

In His Bad Books: Wyndham Lewis and Fascism

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‘Lewis’s politics are a complex affair.’

(*Wyndham Lewis and Modernism*, Andrzej Gašiorek)¹

A Futile Performance

A complex affair: the critical understatement is finely judged, because complex affairs are invariably those that tend to get simplified, especially when emotions run high. In the case of Wyndham Lewis’s politics, the process has been particularly straightforward because, self-evidently, the situation is unambiguous and the important details are well-known and provocative. Early in 1931 Lewis published a series of articles in *Time and Tide* in which – following a brief visit to Berlin in November 1930 – he set out to understand the workings of the National Socialist party in Germany and, in particular, the political philosophy of its leader, Adolf Hitler. The book from which the articles were extracted, called simply *Hitler* (1931), described its subject as ‘a Man of Peace’ (H 44) and dismissed the *Judenfrage* as a ‘racial red-herring’ (H 43). When it was followed by two ‘peace-pamphlets’, *Left Wings Over Europe* (1936) and *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* (1937), together with an article in the inaugural issue of the relaunched *British Union Quarterly*, Lewis’s reputation as a fascist, ‘protofascist’, or fascist sympathiser, was sealed.² His future status as the great pantomime villain of critical discourse, the Emperor Dalek of modernism, was assured. The broad scope and substance of his political writings – D. G. Bridson counts fourteen books – has scarcely been allowed to trouble this easy caricature, and any possibility that the finer details of his ‘bad’ books might reveal something other than crass Hitlerian sympathies continues to be unthinkable.³

Ironically, the simplifying procedures of Lewis’s detractors can lead to the idea of complexity itself becoming rather complex. John Carey, beginning his onslaught on Lewis in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (1992), disparages him as ‘the intellectuals’ intellectual’, implying some degree of cerebral rarefaction.⁴ On the same page, however, making a

case for comparing Lewis with the self-consciously *anti-intellectual* Hitler, he derides what he sees as his ‘relatively small collection of ideas’. If this is not plain academic inconsistency, it must be polemical strategy: with Lewis dismissed as both an erudite obscurantist and an obtuse obsessive, Carey can continue his portrait of the artist as a talentless and spiteful fascist. Given the long-term deterioration of Lewis’s public image, this conception of him as a marauding brutish penman of the Right was hardly going to surprise anyone, and Carey’s originality consisted in being prepared to write about Lewis *at all* in a high profile study, albeit as part of a wider attack on modernism.⁵ The current essay is only one in a long line of attempts to puncture the critical barrier that has been constructed around Lewis’s work as a result of his supposed political toxicity.⁶ Although Gąsiorek’s recent suggestion that the reputation is less ‘tarnished’ than it was a decade ago seems fair, it remains the case – more than fifty years after Lewis’s death – that anyone who speaks or writes about him with anything other than dismissive and righteous contempt will almost immediately be challenged to justify their interest.⁷ Jessica Burstein captures the situation well: ‘Being Wyndham Lewis means never having to say you’re sorry. Being a Lewis critic, on the other hand, means constantly apologizing.’⁸

This is not an apology for Wyndham Lewis. Nor is it an apology for Lewis criticism. If abjection is needed, it can be found in Lewis’s own frank repudiation of his appeasement project in the late autobiography, *Rude Assignment* (1950): ‘So this group of books against war can be written off as a futile performance – ill-judged, redundant, harmful of course to me personally, and of no value to anybody else? Certainly they were in the main just that’ (RA 224). It is also evident in his wartime letters. Here he is writing to the sculptor Eric Kennington in 1942: ‘Long ago [...] it became apparent to me that I had been wrong, like so many other people, in opposing war. Before the Munich Conference enlightened us all upon that subject, I saw too clearly, with anger and dismay, that Hitler was that most detestable of things a chronic and unteachable little militarist, who just would have his good old second war, because it is for such hideous childishness that such men live’ (L 324). Lewis was not inclined towards explicit apology, favouring vision and revision over the affectation of an emotional *mea culpa*. From the viewpoint of a sympathetic reader, the miasma that

encloses the so-called 'fascist' books is indicative of a critical condition in which awkward disregard has proved an easy substitute for analysis.

Lewis's right-wing bias in the years leading up to the Second World War persisted for the best part of a decade, so it can hardly be dismissed as a fleeting aberration. Even so, the 'fascist' texts have assumed a disproportionate significance within his vast and multifarious body of work. Far from being isolated at the time in his attraction to the far Right, only Lewis, it often seems, has been judged on this point alone. It is easy enough to round up the usual suspects of literary modernism – Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Lawrence.⁹ But, as Stan Smith has adroitly shown, the question of political allegiance in the Depression years can be highly problematic.¹⁰ The ideological convolutions of the period are traceable, for instance, in W. H. Auden's *The Orators* (1932), a work which the author himself (surely *the* archetypal left-wing poet of the 1930s) was eventually to consider suspiciously Hitlerian.¹¹ None of this excuses Lewis's errors of judgement, but it does make them seem rather less remote, less deviant and pernicious. And since the complexities of Lewis's vision – often those of rapid modification and self-contradiction – are key to the distinctiveness and power of his work, it is unfortunate that they have been so consistently parodied rather than explored. Through selective quotation, wilful misreading, and biographical reductionism, it is easy to make a monster out of Wyndham Lewis, but the tradition of critical banality that has formed in relation to his work seems, in effect, to have made all too literal the figure of the Enemy, the satirico-psychotic alter ego which Lewis created for himself in 1927.¹²

The real problem with partial readings of Lewis's politics is that they suggest both an inevitability and a finality about his passage into fascist apologia. Carey, again, is typical in this respect, quoting strategically from *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *Time and Western Man* (1927), and *Paleface* (1929) in order to demonstrate that Lewis had been a Nietzschean power-fetishist from the outset, a natural born fascist whose misogyny, racism, anti-semitism, and homophobia were innate. Evidence can be found to support all of these allegations, but it requires some distortion to achieve the appearance of overriding and consistent chauvinism. The dominant prejudices of the day permeate Lewis's writings, but they are as likely to be challenged as they are to be expressed. Significantly, few indictments of his work consider anything written after 1939, and the effect is to truncate his career, ending it with

what is invariably dismissed as the too-little-too-late recantation of *The Hitler Cult* (1939). Attention is rarely drawn to the pro-democratic *Anglosaxony: A League that Works* (1941) or to the utopian internationalism of *America and Cosmic Man* (1948). The argument behind the disastrously ironic title of *The Jews: Are They Human?* (1939) – essentially a plea for tolerance, honest self-appraisal, and cultural openness – is similarly ignored.¹³ Other works of Lewis's *Hitler* period that might point up the true complexity of his position during that 'low dishonest decade' are also forgotten, notably *Doom of Youth* (1932), *One-Way Song* (1933), and *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938).¹⁴ Most striking, however, is the lack of close, sustained attention paid to the primary exhibits in the case against Lewis: *Hitler, Left Wings Over Europe* (1936), and *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* (1937). Carey looks at all three books – and offers a few quotations from them – but he scarcely seems to have *read* them. William M. Chace's polemical essay in *Wyndham Lewis: A Reevaluation* is similarly lacking in finer detail. Having declared (wrongly, I think) that *Hitler* exhibits Lewis's 'truest ideological allegiances', he implies that it need not actually be studied: 'Read, or un-read, it cannot be forgotten, nor should it be.'¹⁵ Surely the critic owes more to a work than this? If *Hitler* is, as Chace asserts, the key to Lewis's politics, a lethal document which undermines the whole of his work as an artist-writer, then it needs to be read and re-read. Even Fredric Jameson – who is far more subtle in his engagement with Lewis than his 'Modernist as Fascist' line might suggest – limits his account by paying scant attention to *Hitler's* adjuncts. His interest is chiefly in the novels, but – in neglecting the other non-fiction of the 1920s and 1930s – he, as Munton argues, gives far too much importance to Lewis's most eccentric and self-destructive book.¹⁶

The Vulgar Frenzy

Although they have proved to be his most damaging works, Lewis's appeasement texts are not his most important political writings – they are not even, I would suggest, his most important political writings of the 1930s. Written to the moment, at great speed, and in response to calamitous historical pressures, they are in some ways anomalous, digressive, erratic, but not entirely inconsistent with what came before and after in Lewis's thinking. Through a dangerous, unpleasant, but

perhaps necessary detour, they enabled Lewis to work out some (not all) of the problems inherent in his 'politics of the intellect' (*ABR* 373).¹⁷ Lewis's advocacy of the 'splendid and oppressed class' of the intellectual in isolation from the democratized 'crowd' has always been a gift to his opponents, and it fits easily with the conception of a man preparing himself throughout the 1920s for a role as fascist champion in the 1930s: 'The intelligence suffers today automatically in consequence of the attack on all authority, advantage, or privilege' (*ABR* 373). This depiction of the intellect 'exposed' and 'helpless' in the face of 'egalitarian rage' (*ABR* 373) was never likely – or, of course, intended – to win either the easy sympathy of Lewis's contemporaries or the approval of posterity. Nor do repeated statements about the potential appeal of fascist government make for comfortable reading eighty years on: 'for anglo-saxon countries as they are constituted today some modified form of fascism would probably be the best' (*ABR* 320-21). Never mind the qualifiers – how *modified* or *probable* would fascism have to be to seem anything other than abhorrent? – or the subsequent designation of the racially mixed United States as uniquely beyond the need for such tough revolution: this is surely proof enough of Lewis's extreme political ugliness? And yet, there is more to this writing than the sum of its transgressions.¹⁸

Gąsiorek recognizes the extent to which the dubious aspects of Lewis's political vision are contained in essence in the 1917 pseudo-manifesto, 'The Code of a Herdsman' – individualism, élitism, contempt for the masses – but he also draws attention to the fragment's fictiveness and irony.¹⁹ The piece shows the direct influence of both Nietzsche's aphorisms and F. T. Marinetti's chronic manifestorrhoea, but these elements are presented in a spirit of satire as much as homage. Lewis's debt to Nietzsche has been overplayed (as, for that matter, has Nietzsche's own reputation as a kind of proto-Nazi), and his feelings about Marinetti and Futurism range from the sceptical to the downright hostile.²⁰ What is apparent in Lewis's absorption of these prominent models is not so much culpable affinity as active critique. 'AUTOMOBILISM (Marinetteism) bores us,' he wrote in the first *BLAST* manifesto. 'We don't want to go about making a hullo-bulloo about motor cars, any more than about knives and forks, elephants or gas-pipes' (*B1* 26). As for Nietzsche, Lewis came to see him as a 'great hysteric' whose early appeal could be attributed to 'a sort of titanic nourishment for the ego' (*RA* 128). At various times, the German

philosopher – always affirmed as a great writer – is linked to both the high priest of the ‘time-mind’, Henri Bergson, and Lewis’s other intellectual *bête noir*, Oswald Spengler. In *The Art of Being Ruled*, for instance, Lewis writes that the ‘vulgar frenzy of Nietzsche, and Bergson’s gospel of fluidity and illiquation, form in about equal measure the philosophic basis of futurism and similar movements’ (*ABR* 334). And in *Time and Western Man*, associating Spengler’s historical paradigm of imperial cycles with the romance of ‘aggressive military states’ and ‘pan-german pugnacity’, Lewis comments: ‘Nietzschean power-metaphysics have long obsessed european ideology and speculation. Spengler’s violent power-doctrine applied to History is still Nietzsche, as Alexander and Whitehead are still Bergson’ (*TWM* 269). In both cases, the shadow in the background is that of Marinetti, and the tenor – when politics are the specific focus – is rather more anti- than pro-fascist: ‘Marinetti’s post-nietzschean war-doctrine became War, *tout court*; and then Fascismo, which as Futurism in practice is the habit of mind and conditions of war applied to peace’ (*TWM* 39). Fifteen years later, designating Marinetti as ‘the father of fascism’, Lewis would write: ‘I did see the Stuka-bomber behind the [Futurist] art-theory. Indeed, it would have been difficult to miss the outline of that evil shape; its crash and roar was implicit in every word that Signor Marinetti uttered’ (*ALW* 45). There are some, no doubt, who would attempt to portray this as wisdom in hindsight, but it is hard to see any significant inconsistency, in this respect at least, between the attitude of the mid-1920s and that of the early 1940s. And yet, in between times, Lewis had torn his reputation as a political commentator – his reputation, full stop – into shreds.

Boxing the Compass

For Lewis, the years following the First World War initiated a period of necessary transition both within and beyond Europe. His starting-point in *The Art of Being Ruled* was, accordingly, the contention that ‘all serious politics to-day are revolutionary politics’ (*ABR* 17), an analysis that would remain fundamentally unaltered a decade later, when he wrote that ‘the breakdown of the present “capitalist” system’ was about to split the world in two: ‘everything seems to indicate some great turning-point in life upon this planet’ (*LWE* 21-22). This transformative instability,

the spirit of the age, was the result of the universal impact of Leninism, and for all that Lewis has often been depicted (with some justification) as a vehement anti-Communist, his sympathies were broadly, albeit idiosyncratically, socialist: ‘Socialist theory is the school in which we all graduate’ (*ABR* 18). The Great War, he argued, was not so much an international conflict as ‘a gigantic episode in the Russian revolution’ (*ABR* 18), and all subsequent politics would be formed in its aftershock. Crucially, Lewis claimed from the beginning that fascism was merely an extreme mutation of the Leninist model, a manifestation that reversed the polarity of dictatorial politics: ‘Everyone to-day is *somewhere* on the Left: all except fascism, which is a faction of the extreme and militant Left who have burst round and through to the Right, as it were – circumnavigated, boxed the compass’ (*ABR* 70). This Möbius strip configuration demonstrates a complex apprehension of political conditions.²¹ It also makes some sense of Lewis’s typically slippery definitions of his own political character, most outrageously in ‘The Diabolical Principle’ (1929) in which he identified himself as ‘partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in my marxism, but at bottom anarchist with a healthy passion for order’ (*DPDS* 126).²² The meaning of Lewis’s recurrent positioning of himself and his writings outside politics needs to be taken seriously, if only because it typifies the restless instinct behind his most controversial work. As Orwell, a writer whom Lewis admired, famously wrote: ‘The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.’²³ Lewis knew this, of course, but – since it contradicted a long-cherished fantasy about the pure possibilities of art – he was never going to admit it, or not in so many words.

Lewis’s image as a textual brawler – an image which he himself did much to promote – has obscured the essentially pacific basis of his politics. The impetus behind *Left Wings Over Europe* is precise and uncomplicated in this respect: ‘There are some people who consider that the only way to attain to a good peace (and there is no one who would be so mad as to say that *this* is a good peace) is to have another war. We must have another, bigger and better, war. Then there will be peace. I am not of that opinion. And in this book I am writing *against war*. Nothing else’ (*LWE* 11). This self-protective qualification is of a piece with Lewis’s repeated declarations of political innocence (‘I fly the flag of no party. My shirt is neither red, nor black, nor purple’) and the preemptive rhetorical manoeuvres which tend to accompany them: ‘I

am, indeed, so remarkably *unred* that you may think me black' (LWE 17). It is also, however, fully consonant with the book's assertion that the arguments for war are 'irrational' and that the notion of a war-to-end-wars is nothing more than philosophical bad faith concealed through sophistry: 'An unlimited number of wars can be fought on the ground that the last one was not bad enough, and that we want a *really* bad war to bring about perpetual peace' (LWE 11).

Those in favour of a war against European fascism are characterized as 'insane' and (in a telling slippage from Lewis's customary position of intellectual amorality) 'wicked'. Their cause, moreover, is judged to be 'meaningless', presumably justifying the subtitle of the book, *How to Make a War About Nothing*. This is, unmistakably, in both tone and substance, the language of appeasement, but it is also the language of ethical pacifism. The extent to which the culpability of the one disgraces the principles of the other is a moot point, and one with ramifications far beyond Lewis. He himself, as already noted, would very soon come to recognize the way in which bad judgement had let down good intentions in his efforts to argue against *unnecessary* war. Even so, his belief that social revolution and bloody conflict were not inevitable correlatives would outlast the necessary war that he would, in the event, unequivocally support.

The political upheaval analysed in *The Art of Being Ruled* is ideally conceived as a revolution of the mind – 'a novel adjustment of the world consciousness' (ABR 69) – and Lewis's writings always show him to be opposed to philosophies of action, especially violent action. Nietzsche, Georges Sorel, Marinetti, and D. H. Lawrence are all found blameworthy in this respect, and it should be remembered (how can it be forgotten?) that the fatal attraction to Hitler was partially founded in a belief that he was a 'Man of Peace'. Lewis's trench experiences form the constant and vital backdrop to his politics, ensuring an aversion to warfare that is difficult to reconcile with the pervasive sense of him as a kind of philosophical attack-dog of the hard Right. 'I found myself in the blood-bath of the Great War,' he wrote, 'and in that situation reflected on the vanity of violence' (ABR 122). Such a response perhaps encouraged the perilous assumption that the author of *Mein Kampf*, another veteran of the war, would share his outlook.

It is not an oversimplification to suggest that all of Lewis's politics, certainly after 1918, were shaped by a longing to achieve stable and lasting peace, and his greatest mistakes were products of this

aspiration. Where he has been misunderstood, it is often because a belief in the need for intellectual ferocity has been rendered crudely literal, a speculative revolution of the mind being taken as an incitement to physical aggression. Lewis's explicitness in this respect – 'one idea cannot overcome another without violence, though it may not be the stupid violence of physical force' (ABR 19) – makes the tradition of critical dullness in relation to his work all the more regrettable. Commenting on the Russian Revolution, he makes the case plain: 'this "catastrophic" conclusion to the "revolutionary" process is not only inessential; it distorts, and I think degrades as well, the notion of revolution. To say that people cannot change their souls (or a good part of them) without destroying their bodies, is a very material doctrine indeed' (ABR 20). Even allowing for elements of equivocation in the argument – the suggestion that 'surgical means' (ABR 20) might be difficult to avoid at times – this seems a long way from the 'mildly psychotic' impulse identified by David Trotter.²⁴

What is most striking to the modern reader of *The Art of Being Ruled* – particularly the modern reader aware of Lewis's 'fascist' reputation – is its anti-democratic animus, culminating in the incriminating discussion of 'Fascism as an alternative' (ABR 319-22). Lewis's impatience with democracy, as practiced between the wars, was based on a conviction that it was fundamentally *undemocratic*, a mechanism for underhand manipulation. Declaring that 'the vote of the free citizen is a farce' (ABR 106), he set about establishing an analysis that was to remain more or less consistent until the late 1930s.²⁵ 'There has never been *less* democracy to the square inch in England than at the present moment,' Lewis would write in *Left Wings Over Europe*, 'whatever other good and bad things may be found there' (LWE 284). This apparent critique of democracy *as constituted* – 'If you are a true democrat, there is nothing in the pages of this book which will pain you' (LWE 24) – becomes problematic, of course, in the context of an established philosophy which seems to disdain democracy *in toto*.

Democracy, Lewis had insisted, is based on a falsehood, the myth of liberty, in which the human individual is assumed to desire freedom above all else. The majority of people have, in fact, no interest in politics, and 'are essentially conservative and not revolutionary' (ABR 17): 'For in the mass people wish to be *automata*: they wish to be *conventional*: they hate you teaching them or forcing them unto 'freedom': they wish to be obedient, hard-working machines, as near dead as

possible – as near dead (feelingless and thoughtless) as they can get, without actually dying’ (*ABR* 151). In such generalizations do Lewis’s problems begin. His phrasing is a constant goad to humanist assumptions about the sanctity of the free individual conscience: ‘A disciplined, well-policed, herd-life is what they most desire’ (*ABR* 42), or – in a variation on the theme – ‘to be a blind, dependent, obedient cell of a crowd organism’ (*ABR* 43). Worse than the basic assumptions about collective temperament, is the apparently brazen lack of disinterestedness, the special pleading on behalf of a cultural élite: ‘Instead of the vast organization to exploit the weaknesses of the Many, should we not possess one for the exploitation of the intelligence of the Few’ (*ABR* 87). Adopting Goethe’s categories of ‘Puppets’ and ‘Natures’ – of ‘mechanical men’ and ‘natural men’ – Lewis argues for the existence of ‘two species and two worlds, which incessantly interfere with each other, checkmate each other, are eternally at cross-purposes’ (*ABR* 125). In *Time and Western Man*, he states the case more bluntly: ‘no artist can ever love democracy’ (*TWM* 26).

These well-wrapped gifts for his enemies obscure the genuine subtleties of Lewis’s position. He was an élitist, for sure, and like most élitists considered himself to be beyond politics, but his élitism took a particular form (particular *forms*) and should not be misread as social exclusivity. Whatever else he might have been, he was not a snob. Demonstrating a consistent hatred of social division based on class – ‘There was no spiritual or intellectual chasm [between aristocrat and peasant] – only a rather dirty little social ditch’ (*ABR* 128) – he is similarly unswerving in his loathing of capitalism, a system which he believes to be philistine, exploitative, and ultimately brutalizing. ‘The war, the blood, and the “catastrophe” is the method of the capitalist,’ he claims, ‘not the method of the socialist, nor necessarily of the fascist’ (*ABR* 52). The wish to see an end to the economic domination of the loan-capitalist – ‘He *makes* nothing. He toils not neither does he spin’ (*CYD* 16) – is a central factor in his critique of both media and political institutions in the West, and it feeds directly into his sense of an exploited hypnotized mass. It also informs Lewis’s support for Hitler, who not only takes on the ‘Big Business Elders’ and ‘Credit-cranks’ (*H* 96) but also dismantles the *Herrenklub*, and encourages him in his belief that ‘the bogus fatuity of our class-machinery’ (*CYD* 44) might be similarly broken up. Impossible as it is to deny the delusions and inconsistencies of Lewis’s political writings, it must nevertheless be

recognized that even his most dubious discourse sets itself firmly against ‘the kind of dead fish social snobbery that lies like a damp pall upon the English people’ (*MMB* 279-80).

Lewis proudly admitted to his limitations as an economic theorist – ‘Finance to me is a closed book’ (*H* 162) – but never allowed this to stop him engaging at length with questions of trade and finance. His ‘fascist’ texts, in particular, are loaded with fiscal polemic, and an obsessive antipathy for the ‘skulking super-monarchs’ (*CYD* 15) of capitalism seems to drive his supportive analysis of right-wing extremism. This is nowhere clearer than in the article written for the *British Union Quarterly* in 1937, where Lewis – claiming his usual political detachment – extols the Fascist as the true egalitarian of the age: ‘You stand to-day where Socialism stood yesterday – for the Poor against the Rich’.²⁶ Lewis’s idealization of the Blackshirt is encapsulated in one astonishing passage of quixotic delusion: ‘You as a Fascist stand for the small trader against the chain-store; for the peasant against the usurer; for the nation, great or small, against the super-state; for personal business against Big Business; for the craftsman against the the Machine; for the creator against the middleman; for all that prospers by individual effort and creative toil, against all that prospers in the abstract air of High Finance or the theoretic ballyhoo of Internationalism’.²⁷ Lewis’s naivety in relation to *practical* politics has been noted many times, by friend and foe alike, and here it is alarmingly, almost tragi-comically, obvious. But what Lewis *thinks* he is writing in favour of, and what he has been accused of endorsing, are two very different things.

At the heart of Lewis’s political speculations in the inter-war years is his attempt to reconcile ‘the requirements of authority’ with the need to retain ‘the personal initiative that is impatient of rules’ (*ABR* 75). This generates some of his most unpleasant contentions about the inert masses and their intellectual superiors, together with some of his most painfully knotted contradictions on the nature of liberty. Fiercely individualistic and oppositional as an artist, it can only seem (at best) paradoxical that Lewis should have spent so much time arguing against the vitality of the individual and in favour of disciplined conformity. Even so, the sincerity of his engagement with what he identifies as ‘the complexity of the problem of human freedom’ (*MMB* 199) can hardly be doubted, and it is striking that, even in his most disreputable work, his concerns seem far removed from the merely egotistical preening of the intellectual overlord.

A solution to the problem of freedom-versus-authority is vital, Lewis writes, ‘unless you wish to rule machines, not men’ (ABR 75), and the failure of Western democracies to grasp the problem – let alone explore solutions – has resulted in a culture of ‘hallucinated automata’ who are periodically ‘released against each other’ (ABR 106). The idea that human beings are innately warlike is dismissed as an illusion of defective or nefarious government, and for all his frequently alleged misanthropy and bellicosity, Lewis rejects the Hobbesian pessimism that classifies man as ‘a fighting animal’ (ABR 17). Again, Lewis seems here to be taking the side of the mass, contrasting its essential decency with the violent mendacity of its rulers. Just as he doubts that parliamentary democracy is a representation of the will of the people, he repudiates the notion that wars are fought according to the subconscious and collective urges of the majority: ‘To describe the carnage of the war as *willed* by the majority of men, in some sadistic excess, is so stupid that it is almost *too* stupid. If you tickle the sole of the foot of a sane man he temporarily loses his reason’ (ABR 82). The representational and egalitarian pretensions of democracy are, Lewis believes at this stage of his career, a distraction from the strategies of control deployed by the mass media. In his concern for the narcotic influence of the press, cinema, radio, and other aspects of popular culture, Lewis betrays a condescension towards – and, at times, a venomous contempt for – the *plebs urbanus*, which lends furious force to his arguments, but does little to win over either the common reader or the liberal critic. Neither of these constituencies had any natural appeal for Lewis, but even so, his urge to antagonize, provoke, and alienate is clearly in tension with his wish for *The Art of Being Ruled* to reach a popular audience (H 78). An author who recommends that *War and Peace* – ‘a book written to rouse the consciousness of the oppressed’ (ABR 112) – should only be made available to society’s rulers, and not to those with ‘ignorantly inflammable’ (ABR 112) minds, is going to sound perverse, at best, when he begins to bemoan a future in which only the wealthy have access to the arts, and goes on to express admiration for ‘the poor man struggling to obtain some of that culture which, owing to the circumstances of his life, has been denied him’ (ABR 160).²⁸

The point here is that Lewis’s élitism is always based on qualities of intellect and aptitude, never on discriminations of wealth or class (including what he saw as the ‘classes’ of race and gender). His depictions of the herd – scornful as they undoubtedly are – are

illustrative, not recommendatory. Nowhere in his writing does Lewis *advocate* the rise of the 'group personality': he *diagnoses* it. Compliant populations might flatter the operations of both totalitarian and supposedly democratic governments, but they are viewed by Lewis with anger, dismay, and at times sheer misanthropic despair: 'the contemporary Public, corrupted and degraded into a semi-imbecility by the operation of this terrible canon of press and publicity technique, by now confirms its pessimism. It has learned to live up to, or down to, its detractor' (*ABR* 74). Carey's claim that Lewis is hostile to popular education, that he denigrates 'any spread of knowledge', relies on a typically incomplete representation of the facts.²⁹ Lewis's hard critique of the existing education system is driven by a conviction that cultural indoctrination has superseded ideals of edification and improvement. Education has become, in combination with the apparatus of mass media, an engine of subtle management: 'Force is a passing and precarious thing, whereas to get inside a person's mind and change his very personality is the effective way of reducing him and making him yours. Merely to chain him up like a dog or a slave is the act of an unimaginative tyrant. To kill him is equally meaningless. It is by taking him when he is young, and educating him, that you can secure him to yourself' (*ABR* 94).

In an accommodation of lesser and greater evils, the flagrancy of open coercion begins to look preferable to the shadiness of pretended emancipation. Lewis's conclusion is a menacing one. It is typically strange and confrontational, but in suggesting that the counterfeit liberty of '*What the Public Wants*' might constitute a new opium of the masses, he is surely producing a social analysis that is closer in its polemical intent to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' (1944), or to Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), or to Jean Baudrillard's *Ecstasy of the Communication* (1988), than it is to *Mein Kampf*. In asking 'Does the Public really want *What the Public Wants*?' (*ABR* 87), Lewis anticipates Adorno's account of a heavily mediated environment in which 'conformity has replaced consciousness', or Herbert Marcuse's declaration that '[a] comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization'.³⁰

Humane and Sensible

When Carey refers to Lewis's 'eager championship of the Führer in *Hitler*' it is unclear which of the monosyllables in the statement 'I do not write this book *from choice*' has been misunderstood (*H* 128).³¹ In fairness to Carey, the book *exists*, and perhaps that is eagerness enough, and the way in which Lewis slithers around the ethical obstacle of the *Judenfrage* is a disgrace that can only really be comprehended as a by-product of sincere enthusiasm. It should be emphasized, however, that at the time of its publication, Hitler was still nearly two years away from becoming Chancellor and over three from declaring himself Führer of the German Reich. The Hitler presented by Lewis was leader of the second largest political party in Germany, a significant figure in local terms but by no means recognized as a major figure on the wider European stage. Indeed, one of the reasons that Lewis undertook to write a study of this 'very typical German "man of the people"' (*H* 31) in the first place was his sense that the significance of Hitler's progress had not even begun to be acknowledged. Whatever its idiocies, *Hitler* was the first full-length analysis of its subject and it articulated, in an atmosphere of general disregard, the urgent need for a full appraisal of events in Germany at the start of the 1930s.³²

In Lewis's poem sequence *One-Way Song*, the Enemy relates that the aim of his 'Hitler book' – 'this most mild brochure' – was to give an 'impartial' report on German manners and to convey 'an impression of the German scene' (*CPP* 48). Significantly, *Rude Assignment* – written nearly twenty years after this – shows that Lewis's justification for the work remained essentially unchanged: 'My general aim [...] was to break the European ostracism of Germany, call in question the wisdom of the Versailles Treaty and get it revised, end the bad behaviour of the French chauvinists, attempt to establish healthy relations in Western Europe' (*RA* 224). This sounds as 'humane and sensible' (*RA* 224) as Lewis remembers it to have been, and the opening pages of the book confirm the basic impulse to throw light on a neglected aspect of current affairs. Emphasizing the geographical centrality of Germany to Europe, he gestures to its historical greatness and contends that, one way or another, it will be 'the key of the New Europe': 'what it dreams and wishes and resents cannot be lightly set aside' (*H* 3-4).

So much for the desire: what, then, of the action? Lewis's identification of himself as neither a 'critic' nor an 'advocate' of National

Socialism, but rather as ‘an exponent’, is open to misinterpretation, but it is clear that he intends to expound in its purest, most objective sense – to *explain*, in other words. Whether the intention is sustained is another matter. It is hard to reconcile, for example, the role of detached observer with a writer who characterizes Nazism as the precursor to ‘such a Golden Age as Man has never either passed through or so much as imagined’ (H 188), and who ends his study with the following lines: ‘I myself am content to regard [Hitler] as the expression of current German manhood – resolved with that admirable tenacity, hardihood, and intellectual acumen of the Teuton, not to take their politics at second-hand, not also to drift, but to seize the big bull of Finance by the horns, and to take a chance for the sake of freedom’ (H 201-2). History makes an ugly nonsense of these words, and these words have made a fool of their author. Notice, though, that even here Lewis is not quite as culpable as he might at first appear to be. Having cast (possibly regretful) doubt on Hitler’s chances of political success – ‘it does not on the face of it seem likely’ (H 201) – he suggests that the Nazi leader should be taken as ‘a symptom, or a point-of-departure’, a product of Versailles and of rotten capitalist politics. In this sense, Lewis’s purpose seems diagnostic or predictive rather than propagandist: ‘Is it not fitter that the Brit should know / The sort of sunlessness makes Hitlers grow?’ (CPP 48).

Dismissing British democracy as ‘merely the Punch and Judy show of Tory and of Whig’ (H 194), and ‘Anglo-Saxony’ as ‘a pure political void’ (H 197), Lewis rehearses criticisms of the parliamentary system which have persisted into the current century. Lewis’s anxiety about the bipolarity of the political mechanism, his unease at the perceived nothingness of the governmental *status quo*, arose from a conviction that Europe had been left damaged and unstable in the wake of the First World War, that its political condition was volatile, and its cultural condition (potentially, at least) terminal. His initial apocalyptic optimism (see *The Caliph’s Design* of 1919) had dwindled rapidly, being replaced by an intuition of directionless drift and shifting ground.³³ At the heart of this was a suspicion that the war had never really ended – or at least had never been reasonably *settled* – and that its mere deferral was the prelude to an even more appalling cataclysm. Demonstrating his characteristic antipathy to nationalism – his view of nationhood as an aggressive falsification of reality – he asserts that ‘[t]he Great War was, in fact, a Great Civil War’ (H 142) but reluctantly concedes that the only

hope for peace rests, at the moment, within the fantasy of strong borders: 'The Hitler Movement has done wonders inside the frontiers of Germany, and its leaders should, I think, extend their message – which also would be a message of peace – to other countries of a similar culture (H 142).³⁴ This bizarre and historically deplorable misreading of events represents a considerable compromise for Lewis, who was instinctively internationalist in his opinions. It indicates, in fact, the distinctive fault-line in his work where utopian idealism grinds against cultural pessimism. Experience of the trenches had left Lewis with an obsession that war was always imminent: 'A state of emergency came to appear for me, as for most soldiers, a permanent thing' (H 129). Lewis's early perceptions of Nazism are skewed by a belief that crisis management and damage limitation are the only options open to European governments. In a spirit of paranoiac awe, he fatally overlooks those features of Hitlerism that he neither understands nor supports, notably its 'incomprehensible' attitude to the Jews (H 4).

By the time he came to write *The Hitler Cult* (1939), Lewis had more than sobered up from the theatrical intoxication of fascist performance. Indeed, the atavistic melodrama of Nazi self-promotion – the 'cult of the Kolossal' (HC 63) – became not only a focus of particular scorn but a key factor within his wider critique of European culture in the months before open hostilities. In 1931, however, his sensitivity to the injustices of Versailles led him to feel an authenticity of grievance behind the spectacle of 'a monster meeting' of 20,000 people in the Berlin Sportspalast, the 'unmistakable accent of passion, and of impressive conviction' (H 5), 'something like the physical pressure of one immense, indignant thought' (H 10-11). Describing the events he witnessed as a kind of 'political cinema' (H 12), Lewis appears to prefer their mass-mediated bombast over the low-level disingenuousness and shadowy torpor of British democracy. As is so often the case in his writing at this time (or at this time *in particular*), perspicacity goes hand-in-hand with recklessness: he recognizes from the outset the Nazis' attunement to the new media age, but almost entirely fails to understand the message embodied in the formal mechanism of communication.³⁵

The 'religion' of Hitlerism has, in Lewis's initial misunderstanding of it, an essentially isolationist character, its modest aims being to confront the war debt, safeguard national borders, and challenge cultural decadence. Lewis's preference for the conspicuous autocracy of fascism over the covert manipulations of supposedly democratic rule is the

reductio ad absurdum of a perennial critique of open government. Agreeing with Mosley's claim that there had never been democracy in England, he adds a mischievous and highly significant rider: 'He might of course have added that there had never been any democracy anywhere' (*H* 193-94). Germany, he suggests, has been given the unique opportunity 'of voting for its future tyrant', and the sheer mad pessimism of this goes some way towards explaining why *Hitler* reads, at times, like a kind of Swiftian satire, something out of the same stable as *A Modest Proposal* (1729).

Speculating on the possibilities for an extremist alternative in Britain, Lewis rejects the existing European models of fascism as inimical – 'it would be better if it were not Italian, nor yet German, in inspiration' (*H* 198) – but stops short of offering support for the kind of home-grown fascism represented by Mosley. He has already, of course, dismissed Marxism as 'a fanatically dehumanizing doctrine' (*H* 182) and caricatured the Communist as a species of melancholic hystericist: 'Everything for him is *difficult*, and incredibly bitter and black. His is the romantic, the stormy palette' (*H* 184). The Nazis, he claims, are 'laughing and gay' in comparison. So what exactly *does* Lewis support in the pages of *Hitler*? If democracy is finished and Western civilization is on the brink of self-destruction, then what next? Faced with this question, *Hitler* offers little more than a counsel of despair: 'Under the circumstances, why throw up your hands in horror, Mr. Democrat, when confronted with Mussolini, Pilsudski or Hitler' (*H* 195). This, it seems to me, is the true *badness* of Lewis's most maligned book: not that it celebrated Nazism, but that it gave up on everything else. It is a depressed and depressing text, occasionally perceptive in its perversity, but mostly wrong, sad, and disturbing. Politically, it marks Lewis's – and Europe's – long, dark night of the soul: 'Gentleness, beauty, sweet reason must veil their heads, they must give way to arguments of *power*' (*H* 130). Ten years later, Lewis's vision had fully adjusted to the gloom: 'We who are democrats have likewise to be on our guard. From a different starting-point we might, for a similar reason, evolve in the same – the fascist – direction. If we do not wish to find ourselves fascists tomorrow, it might be well to consider very carefully what the conditions are which produce that ethical void so propitious to fascism' (*ALW* 3). The sort of sunlessness that makes Hitlers grow? In a strange way – in *many* strange ways – this is a consideration that had begun long before *Hitler* was written, one which reached a particular pitch of

composite intensity by the time Lewis came to write his most easily dismissed book, *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive! or A New War in the Making* (1937).

Ned and Launcelot

Establishing a context for Lewis's 'pro-Franco' book, Bridson judges it to be 'perhaps his worst political squib' and adds that 'if it is the privilege of every author to write one thoroughly bad book, Lewis [had here] availed himself of that privilege'.³⁶ Meyers concurs, branding the volume in plain terms as 'Lewis's worst book', a 'superfluous' publication 'redeemed only by a brilliant drawing on the dust-jacket'.³⁷ Significantly, the book casts a kind of demonic shadow around *Revenge for Love*, described by Bridson as a 'cool appraisal of Communism in action', which was published in the same year and which might be seen as having many of the qualities which *Count Your Dead* lacks: refined structure, psychological subtlety, wit, charm, coherence, edge, not to mention a degree of political discernment.³⁸ Even so, it seems to me that for all its many and often lamentable faults, *Count Your Dead* is more than the cumbersome sum of its parts and represents an intriguing continuation of Lewis's earlier attempts to probe the culturo-political situation through fictive and dialogic modes of writing.³⁹

When reading *Count Your Dead*, it is customary to associate Lewis with the character of Ned – 'a good Bolsho-Tory' (CYD 76) who is anti-Communist, anti-internationalist, and anti-war – in opposition to his deceased idiot of an acquaintance, Launcelot Nidwit, an embodiment of the 'Toby-jug world' (CYD 26) of British politics with its 'Hitler complex' (CYD 75) and 'bogus' (CYD 44) class obsessions. The partition between Ned and Launcelot is placed under constant formal strain within the book, however, and ultimately it begins to disappear altogether as their voices and arguments effectively merge. Acting as literary executor to Launcelot's estate, Ned is supposedly editing the papers of his 'absurd friend' (CYD 1), whom he claims to have killed with 'an overdose of the truth' (CYD 2). His aim, on the surface at least, is to expose Launcelot as 'a monument [...] of objectionable folly', but it soon becomes clear that the two men – friends all their lives – are in many ways two aspects of the same personality. When Launcelot likens Baldwin to 'a character in Bunyan', for instance, and writes that the

In His Bad Books

Prime Minister would ‘pull down the world rather than let Hitler live’ (CYD 190-91), it is impossible to distinguish his accent from that of his putative editor. A similar warping of perspectives is achieved when he launches into a defence of Spanish fascism:

General Franco is an ordinary old-fashioned anti-monarchical Spanish *liberal*, like his airman brother. [...] Franco is part of sleepy old bull-fighting Spain, – no more a Fascist than you are, but a Catholic soldier who didn’t like seeing priests and nuns killed. He just didn’t want to see all his friends murdered for no better reason than that they all went to mass and to the more expensive cafés and usually were able to scrape enough money together to have a haircut and a shave. (CYD 196)

It is as if Launcelot is taking his words straight out of Ned’s Introduction – or, for that matter, out of Lewis’s *Left Wings Over Europe*. The unreliability of the narrators is at odds with the ostensibly straightforward aim of the book to provide a commonsensical satire of gung-ho militarist folly. Ned and Launcelot seem to be set up as binary opposites, but they occupy an anomalous zone where positions are far from resolved. Lewis’s third peace pamphlet is characterized by a kind of baroque excess of meaning which signals uncertainty rather than the boorish right-wing dogmatism with which it has usually been associated. It would be easy to dismiss such an effect as simply poor writing – and therefore to confirm previous assessments of *Count Your Dead* as turgid, confused, and obnoxious – if the book was not so strikingly and consistently self-aware in its handling of vocal and rhetorical ambiguity. Early on in the text, Ned remarks on the imbrication of ideas between himself and Launcelot: ‘he adopted my views on many subjects. And they jostled in the strangest fashion with his own’ (CYD 8). Launcelot, for his part, notes the same tendency in the automatic writing of his manuscripts, speculating on the possibility that he might be ‘psychic’: ‘It isn’t always me speaking. Sometimes I’m damned if I don’t reel off whole chunks of ‘Thoughts of old Ned’s’ (CYD 235).

‘Why try and give the impression of a consistent and indivisible character?’ Lewis had asked in the second issue of *BLAST*. ‘You must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion’ (B2 91). There are similar statements in other early writings which indicate that the clouding of personalities in *Count Your Dead* might be more than a

result of rough and hasty craft. Most memorably, perhaps, ‘The Code of a Herdsman’ includes ‘*Never* fall into the vulgarity of being or assuming yourself to be one ego’ and ‘Contradict yourself. In order to live, you must remain broken up.’⁴⁰ Such aphoristic challenges to the integrity of the authored subject anticipate something of the spirit of Julia Kristeva’s writings on Menippean discourse and the carnivalesque, and there is much to be gained from considering the relationship between Ned and Launcelot (and their author) from this perspective. ‘Within the carnival,’ Kristeva writes, ‘the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of *the author* emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as man and mask.’⁴¹ I have previously invoked this theoretical formulation in my discussion of *One-Way Song*, where the dominant characteristics of the carnivalesque manner – including social and political provocation, extreme physical comedy, and themes of ‘the double’ – are sharply in evidence. They seem, if anything, even more apparent within the operations of *Count Your Dead*, and it is notable that the bleeding together of voices in the book enacts an extended version of the coalescent dialogue that dominates the ‘If So the Man You Are’ section of Lewis’s poem sequence.

Launcelot is artlessly explicit in his sense of himself as an unstable voice, alerting the reader to his particular talents as a counterfeiter: ‘one of my only real accomplishments is *forging*. I forge signatures so you wouldn’t tell the difference’ (CYD 290). In the world of the book, this takes on a comic-existentialist significance, as in the scene where Launcelot confronts Ned about his description of Colonel Blimp as ‘an old stage prop’:

‘So you think that Blimp is unreal!’ I said.

‘As unreal as you are, Launcelot!’ he laughed [...]. (CYD 248)

The layered ironies of this exchange are intensified when it is recognized that the figure of Blimp has been introduced to the narrative via Launcelot’s ruminations on whether Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Pauncefoot-Runt CMG DSO is its ‘original’. Pauncefoot-Runt subsequently attempts to throttle Launcelot. In a recension of simulacra worthy of Jean Baudrillard himself, fictional characters come to blows over the rumours of war and their own fictionality.⁴²

‘You’ve reached the point at which you mistake living people for political cartoons’, Ned accuses Launcelot after the scuffle with

Pauncefoot-Runt, and yet it is Ned himself who began his task of 'editing' by characterizing his late friend as a 'political cartoon' (CYD 254). Describing Launcelot's world as a paranoid 'phantasmagoria', Ned presents a vivid illustration of the urgent historical immanence of the conflict between order and chaos: 'For you, the tables and chairs and the walls of your dwellings are sliding and slipping away; disappearing into the ground, or forever moving about. Whereas for the opposite camp they are *fest* – objectively realized, euclidianly understood. They have one steadfast character. They have personality. They occupy space. They stand still' (CYD 268).⁴³ Unlike, it might be suggested, either the *dramatis personae* or the *modus operandi* of this strange, neglected, and detested book. Lewis, with his antipathy to flux, undoubtedly aspired towards the stable and the certain, but he exemplified in *Count Your Dead* (as perhaps nowhere else in his work) the profound perplexity through which, in politics – as in art, as in life – these are relentlessly frustrated.

If nothing else, the failed experiment of *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* dramatizes the tensions and uncertainties of Lewis's political position as he came to the end of his 'fascist phase' and began the reversal into anti-Hitlerian invective and a pro-war attitude. The book is confused, but it is confused in a revealing, important, and self-conscious way. When it makes reflexive reference to *Left Wings Over Europe* – written, Launcelot tells us, by 'some writer fellow' (CYD 224) – it suggests an element of critical reflection which might be dismissed as trivial if it didn't fundamentally affect the way in which the book is read. Launcelot's musings on his method of composition, for example, can be seen as a form of self-satire when considered alongside Lewis's own practices of impetuous political commentary in the 1930s: 'I got out a lot of foolscap and a pen and ink and I let fly' (CYD 89). The fact that Ned holds Launcelot's writings in contempt – 'He calls my Thinking Aloud the dance of the Dark Forces of Unreason' (CYD 141) – and that Launcelot himself is so self-effacing in this respect – 'he's got as much grey matter in his little finger as I've got in the whole of my body' (CYD 113) – adds to the impression of auto-criticism. There is a dimension of both sympathy and condescension in Lewis's first-person representation of Launcelot's discursive improvisation: 'My last Thought rather surprised me when I read it over. I didn't know I thought that way! It's a very singular thing, but until one begins Thinking Aloud and writing it all down, one doesn't know what one *does* think' (CYD 221).

For a writer who is producing works that are written to the moment across the grain of a calamitous time, there is the inevitable danger that the thoughts which emerge will become thoughts which condemn. This can lead to a position of moral equivocation which might seem comically inane in relation to Launcelot, but reprehensibly evasive in relation to Lewis: 'It may be the devil speaking. As I've explained, or haven't I, I can't take any responsibility for what I write when I'm thinking aloud' (CYD 107). It is significant that Lewis chose, in the third and least politically confident book of his appeasement trilogy, to take on satirical personae, effectively (but, as it would turn out, ineffectually) distancing himself from the discussion it contained. This discussion reaches a condition of gothic rhapsody in the last page of the book, reminiscent of the macabre visions of Lautréamont's Maldoror: 'I can see all the dead, each body with its group of mourners. I would like to say to these bereaved and helpless masses now, if I could reach them: *Count your dead!* I would take each one aside and shout: *They are alive!* Can't you see that they are not dead *yet* – though people are preparing to butcher them in millions. For *nothing at all*. In a Great War, all about nothing' (CYD 358).⁴⁴ In a passage pitched somewhere between hysterical raving and visionary authority, Ned communicates both the unrelenting force of Lewis's dread of war and the principled historical opacity that it led him into. Six years after *Hitler* and two years before *The Hitler Cult, Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* marks a vital crisis-point in Lewis's painful translation of *nothing* into *everything*.

Becoming Wise

'What fools we shall look to future men!' Lewis declared in *Left Wings Over Europe*, demonstrating an unerring ability to set ironic snares for his own future reputation: 'Can we *always* be caught in even the cheapest Messianic net?' (LWE 12). His belief that he might distinguish between 'rationale' and 'justification' (H 34) in his evasive early reflections on the *Judenfrage* is naïve, and when he writes of his intention 'to soften somewhat the contours of this preliminary snag' (H 35) the inappropriate mundanity of the metaphor is deeply disturbing. And yet, with typical perversity, the appeasement of *Hitler* and its successors marks a crucial stage in the formation of Lewis's response to fascism and, inevitably, in his ongoing critique of democracy. It is natural for

supporters of Lewis to wish that he had never written the fascist texts, but without them it seems unlikely that *The Hitler Cult*, *The Jews: Are They Human?*, and *Anglosaxony* (or even *America and Cosmic Man*) would have been written.⁴⁵ To his opponents, the political and ethical positions that Lewis assumed after 1938 undoubtedly represent a *volte face* so astonishing as to be implausible. But to follow the intellectual current that runs between *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Anglosaxony* is to realize the extent to which Lewis engaged with politics at the level of uneasy critical process rather than ideological attitude or obligation. As a result, he was generally careless of categories and sceptical about the usefulness of such concepts as Left and Right. He wrote in *Left Wings Over Europe* of their convenient reductiveness: ‘So much for these terms [...] and for the mercurial and diverse reality which they are apt to conceal’ (LWE 42). Even so, his characterization of himself the following year as ‘the most broadminded “leftwinger” in England’ (BB 340) reads like an offhand draft of the more considered self-portrait that he would provide on the eve of war: ‘I must confess that my sympathy lies with the parties of the Left’ (HC 139).⁴⁶

Lewis’s approach to politics was dangerous and, in some aspects, seriously defective, but it nevertheless – and in spite of rumours to the contrary – combined thematic and ethical consistency with a genuine flexibility and historical alertness. As he put it himself, in plain terms, towards the end of *The Hitler Cult*: ‘I have had my eyes fixed upon the political scene now for six years without intermission. My conclusions to-day differ, not unnaturally, from those arrived at earlier’ (HC 241). In the political writings of his *Hitler* period, Lewis allowed cultural itchiness and apprehension to make him reckless, but his subsequent renunciation of Right-wing extremism was informed by a similarly inflamed sense of urgency. He is despised for having written a sympathetic study of Hitler as a peacemaker in 1931, but his production of an excoriating denunciation of him as ‘a *destroyer of culture*’ (HC 114), who was ‘capable of almost any violence’ (HC 132), eight years later is seldom recognized. *The Hitler Cult* is not just an act of self-serving revisionism, it is a brilliant piece of polemical analysis in its own right. If its near-namesake had not been written, it would doubtless now be seen as a (perhaps *the*) key contemporary document of committed British anti-Nazism. Then again, if there had been no *Hitler* there could have been no *Hitler Cult*. If Lewis had not misread Hitler as a pragmatic and visionary man of peace he could never, with quite the same acerbity, have re-read him as a lethally

intoxicated and deranged romantic. If he had not been so casual about *Mein Kampf* in 1931, he could not have been so lacerating about it in 1939. 'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise,' wrote William Blake.⁴⁷ Meyers, reflecting on Lewis's political progress, puts it rather more prosaically: 'Fascism involved ideas and people whom he utterly despised – once he recognised them'.⁴⁸ Such belatedness was to prove unforgivable, of course, no doubt accounting for the peculiar power of the line which opens (and furnishes the title for) the second chapter of his last non-fiction work, *The Writer and the Absolute*: 'It is dangerous to live, but to write is much more so' (WA 9).⁴⁹ To read such a statement alongside the final declaration of *Left Wings Over Europe* is to experience the full, strange irony and perverse authenticity of Lewis's political writings: 'It is impossible not to resent the fact that one has been so right – that one has not by good fortune been *wrong!*' (LWE 333).

Notes

¹ Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), 77

² The 'protofascist' reading of Lewis's inter-war politics originates in Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1979), 14-15.

³ D. G. Bridson, *The Filibuster: A Study of the Political Ideas of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Cassell, 1972), 3. Bridson's inventory runs from *The Lion and the Fax* (1927, but written before 1926's *The Art of Being Ruled*) to *Rotting Hill* (1951). His tally only relates to the 'primarily political works' in the canon of Lewis's literary output. It does not include the 'political sidelights' in his other written work (notably such novels as *The Revenge for Love* (1937) and *The Vulgar Streak* (1941)), or – for that matter – in his visual artwork.

⁴ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 182.

⁵ Or, as Peter Nicholls has recognized, a 'one-dimensional' travesty of Modernism.' See Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), vii.

⁶ Books by Bridson and Gąsiorek have already been invoked. Other reference points include Tom Normand, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paul

Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000); and a series of important articles by Alan Munton, spanning: ‘The Politics of Wyndham Lewis’, *PN Review* 1 (March 1976): 34-39; “‘Imputing Noxiousness’: Aggression and Mutilation in Recent Lewis Criticism’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* IV (1997): 5-19; ‘Fantasies of Violence: The Consequences of Not Reading Wyndham Lewis’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* V (1998): 31-49; and ‘Wyndham Lewis: From Proudhon to Hitler (and back): the Strange Political Journey of Wyndham Lewis’, *e-rea: revue d'études anglophone* 4. 2 (automne 2007): 27-33, at <<http://www.e-rea.org>> (last accessed 12 August 2011).

⁷ Andrzej Gąsiorek, ‘Editorial’, *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies* 1. 1 (2010), unpaginated. For a terse summary of the situation a decade ago, see Paul O’Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 636.

⁸ Jessica Burstein, review of Vincent Sherry, *Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, and Radical Modernism*, and Toby Avarad Foshay, *Wyndham Lewis and the Avant-Garde: The Politics of the Intellect*, in *Modernism/modernity*, 1. 2 (1994): 172-74, 172.

⁹ Although why modernism should be so consistently be marked out as the exclusive territory of fascist fellow travellers is questionable, since possible culprits can easily be found elsewhere: at various times, and in varying degrees, such figures as G. B. Shaw, H. G. Wells, Edmund Blunden, Evelyn Waugh, Hilaire Belloc, and Roy Campbell all showed empathy for aspects of European fascism. The case of Henry Williamson, *Tarka the Otter* (1927) author and BUF member, is better known. Lewis himself, in *The Hitler Cult and How It Will End* (1939) would note that he ‘was not the only person who was deceived’ (HC 40), an observation more than borne out by such works as John Harrison, *The Reactionaries: a Study of the Anti-Democratic Intelligentsia* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966); Alastair Hamilton, *The Appeal of Fascism: a Study of Intellectuals and Fascism, 1919-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1971); and Richard Griffiths, *Fellow Travellers of the Right: British Enthusiasts for Nazi Germany 1933-39* (London: Constable, 1980).

¹⁰ Stan Smith, ‘Re-Righting Lefty: Wyndham Lewis and Wystan in the Thirties’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* IX-X (2002-3): 34-45. Oswald Mosley’s progressive socialist ‘New Party’ – formed early in 1931, nine months after he had stormed out of the Labour Government – was broken up following a visit to Mussolini’s Italy in 1932 and replaced, before the end of the year, by his British Union of Fascists. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald formed his ‘National Government’ coalition with Tory Leader Stanley Baldwin.

¹¹ 'In one of the Odes I express all the sentiments with which his followers hailed the advent of Hitler [...]. My name on the title page seems a pseudonym for someone else, someone talented but near the border of sanity, who might well, in a year or two, become a Nazi.' See W. H. Auden, *The Orators* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 7. The ode in question is the 'birthday ode' to John Warner: 'Roar Gloucestershire, do yourself proud'.

¹² Two issues of *The Enemy* were published in 1927, and another in 1929. The Enemy persona was a synthesis of the earlier Tyro character (two issues of *The Tyro* were published in 1921 and 1922) and the eponymous anti-hero of the 1914 play *The Enemy of the Stars* (revised 1932). The Enemy went on to play a central role in the 'If So The Man You Are' section of *One-Way Song* (1933). Presumably, in developing the persona, Lewis did not have in mind the kind of easy equation which Carey attempts in *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, where he catalogues the 'obvious' psychological parallels between Lewis and Hitler (failed artists, obsessive, repetitive, twisted, filled with hatred). Questions of aesthetic judgement aside, there can surely be no serious correlation between a man who (in spite of his continuing pariah status) is generally recognized as one of the most important British modernist artists, and a man whose romantic juvenilia (anti-modernist to its rotten core) will never be more than a brief footnote to his achievements as an architect of European genocide. However wrong-headed and potentially dangerous Lewis's *Hitler* might have been, any easy equation of the author with the subject is beyond unjust: it is absurd.

¹³ There is not the room to explore *The Jews: Are They Human?* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939) as I would ideally like to here, but it is worth noting how – for all its essentialist stereotyping – Lewis goes a good way in this book towards doing himself justice as an opponent of anti-semitism, an advocate of tolerance, and a promoter of cultural diversity. I am currently working on a separate, but related, essay in which I consider the vision of *The Jews: Are They Human?* alongside Lewis's other 'race' texts, *Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting-pot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929) and *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (London: Robert Hale, 1938).

¹⁴ The phrase is, of course, Auden's, from 'September 1, 1939'. See W. H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 249.

¹⁵ William M. Chace, 'On Lewis's Politics: The Polemics Polemically Answered', in Jeffrey Meyers (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: A Reevaluation* (London: Athlone Press, 1980): 149-65, 149.

¹⁶ Munton, 'Fantasies of Violence', 31-32.

¹⁷ A recurrent idea in Lewis's writings of the 1920 and 1930s, 'The Politics of the Intellect' gave its title to the final chapter of *The Art of Being Ruled*.

¹⁸ Or, indeed, the earlier claim that 'in the abstract I believe the sovietic system to be the best' (*ABR* 320).

¹⁹ Gašiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism*, 77-78.

²⁰ The two figures are, in fact, yoked together unfavourably as early as the 'Vortices and Notes' of *BLAST*: 'His war-talk, his sententious elevation and much besides, Marinetti picked up from Nietzsche' (*WLA* 35).

²¹ The pattern of categorical reversal which Lewis here reads into the politics of the day – Left-wing extremism looping into Right-wing extremism – has wider social and cultural implications. I suspect, for instance, that it was a direct influence on the tetradic 'law' of media effects which Marshall McLuhan formulated (with his son, Eric) in the 1970s, according to which the impact of any cultural phenomenon ultimately extends itself to a point at which it reverses into its antithesis. See Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992) and Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²² 'The Diabolical Principle' original appeared in *The Enemy* 3 (London: Arthur Press, 1929): 9-84.

²³ George Orwell, 'Why I Write', in *Collected Essays* (London: Mercury Books, 1961), 422. I am thinking of Lewis's sustained and considered analysis of Orwell's work in *The Writer and the Absolute* (see *WA* 151-93), and not of his self-defensive attack on Orwell in *Rude Assignment*, in which he is derided as 'a big boy behaving like a small boy' (*RA* 86) after accusing Lewis of becoming a Communist. Lewis in *The Writer and the Absolute* refers to Orwell as 'the only good writer of a decade or more' and, significantly, 'almost purely a political writer' (*WA* 153).

²⁴ David Trotter, 'A most modern misanthrope: Wyndham Lewis and the pursuit of anti-pathos' (review of Paul O'Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* and Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Artist and Writer*), at *Guardian Unlimited*, 23 January 2001 <<http://tinyurl.com/6k3rzc9>> (last accessed 12 August 2011). Originally published in *The London Review of Books*.

²⁵ The point is repeated in *The Mysterious Mr Bull*: 'A General Election is, of course, a notorious farce' (*MMB* 94).

²⁶ Wyndham Lewis, "'Left Wings'" and the C3 Mind', in *The British Union Quarterly*, 1 (January-April 1937): 22-34, 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸ There is a parallel here, and a point of contrast, with the attitude of D. H. Lawrence: 'I don't intend my books for the generality of readers. I count it a mistake of our mistaken democracy that every man who can read print is allowed to believe that he can read all that is printed.' See D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious/ Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), 11. Reflecting on this, it is worth noting that Lawrence's great champion, F. R. Leavis, anticipates Carey in his approach to Lewis. Although his primary aim is to identify Lawrence as a 'representative of health and sanity', his accompanying case against Lewis shares Carey's insistence on the intellectual snobbery of his admirers: 'Those who plume themselves on being intelligent but find [Lawrence's] notion of intelligence uncongenial will prefer Mr Wyndham Lewis – even a Wyndham Lewis who comes out for Hitler.' See F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), 238.

²⁹ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, 190.

³⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, *New German Critique* 6 (Autumn 1975): 12-19, 17; Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: The Ideology of Industrial Society* (London: Sphere Books, 1968), 19.

³¹ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, 182.

³² Munton summed up the idiocy in a single well-turned sentence over thirty years ago: '[Lewis] was a deluded apologist, and *Hitler* and *Count Your Dead* are stupid books, not evil ones.' See Munton, 'The Politics of Wyndham Lewis', 38.

³³ See also Philip Head's discussion of *The Caliph's Design* in this issue of *The Journal of Wyndham Lewis Studies*.

³⁴ Even Germany's entry into the Rhineland in March 1936 – in direct violation of both the Versailles and Locarno treaties – would do nothing to shake Lewis's belief in the essentially introverted and pacific attitude of Hitlerism. *Left Wings Over Europe* would refer to 'this culminating act of rehabilitation by Hitler, which finally re-established Germany as a sovereign state, within its own frontiers, subject only to its own law; though outside its own frontiers ready to subscribe to the general law of nations' (*LWE* 17).

³⁵ In Marshall McLuhan's well-known but widely misunderstood formulation 'the medium is the message', the 'message' as *effect* or *impact* is distinguished from the usual notion of *content*. The true meaning of the Nazi rallies, in this respect, is their violent channelling of collective emotion, not their close articulation of specific ideas or issues: it is corporeal rhetoric rather than political expression. Lewis misses this in *Hitler*, but grasps it

fully in *The Hitler Cult*. Of course, McLuhan's categories can be accused of oversimplifying the processes of mediation, and this is one of many instances where Lewis's own reflections on media are shown to be ultimately more sophisticated than those of his acolyte.

³⁶ Bridson, *The Filibuster*, 167. In the closing pages of *Some Kind of Genius*, O'Keeffe provides a terse summation of the reputation of *Hitler's* sequels: '*Left Wings Over Europe* and *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* are remembered, if they are remembered at all, not as anti-war books, but as pro-Mussolini and pro-Franco respectively' (635-36).

³⁷ Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (Boston, London, Melbourne and Henlet: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 229.

³⁸ Bridson, *The Filibuster*, 167.

³⁹ The first of these can be seen in 'The Code of a Herdsman', the latter in the 'BLASTS' and 'BLESSES' of Vorticism, the 'Tyronic Dialogues' of 'X' and 'F' (1922), and the proto-Beckettian double-acts of Hanp and Arghol in *Enemy of the Stars* (1914 / 1932) and Pullmann and Satterthwaite in *The Childermass: Section I* (1928).

⁴⁰ Julian Symons (ed.), *The Essential Wyndham Lewis* (1982) (London: Vintage, 1991): 25-30, 27 and 29.

⁴¹ Toril Moi (ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 49. I have suggested elsewhere the similarities between Kristeva's language here and that used by Lewis in his 1917 essay (revised 1927), 'Inferior Religions'. See Ivan Phillips, 'Enemy Lines: Form, Politics and Identity in Wyndham Lewis's *One-Way Song*', *Wyndham Lewis Annual*, XII (2005): 59-79.

⁴² Jean Baudrillard, who has been widely misunderstood for declaring the 'end of reality' in his 1979 essay 'Simulacra and Simulation', went on to attract an almost Lewisite degree of opprobrium for a series of articles published in *Libération* and *The Guardian* at the time of the first Gulf War (1991). These articles were subsequently re-published under the title *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁴³ Far from being a text in a void, as its dismal reputation would suggest, *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* contains a number of features which might be seen as having formal correspondences with other better known and more obviously 'experimental' works. The description of dwelling which folds in on itself, for instance, bears some imaginative resemblance to the room 'full of furniture' into which Mr Allingham leads Samuel Bennet in Dylan Thomas's unfinished novel *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (London: J. M. Dent, 1955), a book begun during the Second World War and reflecting, I suspect, something of Thomas's experience of the Blitz, and more generally

of the situation of a world turned upside down that the pre-war Lewis was so desperate to prevent. Elsewhere, the description of Launcelot Nidwit's father as having lost his left buttock in the Boer War (CYD 4) suggests at least a passing reference to the similarly intimately war-damaged Uncle Toby in Laurence Sterne's definitively indefinite 'shaggy dog story', *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67).

⁴⁴ Lewis provides a brisk but striking critique of Lautréamont's *Les Chants des Maldoror* in the final edition of *The Enemy*. This formed part of his polemic *The Diabolical Principle*.

⁴⁵ I would go so far as to suggest that some of the finest fictional writings of Lewis's last twenty years would not have been written either (or, at least, not in the form that we have them), most obviously his 'anti-Hitler' novel *The Vulgar Streak* (1941) but also the social analysis stories of *Rotting Hill* (1951), the vulnerable existentialism of *Self Condemned* (1954), and the redemptive allegorization of the second and third books of the unfinished *The Human Age* tetralogy, *Monstre Gai* (1955) and *Malign Fiesta* (1955).

⁴⁶ By the summer of 1951, when he was writing *Rotting Hill*, Lewis had become disillusioned with the Labour government of Clement Attlee and – feeling no attraction to Winston Churchill's Conservative Party – had returned to something resembling his pre-war attitude of apolitical distance. However, it is interesting to recognize that his stance in *Rotting Hill* no longer pretends to the kind of supra-political purity that had belied earlier works.

⁴⁷ William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (1957) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 151. Another axiom from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-93) might be similarly apposite: 'If others had not been foolish, we should be so' (152).

⁴⁸ Meyers, *The Enemy*, 245-46.

⁴⁹ The chapter is called 'It Is More Dangerous To Write'. The previous chapter, 'Objective Truth', ends with the following bitter rumination: 'What has befallen me, or rather my books, proves what is my contention: namely that the mid-XXth Century writer is only nominally free, and should not fail to acquire a thorough knowledge of the invisible frontiers surrounding his narrow patch of liberty, to transgress which may be fatal' (WA 8).