sufferance.

The tactical devices are present in order to allow action to happen and arguments to be developed. The most brilliant part of the novel, most commentators agree, is the first section, where Pullman and Satters wander around in the chaotic regions of their purgatory. Yet chaos does not lend itself to the advancement of plot, so Lewis introduces the frozen landscape in diminishing perspective through which Pullman and Satters wander. Here actions are solid: a scratch causes bleeding, a bite causes pain, a tree supports weight, a hedge does not disappear while it is being leapt over.

Such devices are, however, of a purely tactical nature: they would be difficult to sustain for the whole book; the bulk of the novel takes place, therefore, in the camp in the form of the debate at the Bailiff's court. However necessary this is technically, there is no doubt that the court-scenes occupy a disproportionate amount of the book, and are of more interest for their dramatisation of the philosophy outlined in The Art of Being Ruled and Time and Western Man than for our study of Wyndham Lewis as novelist.

Lewis himself can hardly have been unaware of this, and he wrote to Yeats on this subject:

"... your remarks on that part of my book that you like best will be an encouragement for me in the writing of the remaining portion, especially as that will be mainly narrative, and not open to the objections that the long dialogues perhaps invite."<sup>27</sup>

The problem was solved in the simplest of ways in Monstre Gai - as Pullman and Satters pass through the walls of the city they are 'regutted' - they regain their reality, or at least, they attain to a more concrete level of reality, and this makes everything which follows

<sup>27</sup> Letters. p.181



much more plausible, for they are then subject to the same physical and emotional fears as ordinary men, and actions can affect them much more directly. Lewis of course, makes this transformation dramatically very effective: Pullman and Satters immediately want to urinate - no easy task in a strange city - and they are befriended by the first sympathetic stranger who recognises their difficulty - Mannoek. From this point on, action is able to play a much larger part in the novel and ideas can be expressed through action rather than in the more limited theatrical terms dictated by the Bailiff within the camp.

Of course to some extent the problem of action in The Childermass is concealed by Lewis's use of language, for it is written in the 'twenties, partly contemporaneously with The Apes of God and it displays some of his almost exultant use of language. This expresses itself in a variety of forms, from the jokey pun: "'Well I'm damned!' - 'I hope not!'" (11) to the carefully frozen descriptions:

"In thin clockwork cadence the exhausted splash of the waves is a sound that is a cold ribbon just existing in the massive heat. The delicate surf falls with the abrupt crash of glass, section by section." (41)

Was ever such energy devoted to conveying such weary sterility!

Alliteration - 'clockwork cadence'; rhyme - 'splash, crash and glass';

careful selection of epithet - 'thin, exhausted, cold, delicate'

all combine to impress weariness on the reader. The only adjective with any force is 'abrupt' and it is quickly killed by the repetitive near-rhyme and straightforward repetition which follow.

We are reading a description of waves - a very fluid medium; yet the effect is frozen by the choice of images - clockwork, ribbon and glass. Time may reign supreme here, in this strange world, but Lewis never allows romanticism to carry us away - it would never surmount this hurdle of words.

Of course such triumphs are inevitably limited - these limitations are one of the things that Lewis explored in The Childermass and

The Apes of God, but to be fair to Lewis he is aware of the necessity to keep his novel moving by occasionally galvanizing rather than petrifying his language. Eyes, for example, those perennial victims of Lewis's mechanical imagery, light up at contact with a problem (57) and, on occasion go scuttling back into their head (39). A longshoreman, stepping like a flamingo, is seen in a precise image:

"A longshoreman fidgets at the movements of the small observer, finally thrusting first one long-booted leg and then another into his bark, a giant clog whose peaked toe wavers as he enters its shell, he walks off, wagging his buttocks as he churns the rudder-paddle upon the rusty tide, an offended aquatic creature." (10-11)

This passage also provides a neat illustration of Lewis's technique of using precise physical descriptions and investing them with a more metaphysical significance. There follows:

"A stone's throw out he stops, faces the shore, studying sombrely in perspective the man-sparrow, who multiplies precise movements, an organism which in place of speech has evolved a peripatetic system of response to a dead environment. It has wandered beside this Styx, a lost automaton rather than a lost soul. It has taken the measure of its universe: man is the measure: it rears itself up, steadily confronts and moves along these shadows." (11)

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about many of the descriptions, however, is the manner in which they employ imagery which in anyone else's hands would convey an impression of energy, and yet here they simply blend in with the listless environment. The peons for example, even in action, never come to life:

"One holds by the bridle an ass, which trumpets with sedate hysteria. Electrified at each brazen blare, its attendant stiffens. He is shaken out of an attitude to which on each occasion he returns, throwing him into a gaunt runaway perspective, that of a master-acrobat tilted statuesquely at an angle of forty-five degrees from the upright awaiting the onset of the swarming troupe destined for his head and shoulders." (20-21)

Perhaps it is simply the air of inevitability which produces this effect - a word like 'destined', the effect of normality surrounding this weird scene, or a startling collocation such as 'sedate hysteria' but the unreality persists even in the face of superficially dramatic events.

This would become intolerably heavy if it were kept up, but the conversation of Pullman and Satters, as they move through this scene, breaks up the heavier prose, even though Satters thought is sometimes so vacant as to be almost as tiring:

"'Since we've met I've behaved in an idiotic way I agree. I've been a perfectly ghastly baby I don't know how you tolerate me. I've had no one to talk to for so long you see that must be it. I suppose you're perfectly splendid about me, I'm not - I'm sure you must despise me to a perfectly frantic extent, ...'" (31)

Satters is, in general a much less satisfactory character than Pullman - a fine example of how a character who is too thoroughly satirized forfeits our respect to such an extent that he also forfeits our attention! Lewis resolved this problem to some extent in the later books by getting rid of Satters for long stretches of the action (off playing with a gang in Monstre Gai and out learning gardening in Malign Fiesta), and substituting more intelligent men with whom Pullman can conduct his conversations - Mannock in Monstre Gai and Schlank in Malign Fiesta. Yet at the same time he also makes judicious use of Satters, reproducing him at will, to highlight the gang-kife of Third City, or to start a buffoon-fight with one of the Angels in Hell. At the same time the focus shifts slightly, changing the emphasis from Satters as stupid and thuggish (as a gang-member in Monstre Gai) to Satters a human companion in spite of his stupidity (as when he returns to Pullman, when the latter is feeling isolated in the Hotel Phanuel) and on to Satters as innocent of all sin because of his stupidity and led into Hell because he blindly followed a superior intelligence: that of Pullman.

The fact remains, however Satters may be used in the later books, that he has only a very limited dramatic value in The Childermass itself. He is, however, used in two rather interesting episodes of a similar kind. The first is when he is in the time-warp landscape with Pullman and he breaks the conventions of his situation by picking up the Tom

Paine character. Paine struggles and fights, and an enraged Satters stamps him out of existence. This is normally taken as an example of Satters's mindless violence - and so it is - but it is also something more. For the whole scene disintegrates before their eyes and they are catapulted back into chaos: Satters has broken the rules and chaos results. Later, exactly the same thing happens when Satters loses patience with the childish clothes with which he has been issued. He takes them off and immediately he himself starts disintegrating, growing older.

It appears that if you break the rules of this purgatorial establishment, a punishment of some description results.

Pullman is very anxious not to break the rules - he even fights with Satters in an effort to persuade him to put his clothes back on again; there is here a germ of the future Pullman of Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta, the Pullman who cannot bring himself to rebel against a strong physical authority, regardless of his ethical or spiritual opinion of that authority. Satters on the other hand, rebels against anything which happens to irritate him - regardless of the consequences. This is not simple goodness of course - it is stupidity: fighting with an angel is certain suicide; but Satters' lack of intelligent guile is, in a sense, his protection. The moral drama, and the true Hell are reserved for Pullman.

The 'life' of The Childermass really belongs to the Bailiff; like the devil, he has all the best tunes. His harangues dominate most of the book, and his power seems limitless though he himself gives different accounts of it. From the beginning, however, he is an unpleasant character, reminding the audience that they are precariously warmed-up corpses, and regarding their progress towards Third City (which the Bailiff represents as Paradise) as a process of digestion in which they have now reached the stage of passing through the anus. His command

of language is superb and he has many memorable lines:

"I like to see a few corpses about, it makes the others seem almost alive." (290)

But in the argument between Space and Time - the argument of Time and Western Man, the Bailiff is on the side of Time - or of what he calls Space-Time - which is subjective, fluid and infantile. Thus the bailiff has a superb parody of James Joyce, a kind of negro black mama act and bouts of infantilism, included in his repertoire. But while he is all for democracy, and even claims that he is the mob, he is also a vicious tyrant, quite happy to crush those who irritate him. There are some very lively and comic scenes - such as the climax of the interview with Macrob, the obstinate Scotsman who is infuriated that the Bailiff evades his questions, and offers him a passage into the city which he does not want.

His attack on the Bailiff, throwing snuff in his face and dragging him out of his box, at least liven up the proceedings, while his own brutal destruction at the hands of the Bailiff's bodyguard is ample evidence of the true nature of the Bailiff.

The curious thing is that Pullman already admires the Bailiff. He likes the humour of the Bailiff's questionnaire, which Satters takes seriously, and he tells Satters:

"He's not as black as he's painted ... He really can be extremely entertaining at times." (55)

Pullman, in fact, is extremely insecure. Trying to establish positive coordinates in this purgatorial chaos is an obsession with him. We meet him speculating about the facts of his existence there:

"Speculations as to the habitat and sport-status of the celestial water-fowl ... Speculations as to fish-life in these waters ... more speculations ..." (10)

His is the kind of genius which, as Max Stirner says, conquers things by knowing them. Thus he attempts to find a rational explanation for everything. When Satters nervously asks whether or not the city gets

smaller from time to time, he is indignant:

"'Certainly not! Whatever makes you think! ... It's only the atmosphere.'" (20)

And he displays an amazing faith in the solidity of objects:

"'That's a good tree', Pullman assures Satters, and they make for it ... 'It has endurance' ... As they reach the tree it vanishes, like a reflection upon the air.'" (41)

And what is Pullman's reaction to this:

"'I made sure', mutters Pullman" (41)

Pullman's efforts to master his environment are in fact so much sham; his confident explanations to Satters of the Bailiff's character and the state of their existence are not well founded. As regards the peons he simply repeats the Bailiff's formula (several times) that they are the multitude of personalities whom God, having created, cannot destroy. This in some respects seems plausible, but Pullman seems prepared to accept whatever the Bailiff says. When Pullman advanced a theory as to the condition of himself and all these strange animated corpses, to the Bailiff, he is extremely flattered to hear the Bailiff plagiarise the theory and repeat it to someone else. This he takes as proof that his theory is true - it never crosses his mind that the Bailiff might do this kind of thing all the time, simply repeating plausible theories for his own amusement, without any regard for their veracity or otherwise. When Pullman starts calling the Bailiff:

"'Professor of Energy what Stendhal called himself, that's what he is: he is really like Napoleon.'" (79)

we see how much of a disciple he has become. Satters, incidentally, performs a very useful function here:

"'Napoleon! Yah-yah-yah-yah!'" (79)

In a sense however, Pullman's explorations on the frontiers of the camp are a blow against his dependence on the Bailiff, for he is thus trying to discover reality for himself, and the Bailiff declares these areas out of bounds. Further, there is a theme, slight in The Childermass,

but later to be considerably expanded, of Pullman's awareness of religion.

This theme actually occasions one of the relatively few changes between the first edition of The Childermass and the revised version, brought out as part of The Human Age. For in 1928 Pullman is only an Anglo-Catholic (1st ed. p.8) while in the later version he is a full Catholic. (p.16). Thus has some significance in terms of Pullman's leanings towards the church during the harangues in Monstre Gai and in his prayers in Malign Fiesta. There is however, even in the first edition, some hint of the efficacy of religion, for when Satters complains that he cannot sleep Pullman advises:

"Have you tried lying with your arms out? You make a cross." (32)

This is the theme which comes to dominate The Human Age. The Bailiff's arguments come to seem irrelevant as the story proceeds, and the space which they are allotted in The Childermass seems disproportionate. The drama which develops is a moral, not an intellectual one.

In The Human Age our concern will not be with language to the same extent as in many of the other novels. Much of the analysis given in this thesis concerns itself with the way that Lewis worked out themes through imagery - with the complexity which was achieved in The Revenge for Love and the intensity attained in Self Condemned. But it seems as though having done this, Lewis turned away from using language in this fashion when he came to complete The Human Age. For the prose in these two books is almost entirely stripped of metaphor, and yet the precision, accuracy and power of his descriptions rules out the possibility that this was done because Lewis was blind and unable to sustain the necessary creative effort.

Not everyone would agree with this point. Wagner for example, speaks of:

"how little Lewis has visualised his final scenes ... we read this his Paolo and Francesca are naked, 'glued' together, and 'the man exactly placed to facilitate sinful love.' (my italics). Three pages later, we read that their posture is 'lips to lips and sex to sex'" (28)

Precisely why Wagner finds these two accounts incompatible he does not explain. Presumably he thinks that 'sinful love' can only refer to sodomy. Paolo and Francesca, however, are placed in Hell by Dante for adultery, and adultery, in spite of our changed morality, is still sinful love. Wagner generally seems to read Lewis's novels rather sloppily, and a few pages later he says:

"They also meet literary characters, like Bill Sykes, ..." (29) but this is not true. Pullman and Satters do not meet Bill Sykes as they do Tom Paine, for example. Satters, in one of his more vulgar aggressive phases, is simply compared to Sykes. (p.114). Lewis himself remains remarkably consistent in his working out of the plot and it is indeed ironic that, so often labelled a 'difficult' writer, he should achieve such clarity of vision and expression only in his blindness.

The burden of meaning in Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta is in fact borne by the action. Action - of the kind which grips the reader and keeps the novel in rapid motion - was a device which Lewis had shown great skill in using in flashes: in Tarr and in The Revenge for Love, but it was a quality which he almost seemed to spurn, no doubt because all his books are an attack on spurious action. It is remarkable to examine the extent to which Lewis's books, so much concerned with 'action' and containing a considerable number of deaths, contrive to exclude action from their pages - or at least to keep it off-stage. This feature has already been looked at in The Vulgar Streak but it is also true of Hester's suicide in Self Condemned and of the various murders in The Red Priest. Certainly the shooting of Humph in Snooty Baronet is done in full view of the reader - but nothing could be less calculated to give him the thrill of action.



By contrast, not only is the action of The Human Age the sustaining interest of the novel, with the reader - as in the best science fiction - always reading simply to find out what happens next; not only is this the case, but many of the actual scenes in the two books, and particularly in Malign Fiesta are the most vivid and disgusting which Lewis ever presented; indeed they are among the most disgusting I have read and one of the questions which we have to ask about the novel is whether or not they are necessary.

However that may be, the point is that the kind of analysis to which we have subjected the other novels is not appropriate here; Language in the Human Age is much more purely referential, and the moral drama is worked out in the action of the novel. This is not to say that there is not the occasional linguistic joke - various plays on the words 'Hell' and the 'devil' for example - but basically the language does not appear to be 'worked' in order to carry themes.

This does not mean however, that there is not a fair degree of complexity in the novel: it is simply that most of the complexity is concerned with Pullman's increasing moral dilemma, and the terms in which he sees it.

The first difficulty in passing smoothly from The Childermass to Monstre Gai is the change in the character of Pullman which ensues. We have already looked at Pullman's change of religion in the revised text of The Childermass, but the changes of character are much larger and more important than mere changes of detail. In The Childermass Pullman is largely a satire on James Joyce and he appears to have something of a homosexual relationship with Satters (who is a Gertrude Stein figure with his stammer). In Monstre Gai Pullman still bears some resemblance to Joyce and in fact some of the biographical correspondences have been made more specific - such as the fact that Pullman is now said to have been brought up by the Jesuits in Ireland. (86)

But on the other hand he has been to an English, rugger playing, public school (48) which is an attribute not of Joyce, but of Lewis, for he attended Rugby. Moreover, when Pullman buys a hat (88) it is a wide-brimmed hat, of the kind generally worn in Paris. This description would apply equally to Lewis and Joyce, as both wore such hats.

The point is that Pullman is no longer the object of satire to the extent that he was in The Childermass; he is now the hero of the book - the character with whom the reader is imaginatively engaged, and though he is said to have to some extent sold himself to publishers, he is also the foremost writer of his age. These changes cause considerable problems of consistency within the work as a whole, for in the later books Pullman is no longer a homosexual, yet this was apparently part of the initial reason for his teaming up with Satters. From the outside the relationship appears homosexual - why else does Pullman go around with an idiot- and Pullman has to repeatedly deny that he is homosexual, even fending off a homosexual proposition from his diabolic attendant Sentoryan. It may also be significant that while Pullman is certainly Irish, he is referred to as a 'British author' (253). In some respects he remains Joyce, in others he becomes Lewis:

"he was not for the Right wing, he was for the Left wing, ... But about one thing there was no question whatever: for a writer of his experimental sort it was to the Left wing that he must look, for sympathy, interest, and patronage. It had been like that in his earthly life: and in his unearthly life it was apparently just the same, only more so. As unattached as the "lone wolf" man, of the fierce modern "genius" type, believing not in God, in class, in party, but solely in himself, it was all one to him who was supporting Pullman; anyone who did so was a good man. He was not, of course, so utterly faithful to the god Pullman as that suggested. Solipsistic he was in principle, but no man is so watertight an ego as all that." (146).

Lewis, questions of politics apart, bears some resemblance to this description in giving his primary allegiance to his art rather than to any extraneous influence- but again, so does Joyce. The point is of some importance for there are two ways to interpret the reasons

for Pullman's descent into Hell.

One is that Pullman has prostituted his talent to pander to power-sources -- left-wing publishers on earth, the Bailiff in Third City and Sammael in Hell. The other is that he attempts to solve all his problems by the use of his intellect -- logically working out a course of action, rather than relying on faith -- even though in Third City he knows that God exists.

Both explanations are partially true, but all that we have seen in Lewis's novels so far would indicate that the latter reason is the one which is given most importance, and that we are involved in yet another merciless exploration of the limitations of the intellect. Certainly I believe that this is the explanation given most credence by events in the novel.

Even in The Childermass Pullman has been a creature of the intellect -- we have already looked at his efforts to understand and explain everything which he comes across. Admittedly he does declare that Reason is overrated -- but this is while he is intoxicated with the atmosphere of the time-warp, and there is no doubt that he is a creature of the rational -- ignoring a "lapse from the rational" occasioned by the strange conditions on the plain outside the city "as a person guilty of a spasm of wind in a select company" (39).

In Monstre Gai Pullman's dilemma is expressed very directly after he has been listening to the speeches of Father Ryan, Hyperides, Vogel, and the Bailiff -- The church, Fascism, Communism, and Big-Business-gangsterism masquerading as 'what-the-people-want'. Pullman sees all the alternatives quite clearly before him and he knows that the voice of the church:

"was the only voice, in this place of oratory, to which he had any right to respond, to which he would listen with more than a wordly -- an all-too-wordly -- tolerance. He himself should have turned his back on the world when he was on earth ..." (215)

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The issues put before Pullman in Third City are recognised by him to correspond to the issues he faced (or refused to face) on earth. He tells himself that if he were in Heaven or Hell he would have no difficulty in deciding on his course of action - but Third City is simply a kind of supernatural earth, and he finds this confusing:

"More and more, as his mind laid bare the ultimate truth involved in these four opposing philosophies - more and more clearly he understood that the point had been reached at which he was called upon to take a final decision. Should he take the emotional road, or the one dictated by common sense. He realised that upon Earth he had decided in favour of common sense, or, to put it in a more complimentary way, the logical and the practical." (220)

It seems to me that Lewis indulges in some sophistry here, for the logical and the practical do not always go hand in hand. Pullman chooses to side with the Bailiff, whom he does not like, for the practical reason that he feels he has been identified so much with the Bailiff's cause living in his hotel, becoming involved in fights against the Hyperideans, that he would not be fairly treated by any of the other parties.

Yet we are told that was the speech of Father Ryan which "spoke to his intellect and to his heart." (223)

The reason which is provided for ignoring this directly appealing voice is explained:

"Yet ... there was a destiny in this, there was a compulsion from the past." (223)

This compulsion is Pullman's passion for intelligence: as he has earlier explained to Mannock, when analysing the reasons for the Padishah's apathy towards governing Third City:

"... only what is intelligent interests me. Perfection repels me it is (it must be) so colossally stupid. Here - in Third City - we are frail, puny, short-lived, ridiculous, but we are superior, preferable to the Immortals with whom we come in contact." (140)

Pullman sums up his whole attitude to the Angelic nature in this manner, and is in no doubt about his preference:

"I esteem knowing, immeasurably more than I do being." (140)

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Naturally enough, this predisposes Pullman against choosing to be 'on the side of the angels' and he reviews his alternatives:

"He had lived with the Bailiff upon the earth but had not recognised him. He had built all his success upon Bailiff-like rather than Padishah-like interests; and now, here, the Bailiff had acted as a magnet: he had been drawn in that direction at once. And anyhow, where else would he be in this collection of men? Would he be a Fascist, mouthing all that stupid claptrap moralistic stuff? Would he be attempting to secure a standing in the social life favoured by Mannock? Would he be inflaming himself in favour of equality, under the leadership of Vogel, or playing the part of such a leader himself? No. As he had been instructing Mannock, only some men were intelligent. No other creature, natural or supernatural, could be; and for him human intelligence alone mattered. Yes; the natural-supernatural problem (problem for a man among supernatural creatures) was the essence of things here, it supplanted everything else. Odious and monstrous as the Bailiff was, he was the supernatural element, paradoxical as that might seem, most favourable to man." (223)

The sophistry seems to me to lie in the fact that while the words of Father Ryan appeal to Pullman's intelligence, he prefers to cast in his lot with the Bailiff whose words and actions do not appeal to him, simply because the Bailiff is intelligent. To some extent Pullman is right of course: the Bailiff is the most intelligent character in Monstre Gai - just as Sammael is the most intelligent creature in Malign Fiesta. But, that being the case it is odd that Lewis should say that Father Ryan's words speak to Pullman's intelligence as well as to his heart.

The difficulty may perhaps be resolved when we examine what Lewis means by intelligence.

For intelligence implies (as Pullman explains to Mannock) "consciousness of self" (139) and self, as we know from other examples of this concept which we have examined, is a worldly thing. The Bailiff is very aware of his 'self', his postures and roles, just as Sammael is very aware of his role - sporting a flashy car, and waving to the other angels like an American politician. In this respect they show their intelligence - they can analyse their own situation and indulge in their role with a hint of self-mockery.

But their intelligence is useful only in devising and maintaining these roles. What they are doing is not 'good' or admirable in any sense. Pullman in fact prizes his intelligence almost as if it were a material possession, and this kind of awareness of intelligence is assertive and vulgar, a product of the will to power.

This theme has been looked at already; it is this kind of vulgarity, rather than social vulgarity, which is the hallmark of Vincent Penhale in The Vulgar Streak, and we are specifically told that Rene Harding has a very materialistic streak in his make-up, which is part of the reason that his intelligence becomes rigid and brittle under the control of his will.

Pullman's desperate desire to understand everything -already glanced at in the criticism of The Childermass - continues apace in Monstre Gai. He explores the limits of his environment, asking a shopkeeper how he can escape from Third City if the need arises, endlessly analysing his environment. Even after the first attack on the city, when he recovers consciousness he starts analysing his situation. He is lying in great pain, but as Lewis says "With an analytical mind such as Pullman's" he is immediately concerned to know how long he has been unconscious. (54)

Pullman in fact devotes so much thought to the situation of Third City that he is quickly able to offer an elaborate analysis of prevailing conditions (which is not challenged and which we are evidently meant to accept) to Hanneock, who has been living in the city for years and who began by acting as Pullman's guide and mentor as regards the habits of the city.

But as Pullman's obsession with his intelligence is indicative of materialism, it is natural that his materialism, that is his fear of pain and destruction, should compel him to follow powerful people whose actions he does not approve of. The trouble is that in so doing he is

inevitably drawn into situations where his intelligence cannot help him. This he finds himself in the Bailiff's palace when it is attacked by one of the Padishah's angels. Pullman attempt to learn more about the nature of the place (Hell) which the Bailiff intends to take him to, but though he is not satisfied with the Bailiff's reassurances he is nevertheless compelled to drink the liquid which the Bailiff gives him, and to flee from Third City to Hell, because he is more afraid of what is threatening him in Third City than he is of the unknown. Dealing with supernatural forces his intelligence has all its limitations exposed. As Pullman himself says:

"It is a case of 'TAKE ME' isn't it?" (253)

It is indeed, and the suggestion that it has much in common with the fantastic and irrational adventures of Alice is very appropriate. This is not a situation in which a man relying solely on his intellect would wish to find himself.

Moreover this situation quickly deteriorates, for Pullman finds out he has plunged Satters and himself into a Hell which is every bit as bad as its reputation. Yet even here Pullman starts analysing his situation very quickly. He presses the Bailiff's mother, the widow of an eminent torturer, for more information about Hell even though the details that she so cheerfully relates are making him violently ill. This is in fact a good example of how Pullman uses his intellect to give him power, for though terrified of the old woman, he quickly puts himself on equal terms with her to the extent of implying that she has a very limited understanding of human psychology - an aspersion which clearly upsets the aging torturess.

He continues to rely too heavily on his intelligence however, even after he meets the most intelligent being in Hell - Sammael.

In Sammael the image of the intelligent urbane executive can co-exist with the most appalling cruelty. Within minutes of meeting

Sammael, Pullman witnesses him plunging a hypodermic into the arm of a crying infant. The point is, of course, that the child is incapable of sin, as even Sammael admits; yet there is something inexpressibly cold-blooded about the combination of lullabies and injections with which he keeps her quiet.

Pullman recognizes this, and, afraid of Sammael, says nothing.

We have here, I think, the motivation behind the introduction of the vivid and cruel scenes in Malign Fiesta which I mentioned above. For it is they, above all, which betray the true reality of Hell to Pullman and the reader. The personality of Sammael, outside of these tortures, is perfectly acceptable, and his version of his quarrel with god, indeed the image he presents of God, is quite rational and plausible. It has been said that only a God could resist the persuasions of Satan directed at Eve in book nine of Paradise Lost, and the point is valid, for how could Eve know whether or not Satan was lying except by accepting the word of God implicitly - and why should she do that?

But Pullman can, should, and does know that Sammael is concealing his true nature from him purely on the objective evidence of the Hell that he sees before him.

The first inkling Pullman gets of the real situation in Hell actually occurs in Third City, when the deputation from Hell meets the Padishah's emissary. This deputation gives a physically exaggerated picture of Hell, but an essentially true one, for they are still used in torturing sinners, as the sequel makes clear. However, their physical appearance alone would be enough to dissuade most people from visiting Hell: and the scene is very vividly described:

"To a roar of fear, of disgust, of half-human cries, snorts, and gasps, advanced pirouetting the double line of demons hoofed and horned, frisking and cavorting, ogling and grimacing, and, not by any means least, emitting the most revolting stench." (93)

Pullman however allows the Bailiff to tell him that such scenes are merely theatrical gestures aimed at dramatizing the image of



Hell. The Bailiff himself, however, employs demonic helpers to murder Hyperides, crucifying him by the throat, in a carefully rehearsed operation. Pullman, intelligent, analytical man that he is should not be deceived about the true nature of Hell.

In Hell itself, the horrors are naturally more numerous, more elaborate and more fiendish. The manner in which they are strongly impressed upon the reader seem to me necessary in order to convey accurately the impression which they are making on Pullman, and to make the reader realize the exact nature of the horrors which Pullman is forcing himself to countenance with equanimity.

Though Sammael protests that the whole set-up is the work of God and not his responsibility, he is described as "a mad puritan" (55) and admits that he approves of punishing man simply because he is man (62).

Perhaps the most striking of the Hell horror-scenes occurs when Sammael invites Pullman along on a trip in his limousine, carrying a woman sinner out to the wilder regions of Hell where she is tossed to the archetypal demons, vicious, lecherous animalistic goat-like creatures who rape and eat her at the same time:

"There was her body, shoulder-high, for the fraction of a second, in the midst of the stinking pack - the sickening odour increasing in intensity. Just for that fractional speck of time a dozen claws could be seen defiling her person. The most terrible scream Pullman had ever heard filled aurally that speck of time. The car gathered speed, the door was closed, and that was that." (57)

Just before she is thrown out, however, this female sinner denounces Satan in penetrating terms - recognising that he is a monster and that his human face is only a sham. She turns on Pullman:

"But you are intelligent, you see what is underneath. You see the terrifying monster - you are not deceived by the face like that of a man." (56)

Her courageous denunciation of Sammael, and the horrific manner of her death forces Pullman to recognise the truth - that once again, as formerly with the Bailiff, he is selling his soul to a power-monger

when he should be crossing himself and praying to God for salvation. Instead of acting on this realisation, however, Pullman devotes all his energies to preventing Sammael from knowing that he is totally revolted.

He expresses an interest in Sammael's recordings of a mass slaughter, and resolutely forces himself not to be sick.

"His glimpse of the closing scene in this hideous play had to be hurried away from the foreground of Pullman's consciousness and a mask drawn down over his face. He congratulated himself on the effectiveness of the suppression." (63)

Dirty Intellect!, as Tarr would have said. Pullman rushes home to analyse the whole of this entire event from beginning to end." (65)

This kind of analytical mind is in danger of being as uncaring as Sammael himself. When Pullman is taken on an extended tour of Dis, visiting all the most ingenious tortures, mostly imitations of Dante, we are given a glimpse of how his mind is functioning:

"It was also his intention when he was by himself, to analyse the creative mind of Dante. It seemed to him, at first sight, that Dante's infernal persons were everywhere less real than life;" (87)

Befriended by Sammael, and too afraid of him to protest, Pullman's greatest fear is that Sammael will employ him in the schemes which he is preparing against God. For, although he is too frightened to openly defy Sammael, Pullman has begun secretly praying to God, thanking him for the favours bestowed by Sammael.

Inevitably the call comes from Sammael. He wants Pullman's help in composing a letter to God informing him that he intends to dismantle Hell. Pullman has been dreading this interview, but once his mind is set to work on a problem he cannot resist the challenge:

"Now, sir, what do you possess, on your side, by way of an information bureau? Is there a reliable secret service throughout the angel community - here and in the other two places - those who are ahead of you in increasing the population and the still angelic neighbours? May I venture to ask if you are well represented in Heaven? How about your colleagues ruling Angeltown? Have you got a little man beneath their beds or behind their dining room curtains? And Heaven? Have you made it worth the while of White Angels to bring you news immediately of any fresh move on the part of the Allhighest?" (136)

Even Sammael is a little astonished at this rampant Machiavelli, and Pullman rapidly becomes his right hand man, organising the Malign Fiesta which is to mate angels with sinners and bring about the destruction of the angels' divinity. This destruction is, typically, to be brought about by an increasing democratization of Angeltown, signalled by the fiesta, at which all the moronic stunts of the carnival and blatant sexuality are to be employed. Naturally, coupled with the increase in democratic control, Sammael's power is greatly extended by using the new Bailiff-run secret service to dispose of Sammael's enemies - freedom in Hell brings angelic intrigue and assassination in its wake.

As Pullman becomes increasingly involved in this corruption, however, he also becomes increasingly devout, informing God of all his activities and trembling for fear that Sammael should find out about his betrayal.

When the fiesta takes place Pullman gets a glimpse of the reality of his fiendish master:

"There were speeches, the first a dazzling oration by Sammael. How tremendously good-looking he was, as he stood there dominating his fellow angels by his combination of legendary beauty and matchless intelligence - yet how false, thought Pullman. This was merely a defiance of God. In Sammael's heart there was no great purpose, but the old, cold pride." (168)

And the plain truth strikes him, that he, Pullman,:

"had been actively assisting at the annihilation of the Divine." (168)

He begins to understand the true nature of Sammael and his disciples:

"It was untrue to say that these people are cruel. They are not cruel. It is only cruel if you realise that the people you are injuring or destroying have feelings. There is no sense at all of the other person feeling: these people are devoid of that sensation. They do not recognise feelings in others." (181)

So much for Sammael's "matchless intelligence". Pullman comes to a new realization about God's values:

"All that is so of course but it isn't worth saying. God values man: that is the important thing to remember. It is this valuing that is so extraordinary. There are men who only value power. This is absurd because power destroys value. Value can only exist with multiplicity. The only value for Sammael is solipsistic. I, Pullman, am acting in a valueless vacuum called Sammael." (181-2)

This is where the Self takes you - especially when coupled with intelligence and force. Pullman recognises this. But he may well be too corrupted to do anything about it. When he is visited by a White Angel for example, he collapses onto his knees, but this is less in abject penitence than with the feeling that the Angel will report back to Heaven that the sinner looked very distressed and that this will make a good impression. Pullman's dirty intellect is at work again:

"How his mind worked was to attribute great importance to the statement It was not God. The writing on the wall had not the signature of God. It was not a first-class document. Would God have okayed it? He must get an appeal through to God in person. Sammael must not be informed of this, not only because he was a smart alec but because he would in any case be the last person to help him get in touch with God. It would be through a White Angel, most probably, that he could obtain the necessary information, the low-down. Not the kind of angel the last one was. They were most likely as variable as any other species." (205)

'Okayed', 'smart alec', 'lowdown'. Americanisms! Pullman's corruption is complete! However, this idea sustains him and it appears that his desire is about to be fulfilled for at the end of the novel Pullman is borne off by two soldiers of the invading Heavenly army, presumably to reappear in Heaven.

He leaves behind him a symbol - a Japanese peony of great beauty, accidentally crushed out of existence by the foot of one of Sammael's angels. It has been cultivated by Satters.

That finishes the novel as we have it. But there is the manuscript of a rejected opening to the fourth part of The Human Age, labelled 'synopsis' but actually an attempt at the opening chapters of the new work. This manuscript does not take the action very much further forward - we learn only that Heaven has captured Hell and that Sammael

has lost a leg in the process. However there is an impression given of the attributes of God, as they appear to a nurse who is looking after Sammael. Impressed by his majesty, she is yet not over-awed:

"There was nothing personal pressing on her from this big machine: and this indifference, or this apathy, delighted her, without her knowing what was responsible for such a reaction. Here, at last, was someone asking nothing of her personality, who was a selfless expanse of indifference (free of the selfish pressures which are emitted by all men and women, who are so unrelievedly functional).

From her young days she remembered "where there is nothing there is" ... oh what was it that there was? Something like this ... something which was not zero, as she had always supposed this meant. No - that nothing of her early teachers meant somewhere where nothing oppressively human was to be found - nothing functional, that loved and hated, nothing that uncomfortably willed and wanted - something which had everything. But that was the reverse of nothing, was it not? Yes, the reverse, the Sister thought, the greatest degree of the opposite of nothing which it is possible to imagine." (M.F. 218)

This is a remarkable passage. Lewis is attempting to describe a great positive quality - the greatest positive quality imaginable. And he does it by trying to indicate the reverse of all the qualities which he has attacked throughout his fiction.

God, we are told is 'indifferent'. We remember Tarr's 'famous feeling of indifference' but with Tarr we found that it was a self-deluding sham, for Tarr was too selfish, continually trying to demonstrate too much about his own personality and intelligence. God does not need to do this. He does not need to press his personality on other people, he asks nothing of people, simply comprehends everything.

And because he asks nothing, he is the opposite of nothing. We remember Lewis's concern with 'nothingness' particularly in The Revenge for Love, but present throughout his work, even in his last novel, The Red Priest; this nothingness underlies almost all human reality according to Lewis, and in his novels we find it as an inevitable product of the rigid will.

God, in his contemplative tranquility does not assert his will - has no power-craze, does not need to possess or to dominate anything -

he has everything. He is:

"the greatest degree of the opposite of nothing which it is possible to imagine."

Presumably he is intelligent, but his intelligence does not have to assert itself in the struggle to know things, as Pullman's does. It is not human intelligence at all. By contrast, that other intelligent supernatural being, Sammael, is all assertion:

"There was nothing of that divine nothingness about that man, no. There was all will there! The Sister shrank." (M.F. 219)

It is not surprising that Lewis was unable to complete The Trial of Man, for to make such a figure as this God move and act would be very difficult. Sammael can be convincingly drawn as a powerful crazed intelligence, because he has human qualities; God cannot be represented in human terms with the same conviction.

Nevertheless it is extraordinary that Lewis was able to project such a strong image of his concept of God as he did in his 'synopsis', and the reason is undoubtedly that he was able to draw on the moral values that he had built up so convincingly throughout all his novels. We are only given a glimpse of God, but a glimpse is all that we can reasonably ask. We should be grateful for such glimpses.

CHAPTER 11 : THE RED PRIEST.

2004

The Red Priest is the most neglected of Lewis's novels. This seems rather odd as it is his last novel, and one which Lewis himself apparently considered so important that he postponed finishing the much more highly acclaimed Human Age in order to write it.

It is fair to say that it is almost entirely ignored by the critics. Kenner, of course, is writing too early to consider it, but Wagner disparages it almost every time he mentions it, and thinks it "bogs down...contains a covey of non-functional and uninteresting characters...Card...is unconvincing... The prose itself slowly becomes more and more banal."<sup>1</sup>

Pritchard hardly mentions it in his Twayne book, and in fact omits it altogether from his list of the novels in the bibliography in his Profiles in Literature book<sup>2</sup>.

Even the recent "Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires" by Chapman, which affords the novel four and a half pages, mostly retells the story and offers judgements couched in terms of Kreisler and The Wild Body - Lewis's writings of forty years before.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps understandably, in view of his own religious beliefs, even T. S. Eliot disliked The Red Priest.

In an obituary of Lewis he described Monstre Gai and Self Condemned as Lewis's best novels and judged The Red Priest to be markedly inferior - not, he says, because of failing powers, but because of a mistaken choice of subject matter. Eliot finds the Anglo-Catholic priest, Augustine Card, "preposterous"<sup>4</sup>.

Lewis had at least anticipated the direction of that criticism. Writing in Rude Assignment in 1950 he said:

<sup>1</sup>Wagner, G. - Wyndham Lewis, p. 267

<sup>2</sup>Pritchard, W.H. - Wyndham Lewis, p. 100

<sup>3</sup>Chapman, R. - Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires, pp. 148-52

<sup>4</sup>Eliot, T.S. - Hudson Review 10: 167-70, 1957



"Were I for argument's sake to describe a few months in the life of an average priest - treat of his bitter effort to master his animal nature, his troubles about belief, perhaps his antagonism to his superior - it would probably give universal offence".<sup>5</sup>

Lewis was never afraid of giving universal offence, but in fairness, the offence is not quite universal. The novel has its champions. Martin Seymour-Smith, for example, sees the novel as self-critical (along with Self Condemned and The Vulgar Streak) and neglected:

"Whatever its merits or demerits it is of enormous importance in any consideration of the meaning of his prose".<sup>6</sup>

The tone of that criticism suggests agreement with John Holloway who is the real champion of the importance of The Red Priest in the Lewis oeuvre. Holloway argues in terms of 'the total movement of the narrative' and claims that Augustine Card gropes towards representing the "whole phase of history" between St. Augustine and our present house of cards:

"And surely, with his yearning to fuse Christianity and Communism, his intellectual curiosity that only leads on to disaster, his immense physical power that he cannot keep from senseless violence, his greed and love of display, his incapacity not to draw on capital and devour his inheritance, his desire to justify himself and be a scapegoat all at once, surely with all these things, he is a representative figure for the 'backward epoch' in which we ourselves have all been living."<sup>7</sup>

Pritchard calls this Holloway essay: "perhaps the best single essay on Lewis's insight into modern reality"<sup>8</sup> and indeed, his version of the unity and strength of Lewis's vision has considerable power behind it. In the case of The Red Priest, however, one feels that he may be injecting the power himself, or at least borrowing it from elsewhere. For example he writes:

<sup>5</sup> Rude Assignment, p. 215

<sup>6</sup> Seymour-Smith, M. - Agenda, Vol. 7, No. 3, Autumn-Winter, 1969-70, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> Holloway, J. - The Charted Mirror, p. 132

"What emerges above all from The Art of Being Ruled is the conviction of an imminent planetary change in human life so profound as essentially to be a transmutation in the biological sense. This is just what Lewis states of the central figure in The Red Priest:

'He is the last of a species (to which we all belong) and in him in travail - and there are none of us who do not experience the travail too - is another species.'<sup>9</sup>

This is persuasive - until one realises that Lewis never said this about the Red Priest at all. The quotation is lifted directly from Lewis's short story The Bishop's Fool, where the character is certainly an Anglican priest with left-wing sympathies, but otherwise could hardly be more different from Augustine Card!<sup>10</sup> Holloway, to put it mildly, in spite of offering some valuable insights, stands in danger of importing a spurious interpretation into the novel, and importing the evidence to justify it.

Still the conviction remains that there is more to the novel than its detractors will admit. The storyline itself seems slight when compared to the Human Age or Self Condemned:

In post-war London, swarming with juvenile gangs, Augustine Card, an Anglo-Catholic priest of a great church family, is creating something of a stir with his combination of Catholic ritual and apparent Russian sympathies. An enormously athletic ex-boxer, tearaway and publicist, Card has taken to the cloth to lead a band of disciples in a 'new Christianity'. At first the campaign appears to be successful - a few protesters have to be removed from his church, but Card's activities gain great publicity and he even marries a beautiful girl disciple. But things soon go wrong; Card's marriage bogs down in financial recrimination because his wife will not part with her recently inherited capital in order to finance

<sup>9</sup>Holloway, op.cit. p. 128

<sup>10</sup>Rotting Hill, p. 31

his increasingly extravagant schemes; and the crusade disintegrates when Card fights with and kills his curate who foolishly argues with him from a standpoint of superior knowledge.

Inevitably Card is sent to prison. When he comes out he leaves for Canada where he plans to bring the Eskimos to Jesus. While still en route, however, he kills an Eskimo who is trying to steal his wallet and shortly afterwards he is reported dead - his throat gouged out, presumably by vengeful Eskimos.

However, as the review in T.L.S. said: "The book is stranger and more obscure than such a summary suggests."<sup>11</sup>

In fact the strangeness and obscurity starts on the first page. Jane Greevey, a spinster born in the Victorian era, is dusting a 'precious' copy of Antic Hay the novel of the early twenties by Aldous Huxley. From what we learn of her attitudes later, it is somewhat out of character for Jane to admire this novel; for example, the scene in which a bearded, blood-flecked character, having been stabbed by his mistress, rapes a young woman who mistakenly arrives at his door, can hardly have appealed to Jane, in whose "romantic sexology, the man impended apologetically".

Why then does Antic Hay appear on the first page of The Red Priest? Perhaps because Lewis himself is mentioned (in the same breath as Picasso) in the first chapter of Antic Hay?<sup>12</sup> There are also one or two references in Antic Hay which would connect with The Human Age - the novel Lewis had just finished. For example, Coleman sees himself as conducting a tour of Hell<sup>13</sup> and earlier declared: "I believe in one devil, father quasi-almighty, Samael

<sup>11</sup>T.L.S. 1956, p. 529

<sup>12</sup>Huxley, A. - Antic Hay, Penguin. p. 16

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 180

and his wife, the Woman of Whoredom".<sup>14</sup> Samael is a Hebrew word for a (or the) devil - but it is not in my experience common in English. Lewis spells it (acceptably) Sammael, but one wonders if he lifted this particular name for Satan from Huxley. Of course, Samael has been called the first art critic! Later on in The Red Priest Donald Wolfit is referred to by Mary (p. 179). Wolfit played the part of the Bailiff in the Radio production of The Human Age. But perhaps the most important aspect of Antic Hay is that Lewis himself is almost certainly being satirised in the novel in the person of Casimir Lypiatt, painter, poet and musician. Like Lewis's own satires, this one is unfairly distorted, but for our purposes here we need only note three points made about Lypiatt: his art is seen as an advert<sup>15</sup>, himself as a charlatan<sup>16</sup>, and in a moment of great self-pity he sees himself as a Christ-like figure<sup>17</sup>.

Here we could perhaps take up Seymour-Smith's point that The Red Priest is a self-critical novel. The reference to 'Argal' (Arghol?) in Antic Hay<sup>18</sup> and a little chant of Coleman's: "Rot the People, blast the People" may well refer to Lewis's BLAST period, while Lypiatt lives rather like Jane in a mews with stables and garages which is infested with small children whose interest Lypiatt dismisses as "merely an example of the mob's instinctive dislike of the aristocratic individual".<sup>19</sup> - a typical Lewis opinion.

Moreover, in this connection Lypiatt is fond of speaking of 'Yahoos' one of the many Swiftian references which Lewis was fond of making, while Card in The Red Priest refers to Lilliput (232).

<sup>14</sup>Huxley, A. - Antic Hay. Penguin. p. 51

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 87

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 214

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 212

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 86

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 73

Mrs. Viveash offends the taxi-driver by high-hatting him in a similar manner to that in which Hughie offends the milkman<sup>20</sup>, and while walking in the Mews to Lypiatt's house Mrs. Viveash walks in a fastidious manner very like the manner in which Augustine Card is walking when we first see him, in Jane's Mews<sup>21</sup>. Also, when the children appear to pester Mrs. Viveash in the Mews she turns and says: "Have you ever read about the Pied Piper of Hamelin?"<sup>22</sup>

When Jane is in the church of St. Catherine and the Angels for the first time and is experiencing the magnetic personality of Father Card, she compares him in her mind with the Pied Piper.

So, if Antic Hay is critical of the early Lewis, and there are a number of connections between Antic Hay and The Red Priest what conclusions can we draw?

Perhaps we can look at some of Lewis's opinions published elsewhere. For example, in the Demon of Progress and the Arts, written not long before The Red Priest, he makes an interesting connection between the extremism of art critics, and that of religionists and politicians: "It may for instance, by its absolutist tone, by its irrational fervour, appear rather as the crusade of a religionist or a millennial politician."<sup>23</sup>

And, of course, Lewis repudiated the extremism of his BLAST period in rather similar terms:

"I might have been at the head of a social revolution instead of merely being the prophet of a new fashion in art.

"Really all this organised disturbance was Art behaving as if it were Politics. But I swear I did not know it. It may in fact have been

<sup>20</sup> Huxley, A. - Antic Hay. Penguin. p. 72. Red Priest, p. 68

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 72. Red Priest, p. 68

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>23</sup> Demon of Progress in the Arts, p. 48

politics. I see that now. Indeed it must have been. But I was unaware of the fact: I believed that this was the way artists were always received; a somewhat tumultuous reception, perhaps, but after all why not? I mistook the agitation in the audience for the sign of the awakening of the emotions of artistic sensibility."<sup>24</sup>

So Lewis makes a clear connection between political, religious and artistic crusades and is clearly critical of his own early activities. Huxley satirizes the early Lewis (as Lypiatt) as a self-advertising charlatan, seeing himself in bloated terms (e.g. as a Christ-figure). Lewis paints Card in exactly these terms; he is repeatedly called a charlatan in the novel and he even worked in publicity at one time in his past. And Jane, in the church for her first service, sees Card himself in Christ-like terms and in fact appears to be confusing the object of worship, Card or Christ: "The hero she had tremblingly come to watch had begun the story of his fabulous life, among the choiring voices." (54)

It seems, therefore, at least possible that Lewis was making a comparison between Card and his own early image. If we remember that Lewis's work was, and is, often judged in terms of his early work, and Tarr, Kreisler, Blast, The Wild Body, often taken as exemplifying his philosophy throughout his career, then it is possible to read an objection to this process in the story of Augustine Card pulling a policeman off his horse, leaping on it and riding away. Everything which Card later does which attracts attention is seen as a symbolic act of jumping onto the policeman's horse. As Jane says:

"If at the beginning of his life a man behaves in a very sensational manner, anything that he does at a later period will, of course, be referred back to that." (28)

<sup>24</sup> Blasting and Bombardiering, p. 32

On the other hand, it transpires in the novel that this interpretation of Card's actions is very probably the correct one - he has not 'grown up' as much as first impressions imply.

It is, therefore, rather difficult to establish just how far the novel is self-critical. There is no doubt that in his later novels Lewis was exploring the limitations of his earlier world-view. Both Rene Harding in Self Condemned and Pullman in The Human Age represent the Intellectual Man with whom Lewis had always identified himself; and both have their limitations and failures painfully explored.

Augustine Card seems to represent an earlier Lewisian type - noisy, aggressive intellectual energy - a type which Lewis exploited in his early days of barracking Marinetti at public meetings, and associating himself with T. E. Hulme and Gaudier-Brzeska. This form of intellectual energy is exposed in Card as nothing more than a mask for half-repressed physical violence - but how far we can apply this to the early Lewis is not clear.

At least this problem brings us to a fundamental problem in most of Lewis's work - the violence of his style. It has often been remarked that although Lewis continually emphasised and espoused the classical virtues his own work often appears very undisciplined. He could never claim, as Joyce claimed of Dubliners that he wrote in a style of "scrupulous meanness". This feature of his style has been seen as everything from a unique energy to an amazing vulgarity, and, especially in the polemical works, it is certainly capable of moving between the two.

The point here, is that there appears to be an approach to this problem in one of the lectures given in the interlude at Hambledon College. During the lectures on short story writing we are given a piece of advice, which we are told is a very good

piece, even though it comes from Gertrude Stein - hardly Lewis's favourite writer!

The advice is about avoiding an over-violent prose-style:

"This is an invaluable suggestion, especially to a writer inclined to throw himself about...You cannot invest a small area too violently, or you will bang it to pieces...If you have a prose that dashes itself about, you will be sure, in the end, to meet with a mishap."(101)

This, of course, can be applied quite literally to Card who listens to and admires this lecture. For it does invest a small area too violently when he beats up his curate, and he does bang it to pieces, for the man dies. But the application can be much more subtle than this, for Card's prose style, also, dashes itself about and his sermons are remarkable for the violence of their imagery.

This is expressed quite subtly as a mere instinct for the dramatic in, for example, his conversation with Mary:

"If,' she said, 'one were enabled to examine it - an ants' nest...'  
'...or such strange places as North or South America,'  
Father Card felt an ants' nest might not achieve interest."(95)

But this 'instinct' becomes much more pronounced when Card is discoursing on the subject of Jesus:

"Jesus, properly understood, has just as desperate a message as had the man we conjured up, in the first instance, with the revolver on the table."(117)  
"The image of the violent Christ seemed to rise in the air and dominate the congregation."(125)  
"If I could make you understand what I am talking about, it would be like a clap of thunder in the vault of this church, or like the bursting of a bomb"'.(125-6)

This last speech provokes a protest, but the interrupter soon makes a 'violent exit'.

And after the murder, a half-crazed Card makes the imagery even more explicit:



"The rejuvenation of my church hid what I meant to be dynamite. Jesus was a stick of dynamite. That man struck me in the face - me! He must have been mad. He did not know that I held in my hand the bomb of Jesus!"(244)

So Card's prose style is seen as a symptom of his violent tendencies. What is not clear is whether this is simply another aspect of Lewis's criticism of 'action' or a critical look at Lewis's own tendencies in his early prose - the tendencies which he deliberately ran into the casual brutality of Snooty Baronet and later analysed in Pullman's betrayal of mankind.

All his life Lewis denounced violence - and equally all his life he was clearly fascinated by it. Also, throughout his life, even after his prose had stopped seeing men as machines and started viewing the machine-man as a failure of humanity, Lewis equated animals and machines, both being mindless reflex-action 'creatures'. And in the fifties especially, the form of violence which seemed to fascinate him most was the ritualised violence, the man as 'fighting machine' of boxing.

Boxing is Card's central ritual of violence just as the Mass is his central ritual of religion, and like most rituals it provides the gloss of civilization to cover a savage impulse - in this case the impulse to kill.

It is clear from his other work that Lewis was interested in the technique of the boxer, and if anything, tended to over-estimate the abilities of a trained boxer. There is, for instance, the American boxer whom Rene Harding unwittingly encounters in Self Condemned:

"A crouched, medium-sized figure was dancing in front of him. There was no angry face - there was hardly any face at all. It was an engine rather than a man, or a man who was so highly trained that his personality was submerged. There was something very dangerous about this taut and dancing body. The presence of this figure

in front of him admitted of only one interpretation, and he struck it with all his force, as if it were an adder, or any other dangerous thing in nature. The next thing he knew was that he could no longer strike it because it was so near to him. The next thing he knew after that was how the lightning snaps and is gone, and it hits you, and he had been slammed in the stomach, and he was shut up over the pain like a book that had tried to slap itself shut. The pain filled the room and he was crouched in the middle of it hugging his pain."(228)...

"He stood gasping with his neck stuck out, like a bearded rooster. It was then that he was the face - the face of the engine, which had attacked him. It was a smooth, young, and rather thoughtful face; just now it was looking at him with a calm concentration, one eyebrow a little lifted."(228)

There is, too, Jack Cox in The Bishop's Fool, who, though pinned to the ground by a much heavier man, is able to avail himself of 'one of the many thuggish tricks included in Commando training' to virtually cripple and totally humiliate his more powerful opponent.

Even before the War, we find this interest in Lewis's novels. Jack Cruze, in The Revenge for Love is not a trained boxer, but he was 'as handy a man with his fist for his size as it would be possible to find, as natural a boxer as a flea is a jumper.' (Penguin 217) And his boxing style is identical to that of Lewis's other boxers: "Jack was jumping about like a Jack-in-the-box, unable to keep still".(217)

But the most 'fully developed' boxer is the hero of the recently published The Man Who Was Unlucky With Women, a short story written sometime in the '50s. This concerns one Dicky Dean who on finding his wife in bed with another man, a man moreover who is smaller than himself, commences to beat up his rival. To his surprise he finds the rival does not wish to be beaten up, in fact he 'began jumping about, and, before Dean knew quite what was happening, he received a torrent of blows in the face...this well-knit belted figure began springing to left and right like a mechanical toy, and his fists landed upon Dean's face as if to order - bang, bang,

bang, bang, and so on'.<sup>25</sup>

This spectacular agility makes a profound impression on Dean who promptly commences learning to box, leaping around in a most alarming manner, and 'keeping his hand in' by picking fights at every opportunity. At length, now living with another woman, he finds himself cuckolded again and this time has the satisfaction of beating up and knocking out the offending gentleman. Unfortunately in the process he attracts the attention of a very large wolf-hound who feels challenged by his aggressive antics, and who meets the challenge by sinking his fangs into Dean's throat - with fatal consequences for the unfortunate boxer.

There is an interesting personal sidelight on this interest in boxing, in some of Lewis's friendships.

Roy Campbell, a long-time friend and admirer of Lewis, was a very keen boxer, as was <sup>Jacob</sup> Joseph Kramer, whom Lewis mentions as causing trouble at Roy Campbell's wedding by showing off his biceps (a trait of Card's also).<sup>26</sup>

However, probably the best-known example of Lewis's personal experience of boxing comes from a somewhat poisoned pen sketch of Lewis, written after his death, by Ernest Hemingway in A Moveable Feast<sup>27</sup>.

After calling Lewis the nastiest looking man he has ever seen, and repeating Gertrude Stein's nickname for Lewis - 'The measuring Worm' ('a kinder and more Christian term than what I had thought about him myself'), Hemingway proceeds to recount a story of a boxing lesson which he was giving Ezra Pound, watched by Lewis. Curiously enough, he too emphasises the footwork of boxing rather than the fisticuffs - rather as Lewis tends to do. According to Hemingway, when he wished to conclude the lesson Lewis insisted

<sup>25</sup>Unlucky for Pringle, p. 163

<sup>26</sup>Blasting and Bombardiering, p. 222

<sup>27</sup>Hemingway, E. - A Moveable Feast, p. 95-8

that they continue - and Hemingway eventually concluded that Lewis was hoping to see Pound hurt.

It should be pointed out that Hemingway bore something of a grudge against Lewis for the latter's study of Hemingway The Dumb Ox, published in both Britain and America and eventually in Men Without Art.

According to Carlos Baker's biography of Hemingway, Sylvia Beach showed this essay to Hemingway in her Paris bookshop shortly after it appeared: "He was so enraged that he punched a vase of tulips on Sylvia's table."<sup>28</sup>

Whether this story ever found its way back to Lewis I do not know, but if it did he must have amused at this 'dumb ox in a bookshop' acting as the proverbial bull in a china-shop.

The point of these biographical asides is that Hemingway figures in The Red Priest. In Hambleton College the lecturer in prose writing recommends the work of Ernest Hemingway to his students and quotes advice which Gertrude Stein gave to Hemingway and which we have investigated above. The point is that the short story which is particularly recommended to the students is The Killers - a story about a boxer who has broken the rules - gone against the gangsters who run the games - and is resignedly waiting in his hotel room to be killed - another illustration of the dangers of being a boxer. The point is actually made that Hemingway was "familiar with the fighter. And certainly he has written several of the best stories in existence about a man occupied, from his youth up, in that way." (102)

With hindsight - knowing of Hemingway's future suicide - his inclusion here as another 'man of action' might appear very

<sup>28</sup> Baker, C. - Ernest Hemingway - A Life Story, p. 258

significant; but, of course, when this book was being written Hemingway was actually at the height of his career, and had in fact been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1954. On the other hand just before that award he had narrowly escaped death twice, in two plane crashes in Africa, where he had gone to report on Mau-Mau activities, the shadow of which comes into The Red Priest in relation to Mary's aunt's Kenyan properties. Hemingway's death had in fact been reported in all the papers - it may have seemed to Lewis a fitting end for a man of action.

In any case, Lewis makes it clear in the chapter entitled 'A Stone-Age Man' how close to the animal he regards the boxer as being, and the game of boxing is seen as a mask for the killer.

This idea of the mask is an interesting one: Percy Hardcaster in The Revenge for Love, Rene Harding in Self Condemned, and (especially) Vincent Penhale in The Vulgar Streak, all wear masks, personas which conceal the hollowness of their personalities. Less use is made of this theme in The Red Priest, nevertheless it is made clear that Card does wear a mask (e.g. p. 90). Card's civilised, intellectual veneer sits as uneasily on him as does his biretta, and he has to wrinkle his brow to keep both on. When Mary does see him in more relaxed circumstances she is astonished by the change which has come over him: "It was as if he had lifted a mask off his face"(93).

That this mask ultimately conceals violence and an animal nature is also made clear. Card's enormous bulk is continually emphasised, his hand is even called an 'immense paw' we are told that 'to remain supremely an animal is essential for the successful fighter'.(151) Finally, after the murder he is reduced to almost pure animal. Mary finds him 'lying in wait'...his eyes 'like those of an animal'. (240) and after she sees the dead body she bursts out against him:

'What a brute you are!...I should have squarely told you that I would not live with a wild animal'.(242) Even after Card's release from prison and his departure from England we get an account of his violence towards a rather nosy stranger, and the stranger's reaction: 'I thought of the absolute necessity of showing no fear to a wounded animal'(297). And, of course, after his final act of violence - strangling an Eskimo who was attempting to rob him - Card turns up dead, with his throat gouged out, apparently by Eskimos. It is the same fate which met Dicky Deans, boxer-hero of The Man Who Was Unlucky With Women, except that in his case it is a wolf-hound which does the gouging, but the moral - and the animal appropriateness - is clear.

However, apart from this aspect of Card, the rest of his personality and motivation is not easy to decipher. We begin the novel, receiving a favourable impression of him through the eyes of Jane and this impression is only gradually undermined as the novel progresses. Early on (42-3) Card appears to explain his religious motives to Horrid, his assistant, but these appear, almost in the same breath, to be a cynical lust for power and a genuine concern for Christianity. By the end of the novel we are to understand that Card is an obsessive religious fanatic. Yet there are undeniably attractive features to his personality. He has a clear, direct, informal style of speech which is Lewis's own, and this shows in his easy relationship with Horrid, and to some extent in his speech to the students at Hambledon College.

Then too, though an undoubtedly violent man, when faced with his friend Hartnell's problem of having to expel a rival from the premises of Hambledon College he announces: 'Muscles alone is no good. My muscles have only been useful for a strictly limited number of things'.(47) And he advises Hartnell to contact a lawyer

immediately. His method of contacting the lawyer is interesting: "He dialled the appropriate number. 'Charles Blockett? This is me'." (48) There is a tremendous arrogance about the assumption that Blockett will automatically know who is calling without being told, but the arrogance is not altogether unattractive, rather. Card seems imbued with a somewhat schoolboyish vitality. He discusses this serious problem with his lawyer, then rings off: "'What fun! Goodbye!'" (49)

In general, in his physical characteristics (cf. p. 38), his carefree confidence and his incisive manner (say, in handling his unsavoury curate, Wimbush) Augustine Card is an impressive figure and remains so for most of the first half of the novel. But there are signs too, of other characteristics. Self-centredness, for example. Card's curate Horrid brings in a second-hand book about St. Augustine and Card immediately seizes on it assuming it is about himself. Finding it concerns a rather more established St. Augustine his: 'interest having been abruptly and automatically extinguished, the book fell from his hand back on to the newspaper on the floor at his side'. (38) Then too, Card is an avid reader of the newspapers when their gossip concerns himself, yet when Hartnell visits him to discuss Hambledon College he is totally unaware of the situation there, even though the story occupies the largest type in The Express which is lying on his chaise-longue.

The small details build towards the later revelations about Card's character. In his cell, for example, he is described as being, 'as usual, recumbent'. (46), and this links up with Mary's later complaints about him having the typical laziness of the giant. His bluff manner of getting his own way in an argument leads into his use of the despised Father Wimbush as a confidante in his dispute with the more intellectually accomplished Father Makepiece (224).

His impulsive ejection of a noisy protester from his church leads to his organisation of athletic young men into ruthlessly efficient bouncers. His espousal of communism does not prevent him from using his aristocratic connections - even the admiring Jane, recognizes that one has to be 'of the family' to approach him (91). Even his informal style in his lecture to the students at Hambledon College is undercut when we discover him inserting stage directions ('a pause') into the script (111). One is reminded of Hardy's poem In Church recording the disillusionment experienced by the bible-class pupil when the door of the vestry swings open to reveal the preacher rehearsing before a mirror the gestures which he has just employed in addressing his congregation.

And indeed it is this address which contains Card's two most glaring inconsistencies, his idealisation of priests as people who prefer to live near the poverty line, and his insistence on the need for humility, the need to feel small:

"The great thing is to make war on self-conceit, and to teach people to feel small, to feel so small that they have never experienced anything like it before. To feel small is the essence of religion. The world is full of people who feel big. They go about, swollen in some idea of their personal importance. To get rid of that is the first step towards God. As an experiment, try to see how small you can feel. It is impossible to feel too tiny. You want to feel the ultimate next thing to nothingness - to zero".(109)

This latter theme is so important to Card's message that the whole chapter is called 'The Miniature Recommended'.

Yet there is enormous irony in both these themes. The man who recommends poverty is the man whose marriage bogs down in financial recriminations because he is not content to squander his wife's considerable income but insists on diminishing her capital in the furtherance of his extravagant religious/publicity ventures.

And the man who so heartily recommends the miniature, and so



vigorously blasts the puffed-up ego, is the man whose resentment against the curate whom he eventually kills is based on the fact that the curate makes him feel small:

"That paragon makes me feel small, that is the fact of the matter", said Father Card. 'I must send him back where he comes from, and tell them that we are all people of a normal size here, he makes us feel as if we were in Lilliput. Ask if they haven't got anyone smaller'." (232)

Card, it becomes apparent, is a gross, manic egoist, and ultimately Makepiece dies because Card has identified himself so closely with Jesus that he views an assault on his person as an unspeakable outrage, the act of a madman.

Some attempt is made to analyse Card's motives in a dialogue between Hartnell and Horridge in the chapter entitled 'Hartnell and Horridge have a Deep Look'. Significantly this takes place in the Cafe Royal. Here the evidence of Card's dark violence is pitted against the virtues of his winning personality. Horridge at least, is badly shaken by his 'deep look' and begins to see his whole environment (e.g. Hartnell and the traffic) in more violent terms than before - a thematic link perhaps with the violent setting of the beginning of the novel. Ultimately we are left with Hartnell's judgement: 'Augustine is not a very easy man to be quite sure about'. (272) Our last glimpse of Card's motivations are a curious mixture of an obsession to expiate his sense of guilt, and a horror of being out in Society, of being black-balled in his club.

Lewis never resolves the problem of this snobbish Communist, this violent priest, and this unstable balance of contradictions is surely deliberate.

It is in any case matched by the balance of characteristics of his wife, Mary. Mary is described by her mother as a 'problem child'; and for the reader at least, she is something of a problem. Lewis never really created a female 'heroine' in the conventional

meaning of the word; virtually all his early women characters are objects of satire. Certainly this view changed when Lewis's whole approach to the novel changed in the 'thirties and Margot in The Revenge for Love, Maddie in The Vulgar Streak and Hester in Self Condemned, though portrayed with all their faults, are treated with a sensitive compassion not to be found in the earlier Lewis. Yet none of them occupies the relative position of Mary, who is Youth and Beauty, 'a mass of youthful perfections'(71) and cast in a sympathetic romantic role. Such virtues, of course, are not likely to be the full story in any Lewis novel, and we find this beautiful heroine has a somewhat hard-boiled approach to sex and romance (an attitude nicely set off by Jane Greevey's old-fashioned, girlish romanticism), a sense of grievance which almost amounts to a persecution complex, and a growing obsession with money and material matters.

It is in deciphering the extent to which these characteristics dominate the more sympathetic Mary that the reader meets his problems. For example, there is Mary's conflict with her mother. The reader sympathises with Mary in her irritation with Arthur, the dull suitor whom her parents encourage, but to what extent are her other grievances against her mother, about lack of money for example, justified?

We are told: "For hours she would go on building up a quite consecutively logical, but quite nonsensical grievance".(73), but the context does not make it quite clear if this is an impartial 'authorial' comment or part of her mother's thought-stream, the latter technique being one that Lewis made more use of than he admitted.

Certainly Mary's mother does turn out to be somewhat mean and vindictive - but so does Mary, and we have at least one 'impartial'

comment on their relationship:

"The mother and daughter both suffered the same emotions but one of them in reverse".(74)

Mary tends to alienate the reader's sympathy with her whining to Monica, her sharpness to Arthur, her claim to her mother that Arthur has never seriously proposed marriage to her when in fact he has just done so for the umpteenth time - Mary simply refuses to take him seriously - and her arrogance on her trip to Norwich. This last is rewarded by a hefty and humiliating slap - delivered by Harry's girlfriend - and the reader is likely to feel it is thoroughly deserved.

Still Mary is beautiful, intelligent and sympathetically treated on the whole, and she champions Card against the philistinism of Hughie and Arthur who are quick to jeer at his Romanish revolutionary ways; much of her hard-boiled rudeness is what makes her seem real as against the 'romantic' Jane Greevey who appears from the early pages of the novel to be the heroine. Mary actually marries Card, while Jane dreams about him, so while she is more competent and more 'successful' than Jane she is also more disillusioned. At the end of the novel Jane is left with a collection of newspaper clippings full of anecdotes of Augustine, instancing his kindness and so forth. Mary recognizes many of these to be material collected, and partially fabricated, by her to help Augustine during his trial; they cannot comfort her as they do Jane. Jane is left with her illusions, Mary is left with her children and her fears that they share their father's nature.

Much of Mary's personality is revealed through her attitude to money - in which respect she is very like her mother as the latter's defence of her capital from Lady Imogen demonstrates (217-23).

As soon as Mary inherits her money she is apprised of the tax situation and the manner in which this eats at unearned income.

This immediately turns Mary into 'a bitter enemy of the state'(174), and, of course, sets her up in opposition to Card. In effect theirs is a marriage of Capitalism and Communism, and their differing attitudes to Mary's inheritance could hardly be more polarised. Just as Card appears to develop an unreasoning mania for encroaching on Mary's capital, so Mary becomes almost miserly materialistic. For example, when Mary is alarmed by the violence of Augustine's sparring matches with a local man on their honeymoon she says:

"Are you sure, Augustine, that you wont hurt that young man? If he was injured anywhere it might cost an awful lot of money'."(202)

In the moment of triumph at the end of the trial, with Card receiving a relatively light sentence for manslaughter, Mary is consumed with hatred for the defence counsel because he has so much of her money, and moments later she is hysterically trying to bribe a policeman:

"Would escape be easy? Could I get my husband away in a launch, fitted with electricity? Could I get him up in a helicopter - are the PC.s used to that? What would it cost? How much? How much would you do it for?"(281)

It is, of course, entirely appropriate that Card should have to kill an Eskimo who was trying to steal his money. In fact, money, property, territory, and animal feelings of possession are all linked in the novel and explored in a number of minor ways at the beginning of the novel. For example, the battles between the armies of children are fought to repel invasion, and the minutiae of trespassing hog-bins and Rolls-Royces are examined in some detail. Jane is first made aware of Card's presence in the News by the fact that Hughie, the man to whom she is talking, is thrusting out his chest and assuming other postures of a male whose territory is invaded. The idea of a hostile territory in which trespassing

is discouraged is specifically used (p. 11), while on page 19 Jane is urged to use her property rights as Hughie's landlord to combat his male domination.

Obviously too, the fulfilment of many of Card's 'masculine' functions are dependent on money. He does his courting 'dancing on an overdraft' and is only able to provide his bride with the appropriate gifts thanks to her financial gift to him before the marriage.

There are, too, other sets of images and a considerable amount of playing on words. For example, not unexpectedly there are a considerable amount of plays on the theme of religion: one of the gangs in the Mews is said to be crusading (3); the injured gang-member is called Pastor (3); the Mews is said to be blessed with a bomb-site (16); Mary's mother says of Mary's changed attitude after inheriting money: 'I think the Devil has got into you'(182); and Mary thinks of Augustine: 'The Devil wants to have a slap at my capital'(215); Mary's mother calls her 'a Holy terror'(219); Card's arrest is called 'a blessing in disguise'(250); and Hartnell even uses the expression 'Heaven forbid!'(273).

In this connection too, a play is made on Card's association/confusion of himself and Jesus for when he is short of money he threatens to go to the moneylenders - and this is twice seen as delivering himself up to the Jews(208 & 219). There are many apparently frivolous plays - 'Horrid's horrid answer'(120); Card is called coin in Hartnell's monograph, Mary tosses a coin to decide whether to marry Card; immediately after talk of low-caste Chinese and 'coolies' Lady Imogen's eyes are described as 'rather Mongolian'(194) though this may be more than frivolous as Card is later said to have 'the extremism of the asiatic'(275).

The significance of any of these is made even more doubtful by the number of oddities and apparent mistakes in the text:

e.g. Matilda is initially called Matilda Tidings(12), but later Matilda Mortlake(50), an apparent confusion with the Sir Philip Mortlake who bullies Jane with his Rolls-Royce; we are told (56) that nothing but Latin is spoken in Card's church but English is quoted (59 & 60); the name Virginia Woolf is misspelt (Wolfe) twice on one page (132); Monica remembers Mary's 'musical clue' moving from Canterbury to Moscow (211) whereas in fact it was from Bethlehem to Moscow (137); Mary keeps her inheritance a secret from Card and the news is broken to him by her mother, but Lady Imogen is able to assert that Mary has inherited £50,000 'according to the papers' (221); in Canada, Card is said to be 'cropped like a Prussian'(294) and he himself says of it: 'This cropped hair has not had time to grow'(295). Yet after coming out of prison into the welcoming arms of Mary Card did not leave for Canada until: 'After months of excited argument Mary gave way!(291). Card's hair had ample time to grow!

In the light of such 'mistakes' - if such they are - the reader becomes unsure how much trust to place in apparent subtleties. For example, when we read, after Card's departure for Canada; "Durant's Newspaper Clippings delivered at Mary's Chelsea flat any publicity sent by Augustine to what had always been his favourite daily papers".(292) Are we to take this as a daring affirmation of the incredible contradictions of Card's nature that he could retreat to the deserted ends of the earth to expiate his sin and yet at the same time send back publicity about his activities to the newspapers, or is it simply a blunder on Lewis's part?

There are many curious things in this novel: an odd comic element in both style and situation the exact function of which is unclear, unless it be simply to undermine Card's seriousness; conversations which seem like synopses - when Mary feels surprise

at having been invited to Card's cell for tea, and having left without being offered any, she is only making explicit some of the reader's feelings about the abruptness of some of these conversations.

Card can be seen, like many of Lewis's early characters as a fine grotesque, but all of the language associated with these early characters is entirely missing from this novel, and the feeling persists that the novel reaches out to do more, mean more, than simply be a picture of an eccentric giant; a feeling that the brats on the bomb-site, the violence, the bickering over money, the peculiar role and conversational style of Jane Greevey should add up to something more than what we have.

A case can be made for the significance of the novel, as can be seen from the quote from John Holloway at the beginning of this chapter, but one feels that the novel merely collects a lot of significant fragments, and that no process of integration takes place; my impression of the novel is one of vitality with dislocations. I would disagree with Eliot, and blame the failure directly on failing powers. Lewis had been writing for years with a tumour pressing on his brain; he frequently lapsed into unconsciousness, but this did not prevent him from producing some of his best work; it did, I think, prevent him from fully synthesising his final novel.

There is, however, a quote from the lecture on writing given at Hambledon College which should serve as a chastening thought to such criticism. The quote is repeated, so perhaps we are meant to think carefully about it:

"It is a question of the appetite for realism at the time"(103)

Many of the elements of this novel suggest it is not meant to be taken realistically at all - names, conversations, even bus

numbers - and that may make some of the fault-finding exercises above hopelessly pedestrian, nevertheless the novel seems to me a gallant, curious, interesting, entertaining, unintegrated (certainly unrevised) failure.



CHAPTER 12 : CONCLUSION.

## CONCLUSION

We have come a long way. From Tarr knocking off Hobson's hat to Augustine Card murdering Eskimos; through high society in the London art-world, through a Spanish prison and an insane Canadian hotel, through purgatory and hell, to a hint of heaven.

We have come a long way, also, from the intense, strident prophet of Vorticism, proclaiming a new art era, through the secretive suspicious artist, to the blind old man, sitting all day in a chair, painfully writing novels on paper which he cannot see.

Lewis's early drawings show an enormous confidence in their use of line; Tarr has the same confidence in characterisation stamped all over it. By the early fifties Lewis could no longer paint and he wrote with a shaky hand, four or five lines to a page, keeping the line with his thumb. But the confidence had not faded; there is perhaps less arrogance, and more self-questioning, but the characters still appear on the page as concretely as before, Sammael is as uncomfortably real as Kreisler, and just as liable to act with sudden, uncontrollable, violent logic.

I have traced in this thesis the history of the novels of Wyndham Lewis. I have looked at the manner in which he employed (one might say deployed) language, and I have argued the consequences of this for Lewis's view of mankind and society. I have traced a progress in these views and changes in his style, and suggested that together they make up a moral and literary epic. And I hope I have in the process made a case for Lewis as one of our most remarkable novelists.

Beginning with a concern for the place of the artist in modern society, Lewis not only documented the problems of his time, but also in his own work he blazed a path to a possible solution. He demonstrated a unique awareness of the presence of the machine

in our lives, not only as it dominates our living habits - for he was not the first to recognize that, and many have followed - but also as it invades and affects our personalities. His early visions may have been predominantly of machine-like people as objects of his satire, and he clearly enjoyed mechanising the Apes in deliberate, but telling distortion. But his later novels all display an increasing awareness of man's tendency to mechanise himself or to be mechanised by his society, and this tendency is no longer seen as a comic vice of a minority, but as a tragic circumstance of us all.

For Lewis the machine was everywhere. In comedy it shows in the way that Dick opens a door in The Apes of God, or the way that Shodbutt fails to manouvre himself through one in The Roaring Queen, but in tragedy it shows in the machinery which dominates the lives of his heroes. This is machinery of action, of behaviour, of speech and even of thought. Vincent Penhale's speech is an aspect of the machine, and his attempts to change the speech of his sister with ritualistic games makes the mechanical influence clear. His whole world is an artificially projected performance, and the machinery of the stage and of the cinema is called upon to support it. Rene Harding actually attempts to employ his mind as a machine, crushing his instincts as irrelevant and inconsistent, enslaving his body and estranging his relatives in an attempt to assert his own one-track rationality.

Pullman's mind, too, seems to operate almost without its owner's volition, scheming and planning, aiding Sammael, destroying the divine, plotting direct access to God, asserting its own superiority over that of any other kind of existence.

And Father Card provides the clearest example of the intellect used as machine, and the body used as machine. Card has set up the machinery of his church, the services, the meetings and the debates, to feed his own ego, and when his mind runs up against an object which cannot be crushed either by his management of debates or by his superior office -- why then he simply crushes it out of existence with his machine-like body.

Perhaps The Revenge For Love is Lewis's most remarkable novel because in the midst of the petty politicking in which he was engaged in the 'thirties, he was able to create a tragic account of the effect which the power-mafia has on two young, naive, untalented, and not very intelligent people. The centre of compassion is not the artist, but simply two normal people, struggling to be sincere in an essentially hollow situation. We have seen, of course, that Lewis was not content to show us only this aspect of the tragedy: Percy Hardcaster is a necessary agent for the representation of the effect on the intellect of this hollow world. But the creation of Margot and Victor was followed by that of other characters -- in The Vulgar Streak and in Self-Condemed -- who continued this theme of the tragedy of the innocent victims in a vicious world. It would not have been possible in 1928 for Lewis to have Satters grow an object of great beauty which would have impressed Pullman as exceeding the spiritual beauty of the Western Intellect. By 1955 it was not only possible, it was essential.

So the growing compassion that Lewis displayed towards his non-intellectual characters is one major theme that we have traced and detailed; but we have examined also the growing criticism of the intellectual himself, or at least of the man who uses his intellect as an instrument of power -- that is, all of Lewis's

later heroes. We can speculate more or less wildly on the extent to which this recognition of the vulnerability of the intellectual to the lure of power or fame is meant to be a self-criticism on Lewis's part. Lewis himself was scornful of the idea of the writer as an impartial god, hiding behind his impersonality, and pretending to have no contact or consanguinity with his creations (he called T.S. Eliot "Mr. Prufrock"), and I have taken him at his word. Nevertheless, I trust that each of the novels, and each of my interpretations of the novels, stands on its own without reference to Lewis's personal life.

Lewis's debut as a novelist was in itself sufficient to secure him a place in English literary history. Tarr created something of a sensation, and, if in the light of his later work we can now be more critical of its overall structure, Kreisler is clearly one of his greatest creations, and the book still retains much of its bite and excitement. The Childermass and The Apes of God were both monumental works, and again, if they are not placed highly here it is essentially because of the higher placing which is accorded to Lewis's later novels. Lewis's early prose is often criticised as 'difficult', and to some extent this is undoubtedly true; but most of his meanings yield themselves to a careful reading. It is worth noticing that whenever Lewis had control of the format in which his work was published, he tried to ensure that the text was easily readable. I am thinking in particular of Enemy of the Stars in Blast and of the first edition of The Apes of God both of which are printed in a massive format which helps the eye to take them in, a worthwhile example of Lewis as painter coming to the aid of Lewis as writer.

The Apes of God stands comparison with Finnegan's Wake as the end-point of a style. Lewis employed many of the techniques

of The Apes in his later novels, but he never again attempted to deal with people in such a rigidly external way throughout a whole novel. One error which I hope this thesis has corrected is the tendency to see Snooty Baronet as a failed Son of The Apes of God; the extent to which Lewis recast his style after 1930 is quite remarkable, and the progress from Snooty Baronet to The Human Age is fascinating to observe.

Themes of hollowness, falsity, shallowness, theatrics, dominate throughout Lewis's work, but the emphasis changes from the whole world being dominated by such themes to the struggle of individuals for survival in such a situation.

The most concentrated example of this is Rene Harding in Self Condemned where the slow deliberate progress of the action is reflected in the concentrated - almost monotonous imagery - until the end (of the novel and of Rene) is crushingly inevitable.

This inevitability is a strong feature of Lewis's writing, from Kreisler's slow rush to destruction, to Rene Harding's determined flight to hollowness. We see it in the glimpse we are given of Maddie in The Vulgar Streak, after Vincent's death, in the manner in which the ending of The Apes of God and The Revenge for Love reminds us of the beginning, and in the parallel structures of Monstre Gai and Malign Fiesta, as Pullman in each novel finds himself drawn closer to an evil which he knows he should reject.

The tendency of the powerful intellect towards violence is a theme which becomes stronger after the Second World War, and we are shown Rene barely managing to maintain his self control, Pullman siding with the violence of the Bailiff and Sammael, and Father Card using his muscular violence to back up his arguments. Of course, violence is present in the earlier

novels. The difference is simply that in the earlier novels violence tends to be an indiscriminate fact of life, and a product of stupidity, whereas in the later novels, though violence is still random - with incidents such as Rene being beaten up in the Canadian beerbar - more emphasis is put upon the similarity between using the intellect as a weapon, and using physical violence.

All of Lewis's major novels are essentially tragic, in spite of the positive values which I have been urging in the later works. Lewis dreamed of a detached, all-knowing intellect, and found at every turn that the artist is caught up in the mess of living - and worse, that he often enjoys it. He treated his own novels as his serious work, and regarded his pamphlets as peripheral, continually asserting that they only distracted him from his real work, yet he leapt into the rhetorical fray at the slightest opportunity, with every evidence of gusto, and a clear talent for invective.

As we move further away from it, the society of parlour pinka and literary yahoos which he so detested is likely to seem more justly satirised because we will no longer view his characters as real personalities, and begin to see them as types.

However, no reservations as to time should be necessary for such novels as The Revenge For Love, Self Condemned and Monstre Gai. There are politics in all these novels, yet none of them could be condemned as a political novel, depending on the political sympathies of the reader for its appreciation.

Lewis's determined statement of intellectual values, combined with his questioning of the direction in which these values lead, and an increasing awareness of purely human values represent a major artistic achievement.

It is often said that Lewis was not good at creating characters, only at creating puppets, and this is true of some of his characters. The Apes of God is quite deliberately peopled with puppets, but I have shown that in his later novels Lewis was asserting humanity against the forces which compel puppetry. And in any case, some of the puppets in the early novels, particularly Kreisler, possess a vitality which many other novelists would dearly like to achieve for their 'real' people.

Lewis's intense awareness of the physical aspect of people, stemming basically from his own physical awareness, gives even the most mechanical of his creations a very real presence. Ezra Pound said that Lewis (in his Vorticist period) made him more aware of the shape of objects and buildings and of the silhouette which they make against the sky. Lewis's puppets make us all more aware of the physical presence of people and of the disturbance which they create in their environment.

This is, of course, only one way of looking at people, but seeing buildings in silhouette is also only one way of looking at them, and Lewis was perfectly well aware of this.

His physical sensibilities can easily be seen as rather neurotic, and they show themselves as such in, for example, T.S. Eliot's story about the cycling accident in France which had Lewis terrified of tetanus for weeks afterwards.<sup>1</sup> Yet as Eliot himself recognised, his announcement of his blindness, in the pages of The Listener, in which he sees himself as a body being moved blindly around, is a "terrifying masterpiece of detached self-observation"<sup>2</sup>

1. Eliot. T.S. "Wyndham Lewis", Hudson Review 10.  
Summer 1957 167-70

2. Ibid. p.167



In any case, what can be said with certainty is that Lewis's physical sensibilities have added an extra dimension to modern literature, balancing with extraordinary neatness the contributions of Joyce and Lawrence to the literature of consciousness.

Furthermore, beginning with Percy Hardcaster, Lewis created a series of heroes in whom the primary object of interest is their mental conflict, however physically this may express itself.

The language of the later novels changes, as we have seen to accommodate this change in approach. Images are used recurrently to establish mood and determine themes rather than to dazzle with their originality, as in the early novels. This method of using language to express mental conflict in a primarily physical way reaches its climax in *Rene Harding* and is promptly abandoned in favour of a simpler style, in which the action carries more of the meaning in the moral drama of Pullman.

The physical approach, the use of violence, even the recurrence of stage imagery is never abandoned; it is simply used in different ways in different times, often with a subtlety which has hitherto been ignored.

This thesis attempts to explore some of this subtlety and the devices by which it is expressed. At the very least I hope that the analyses provided will demonstrate some of the complexity of his work. I believe also that a careful reading of his work shows that Lewis's thought was more sensitive and more flexible than a critic such as Wagner, approaching the novels through the polemics, is inclined to believe.

Wyndham Lewis was a powerful writer, and it is easy to believe that he sometimes misused his talents for invective. But there is nothing very unusual in such a situation; the only unusual thing is that examples of such misuse are so often quoted as an attack

on all of his work. We are not in the habit of citing Pound's radio broadcasts for Mussolini in an attack upon his poetry. Nor can we say that because Joyce hid under his bed during thunderstorms and habitually sponged off his brother that he was a bad novelist. Ultimately Lewis's novels must stand by themselves on their own merits. I believe that they possess more than enough artistic integrity to do so with honour.

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