

## Wyndham Lewis and Ernest Hemingway: Beyond the ‘Unsuccessful Rapist’ and the ‘Dumb Ox’

---

Andrew Scragg

Wyndham Lewis and Ernest Hemingway are two key figures in the development of modernism in the early years of the twentieth century; however, today critical and public attitudes to them differ markedly. Lewis in 1934 published in *Life and Letters* an essay titled ‘The Dumb Ox: a study of Ernest Hemingway’. This essay, which was later included in his book *Men Without Art* (1934) under the title ‘Ernest Hemingway, the “Dumb Ox”’<sup>1</sup>, has been seen as one of the most influential critiques of Hemingway’s life and work. Yet discussion of it tends to focus on Lewis’s outspoken polemical analysis of Hemingway and on the vehemence of Hemingway’s response to it, both in Paris in 1934 and in his memoir *A Moveable Feast* (1964). These are clearly important aspects of the history between Lewis and Hemingway. But if we focus exclusively on them we not only miss much of Lewis’s accomplishment but also limit our understanding of what he was trying to achieve in the article and in his critical writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Jeffrey Meyers suggests that the title of the book in which the essay was collected, *Men Without Art*, is a direct reference to Hemingway’s *Men Without Women* (1927), and that this makes Hemingway the text’s focal point.<sup>2</sup> This overstates the case. Lewis was engaged in a wide review of contemporary art and literature, foreseeing a world without individual agency and art – hence the title.<sup>3</sup> In this article I will reconsider Lewis’s article and his assessment of Hemingway. My focus is the original essay and several of Lewis’s other critical works. I aim to explore the context in which it was written and received, and to explore what it tells us about both men.

Lewis and Hemingway met twice, both times in Paris. In August 1922 Lewis was in Paris trying to set up an exhibition with Léonce Rosenberg, and he looked up his friend and *BLAST* collaborator Ezra Pound who, he hoped, might help to re-establish him in Paris. Describing the meeting in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Lewis writes

that he heard noises and, upon getting to the flat, saw his friend boxing with ‘the tall, handsome, and serene’ Hemingway, with whom the well-connected and culturally industrious Pound ‘got on like a house on fire’ (BB 277). That is all Lewis writes, but his description of the scene suggests that he is positively predisposed towards Hemingway. Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast* confirms these details, but he glosses them in a way that works to discredit to Lewis. He suggests that Lewis encouraged the fight because he was ‘hoping to see Ezra hurt’. Hemingway states that Lewis ‘did not show evil; he just looked nasty’, and he ends with his (in)famous, and much-quoted, assessment of Lewis’s inner character: ‘Under the black hat, when I had first seen them, the eyes had been those of an unsuccessful rapist.’<sup>4</sup> It should be said that *A Moveable Feast* is not a reliable memoir. Written nearly forty years after the events it describes, from notebooks found in a trunk left by Hemingway at a Parisian hotel, it is a vicious, spiteful attack on most of the people Hemingway knew in Paris in the twenties. The memoir is unreliable factually, and the descriptions of those who were then friends are written in hindsight and frequently with malice aforethought.<sup>5</sup>

Hemingway at that time was the Paris correspondent of *The Toronto Star* and working part time on the *transatlantic review* with Ford Madox Ford. He was occasionally publishing stories and poems in small magazines, but he was also looking for his first publication in book form. This would come out the next year with the publication of *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923). Hemingway mixed with most of the important expatriate writers in Paris, in particular with Sherwood Anderson, Robert McAlmon, and Gertrude Stein, all of whom contributed to his eventual success as a writer. Lewis was in 1922 perhaps no longer the brightly burning star he had been in London before the First World War when he was at the centre of the modernist art revolution, but he was a friend of a friend and might nonetheless have been someone with the experience to help the young American writer.

Hemingway appears to have been less than impressed with Lewis and his work. He wrote dismissively to the poet and editor of the magazine *The Quarter*, Ernest Walsh in May 1925:

Don’t let Ezra shove off a lot of Wyndham Lewis bum paintings worse writings on you. Granted that Lewis was great for the sake of argument – and that’s the only way I would ever grant it – he is

*Lewis and Hemingway*

most certainly dead, finished, done for and no sense in using a life review as a pulmotor. The big idea Ezra wrote to Mac was to for you to have a whole Wyndham Lewis [*illegible word*] Mac and I both wrote him [*two lines illegible*] Lewis demonstration. He's a rotten painter and not a good writer – a certain merit – that's all. He was made by publicity and died of his own work [*sic*].<sup>6</sup>

Despite this disregard of Lewis, Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast* wrote: 'Later I tried to like him and to be friends with him as I did with nearly all of Ezra's friends when he explained them to me.'<sup>7</sup> The meeting may have been brief, but clearly the two kept in touch. On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 1927, Hemingway wrote to Lewis in a much warmer manner than that of his later reminiscence: 'There is not much chance of my getting over to London but if you ever come to Paris I would be very happy if we could meet again.'<sup>8</sup> Lewis was in Paris in November 1927, and he took Hemingway up on his offer, meeting him and Archibald MacLeish for lunch. Neither Lewis nor Hemingway describes this meeting, but MacLeish in his autobiography concentrates on the rather strange question of whether Lewis wore gloves throughout the meal.<sup>9</sup> In the five years between their two meetings Lewis's and Hemingway's positions had been nearly reversed. Hemingway's star was very much in the ascendancy. Having published *The Sun Also Rises* with Scribner in America in 1926, he had gained both a wider audience and some financial stability. He was also the toast of the expatriate Americans in Paris. Lewis, in contrast, had not managed to reposition himself in the post-War modernist world of Paris, that of Stein, Joyce, and Hemingway. At this stage it was unlikely that he could be of much help to Hemingway's blossoming career. Perhaps this is why Hemingway didn't refer to the second meeting, and why MacLeish's memoir centres on a possible eccentricity rather than on the discussions that took place.<sup>10</sup> These are the only two recorded meetings of Lewis and Hemingway. However, Lewis clearly watched Hemingway's career and his literary output with a steely critical eye, recognizing the strength of Hemingway's work and reflecting on his cultural significance. The result of this interest was 'The Dumb Ox'.

Lewis in 1934 was becoming a marginal figure within London's modernist circles. He was still recognized, and his books were reviewed, but he was no longer widely considered to be in the front rank. Bloomsbury's power within the British cultural establishment had

arguably grown, and the mutual enmity between Lewis and Bloomsbury had not faded on either side, resulting in an ever-increasing sense of bitterness on Lewis's part. Several of the modernists who had been active in London before the War had either moved to Paris or spent significant amounts of time there during the twenties. Despite the *rappel à l'ordre*, Paris was seen by many as the centre of a modernist radicalism associated with such movements as Dada and Surrealism, Ford's *transatlantic review*, Eugene Jolas's *transition*, and the 'revolution of the word' that was closely linked to Joyce's work. Lewis was an outsider to these groups, and, following his trenchant critique of Pound in *Time and Western Man* (1927), he was no longer as close as he had been in the 1913-14 years to his former collaborator. Lewis's reference in the essay to Hemingway's 'friend Pound' (*MWA* 19) reflects the degree to which he felt distant from Pound.

In the same way as Pound a decade earlier had tried to make sense of the changed cultural landscape in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), Lewis in the critical and cultural commentaries he wrote in the 1920s and 1930s sought to understand and to criticize the post-war cultural landscape. He explained his object in the introduction to *Men Without Art*:

For all practical purposes, then, we may describe this book as a defence of contemporary art, most of which art is unquestionably satiric, or comic. And it is a defence against every sort of antagonist, from that deep-dyed Moralist, the public of Anglo-Saxony, down to that nationalist nuisance, which would confine art to some territorial or racial tradition; from the Marxist who would harness art to politics, up to the mystical dogmatism which would harness it to the vapours of the spirit world. (*MWA* 13)

Fredric Jameson in *Fables of Aggression* describes Lewis's books at this time as a form of 'Culture Critique'. He places them in a wider context of other such writings of the late 1920s and early 1930s by authors like Spengler, Ortega, and Benda, who were all politically conservative.<sup>11</sup> Jameson suggests that their 'proto-fascist' tendencies gave way to cynicism, their supposed defence of certain cultural values becoming more than just 'disinterested guardianship'.<sup>12</sup> While this is an interesting argument, it doesn't follow that just because such writers were right-wing Lewis was as well.

*Lewis and Hemingway*

There has been much consideration of Lewis's politics in the intervening years. As Andrzej Gąsiorek has written: 'Lewis's politics are a complex affair.'<sup>13</sup> Lewis was contradictory and changeable in his politics, shifting from his misguided (and recanted) tentative support for fascism to his 'quasi-socialist' critique of post-Second World War society.<sup>14</sup> Key to Lewis's political views is his emphasis on the importance of the individual, and his fear that the individual in the post-War years was being swept aside by the growth of the state, and, more importantly, by the rise of multi-state, global structures of power.<sup>15</sup> It was only through the individual that art and culture could flourish, and it was the duty of the artistic élite (in which Lewis placed himself) to try to enlighten the individual, and to drive human social and intellectual development. But Lewis thought that British liberal democracy had failed the pre-war avant-gardes (the 'men of 1914'), as his major texts of the late twenties and early thirties make clear. Liberal democracy was guilty, in Victor Barac's words, of 'surrendering to the organized forces of plutocracy and monopoly capital'.<sup>16</sup>

If the democracies had failed, Lewis, like others, briefly looked to the dictatorships for the less philistine world and the freedom from big business and the super-state that he sought.<sup>17</sup> Without the need to worry over the day-to-day concerns thrust on them by democracy, people would be free to concentrate on art and to develop the human spirit. However, by concentrating on his cultural and aesthetic vision, Lewis at this point failed to recognize the brutal reality of life under fascism, the realities of totalitarian domination, persecution of the individual, and social and cultural collapse.

By the late 1930s, following a visit to Germany, Lewis had seen the realities of fascism and in such books as *The Jews: Are They Human?* and *The Hitler Cult* (both 1939) repudiated his former position. However, these gestures proved too late to save his critical reputation. Lewis still insisted on the importance of the individual, of art, and of civilization, but he was for the rest of his life frequently viewed as a fascist apologist, and his cultural writings were regarded as suspect.<sup>18</sup>

In the late 1920s, in order to engage what he saw as the enemies of culture and art, Lewis took on the persona of the 'Enemy', a persona he defined defiantly on the cover of the third volume of *The Enemy*:

THE "ENEMY" IS THE NOTORIOUS AUTHOR, PAINTER  
AND PUBLICIST MR. WYNDHAM LEWIS. HE IS THE

DIOGENES OF THE DAY: HE SITS LAUGHING IN THE MOUTH OF HIS TUB AND POURS FORTH HIS INVECTIVE UPON ALL PASSERS-BY, IRRESPECTIVE OF RACE, CREED, RANK OR PROFESSION, AND SEX.

(E3 front cover)

The 'Enemy' figure was rhetorically positioned as independent of party or politics; he was an outsider, uncompromised, responsible to no one, free to think and write on the ideas that were important to him, to develop these ideas, and to change his mind if he so pleased.<sup>19</sup> This has been described as 'a constructive pose, a satirical mode meant to enable genuine social reflection and change'.<sup>20</sup> From this position Lewis would criticize what he saw as the decline of the autonomy of the individual within Western culture in the face of industrialization, mechanization, and democratization. He was aiming to challenge this decline and to help transform society through art. For Lewis, art represented a personal creation of the free individual. Preoccupied by what he saw as a new child-like generation living in the present and unaware of either the experiences of the past or the potential of the future, Lewis feared the imminent rise of an artless society, full of infantilized and weak individuals, who could be blown about like leaves and would be cannon fodder for a future war. This society was ripe for satirical treatment.

*Men Without Art* is the theoretical text that mounts a defence of Lewis's satire and also makes a case for satire more generally. As Lewis put it: 'we may describe this book as a defence of contemporary art, most of which art is unquestionably satiric, or comic' (*MWA* 13). Satire was an important critical strategy for Lewis. It enabled him to use invective, humour, and wit to challenge popular ideas and mores. There was a serious message behind his satire; he wanted to awaken his readers to the challenges he saw, to make them think. It is not necessary for the satirist to have the answers to the questions asked, the asking is enough. Lewis in *The Apes of God* (1930) has a character remark that 'True satire must be vicious' (*AG* 450). Certainly, some of his own attacks are vicious, as we can see in his treatment of Bloomsbury and the Sitwells in *The Apes of God* and his representation of Gertrude Stein in 'The Dumb Ox'. From Spender onwards, critics have argued that his attacks were personally malicious. It cannot be denied that throughout his life Lewis engaged in feuds and enmities, most notably with members of the Bloomsbury set and the Sitwells, and that these figures are attacked in

*Lewis and Hemingway*

his writing. However, we need to consider this seemingly personal invective in relation to his assertion in his letter to the editor of *The Spectator* in November 1934 (L 222-25) that he attacks ideas, not people; this is savagery as critique, not necessarily personal malice.

There is a paradox at the heart of Lewis's satire: at the same moment that he is engaged in what sometimes descends into a seemingly narrow-minded and offensive rant, he is also clear-eyed and critically astute. In the case of Hemingway, for example, he openly recognized the nature and significance of the latter's artistry, as well as its political significance, well before most of his fellow critics had. So, while pique might at times have been a motivating factor, it wasn't Lewis's sole reason for criticizing those whom he saw as his enemies. In response to Stephen Spender's review of *Men Without Art*, Lewis wrote a letter to the editor of *The Spectator* in which he stressed that he felt no personal malice towards Virginia Woolf or any of the other writers whose work he was criticizing but was exposing 'the internal creative machinery' (L 223) of their texts. Years later, he reiterated this point with reference to Joyce: 'I did not regard what I said [in *Time and Western Man*] as in any way personally offensive to Joyce: nor did I anywhere imply that he was not worthy of the greatest attention and respect' (RA 59). It was precisely because he felt Joyce and Hemingway and Stein were worthy of the greatest attention and respect that Lewis unleashed his invective upon their work and their ideas.

Lewis in 'The Dumb Ox' used Hemingway as an exemplar of popular literary culture in order to demonstrate his thoughts on the implications of much contemporary art. 'The Dumb Ox' and his essays on Faulkner and Eliot in *Men Without Art*, are, Lewis observes, 'intended to supply the sort of information that is required, by a hypothetical reader of this book, about two notable "creative" writers and a celebrated literary critic' (MWA 15). Lewis's critique of Hemingway focused on three themes: Hemingway's apparent lack of political awareness; the pervasive influence of Stein on his style; and the nature of the American vernacular he used in his novels.

Lewis argued that the roots of Hemingway's works lay in the First World War; 'the war-years were a democratic, a *levelling* school', and Hemingway came from 'a pretty "levelled" nation, where personality is the thing least liked' (MWA 23). Lewis recognized in Hemingway's work a 'political significance'. His books reflected and criticized the attitudes of the time; through his dialogue and use of language Hemingway was

able to capture the changes of attitude and world order brought about by the First World War. Although he barely knew Hemingway, Lewis professed to find this unexpected as in his view it was ‘difficult to imagine a writer whose mind is more entirely closed to politics than is Hemingway’s’ (*MWA* 19). He went on as follows:

I do not suppose he has ever heard of the Five-Year Plan, though I dare say that he knows that artists pay no income tax in Mexico, and is quite likely to be following closely the agitation of the Mexican matadors to get themselves recognized as “artists” so that they may pay no income tax. I expect he has heard of Hitler, but thinks of him mainly, if he is acquainted with the story as the Boche who went down into a cellar with another Boche and captured thirty Frogs and came back with an Iron Cross. He probably knows that his friend Pound writes a good many letters every week to American papers on the subject of Social Credit, but I am sure Pound has never succeeded in making him read a line of *Credit-Power and Democracy*. (*MWA* 19)

Here Lewis captured what has since become a popular stereotype of Hemingway. He is presented as a man interested first and foremost in his art, an art perfected in his early writings (particularly the vignettes of *In Our Time* (1925); as a lover and aficionado of sport, especially bullfighting; as a gregarious *bon vivant* who was essentially shallow, rootless, and uncommitted beyond these particular interests. But if Hemingway was, as Lewis suggested, politically naïve or unengaged, as Lewis suggested, then where did the political aspects of his work come from? Who was imposing a political will on Hemingway? Lewis was clear as to his answer – it was Gertrude Stein. The ‘political aspects of Hemingway’s work’, he wrote, ‘have to be sought, if anywhere, in the personality of this *First-person-singular*, imposed upon him largely by the Stein-manner’ (*MWA* 28).

But was Lewis’s assessment of Hemingway and politics accurate? In his examination of Hemingway’s political attitudes and influences, Kenneth Kinnamon states that: ‘With few exceptions, Hemingway’s biographers have discounted his interest in and understanding of politics.’<sup>21</sup> Yet Kinnamon goes on to show that Hemingway in his life and writing (both in his fiction and in his journalism) showed an interest in, and understanding of, politics. Lewis had shrewdly recognized that

*Lewis and Hemingway*

Hemingway's early fiction was not directly political but reflected the culture and uncertainties of the time and was thus symptomatic. Contemporary politics was an element within Hemingway's early novels. These political aspects – for example, Chapter 6 of *In Our Time* (the vignette of the execution of the cabinet ministers) and Chapter 18 (the Greek King) – may well be themes that Hemingway sought to treat artistically, but they may also reflect his political knowledge and his engagement with politics.

Hemingway after his return to America and Canada from the First World War, and in his early years in Paris, was a newspaper journalist, reporting on a range of feature topics (fishing, sport, and bohemian life, etc.) as well as on the big European political stories. If we consider some of the articles he filed to *The Toronto Daily Star* and *The Toronto Star Weekly* in 1922, we can see a range of engagement and level of understanding that perhaps belies Lewis's assessment: 'Clemenceau Politically Dead: Builder, not Fighter is what France wants' (February 18); 'German Export Tax Hits Profiteers' (February 25); 'Tchitcherin Speaks at Genoa Conference: World Economic Conference opens in Genoa' (April 10); 'Fascisti Party Now Half a Million Strong' (June 24); 'German Inflation' (September 19); 'German Riots: Riots are Frequent Throughout Germany' (September 30); 'Christians Leave Thrace to the Turks' (October 16).<sup>22</sup>

This list of topics shows that Hemingway was directly engaging with economic issues, the rise of dictatorships in Italy and Germany, and war in the Balkans. These stories reflected some of the key political issues of the early 1920s. Hemingway's reports back to Toronto were crisp newspaper sketches, clearly and simply stated, and were written to be read by the ordinary Canadian. Although they avoided complex political theory, they dealt with interviews with key political figures while also giving the views and opinions of ordinary French, German, and Italian people. Hemingway was not explaining abstruse political theories but was describing the direct impact of politics on ordinary people whose experiences he drew on in order to inform his readers in Toronto of situations that were outside their experience. Hemingway was clearly a political reporter with pronounced democratic sympathies. He was aware of the implications and consequences of fascism in a way that Lewis in the early 1930s was not. His descriptions of 'black shirted, knife carrying, club swinging ... nineteen year old potshot carriers' with 'a taste for killing' offer a far more politically and socially aware analysis

than Lewis's at this point.<sup>23</sup> Hemingway *was* politically aware and engaged, but he separated his direct political writing from his novels and stories – from his art. Rather than following Pound in writing essays and letters on political theory, outside of his reportage Hemingway used his political experiences to forge his art, as we see in such short stories as 'Che Ti Dice La Patria' in *Men without Women* (1927) or *In Our Time*'s 'On the Quay at Smyrna'.

Lewis, then, was either mistaken about Hemingway's political awareness or chose to *position* him as politically ignorant. He saw in Hemingway's fictional characters a kind of anti-intellectual 'noble savage', 'the simple American man' (*MWA* 20) of action, not of thought. Lewis suggested that this type was constructed by means of Hemingway's simple and direct language. Lewis referred to the example of Chapter 4 from *In Our Time*, comparing it to the work of Prosper Mérimée, but suggesting that though both writers were vigorous and direct, Hemingway's characters were depicted as volitionless puppets driven by events.

For Lewis this was evidence of how such characters had become infantilized in the post-war period and how they were suffering a loss of individual agency. This infantile passivity was at the opposite end of the spectrum from his conception of individualism and of art. Like those whom Stein had dubbed the 'Lost Generation', Hemingway's fictional characters were 'leaves, *very violently* blown hither and thither; drugged or at least deeply intoxicated phantoms of a sort of matter-of-fact shell-shock' (*MWA* 22). They were 'an integral part of that world *to whom things happen* [*sic*]' (*MWA* 23). Their passivity was a means of escaping from the experience of the war, as was their tendency to '*keep smiling* [...]' from ear to ear, a should-I-worry? "good sport" smile, as do the Hollywood Stars when they are being photographed, as did the poor Bairnsfather "Tommy" – the "muddied oaf at the goal" – of all oafishness! (*MWA* 23). This is a version of the inane smile of the 'Tyro', about whom Lewis wrote: 'The action of a Tyro is necessarily very restricted; about that of a puppet worked with deft fingers, with a screaming voice underneath' (*WLA* 189-90). In the manuscript to 'Hoodopip', an unpublished satire from the same period, Lewis reflected on the grin of the Tyro, a grin developed from the forced smiles of the men on the Somme or Passchendaele with a determination to 'stick it'. But in the post-war world, as Paul Edwards has argued, 'this grin, and the trauma it suppresses, has developed into a more general infantilism

*Lewis and Hemingway*

and worship of the small'.<sup>24</sup> The Tyros represented everything that Lewis hated about the artistic world in London after the First World War – perhaps especially the success of Bloomsbury and the failure of the radical modernism he had championed. The period of the Tyros also represented the point at which Lewis recognized that there was no going back to the pre-War world, one in which he had been briefly at the centre of Britain's cultural life.<sup>25</sup>

Lewis was perhaps too general in his analysis of Hemingway's characters. Nick Adams in Hemingway's short stories and Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* have been traumatically injured in the war, but are determined not to think of the horrors. Indeed, the War remains an echo in these texts, but it is rarely, if ever, directly mentioned. The characters in *The Sun Also Rises* remain unable to escape their experience of the War; they live in Europe cast adrift in a wild swirling world of books, drink, sex, fishing, and bullfighting – a childlike world potentially without consequences. Robert Cohn, Lady Brett Ashley, Count Mippipopolous, and the other characters in *The Sun Also Rises* are Lewis's Tyros writ large, yet if one considers the chief character, Jake Barnes, he is perhaps not the complete Tyro. Although he is frequently drunk, impulsive, and rootless, he nonetheless maintains some moral authority through his code of honour, sense of his responsibilities, and his work ethic – he manages to write both his novel and to produce his journalism, for example.

Lewis expanded on his theme of passivity by considering whether, because *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* are written in the first person, these novels' principal characters (Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry) can be disengaged from their author. Lewis considered that if the 'I' of the narrator volunteered for the war, fought at the Italian front, and was injured as a result, then there was every reason to connect him with Hemingway. This argument suited Lewis's satirical object. It had a certain logic with respect to Barnes and Henry, but it was less pertinent to the Michigan-set short stories of *In Our Time*. Here, certainly, Hemingway's use of language when writing the words of the Ojibway Indians is 'primitive', but that was part of Hemingway's artistic intention. During his childhood, he had holidayed among the Ojibway, and their speech patterns were known to him. So, as Jeffrey Meyers suggests, the Ojibway language was a legitimate subject for him to use in his fiction.<sup>26</sup> This is the language of semi-rural Michigan, not of Oak Park Chicago where Hemingway grew up. While Hemingway had an

affinity with the Indians, and saw them as rebels against the conservative, Protestant world of Oak Park, we cannot associate these voices with Hemingway himself. But Lewis, to suit his overarching purpose, was selective in his evidence. The ‘dull-witted, bovine, monosyllabic simpleton’ (*MWA* 27) character was held to be Hemingway, and, since Hemingway’s characters were mere puppets this made Hemingway one as well. The question that then arose was this: who was the puppet master (or mistress) standing behind Hemingway? For Lewis, it was Stein.

Lewis had met Stein in 1913 before the development of Vorticism and the publication of *BLAST*. In 1913 he had been in Paris and had visited Stein, showing an artist’s informed interest in the new Post-Impressionist and Cubist art by Picasso, Cézanne, and others she had hanging in her apartment. In her memoir of her Paris life, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein writes of Lewis as giving ‘the effect of being in the act of taking very careful measurement of the canvas, the lines within the canvas and everything that might be of use’.<sup>27</sup> This was later twisted by Hemingway into a different account. ‘I call him “the Measuring Worm” she [Stein] said’.<sup>28</sup> The overall tone of Stein’s remembrance of Lewis is not as antagonistic towards him as Hemingway suggests; certainly she had no problem a few months later accepting a copy of *BLAST* from its publisher, John Lane.<sup>29</sup>

Stein’s ideas had been a target for Lewis’s satire before he wrote ‘The Dumb Ox’. He had attacked the ‘Stein Quarter’ in his short-lived journal *The Enemy* (1927-29) and had criticized her prose style in *Time and Western Man*. Stein was for Lewis at the centre of a ‘Child-Cult’. He wrote of her that ‘she writes usually so like a child – like a confused, stammering, rather “soft” (bloated, acromegalic, squinting and spectacled, one can figure it as) child’ (*TWM* 47). The ‘Child-Cult’ can be seen as a new generation’s response to the horrors of the First World War, blocking out death, mutilation, and feelings of disillusionment with drink, drugs, hedonism, and a refusal of adult responsibilities. In *Time and Western Man* Lewis described the child cult as one of the enemies of civilization: ‘The child-personality, the all-important base of this school that I am attacking, and all that the affecting of that personality, and of the language of childhood, implies, is of such decisive importance, that I will now, during some pages, provide a brief analysis of this sudden malady of childhood that has mysteriously overtaken all our world, from the hoariest veteran down to the veritable child’ (*TWM* 50). For Lewis,

*Lewis and Hemingway*

Stein's style of writing symbolized this language of childhood. Her use of language, moreover, was a negative 'contribution to the present mass-democracy' (*TWM* 60) – a sensationist romanticization of the language of ordinary speech.

Seven years later in 'The Dumb Ox' Lewis returned to his attack on the childish use of language. This time his target was Hemingway. Lewis's aim was to single out the similarities between Hemingway's and Stein's uses of language and to trace Stein's influence on the work of her younger compatriot. He saw Hemingway as essentially a folk-prose poet: 'the story is told in the tone, and with the vocabulary, of the persons described. The rhythm is the anonymous folk-rhythm of the urban proletariat. Mr. Hemingway is, self-consciously, a folk-prose-poet in the way that Robert Burns was a folk-poet' (*MWA* 23-24). The language was the language of the new 'folk', the generation who had come out of the First World War and now sought a new, less structured and less formal world. Hemingway's language was, for Lewis, the language of the future, since Lewis recognized the immense cultural and social consequence of America over the world:

But what is curious about this is that the modified *Beach-la-mar* in which he writes is, more or less, the speech that is proposed for everybody in the future – it is a volapük which probably will be ours tomorrow. For if the chief executive of the United States greets the Roman Catholic democratic leader (Al Smith) with the exclamation "Hallo old potato!" today, the English political leaders will be doing so the day after tomorrow. (*MWA* 24)

Where America led, Britain would follow. It was the implicit *valorization* of an Americanized and proletarianized culture that Lewis sought to attack: 'And the Anglo-Saxon *Beach-la-mar* of the future will not be quite the same thing as Chaucer or Dante, contrasted with the learned tongue. For the latter was the speech of a race rather than of a class, whereas our "vulgar tongue" will really be *vulgar*' (*MWA* 24).

It's important that we be clear about Lewis's critical respect for Hemingway's style. He described Hemingway as 'a very considerable artist in prose-fiction' (*MWA* 19), a 'very notable artist' (*MWA* 36), and a 'master of this form of art' (*MWA* 20). Hemingway's avoidance of sentimentality, or artificial heightening of emotion, which would spoil the realistic effect of his descriptions and dialogue, ensures that he is a

true artist. Many of Hemingway's best artistic effects are produced specifically because of his skill with narrative and dialogue, the simplicity of his language, his fine ear for rhythm and effective representation of scenes. However, behind Hemingway's style Lewis identified Stein's infantilism, repetition, and passivity. He suggested that Hemingway's work could only be distinguished from Stein's by his subject matter – war and bullfighting. In fact, so close was Hemingway to Stein that Lewis claimed he couldn't really separate them: 'it is very difficult to know where Hemingway proper begins and Stein leaves off as an artist. It is an uncomfortable situation for the critic, especially for one who "has a weakness" for the male member of this strange spiritual partnership, and very much prefers him to the female' (*MWA* 26-27). In the end, Lewis argued that the difference was that Hemingway hadn't taken his use of vernacular Americanism to the extremes that Stein had, and had merely 'kept it as a valuable oddity, even if a flagrantly borrowed one' (*MWA* 26). Hemingway the artist wasn't the target in this critique; Lewis admired his artistic achievement. For Lewis, Hemingway was the artist as inadvertent victim; he was trapped by the infantile ideas of Stein. Indeed, he was trapped to such an extent that '[i]n the rôle he has chosen for himself' he was 'as it were, a proletarian clown' who 'satirize[d] *himself*' (*MWA* 14).

Lewis, in short, differentiated Hemingway's ability realistically to depict contemporary dialogue from what Lewis saw as the deeper implications of his work. Lewis might not have liked what the art represented, but he was able to recognize its quality. This differentiation is often lost from view when Lewis and Hemingway are discussed. 'The Dumb Ox' is seen solely as a criticism of Hemingway's 'originality, sophistication and admirable fictional heroes'<sup>30</sup> with a 'seemingly insulting title'.<sup>31</sup> This is only a partial reading, since Lewis's expressed his admiration for Hemingway as an artist elsewhere. In a letter to David Kahma, Lewis wrote of Hemingway's style:

But I mentioned Hemingway as a master of realistic dialogue. After the publication of "The Sun Also Rises" he asked me if he had got the dialogue all right where the English lady-of-fashion (I forget the name – was it Brett?) he did not feel quite confident about it. But there was no occasion for anxiety. He has a wonderful memory and ear. To study his handling of dialogue is especially useful to you because he like yourself is an American.

(L 454)

*Lewis and Hemingway*

In *The Writer and the Absolute* (1952) Lewis explained what he had wanted to achieve with ‘The Dumb Ox’. He described Hemingway’s characters as people to whom things are done, as passive figures. He went on as follows:

This is not a shortcoming in a work of art: it defines it merely. It says that the work in question is classifiable as lyrical. As we know, the *jeune premier* must not be unusually endowed with anything but looks. *Bel canto* is allergic to superman. Then Hemingway has been a chronicler, of exceptional genius, of folk-emotions. It is quite a different matter when a writer adopts the outlook of a bi-valve *for himself*. To draw attention to *that* is not complimentary: he is after all not a pathetic figure in a book.

(*WA* 86)

However, in ‘The Dumb Ox’ Lewis had also developed a further issue in Hemingway’s adoption of Stein’s method. He suggested that Hemingway hadn’t just taken on Stein’s *style* in his writing but had taken on *attitudes* that were hers, not his: ‘This infantile, dull-witted, dreamy stutter compels whoever uses it to conform to the infantile, dull-witted type. He passes over into the category of *those to whom things are done*, from that of those who execute – if the latter is indeed where he originally belonged’ (*MWA* 26). Lewis used Hemingway as an example of how the passivity of the characters he had created gradually overtakes the writer himself. The implication is clear. A similar consequence might well follow for Hemingway’s readers – they in turn may become like his passive characters: dumb oxen before the slaughterhouse, cannon-fodder for future wars.

The final part of Lewis’s essay considers why Hemingway’s language and dialogue is politically important – in short, what does it mean for contemporary society. The great strength of Hemingway for Lewis was his capacity for dialogue, and for effective rendition of what he heard into words on a page. Lewis described this as ‘very *American*. And it is a *patois*, a fairly good rendering of which any American is competent to give’ (*MWA* 29). Lewis quoted H. L. Mencken’s analysis of the development of American English, *The American Language*, to indicate that American was a continually developing language, which reflected the varied communities that constituted the country. Lewis wanted to stress the fact that this was not strictly speaking *English*, but

*American*. And ‘dialect-American has tended’, so Lewis claimed, ‘what with negro and immigrant pressure, to simplify itself grammatically, and I suppose is still doing so at this moment’ (*MWA* 29).

Lewis contrasted these alleged changes to the American language with the situation in England: ‘While England was a uniquely powerful empire-state, ruled by an aristocratic caste, its influence upon the speech as upon the psychology of the American ex-colonies was overwhelming. But today that ascendancy has almost entirely vanished’ (*MWA* 30). Lewis seemed to be regretting the passing of a particular kind of linguistic and phonetic influence (rather than, say, the loss of British imperial power) and criticizing the rise of the simplistic American language he sees repeated in Hemingway’s dialogue. He observed that in any book of Hemingway’s one can find, at random, ‘a page of stuff that is, considered in isolation, valueless as writing.’ He amplified the point as follows:

It is not written: it is lifted out of Nature and very artfully and adroitly tumbled out upon the page: it is the brute material of the every-day proletarian speech and feeling. The *matière* is cheap and coarse: but not because it is proletarian speech merely, but because it is *the prose of reality* – the prose of the street-car or the provincial newspaper or the five and ten cent store. (*MWA* 32)

Proletarian dialect in the past had been often used for comic effect (as, for example, in the work of Dickens and Wells), but Hemingway was using it seriously, turning slang into art. This was the democratized, proletarian reality of the post-First World War world, and Hemingway was the most significant modernist artist depicting and shaping that world. Lewis saw it as ‘the voice of the “folk,” of the masses, who are the cannon-fodder, the cattle outside the slaughter-house, serenely chewing the cud – *of those to whom things are done*, in contrast to those who have executive will and intelligence. It is itself innocent of politics – one might almost add alas! That does not affect its quality as art’ (*MWA* 36). Contemporary reviews of *Men Without Art* recognized Lewis’s achievement in understanding and praising Hemingway’s artistic style: G. W. Stonier in *The New Statesman* wrote that ‘what seems at first sight an attack on individual artists is in fact a defence of art’, complete with ‘brilliant and merciless chapters on Hemingway and Faulkner’.<sup>32</sup> Stephen Spender in *The Spectator* saw that ‘[i]n the first two chapters of this book

*Lewis and Hemingway*

Mr Wyndham Lewis, as a critic, is at his best. Messrs Hemingway and Faulkner are evidently writers for whom he has the greatest respect and whom he can attack without losing his sense of their proportions'.<sup>33</sup>

Apart from Lewis's analysis and exploration of the style of Hemingway, one of the reasons that the essay is remembered is because of Sylvia Beach's description of her friend Hemingway's response to reading it:

Hemingway can take any amount of criticism – from himself: he is his own severest critic, but, like all his fellow-writers, he is hypersensitive to the criticism of others. It's true that some critics are terribly expert in sticking the sharp penpoint into the victim and are delighted when he squirms. Wyndham Lewis succeeded in making Joyce squirm. And his article on Hemingway entitled "The Dumb Ox", which the subject of it picked up in my bookshop, I regret to say, roused him to such anger that he punched the heads off three dozen tulips, a birthday gift. As a result the vase upset its contents over the books, after which Hemingway sat down at my desk and wrote a cheque payable to Sylvia Beach for a sum that covered the damage twice over.<sup>34</sup>

This is a vivid, entertaining, and much-quoted anecdote, but it raises some questions: What exactly was it that angered Hemingway so? The implication from Beach's anecdote is that it was the entire article, and that Hemingway missed the positive analysis of his writing style that Lewis offered. Clearly other critical readers saw that Lewis was reacting positively to Hemingway's books in the essay. Why could Hemingway, who was a thorough and critical reader and analyst of others' writing, not see this? It may be that he only hurriedly read the article and missed the overall sense of it. However, it is more likely that the main thrust of 'The Dumb Ox' was an attack on Stein (through Hemingway), and that Hemingway was angered or embarrassed by Lewis's emphasis on his early links with, and his undoubted debt to, Gertrude Stein. These were links from which Hemingway by this stage in his career was striving to distance himself.

While Hemingway and Stein were undoubtedly good friends in the early years of his stay in Paris (she was god-mother to his first son), they fell out violently between 1925 and 1926. The reasons are uncertain and contested. Hemingway's version in *A Moveable Feast* – that the break

stemmed from his overhearing a row between Stein and Toklas – is unconvincing, while *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* gives no real reason for the split. Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* was published in 1932. Hemingway wasn't happy about the way he was represented in it as a young ambitious writer sitting at Stein's feet, guided and supported by her, and clearly playing second fiddle to her. That Stein was very much on his mind, and that he was still resentful, is clear from his references to her and from the coarse, misogynistic language he used about her in his letters of 1933. He wrote to Arnold Gingrich in April 1933: 'G. Stein, who was a fine woman until she went professionally patriotically goofily complete lack of judgement and stoppage of all sense lesbian with the old menopause'. To Janet Flanner in the same month: 'Gertrude S. I was very fond of and god knows I was loyal to until she had pushed my face in a dozen times. Last time I saw her she told me she had heard an incident, some fag story, which proved me conclusively to be very queer indeed'. And to Maxwell Perkins in July 1933: 'Poor old Gertrude Stein. [...] She lost all sense of taste when she had the menopause. [...] suddenly she couldn't tell a good picture from a bad one, a good writer from a bad one, it all went phtt'.<sup>35</sup>

If this was Hemingway's state of mind in 1933, his reaction to Lewis's article, which claimed that he had 'suffered an overmastering influence' (*MWA* 24) from Stein and that as he 'Steins up and down the world' (*MWA* 28) he becomes 'the very dummy that is required for the literary mannerism of Miss Stein' (*MWA* 28), is hardly surprising. The way in which Lewis is subsequently treated in *A Moveable Feast* – the insulting language, the malicious anecdote, and the aggrandizement of Hemingway at Lewis's expense – is then perhaps to be expected. But there is no hint in Hemingway's correspondence or his memoir that he was willing to accuse Lewis of a lack of critical judgement or of a failure to understand the nature of Hemingway's style or to recognize his artistic skill.

'The Dumb Ox' is a multifaceted essay. It can be seen as a simple attack on Hemingway, but a closer reading suggests that it is much more than this. It is an essay that says a good deal about Hemingway's early writings, as well as about Lewis's critical commitments. We can see the paradox that Lewis admired Hemingway as an artist yet was appalled by his subservience to the methods of Gertrude Stein. Moreover, we can see the paradox that Lewis, a talented and sensitive critic, was able to identify elements of Hemingway's art of which he approved but unable

*Lewis and Hemingway*

to create a balanced critique of that art because of the violent and intemperate language of his discussion of Stein, which limited the clarity and effectiveness of his arguments. For much of the essay this is the dominant tone, which makes it difficult for the reader to engage with his central argument – the need to reverse what he saw as the proletarianization of Western society and the undermining of the individualism that Lewis sought to defend.

As the study of Hemingway's work has developed over the last seventy years we can see that Lewis wasn't always correct in some of his statements; he undervalued Hemingway's interest in and knowledge of contemporary politics, and he missed some of the range and depth exhibited by Hemingway's early characters. Beyond this we see cogent and far-reaching analysis of Hemingway's early work, and some biting satiric stereotypes of both Hemingway and his characters. Lewis recognized Hemingway's ear for capturing speech and his skill at writing dialogue, and he shrewdly analysed Hemingway's interest in the democratization of language and its significance for the world that was evolving between two wars.

Lewis's analysis of Hemingway's work has remained an important early statement of the power of his narrative style and his use of strong language. We can see its influence on a number of English critics writing on Hemingway from the 1930s onwards.<sup>36</sup> However, for many readers 'The Dumb Ox' is a difficult text to read and to understand, and it is frequently discussed simplistically as though it were little more than a churlish record of personal animosities. 'The Dumb Ox' demonstrates to a large extent not only many of the issues that continue to plague the study of Lewis but also the ways in which Lewis himself contributed to our difficulties with his work: his complex and contradictory politics, racial attitudes, and often intemperate, satiric language. But the essay also demonstrates what is best in Lewis: his independent, individual mind, his ability to engage with difficult questions of art and society, his talent for identifying artistic achievement, and his capacity to see issues and answers where others miss or ignore them. To understand Lewis we need to go comprehend both sides of his character and his work.

Lewis's use of 'The Dumb Ox' in the title of the original and reprinted article still serves as a lazy shorthand for the typical Hemingway hero: a man of action not deep in thought; a hunter, not a philosopher. But to reduce the essay to just this aspect is to do Lewis a disservice. He certainly saw such figures as Jake Barnes and Frederic

Henry as characters of this type, but he was also shrewd enough to see their cultural significance. His choice of the term ‘dumb ox’ was not accidental. The story goes that Aquinas, the thirteenth-century monk and scholar, was nicknamed the dumb ox as a novice. St Albert the Great said of him: ‘You call him a Dumb Ox; I tell you that the Dumb Ox shall bellow so loud that his bellowings will fill the world’.<sup>37</sup> This was part of Lewis’s point. He was drawing attention to the power (not just the simplicity) of Hemingway’s use of language. Lewis recognized that Hemingway’s significance, his *political* significance, was in giving a voice and a language to a new American generation and class. Lewis was opposed to what he saw as the uncritical valorization of that voice, but he homed in on its cultural importance. So did the Nobel Prize Committee in 1954 when it praised Hemingway’s ‘powerful style making mastery of the art of modern narration’.<sup>38</sup> But the Committee also described his earlier writings as ‘brutal, cynical and callous’ – and therefore at variance with the rule that an award must be given for ‘a work of ideal tendencies’. Still, the citation had spoken of the ‘heroic pathos’ which formed ‘the basic element of his awareness of life’ as well as his ‘manly love of danger and adventure’ and his ‘natural admiration for every individual who fights the good fight in a world of reality overshadowed by violence and death’.<sup>39</sup>

As Lewis had foretold, the Dumb Ox’s bellowing had indeed filled the world.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Wyndham Lewis, ‘The Dumb Ox: A Study of Ernest Hemingway’, *Life and Letters* (April 1934): 33-45. Reprinted in *MWA* 19-36 (I will be using this text for my quotations, and for ease of reading will refer to it as ‘The Dumb Ox’).

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London, Routledge, 1980), 124.

<sup>3</sup> G. W. Stonier, ‘Personal Appearance Artist’, *New Statesman and Society* (6 October 1934): 438-40.

<sup>4</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (1964), restored edition (New York: Scribners, 2009), 89.

<sup>5</sup> See Craig Monk, *Writing the Lost Generation: Expatriate Writing and American Modernism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2008), 141.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway – Volume 2: 1923-1925*, ed. Sandra Spanier, Albert J. DeFazio III, and Robert W. Trogdon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 335. A pulmotor was a type of portable respirator. ‘Mac’ is presumably Archibald MacLeish.

<sup>7</sup> Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 98.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Selected Letters*, ed. Carlos Baker (1981; New York: Scribner, 2003), 263.

<sup>9</sup> Archibald MacLeish, *A Continuing Journey* (1968), cited in Paul O’Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 271-72.

<sup>10</sup> In 1941, exiled in Toronto by the war, Lewis wrote to MacLeish, then the Librarian of the Library of Congress, to see if MacLeish could be of help obtaining employment for the hard up Lewis as an artist at a Canadian University. No work came from this request, despite MacLeish’s efforts. See *L* 302.

<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 128.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>13</sup> Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), 77.

<sup>14</sup> See Victor Barac, ‘The Culture Theories of Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot’, in Andrzej Gąsiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Nathan Waddell (eds) *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011): 185-200.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the influence of Proudhon upon Lewis, see Alan Munton, ‘Wyndham Lewis: From Proudhon to Hitler (and back): The Strange Political Journey of Wyndham Lewis’, *E-rea: Revue électronique d’études sur le monde anglophone*, 4.2 [special issue: ‘Revolving Commitments in France and Britain, 1929-1955’] (2006). Available at <http://erea.revues.org/220>. Accessed 30 September 2013.

<sup>16</sup> See Barac, ‘The Culture Theories of Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot’, 208.

<sup>17</sup> A number of other writers and thinkers were approving of Hitler in the early 1930s. Stephen Spender in 1933 wrote: ‘The attitude of many writers, even highbrow writers is fascist in a more or less disguised form’, and he went on to link Wells, Shaw, Sacheverell Sitwell, Lewis, and Pound with the approval of Italian fascism. See Stephen Spender, ‘Politics and Literature in 1933’, *The Bookman* (December 1933): 147-48.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, John Carey’s *The Intellectual and the Masses* (London: Faber, 1992), 182-208, which gives a one-sided account of Lewis creating ‘a

travesty of historical fact' while ignoring his later recantation of his pro-Hitler stances.

<sup>19</sup> For a fuller discussion of the 'Enemy' persona, see Philip Head, 'The Enemy and his Enemies', *Wyndham Lewis Annual*, XIII (2008): 44-54.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Hallam, 'In the "Enemy" Camp: Wyndham Lewis, Naomi Mitchison, and Rebecca West', in Gąsiorek, Reeve-Tucker, and Waddell (eds), *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, 57-76.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth Kinnamon, 'Hemingway and Politics', in Scott Donaldson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ernest Hemingway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 149-69, 149.

<sup>22</sup> See Ernest Hemingway, *Dateline Toronto*, ed. William White (New York, Scribners, 1985).

<sup>23</sup> Ernest Hemingway, 'Italy's Blackshirts', *Toronto Star Weekly* (June 1924), in Hemingway, *Dateline Toronto*, 174-75.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 259.

<sup>25</sup> See David Peters Corbett, "'Grief with a yard wide grin": War and Wyndham Lewis's Tyros', in David Peters Corbett (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 99-123.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, 'Hemingway's Primitivism and "Indian Camp"', *Twentieth Century Literature* 34. 2 (Summer, 1988): 211-22.

<sup>27</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 134.

<sup>28</sup> Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Meyers, *The Enemy*, 124.

<sup>31</sup> O'Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius*, 343.

<sup>32</sup> Stonier, 'Personal Appearance Artist', 438-40.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Spender, 'One Way Song', *The Spectator* (19 October 1934): 574-76.

<sup>34</sup> Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* (London: Faber, 1960), 91-92.

<sup>35</sup> Hemingway, *Selected Letters*, 384-95.

<sup>36</sup> See Moira Monteith, 'A Change in Emphasis: Hemingway Criticism in Britain Over the Last Twenty-Five Years', *Hemingway Review*, 1.2 (Spring 1982): 2-19.

<sup>37</sup> G. K. Chesterton, *St Thomas Aquinas* (1933; San Rafael, CA: Angelico Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (London: Literary Guild, 1969), 621-22.

*Levis and Hemingway*

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.