

Wyndham Lewis: Vorticist Theory and Comic Technique

Wyndham Lewis is perhaps the purest and most potent-- and the least popular-- comic and satiric artist at work in England today. Critics and scholars have almost completely neglected the achievement of this Canadian-born writer and painter while devoting most of their attention to the opera of his considerably less forbidding though never more rewarding confreres, James Joyce, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. Yet it was Wyndham Lewis who in 1914 founded a 'neo-neo-'classical school of art called Vorticism at the Rebel Art Centre in London, and saw to it that the early work of these others was published in his own magazine, Blast: the Review of the Great English Vortex (1914-15) and in Harriet Weaver's magazine, The Egoist (1916-17). Since the beginning of his career in 1909, he has been the intimate correspondent of such great figures of modern art and letters as Shaw, Ford, Eliot, Pound, Joyce, C.S. Lewis, Spender, Auden, Maritain, Benda, John, Gide, the Sitwells, et al. Now seventy-two years old (he has been blind since 1951), Lewis has been prolific during a long period of creative activity: he has produced forty books and a plethora of canvases. As a philosopher he classifies himself, in Time and Western Man and in Rude Assignment, as a Utopian rational idealist and a perfectionist, a follower of the English savants Berkeley, Bradley and Bosanquet. As an artist he seems to belong, oddly enough, to the Spanish school of hard cold classicism. In his art and in his philosophy there is the fanatical adherence to principle that we find also in Cervantes, the icy intellectuality that we find also in Santayana, and the subtle, often savage, relish of the fantastic, the absurd, and the grotesque that we find also in Rabelais. Yet in spite of his love of principle, Lewis has been occupied, the last half-century, in a running battle with the impressionists, the futurists, the surrealists, the existentialists and the communists among his fellow artists, with all those theorists and technicians who would seem to put principle above genius. Such are men without art, says Lewis: his own ultimate principle is the Self. His undeviating partisan activity in art politics on behalf of the logos has led to his being mistakenly described, by his enemies, the realists of all parties, as a fascist. It is perhaps for this reason, as well as because of the conflict between the Latin, Welsh and Saxon strains in his character, or because of the conflict of his erudition with his love of a certain sort of impromptu vulgarity (viz., commedia dell' arte, for example), that the works of Wyndham Lewis have long been caviar to the general. He remains, as one of his reviewers, George Woodcock, has recently written, "a minority writer, celebrated but little read, untaught on campuses, neglected by and deriding almost every fashionable literary movement of the times."

Again, Lewis is a "minority writer" today probably because his perspective does not seem to be as universal or as catholic as the perspectives of Joyce, Pound or Eliot, or as liberal as the perspectives of, let us say, William Shakespeare or George Bernard Shaw. It will be the aim of the projected dissertation to demonstrate, without engaging in literary controversies, that Lewis is as transcendently original as his friends and to exonerate him from the charge of egocentric megalomania which is sometimes lodged against him. Hugh Kenner has remarked that "no historian's model of the age of Joyce, Eliot and Pound is intelligible without Lewis in it;" and, as a matter of fact, Lewis's work is a missing key and necessary complement to the work of his old associates, as well as a thing in itself. His work, like theirs, owes a considerable debt of gratitude to the research of the Cambridge school of archaeology and anthropology (Frazer, Murray, Cornford, Harrison, Rogers, Chambers, Cook, Weston, et al.). His work, like theirs, is compounded of, and forms a comment on, nearly all of the cultural ideas that were in the air in the first half of the twentieth century; like theirs, his themes are carefully combed, woven together and knit up into a new intellectual fabric. Like Pound, Eliot and Joyce, Lewis was careful to hide his true anti-realistic, anti-mystical, anti-dialectical motives and sympathies behind an ironic mask and to pretend to be what he actually was not, namely, a revolutionary anarchist. However, perhaps because he chose to wear the mask of the alazon, the imposter or literary lion (modelled no doubt on the manners of his former art-teacher, Augustus John), instead of the mask of the eiron, the pseudo-believer or literary fox, which his colleagues wore, Wyndham Lewis's counterfeit was taken, by callow reviewers and a demure public unaccustomed to the bellowing of bull-roarers, at face-value.

But surprisingly, and in spite of the mask, Lewis, like Eliot in his potentially misleading notes to "The Waste Land," was frank enough, or we might say, schoolmaster enough, to reveal his own motives and to indicate the precision of his own art-- save that, being also a writer of satire, Lewis reveals and indicates in a way that will not readily be believed, or that at least will not be passively and hypocritically accepted. To illustrate this last point: Lewis once annexed Edward Caird's description of the Cynic philosopher to a self-portrait: "...Now I have supplied you (he wrote) with an analogy against myself for practical reasons, although it has no literal application.... I am doing a very different thing from what the Cynic was doing, and I am very differently placed. But certainly I am issuing a 'challenge' to the community in which I live. I am 'criticizing all its institutions and modes of action and of thought.' I 'create disgust', that I have proved, 'among the ordinary respectable members of the community,' that is to say among the established orthodoxy of the cults of 'primitivist' so-called 'revolution': what I say is 'violently resented,' and I very sincerely hope will 'awaken thought.' Finally, what I say is 'one of those beginnings of progress which take the appearance of reaction.'" (TAWM, 135:italics Lewis's). Even had Lewis been nothing more than a satirist, satiric art is of course apt to "create disgust" among the "respectable members of the community". To be firmly but vigorously rejected by his audience is a fate the satirist finds it difficult to escape, even if his satire is indirect, complex, and obscure to them. The function of Lewis's deliberate ambiguity and indirection, like Eliot's, was, as Eliot once wrote, furthermore "to preserve in cryptogram certain notions which, if expressed directly, would be destined to immediate obloquy, followed by perpetual oblivion."

Lewis's manifesto of his theoretical 'notions preserved in cryptogram'-- to which the other Vorticists seem to have subscribed in 1914-- was, when presented straightforwardly, simply that: (1) as a creative force at work in the world, pure change due to fortuitous coincidence in the passage of time is practically negligible, practically insignificant (2) all "historical" theories of art and culture invoking organic concepts of growth in time from social origins-- all evolutionary cultural ideas, in short-- are henceforward declared suspect as revolutionary propaganda in disguise (3) art-works are not the result of community endeavor (4) art has no utility (5) "scientific" applications of art to real life are invalid (6) artists neither hope nor fear that scientific generalizations will profoundly alter the human condition which art expresses (7) there is no intuitive revelation that is not the result of individual personal human experience (8) there is no progress in art, except to perfection and away from it (9) a work of art is a static, dead, and atemporal thing: it simply exists (10) the artist looks at his subject sub specie aeternitatis, amorally and unconventionally. In short, science cannot "correct" art. A work of art is cold formal dead matter to which organic living things respond and whose forms they attempt to resemble and imitate: "Life," says Wyndham Lewis, "is matter with a fever." When life has passed from the twentieth century and the fever has subsided, what of the quality of the matter left? This is the question Lewis poses ironically to his contemporaries and it is a conservative question, if not a nihilistic one. As an idealist and a perfectionist, Lewis feels that modern "liberal" and "scientific" ideas of the collective, unconscious, and involuntary progress of human species and its culture are the natural prey of his satire: our only antidote against modern confusion and anxiety-- which is due apparently to the inroads made on the security of realms of human value by contemporary applied science-- our only antidote, he feels, is the cultivation of our total awareness as individual human beings. To become totally aware, Lewis implies, it is necessary for an individual to model himself on "one of those portmanteau men of the Italian Renaissance" who takes (though not uncritically) the whole world of human science and culture as his particular and personal oyster.

The projected dissertation will explore Wyndham Lewis's art theory and his comic and satiric technique in an attempt to isolate the "common ground" of his images-- an attempt to locate not so much the figure in the carpet as the carpet itself. Such a search for controlling frames of reference or unifying matrices is necessitated by a characteristic of Lewis's style which Horace Gregory categorized quite accurately when he noticed that, in his early work especially, Lewis was attempting to write "without cliches". There is, in fact, scarcely anything in his novels, neither characters, nor plot, nor argument, that is conventionally admirable. Yet there is much to be admired nevertheless. Lewis's creative output has been enormous: it can be divided into four parts for convenience: (1) the paintings (2) the theoretical writings (3) the fiction (4) the polemics. Critical discussion of the paintings we leave in other hands; critical discussion of the occasional pieces, the polemics, will be included in the dissertation only as occasion calls for it. I shall deal primarily with (a) an analytical presentation of Wyndham Lewis's philosophical position (b) an analytical presentation of his aesthetic and his theory of imagination (c) an explication of six major works of fiction, namely, Farr (versions of 1918 and 1928), The Apes of God (1930), The Revenge for Love (1937), Self Condemned (1954), The Red Priest (1956), and his magnum opus, The Human Age (in four sections: "Childermass", "Monstre Gai", "Malign Fiesta", "The Trial of Man", 1928-56) (d) a summary chapter in review, and (e) an appendix containing a survey of Eliot's Vortex.

The summary chapter in review will contain a discussion of the Vortex as a symbol in the works of Wyndham Lewis. We shall see that it had its inspiration in Aristophanes' phrase, "Vortex is king, having driven out Zeus;" and that, in its various contexts, the Vortex is a symbol on the one level of understanding, "below good and evil", for human stupidity (the dunce cap), for public hysteria, for power, for electro-mechanical induction, for violence, for human involvement in the human condition, for turbulence--- in short, for inarticulate sub-human forces; while on a higher level of understanding, "above good and evil," the Vortex is a symbol for movement which comes to a point, for hierarchical order, for the totally aware individual, for divine detachment from the human condition, for Cartesian deduction, for true Shakespearean or Shavian non-partisan liberality-- in short, for inarticulate supernatural forces. The projected dissertation, therefore, will be a vortex per se, arranged on a pattern of organization favored by the Vorticists themselves, leading from the specific, private and the particular to the general, the universal and the common: the inductive approach. Psychomachy, logomachy, ideomachy and sciamachy, we shall find, are the four elements which enter into a novel of ideas as it is composed by Wyndham Lewis. His interest in this sort of intellectual epic struggle or mock-heroic conflict-- as was Jonathan Swift's interest, in The Battle of the Books-- is the result of his "rage for order", his passion for "clear, distinct ideas." The work of art, in each case, represents a symbolic resolution of that conflict of ideologies, a resolution which can never be reached in real life or in the little schools of modern art theory, for there psychic or temperamental peace and repose cannot even be declared, much less enjoyed, on quite the same scale.

Note: Wyndham Lewis died in England at the age of seventy-two, March 7, 1957, while the stencils for this prospectus were in preparation.

John H. Edman

On First Looking into Freshman English

I've often wondered, as I sat and thought
about literature and how it is taught,
why authors were cagey about what they wrote
and put hidden meanings in every quote.
Why didn't the author say what he meant?
What's the mystery for, in any event?
Don't explications just waste our time?
What is the point of scanning a line?
The poet's style— is it really important?
Why does he tell us to do what we oughtn't?
What are the morals he's trying to preach?
Do we have to remember the author of each?
Why are these writers so gloomy and sad?
What makes an analysis good or bad?
Why tear apart poems until they are wrecks?
And why do all of them talk about sex?
Did the poet really believe what he said?
How can we know what he meant if he's dead?
My prof informs me that Kilmer's no good,
but his "Trees," at least, can be understood:
I'd stand under them, 'ere "Under Milk Wood"!
If the author's a mask, how can you tell?
(Maybe that's the reason he doesn't sell.)
It all depends on your point of view,
and what the sy**g**bels mean to you.
All this we know, yet none knows well
how to kill the time until the bell.

—John Edman
Lionel Sharp

(in collaboration with the English LB staff of 1957)