'Jujitsu for the Governed'? Wyndham Lewis and the Problem of Power

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By "man of the world", I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and legitimate reasons behind all its customs.

Baudelaire

This disease we name power is most unfortunately power over us. If we were not there, there would be none of this type of power at all: without any Germans there could have been no Hitler. What is really terrifying is that it is all something derived from us.

Lewis

Wyndham Lewis often claimed that he had strayed into politics as though by accident. He held the turbulent times in which he lived responsible for this irksome distraction from the task of creating new work in words and paint. Yet the times in which he was active witnessed not only a reshaping of the arts but also a transformation of the socio-political world, with the result that the aesthetic and political realms became so intertwined that any distinction between 'critical' and 'creative' periods, as urged by an earlier figure such as Matthew Arnold, became hard to sustain. Lewis throughout his life sought to maintain the boundary between aesthetics and politics, arguing that the distinctive contribution of the arts to civilized life rested on their absolute autonomy. His involvement in political matters arose in large measure out of a protectionist impulse: the desire to safeguard the arts from external interference of whatever kind. But Lewis recognized that in a heavily politicized age (marked especially by the agonistic struggle between rival ideologies) to defend the public sphere is of paramount importance, since it becomes the space par excellence within which debate and the resolution of conflicts may take place. His critical interventions in the cultural politics of his time need to be seen in this light, for, despite his protestations that he really wished to think only of his art, they asseverate his commitment to the intellectual's public role.

Lewis’s politics have been subjected to a number of critical analyses, and I don’t propose to go over this ground in detail. This essay is concerned primarily with his reflections on power, and, although there are obvious connections between this issue and his politics, I shall restrict my remarks on the latter to those aspects that have a direct bearing on the former, namely his critique of liberalism and his account of the state. That said, Lewis’s observations about fascism always loom large in any discussion of his thought, so this vexed issue is to some extent unavoidable; one aim of this essay is to clarify the nature of these observations by shifting the angle of vision onto Lewis’s preoccupation with power in the wake of the First World War. From this perspective, it is easier to see not only why Lewis adopted certain (disastrous) positions but also why he later abandoned them. In order to make good on this claim I shall focus above all on The Art of Being Ruled (1926), Paleface (1929), and The Vulgar Streak (1941), although, in view of Lewis’s scatter-gun approach to writing, reference will also be made to a number of other key texts. I shall trace the shift from Lewis’s early post-First World War cultural optimism
to the sombre views expressed in the works of the mid to late twenties; assess his discussion of the need for a strong state (the assault on liberalism) that nonetheless preserves personal autonomy; outline how his development of a powerful form of ideology critique derived from his conviction that the public sphere was being eroded and that most individuals (including so-called avant-garde artists and writers) were incapable of grasping the real workings of power; and I shall conclude by considering his critical comments on fascism, which he systematically aligned with the cults of force and action he had deplored from the days of Blast, an alignment that received a clear, if problematic, expression in The Vulgar Streak.

II

Vorticism, the pre-war movement in which Lewis was a central presence, was committed primarily to artistic change. Lewis wrote: 'By Vorticism we mean (a) Activity as opposed to the tasteful passivity of Picasso; (b) SIGNIFICANCE as opposed to the dull or anecdotal character to which the Naturalist is condemned; (c) ESSENTIAL MOVEMENT and ACTIVITY (such as energy of a mind) as opposed to the imitative cinematography, the fuss and hysterics of the Futurists.' Even if we allow for the exaggeration of differences between rival movements here, a staple of avant-garde polemics in the struggle for cultural hegemony, it's noticeable that Lewis was theorising an aesthetic characterized by its productivity and its capacity for intervention. Its vitality was intellectual (marked by the energy of a mind) and focussed, not, as he disparagingly claimed of the Futurists, motivated by a sense of febrile excitation. This aspect of Vorticism briefly survived the war, finding expression in several of the essays written in its immediate aftermath, perhaps especially The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where Is Your Vortex? Lewis in this pamphlet attacked studio art, arguing that painting, sculpture, and design must be integrated into life, and urging that London be entirely rebuilt. His utopian longings were still very much in evidence: 'The first great modern building that arose in this city would soon carry everything before it. Hand in hand with the engineer by force of circumstances, his problems so exactly modern ones, this surprising building of our new architect would provide a new form-content for our everyday vision'. (WLA 139)

As conceived by Lewis, Vorticist creativity had been connected with the desire for radical artistic and cultural change. Vorticism sought to transform social life by means of art, and, although it was in certain respects pessimistic about the public's capacity to break out of its habitual torpor, it still aimed 'to make individuals, wherever found'. The post-war Caliph's Design was more explicit, claiming that the artist's duty was 'to desire equity, mansuetude, in human relations, to fight against violence, to work for formal beauty, for more intelligent significance in the ordering of our lives'. (WLA 136) But Lewis's thought had from the outset exhibited a tension between utopian modernist aspirations and anxiety about society's intractability, its stubborn resistance to rational planning; his articulation of a positive orientation to the future in essays written immediately after the Great War was even then tinged with scepticism and a sense that his hopes would be frustrated. In this respect, 'The Children of the New Epoch' (1921), which appeared in the first issue of The Tyro, is revealing. Lewis in this brief piece saw the war as the decisive event that separated the dead past from a still emergent future, arguing that those who were committed to what lay ahead should have no nostalgic desire for return but should move 'with satisfaction, forward, and away from the sealed and obstructed past'. (WLA 195) The present, however, was a No Man's Land, a period of stasis in which there were distinct signs of movement and development but as yet no clear direction. The future was uncertain. It is here that the concerns which were increasingly to preoccupy Lewis in the later 1920s start to emerge, for in a passage such as the following one it is easy to pick up on the writer's sense of vulnerability and frustration: 'There is no mature authority, outside of creative
and active individual men, to support the new and delicate forces bursting forth everywhere today . . . we have sometimes to entrench ourselves; but we do it with rage: and it is our desire to press constantly on to realization of what is, after all, our destined life’. (WLA 195-96) The ‘destined life’ was not yet an achieved one, however, and Lewis feared that the absence of valid authority might stifle the vitality of innovative artists, the group he clearly saw as the needful architects of the future. (By the time he came to write Paleface, published in 1929, Lewis was convinced that this absence had produced the disastrous effect he had earlier feared, since he argued that ‘the average artist or writer to-day, deprived of all central authority, body of knowledge, tradition, or commonly accepted system of nature, accepts what he receives in place of those things.’)4

‘The Children of the New Epoch’ hints at some of Lewis’s post-war anxieties: the isolation and marginalisation of the artistic community, the continuing presence of anti-modernist academic art, and a general nostalgia, which directed the culture’s energies towards what Blast had dismissed as ‘the sacripient Past’, while refusing to explore ‘the Reality of the Present’ (as opposed to ‘the sentimental Future’).5 But whereas Lewis viewed the immediate post-war ‘present’ as the opportunity for a genuinely new start, he gradually modified this position, eventually coming to believe that the moment had not been seized and that world history had taken a direction that made a mock of future utopian dreams. In works such as The Art of Being Ruled (1926), Time and Western Man (1927), and Paleface (1929), Lewis argued that western society was in a state of extreme paralysis. He identified a number of changes that had led to problems that were far from being universally recognized, let alone resolved: the great pre-war empires had been overthrown but the nation-states emerging from their ruins were clamouring with political and territorial grievances; the terms of the Versailles Treaty had paved the way for further potential wars by failing to acknowledge such grievances; Europe was becoming economically depressed even as it was being controlled by multi-national cartels which, wielding enormous influence, were creating societies run by plutocrats; the domination of social life by increasingly popular mass media (newspapers, radio, cinema) was undermining the status of high art and thus threatening the values and the livelihood of figures such as Lewis himself; above all, the democratization of society was politically damaging, since it tended to disintegrate much needed principles of authority, and culturally debilitating, since it encouraged the levelling down identified by Tocqueville in America and promoted a standardized, homogeneous ‘mass’ society.

Lewis’s critique of liberalism and parliamentary democracy, to which I shall turn in a moment, lay at the heart of his negative analysis of the post-war situation. Equally important, however, was his conviction that the most significant changes in the socio-political realm were taking place almost unseen. The surface of society was scarcely ruffled by the antics of Waugh’s and Huxley’s Bright Young Things; indeed, their playful iconoclasm and moral cynicism could be seen as mere youthful exuberance, a reading that fed the complacency of those who were still in positions of power.7 This blindness to change led Lewis to claim that England had become a ‘sham antique’ society in which the façade of life (behavioural norms, the continued existence of key institutions) remained more or less in place, while just behind it everything was being altered. In the past, Lewis argued, ‘the machinery of society worked in public’ but now it would ‘go underground’, would be hidden, with the result that only its effects would be visible: ‘We shall never be bothered with real live politics or commerce again. At least, we shall suffer them, but have no part in them.’8 Britain, which clung to its parliamentary traditions, would be unable to confront the realities of power in a world that was being reshaped by the naked Machtpolitik of totalitarian states, whether of the Right or the Left. Lewis’s task, then, was to try to understand how fascist Italy and the communist Soviet Union theorized (and wielded) power in order to articulate a viable alternative for European countries. Believing that natural inequalities between
individuals should provide the basis on which society ought to be organized, he defended the need for some principle of authority in social life. This required him to weigh the respective claims of individual liberty and state power, and somehow to try to bring them together: ‘the most difficult task of any real—that is, powerful and severe—form of government is to reconcile the requirements of authority with the personal initiative that is impatient of rules, and which yet must not be crushed unless you wish to rule machines, not men’. (ABR 75)⁹

A key Lewisian premise in The Art of Being Ruled, which explains the text’s open hostility to liberalism and parliamentary democracy, was that some form of state authority was required for proper governance. Soviet communism and Italian fascism provided Lewis with a point of departure precisely because they acknowledged this unpalatable truth:

But the wise ruler (and I am assuming that in the world today there is really such a ruler) would see quite well—if I am correct, has seen—that there must be a master. Some one or other has to assume responsibility for the ignorant millions. And their expression of their willingness and determination to assume power, even to wrest power from those who abuse it, where necessary, is the personal announcement on the part of the Russian rulers, or the rulers of Italy, of their accepting this situation. (ABR 89)

It is revealing that with respect to the issue of the state’s assumption of power Lewis scarcely differentiated fascism from communism; both political traditions were based on a conviction that successful rule, however much it might be motivated by a compassionate desire for the welfare of the populace, must be authoritarian and might even be despotic. Lewis approvingly drew on Michael Farbman’s After Lenin: The New Phase in Russia (1924), which argued that Leninism was characterized by tight party discipline, rigorous organization, and, through the single-minded pursuit of power, the creation of a ruthless new ruling class. Lewis maintained not only that Farbman’s account of Leninist Russia was historically accurate but also that it was prophetic of the future, setting a pattern for already nascent political struggles in Europe in which the soviet approach to power would inevitably clash with parliamentary traditions: ‘So it is natural that the struggle for ascendancy throughout Europe should today be more or less reproducing the struggle that occurred in the first months of the revolution in Russia; and that the opposing camps resolve themselves into a set of men on the one side imbued with the notion of a rigidly disciplined obedience to a central authority with dictatorial powers, and on the other into a set of men faithful to the liberal, democratic ideal of the last century’. (ABR 92)

This, then, set out the terms in which Lewis saw the single most important political dilemma of the 1920s. It must once more be noted at this point that Lewis was not primarily interested in the actual policies or programmes associated with either Italian fascism or Soviet communism but in their shared belief that in order to be effective power must be concentrated in the hands of a small, motivated minority prepared to exercise it with impunity.¹⁰ (This is why Lewis, in his oft-quoted statement of support for ‘some modified form of fascism’ (ABR 320-21), aligned it with Marxism, seeing both political doctrines mainly in terms of their drive for centralized control, and hardly pausing to discuss the major differences between them.)¹¹ Farbman’s conclusions about the progress of Leninism were Lewis’s also, and on their basis The Art of Being Ruled defended a meritocratic caste system in which a trained élite (which Lewis had no personal desire to join) was to take on the harsh and often unpleasant duties of government.¹² Within this model, the fact of state power—its necessity and even desirability—was openly to be acknowledged, not dressed up in cosy sentiments that served to conceal its workings out of a sense of shame that authority could not be exercised equally by all members of society.

Modern liberal democracies were the intended targets here. Lewis argued that liberalism, part of the ‘sham antique’ masquerade, represented society’s abject failure to provide meaningful
direction in a political landscape that had been transformed by fascism and communism. A familiar charge against liberalism, this line of argument focused on its inability to provide a positive account of its own underpinnings; it claimed that liberalism relied on a negative (defensive) conception of the state, whose primary task was to guarantee to all citizens their right to pursue their particular life-projects without hindrance. Lewis held that liberalism was unable to combat the manipulation of public opinion by demagogues and the popular media, or to escape the straitjacket of an essentially defensive system based on the theory of checks and balances, and was thus a disintegrative doctrine, which could not recognize the need for state power, still less sanction its deployment. Liberalism’s invocation of equal rights had fatally weakened Europe by dispensing with natural distinctions between individuals (in terms of innate ability rather than birth) and by presiding over the birth of democracies, which led to the rule of a largely benighted majority. Lewis wrote: ‘We have given as a capital reason for the political weakness of Europe the notion of individual freedom, as opposed to the greater solidarity of a community “working together” under a centralized consciousness and despotic, or at all events very powerful control’. (ABR 108) And he concluded thus: ‘How the notion of political personal freedom has spelt weakness in the end for Europe (so that it is not at all too much to say that this is the principal cause of its present decline) is that it is by way of this notion, through this gate, that all the disintegrating tendencies have entered’. (ABR 110)

In as much as Lewis was critical of liberalism, he was equally harsh on conservatism, and, although he has often been read as a straightforward reactionary, he was nothing of the kind. He held Arnold’s barbarians in contempt, derided the stolid complacency and unruffled philistinism of John Bull, and dismissed the nationalist fervour and aggressiveness of Action Française. Lewis was deeply offended by the class system, deplored hereditary privilege, and considered most of Britain’s social institutions to be inefficient and inequitable, as a remark from Blasting and Bombardiering makes clear: ‘I wouldn’t lift a finger to conserve any “conservative” institution; I think they ought to be liquidated, without any exception at all’. (BB 15-16) He was scathing about European claims for the superiority of its civilization over others: ‘All the European seems to understand is a savoir mourir. That he has to unlearn, as so many people have remarked lately. It is not altogether the fault, it must be conceded, of the people who benefit greatly by this pugnacity of his; the white races seem almost incurably brutal, and always ready, after the regulation press provocation, to slaughter themselves. The breaking of that traditional spirit in them is the most hopeful possibility’. (ABR 54) Many of the critical works Lewis wrote in the 1920s and early 1930s were at least in part intended as intellectual contributions to the breaking of the self-destructive spirit he had witnessed at first-hand during the Great War.16

In Paleface Lewis connected his critique of liberal politics to the ethics of T.H. Green, which he read as symptomatic of a sentimental protestantism that urged the dictates of the private conscience over obligation to the wider community. For Lewis, this insistence on the primacy and unlimited scope of the individual conscience was a disaster, which threatened ‘to make a waste-land of our life’. (P 9) Lewis viewed Green’s emphasis on a brotherhood of men, in which all are equal in the eyes of God and therefore should be so in human eyes, as a profound mistake. This humanitarian spirit, which had already received short shrift in The Art of Being Ruled, placed an intolerable burden on all members of society since it enjoined them to feel responsible for everybody else. Where Green saw an identity between self and other, Lewis saw difference, arguing that Green’s view was hopelessly romantic.17 For Lewis, Green’s ethics rested on demonstrably false premises about human beings—that they should in principle be treated as of equal worth—and he argued that these premises, when transferred to the political realm via theories of equal rights, led directly to civic chaos: ‘As this society becomes, instead of an organic whole, a mass of minute individuals, under the guise of an Ethic there appears the Mystic of the Many, the cult of the cell, or the worship of the particle; and the dogma of “what
is due from everybody to everybody” takes the place of the natural law of what is due to character, to creative genius, or to personal power, or even to their symbols’. (P 77-78)

In opposition to Green, Lewis took a resolutely non-ethical line on the question of politics, a line he held to the end of his life.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, he argued that the importation of ethics into politics introduced considerations that had no business there, and that they confused the issues by treating them in the light of kindly sentiment rather than logical thought. Politics was a pragmatic affair in which experience, not idealism, should be decisive. Lewis had written in \textit{The Art of Being Ruled}: ‘All the libertarian cries of a century ago were based on unreal premises, and impulses that are not natural to, and cannot be sustained by, the majority of men’. (ABR 130) \textit{Paleface} urged the same empirically derived view, arguing that ‘in every case our human laws must be in the nature of a “law of things”’, since ‘our dependence or our independence is . . . an organic phenomenon, a matter of concentrations and dispersions’. (P 79) The belief that all could be free or could function as independently thinking autonomous individuals was for Lewis a democratic delusion that was itself a by-product of the puritan moralism infecting philosophies such as those of Green.\textsuperscript{19} So in the course of his discussion of Alain Locke, Lewis maintained that ‘the “democratic” basis seems to me as things stand an impossible one for argument’ (P 67) with respect to the question of equality between different races, and he clarified the nature of his alternative view of human inequality and its implications for any account of political obligation a few pages further on: ‘something in fact is “due” not because the object of it is “human,” nor because the skin in question is white or black: it is “due” because in some way we recognize an entity with superior claims to ours upon our order, kind or system’. (P 76)

Lewis’s hierarchical leanings clearly emerge from the arguments canvassed in \textit{The Art of Being Ruled} and \textit{Paleface}, and he restated them pithily in \textit{Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!} (1937): ‘I prefer a Democracy more like a pyramid, and less like a morass’.\textsuperscript{20} His scathing analysis of democracy recalled Nietzsche’s contempt for it and aligned him with a number of French writers such as Henri Berenger and Alfred Fouillée who had at the turn of the century urged the creation of an intellectual aristocracy.\textsuperscript{21} Venita Datta summarises their aims succinctly, writing that ‘they shared common hopes, among them the desire to assert the importance of intellect in society and to establish an “aristocracy of intellect” that would lead the way toward national regeneration, as well as common fears, most notably, of being subsumed by the untutored masses and by the unfettered forces of the marketplace.’\textsuperscript{22} Datta notes that they believed in natural inequalities between individuals but were hostile to class based hierarchies, which further entrenched social inequalities; the new, more republican concept of a talented minority was to cut across political and class lines, since it was argued (by Fouillée, for example) that ‘competition and natural selection would lead to the formation of natural élites of talent’.\textsuperscript{23}

Lewis shared both this general structure of feeling and the specific desire to destroy inequalities produced by class and wealth; his own version of a social system predicated on the separation of functions was intended to be radically meritocratic, however unpractical were his suggestions.\textsuperscript{24} I would suggest that Lewis was ambivalent about the concept of an intellectual aristocracy, partly because he feared it would be imbued by the taint of snobbery and might be associated with unjustified privilege, and partly because his commitment to overturning social inequalities sat uneasily with his defence of sharp distinctions between individuals. So although Lewis claimed that ‘men owe everything they can ever hope to have to an “intellectual” of one sort or another’, he insisted that there was ‘nothing “aristocratic” about the intellect’, arguing that this word was ‘peculiarly inapt for the essentially individual character of the intellect’ and concluding thus: ‘The intellect is more removed from the crowd than is anything: but it is not a snobbish withdrawal, but a going aside for the purposes of work, of work not without its utility for the crowd. The artificial barriers that an aristocratic caste are forced to observe are upheld to
enhance a difference that is not a reality’. (ABR 373-74) Such barriers, Lewis held, were artificial because they were based on contingencies (the accident of birth, above all) which were desperately inefficient; they ratified existing power relations by treating social differences as natural differences. The Art of Being Ruled and Paleface made it clear that Lewis, fervently believing in innate aptitudes and abilities, wanted to reverse this trajectory by taking natural differences as his point of departure and on their basis constructing a new social order, which would do away with privilege altogether. The intellect’s votaries were ‘not a sect nor an organized caste, like the priest or the hereditary aristocrat, but individuals possessing no concerted and lawless power, coming indifferently from all classes, and living simply among other people’. (ABR 374)

III

There was, however, another aspect to this line of political thought, namely Lewis’s concern with exposing the real forces at work in the world and communicating his findings to as wide an audience as possible. Like both Sorel and Weber, Lewis focussed on the power of ideas to bring about social change, conceiving his own radicalism in terms of ideological critique. The major critical texts of the 1920s (one could add Men Without Art of 1934 to this list) were all in different ways devoted to analyses that tried to uncover and problematize what Lewis thought were the key philosophical, artistic, and political impulses lying behind contemporary socio-political life. Each of these texts explicitly addressed itself to readers who lacked either the time or the knowledge to engage in similar analyses themselves. Lewis’s analyses worked on two levels: they assaulted the reification of language in order to expose the ways in which it ossified thought, trapping people in perspectives that had no purchase on contemporary realities but merely obscured them; they depicted the apparent anonymity of social processes as a ruse of power, which denied agency to individuals or institutions and thus naturalized developments that served the interests of particular groups and should be challenged. In seeking to expose the intellectual trajectories that motivated these processes and to identify the interests that benefitted from them, Lewis aimed to dissect the socio-cultural forces that he saw as most destructive, suggesting at the same time that viable alternatives existed.

For Lewis, this deconstruction of the dominant ideologies by which the majority were interpellated (to borrow a still useful Althusserian term) could have real effects in the life-world. It moved from the realm of speculative reason to the practice of everyday life, as the opening passages of Time and Western Man made abundantly clear:

[E]veryday life is too much affected by the speculative activities that are renewing and transvaluing our world, for it to be able to survive in ignorance of those speculations. So everyone, I think, in one degree or another, has this alternative. Either he must be prepared to sink to the level of chronic tutelage and slavery, dependent for all he is to live by upon a world of ideas, and its manipulators, about which he knows nothing; or he must get hold as best he can of the abstract principles involved in the very “intellectual” machinery set up to control and change him . . . . Notions are manufactured or concocted in [philosophy’s] laboratory that come out later into the concrete everyday world: there they assume shapes as definite as aeroplanes and crystal sets, though of another order. That is why the rough ascent into the region of the abstract, proposed by me in this essay, should be undertaken by all those aspiring to an enfranchised position, or willing to make the effort to retain it. If you balk this exacting adventure you must sink, as things are, into a condition that will be less than free. (TWM xi-xii)

Unlike those developed within Marxist traditions, which took their point of departure
from their desire for political change and their historical situatedness, Lewis’s form of critique derived from a commitment to intellectual purism, and this led him to countenance the possibility of disinterestedness, the unprejudiced eye elevating itself above the fray to a position beyond action and reaction. For Lewis, this desired perspective, which in practice he treated as one to aspire to rather than to attain, was necessarily apolitical. Deployed in the service of criticism and the creation of art, it was not to be subordinated to external constraints because under such conditions it risked being subsumed by the very ideologies it sought to penetrate. It was also radically individualist both in terms of its mode of address, putting forward the personal vision of this particular writer, and its desire to rescue human potential from the half-life of an unreflective existence. Blast’s utopian longing to create individuals found expression in texts such as The Art of Being Ruled and Time and Western Man through an emphasis on social engineering, but once more the transformation of ideas is of the first importance for Lewis: ‘It has been my ambition to assist in the breeding of a race of transformed “hurried men,”’ in the anglo-saxon world, who handle ideas as expertly as any other people, and whom, in consequence, it is less difficult to fool with transparently shoddy doctrines... we want a new race of philosophers, instead of “hurried men,” speed-crankers, simpletons, or robots’. (TWM xiv-xv)

Such remarks make it plain that there were unresolved tensions in Lewis’s thought at this time. On the one hand, his view of most people as an unthinking, conformist mass led him to arguments in favour of rigid social structures predicated on a strict division of labour; on the other hand, his view of the iniquitous effects of class and privilege informed his revolutionary antipathy to the existing order. These viewpoints warred within him throughout the 1920s, often, as in the case of The Art of Being Ruled, being expressed within the pages of the same text. The first impulse encouraged that side of Lewis (seething with frustration at inefficiency and drift) which was ends-orientated and which was willing to countenance, sometimes with a breathtaking casualness, the use of force in the service of political goals. The second impulse manifested itself in his hostility to force, his polemics against ‘catastrophist’ (revolutionary) solutions to political conflict, and his insistence on the desirability of resolving ideological disagreements through rational debate. Put at its simplest, the temptations of power—so decisive, so far-reaching in its effects—vied with the more modest importunities of reason, the social utility of which was less direct, less immediate.

Alan Munton has in ‘The Politics of Wyndham Lewis’ argued persuasively that in Lewis’s account of what it means to be an intellectual he distinguishes between the politics of the intellect and the politics of power. He notes that for Lewis the intellectual is characterized by ‘the potential capacity for a detached and dispassionate analysis of his society’; the intellectual does not participate in practical politics but is ‘the source of suggestions and definitions of human possibility, and he is therefore the source of political change if the political structure is changed to realize such possibilities’. This interpretation is borne out by The Art of Being Ruled: ‘The life of the intelligence is the very incarnation of freedom: where it is dogmatic and harsh it is impure; where it is too political it is impure: its disciplines are less arbitrary and less political than those of religion: and it is the most inveterate enemy of unjust despotic power’. (ABR 374) Munton suggests that the trauma of the war led Lewis to formulate the principle that informed so much of his thought after 1918, namely that ‘no truly detached consideration can be given to a problem when the need to act is paramount’. The capacity to think clear-sightedly and impartially depended not just on the individual’s capacities but on the cultural conditions under which he lived and worked. Munton argues that Lewis’s hostility to the commodification of the arts within liberal capitalism, which for him compromised their autonomy, drew him to Proudhon’s advocacy of a decentralized political order (because it promised a separation of
functions that would free intellectuals to get on with their work) but that in fact he drew on Rousseau (not Proudhon) for his defence of a centralized state wielding autocratic power. This seems to me to be right. Centralization appealed to Lewis because it offered an abstract, impersonal principle of order that seemed more likely to guarantee just government than federalism or syndicalism, as The Art of Being Ruled suggested: ‘That is why Rousseau or Marx appear to me more humane, even, in the end, than is the pervasive, familiar, parish-pump sociability of Proudhon, which is extremely human, but might not, for that reason, be very humane’. (ABR 319)²⁹

Looking back on his career in Rude Assignment (1948), Lewis remarked that he had always defended the claims of the ‘civilised intelligence’ against those of a ‘fanatical étatisme’. (RA 154) This was a neat piece of personal historical revisionism, for the texts of the 1920s, especially The Art of Being Ruled, show that the picture was not nearly so clear-cut. That text, as I have argued, is internally contradictory, weighing the respective merits of centralization against decentralization in a thoroughly dialogical manner, but disclosing a strong preference for minority rule and viewing the Bolshevist strategy of consolidating political control as an example of a necessary will to power. That this was naïve, fanciful, and blind to the tragic historical realities produced by such exercise of power has frequently been pointed out.³⁰ Lewis’s at times cavalier disregard of the consequences of despotic power for the ruled was the product of his poor grasp of how politics actually worked; his completely abstract notion of how the social order might be transformed—made both more efficient and more rational in its deployment of individuals’ talents—led him to contemplate the seductiveness of power, and it was this temptation that ultimately resulted in his complete misreading of Hitler.

Lewis’s inability to grasp any of this at the time was later to puzzle and disturb him. He admitted of his observations on Hitler and National Socialism in 1930 that in the light of future events he felt he hadn’t really seen anything at all, and reflecting on his earlier interpretation of Italian Fascism he noted that he ‘had not advanced far enough in those investigations [of politics] to make head or tail of such an elaborate piece of political mechanism as Mussolini’. (BB 232) That said, our reading of Lewis’s attitude to power needs to be finely calibrated because power functioned in his thought in two quite different ways. With respect to politics, he argued in favour of disciplined minority rule on the grounds that societies should be led, not governed by a democratic consensus vulnerable to demagoguery, and that strong leadership would ensure an appropriate division of labour based on individuals’ abilities. As D. G. Bridson pointed out, Lewis saw fascism as a form of socialism and was primarily trying to promote ‘a strong form of centralized government by which the economy of the country as a whole can be planned and controlled efficiently. This was a fantasy of the proper exercise of authority, and it derived in large measure from Lewis’s single-minded desire to carve out a space in which the creative figure could flourish: ‘All any true scientist or true artist asks is to be given the opportunity, without interference, indifferent to glory, to work’. (ABR 111) The second way in which Lewis deployed the term power made reference to what he saw as its mistaken valorization (in a range of artistic and philosophical traditions) as a source of dynamism and vitality. This is an important distinction. Lewis was certainly myopic about the ease with which élite ruling groups could (and did) misuse power, but he never glorified it as a regenerative principle in itself. In fact, he had resisted any such view of power from the earliest days of Blast, especially in his scornful denunciations of Marinetti’s Futurism, and his articulation of this alternative perspective on power (which runs all the way through The Art of Being Ruled) sheds a good deal of light on his later critique of fascism and his dramatization of its psychological underpinnings in The Vulgar Streak.

Marinetti’s influence on Lewis can hardly be gainsaid, but Vorticism nonetheless defended
an aesthetic that defined itself against that of Italian Futurism, opposing its emphasis on speed, movement, and, as Lewis saw it, its exaltation of the machine. Marinetti’s rhetorically charged pronouncements extolled violence and aggression, celebrated iconoclasm and revolt, and sought a rejuvenescence of culture through a primitivist harnessing of energy. Lewis urged a synthetic aesthetic in which dynamism was controlled by form. At the same time, his commitment to reason was at odds with Marinetti’s voluntarism, a difference that may be signposted by reference to Nietzsche’s distinction between Apollo and Dionysus. These disagreements were played out primarily in the aesthetic sphere, but they had obvious wider ramifications.

Lewis’s essay ‘Power-Feeling and Machine-Age Art’ (1934) is instructive in this respect. It linked Italian and Russian Futurism through their shared orientation towards the machine, using this as the means by which to consider the role of power in art. Lewis began by announcing his anti-futurist credentials: ‘That I am a brave-new-worldite myself, I freely confess; but the first stage of Italian Fascism (namely, Marinetti’s “futurism”) I opposed at the time . . . that interpretation of the “new” seemed to me a shallow and sensational one, which could lead nowhere, except to a degrading vulgarization, and to a religion of force and “action” at all costs’. (WLA 286) For Lewis, power thus conceived had no place in art. To celebrate technology uncritically, without differentiating its multiple forms and uses, was to ignore the extent to which it fed individual fantasies of power with all their obviously destructive effects. Equally objectionable, for Lewis, was the idea that art should be in any way subordinated to the dictates of power. Lewis argued on the basis of this position not only against Italian Futurism but also against transition: ‘Intellectual power is always power, is it not, and you wish to make it your monopoly. It is your idea to harness it like a river and make it do work. I, on the other hand, believe that that exploitation, because of the peculiar nature of our minds, will injure and impoverish the intellect’. (E3 23)

There are fundamental divergences here, not just over aesthetics but over the role that the intellect was to play in contemporary life, in contrast to vitalist doctrines. So when Lewis in The Art of Being Ruled claimed that étatism and fascism were interchangeable, describing the latter as ‘merely a spectacular marinettian flourish put on to the tail, or, if you like, the head, of marxism’, we should at least ask, given his hostility to Marinetti’s vitalism, whether this description doesn’t substantially complicate our reading of Lewis’s contradictory remarks about fascism in this text. Consider, for example, this statement from the contemporaneous Time and Western Man:

But the actual source of all this half-century of propaganda of violence or of action, is, of course, the darwinian doctrine of “the struggle for existence.” From Darwin to Mussolini or Turati, is a road without a break. Bergson’s “creative evolution” is as darwinian as was the “will to power” of Nietzsche. It is Darwin’s law of animal survival by ruthless struggle, and the accompanying pictures of the organic shambles through which men reached world-mastery; broadcast throughout the civilized democratic world, it has brought in its wake all the emotional biology and psychology that has resulted in these values, for which fascism is the latest political model. (TWM 203)

Hardly a recommendation. Lewis, in fact, was already in the mid-1920s associating fascism with philosophies of action and sensation that valorized force and hyped up the emotions, and tracing a fascist genealogy that ran from Hitler to Mussolini to Nietzsche to Darwin.32 In The Art of Being Ruled his analysis of Sorel’s focus on the importance of ideas to revolution and of Fouillée’s concept of the idee force showed how his anti-catastrophist approach to social change was informed by his desire to bring it about on the plane of ideas. But by the late 1930s he had grasped that this naïve and impractical view of politics had blinded him to the real import of
fascism—which he now attacked for its vicious nationalism, anti-semitism, and expansionism—and had led him mistakenly to believe that autocratic government could be socially beneficial. He described *Left Wings Over Europe* (1936) as ‘from cover to cover, one long plea against the centralization of power . . . Centralized power—when it is human power—is for me, politically, the greatest evil it is possible to imagine.’

**IV**

Having become sceptical as to the possibility of basing social systems on ‘natural’ differences between people, Lewis had also come to question the viability of the grounds on which such differences could be ascertained, revealing in the works of the late thirties a compassionate spirit that had not previously been much in evidence. Texts such as *The Revenge For Love* (1937) and *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938), for example, suggested that Lewis now saw how the language of difference could damage physically and psychologically those against whom it was deployed, and that he was less interested in utopian political speculations and more concerned with the sufferings wrought in Britain by social iniquity. In the earlier work there is a tendency to portray most people as part of a *Lumpenmass* responsible for its own inertia, but in the later writings Lewis is more aware of the extent to which social structures enable or impede the formation of subjectivity.

*The Vulgar Streak* (1941) provides Lewis’s clearest fictional response to his own earlier misreading of fascism’s inner meaning. The draft of a letter to H.G. Wells, who had written warmly to Lewis about the book, explains the novel’s indebtedness to Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le Noir* and outlines its intentions:

It seemed to me that the time had come to add another book to this line: that the doctrine extracted by Mussolini from *Les Réflexions sur la Violence* and from
Nietzsche (who got his stuff fundamentally from Darwin)—it seemed to me that this doctrine taken over by Hitler, and influencing so many minds in Europe, might be made to do its fell work in the soul of a character in fiction, once again. On very different lines, it was time to project another Sorel or Raskolnikov; whose bug could not be the Napoleonic bug this time, but rather the selfconsciousness "power", "force", and "action" that has infected so many people today. (L 332)

Vincent Penhale is the novel's up-dated Julien Sorel, the fictional cipher through which Lewis projects his caricature of the dictator as a sham personality who, for the aggrandisement of power, inhabits and creates a world of spectacle and pageantry, a view toward which Lewis had already been moving in Time and Western Man: 'But the transition society of today, no doubt inevitably, is essentially an actor's world. The successful personality of the moment is generally an actor-mind (Mussolini): with all the instincts bred behind the footlights, the apotheosis of the life-of-the-moment, of exteriority, display and make-up'. (TWM 342)

Lewis's turn in The Vulgar Streak to a less experimental style led him back to various literary antecedents. He himself emphasised the novel's indebtedness to Stendhal, but The Vulgar Streak also displays affinities with Trollope's The Way We Live Now, Dickens's Our Mutual Friend, and above all Wells's Kipps, The History of Mr Polly, and Tono-Bungay. Trollope's assault on a gimerack plutocracy based on appearance is echoed in Vincent Penhale's view of "the unreality of the stately London scene—with its gilded portals, dazzling footmen, and be-medalled doorkeepers", which he exposes as a "fantastic House of Cards", concluding that society as a whole is a "crazy system" producing "a world of facades"; Vincent's own attempt at public deception and upward social mobility mirrors that of Dickens's opportunist Veneerings; Lewis's diatribe against the class system looks back to a good deal of Wells's work, but especially Tono-Bungay; finally, Vincent as protagonist is a more decisive Polly—whereas the latter dreams his frustrations away, Vincent acts to change them, refusing to remain trapped in a world not of his making.

How far Vincent really is a man of action is a key critical question. But the question is finally unanswerable, I think, because The Vulgar Streak works on a number of levels, deploying a range of narrative registers and explanatory schema that admit of no simple reading. Like its immediate predecessor, The Revenge For Love, it consists of a series of 'false bottoms'; as each one is discovered and opened, another appears just below. Thus although the novel is easy to read, its apparent simplicity is deceptive. Divided into three sections, The Vulgar Streak exhibits a tripartite structure both in theme and in narrative discourse. Thematically, it begins abroad with an account of the threat to western civilisation posed by the imminent war, then moves the action to England, turning to a specific critique of English society, before it finally provides a detailed account of Vincent as an individual, portraying him as a victim of class society. By this means, the novel enacts a series of metonymic substitutions—it describes a trajectory that moves from a general concern with the current state of Europe to a particular concern with the fate of the individual.

Yet these substitutions cannot be understood solely in terms of shifts in thematic concerns, for they also entail changes in explanatory schema, and thus in types of discourse. At the beginning of the novel, stress falls on the arbitrary and constructed nature of the social order; a product of spurious differences between people, it is depicted in images of art, artifice, linguistic power, intrigue, and conspiracy. As the novel develops, this imagery remains in place but is supplemented by an emphasis on Vincent as the individual locus of the social inequalities earlier disclosed. It is the link between these two features of the novel that I wish to explore here, for it enables Lewis to suggest that the entire social system is a fraud, which produces differences between individuals where there are none.
In *The Vulgar Streak* modern civilisation arises from a sinister darkness; its origins are hellish and its achievements tainted by the excremental waste it tries to evacuate. Its hierarchical class-based social systems institutionalise inequality at their very heart; class is a ‘blight’, an ‘infection’, a ‘poison’, which leads to the ‘inferno’ of deprivation and suffering. But the novel depicts class, and the structure of differences it creates and depends on, as a masquerade. The language of artifice is applied to a wide range of social phenomena (architecture, fashion, money, physical appearance, urban life, speech). Beneath its deceptively limpid surface, *The Vulgar Streak* is busy dismantling the conventions on which English society is predicated. Two related issues are important here: language and subjectivity. The novel shows in two ways how language is the means by which social power is exerted and maintained. It focuses on the role of accent and speech in marking out the individual’s place in a wider group, a marking out that at the same time polices vertically construed boundaries, and it emphasises that the ability to wield language, to make and remake meanings, confers power. To put it this way risks reducing social differences (with all the inequalities that are thereby sanctioned) to the effects of language and thus ignoring the economic and political determinants also at work. *The Vulgar Streak* is careful not to do this. The novel exploits the question of language to the full, but it persistently connects language to issues such as education, work, and wealth.

Nonetheless, language is the novel’s primary focus. Vincent is from the outset depicted as an actor (emphasizing the connection to Mussolini), and a link between playing roles and playing with language is early established. The image of ‘play’ runs right through the text, suggesting that both individual and society are unstable entities. Vincent, rather like Conrad’s Kurtz, exhibits a tremendous energy coupled with a strange inner emptiness. By way of his skill with language, he has been able to pass himself off as a member of the upper middle class and thus to reconstruct himself. But this process is no act of superficial mimicry, for it raises doubts about the nature of identity:

“I am a sham person from head to foot. I feel empty sometimes, as if there were nothing inside me. I lied to you at once when I first met you. I began building up a false image of another man than myself. Of someone who was not there. For I am not here. It is not I who am here. And ever since in my intercourse with you I have lived inside that empty shell that I began to manufacture... But of course at present it is second-nature until I hardly know which is the real man”. (*TVS* 31-32)

By the end of this speech, the notion of a ‘false image’, with its suggestion of a hidden ‘true’ one, an essential individuality somehow outside its own self-representations, has proved untenable. The ‘I’ cannot be located—it is neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’. Vincent’s terms break down, since the image of an ‘empty shell’—to be used as protective armour and deceptive colouring but to be inhabited by an autonomous entity—misdescribes the social nature of the self by positing a strict break between ‘appearance’ and ‘reality’. He himself makes the point later on: “I am by now what I seem” (*TVS* 38). Lewis’s point, however, is a wider one. It is not just that Vincent has undermined the nature and stability of his identity, but that identity in general is unfixed in character or condition. If Vincent is a ‘sham’ then so is everyone else. Thus when he ‘confesses’ to Martin, the latter is immediately threatened: ‘The Belloqian personality suffered a disintegration. Some spring had been touched, as it were, and the whole set-up had begun to drop to pieces. The little imitation Belloq, as artificial in its way as the bogus Public schoolboy and Old Haileyburian, and all the other personae in sight, began to come unstuck, in the insidious heat of this strange confessional’. (*TVS* 32) Feeling himself being ‘unmasked’ by Vincent’s admission, Martin considers that if ‘one insisted on stripping off his properties, that left the other in an invidious position’. (*TVS* 33) Lewis’s use of the word ‘properties’ goes to the heart of the novel’s concern with identity, since it relies on the double meaning of ‘property’ as either a
portable (arbitrary) article used by actors in their playing of parts, or an attribute or quality that both belongs to and defines a person's essential character. The latter meaning is here displaced by the former, producing a view of the self as a layered series of masks or as a mechanism that can be dismantled and reassembled at will. Hence Martin's fear that the self doesn't really exist at all: 'Suppose Vincent were not Vincent? Suppose there were no Vincent, and this had been an illusion?' (TVS 34)

The Vulgar Streak turns this insight into an assault on the social system. Deploying the metaphor of crime, it depicts society as a fraud practised on those whose scope for upward mobility is limited by class position, education, and finances. The only way out, it seems, is to cheat in turn. The counterfeiter Halvorsen sees himself as engaged in subversive mimicry, since he considers that "the modern state is based upon organized—legalized—Fraud" (TVS 205), and Vincent, a counterfeiter of a different kind, argues that if "you are born poor, you must go about disguised". (TVS 175) Difference is created to ratify a social system, as The Art of Being Ruled has already insisted. It involves dispossession, since it denies one class many of the goods that are available to another: the novel refers to medical treatment, jobs, education, wealth, and housing, the very issues that were taken up by the Beveridge report. But for Vincent language is the principle means by which social differences are encoded. His family speak a stigmatising "slave-jargon" (TVS 133) that announces their membership of a 'lower' class: "Here the poor are treated as creatures of another clay". (TVS 134) Despite his hatred of the class system, Vincent is unable to move beyond the assimilative strategy by which he gains admission to 'society' and unable to question the normative view of language-use that he has had to impose on himself in order to remain there. Paul Edwards puts it well: 'The conspiracy of correct English is complete, and Vincent's attempts to correct his family's speech merely parallel his attempt to subvert the class system by co-opting himself into the bourgeoisie: he is actually endorsing, not undermining, the system that has oppressed his class.'

Vincent becomes the site on which social contradictions play themselves out. As he remarks: "All the problems of Class... positively seethe and bubble around my sad case". (TVS 220) But with the introduction of Mr Perl, his 'case' is diagnosed according to a quite different discourse (that of psychoanalysis), and he is described in terms of a psychological aetiology, while the issue of class recedes from view. For Perl, Vincent suffers from "an excess of Will" (TVS 177) and this has nothing to do with the social problem: "Let us forget class. That is not the whole picture. Whatever station in life you had appeared in, it would have been the same". (TVS 176) This asocial view of Vincent as an egotist with a dictator inside him allows Lewis not only to make explicit the text's critique of fascism but also to introduce (via April) the language of altruistic love and moral agency as a corrective to the cult of force and action. But it should be noted (and I will return to this) that none of these discourses is unequivocally endorsed by the text; indeed, each is called into question, leaving The Vulgar Streak an open-ended work of fiction from which conclusions cannot easily be drawn.

A major difficulty for The Vulgar Streak may be traced to its attempt to bring together two different kinds of critique: of social class and of fascism. The figure of Vincent Penhal is made to carry a heavy metonymic (and allegorical) burden, since he is meant simultaneously to represent working-class revolt against iniquity and the doctrine of will that Lewis associated with fascist ideology. Had Lewis chosen to portray Vincent as a victim of social injustice who turns to fascism in response to his grievances, the link between class and fascism might have been established—his psychology would then be shown to be socially formed, and this would help to account for his politics. But the novel splits the social and the psychological apart, offering two explanations for his character and predicament that are never aligned. In the penultimate chapter, when Vincent pronounces on his own case, he first accounts for his
behaviour in terms of class before offering an alternative explanation, namely that he made a cult of egotistic action, which presents him as having the psychological profile of an incipient fascist: "The arch-type of that sort of man who is all action...is to be found in Berlin—or that bloody little Jack-in-the-box up in his balcony, at the Palazzo Venezia. That is obvious enough. Our epoch finds its highest expressions in those dynamical puppets—with little names full of stupid percussion, like Hitler". (TVS 223-24) The link between Vincent and the two fascist dictators has of course been established earlier. Perl, having described Vincent as suffering from a will "steeled almost out of human semblance", makes the connection when he asserts that will is inseparable from action and then explains Hitler and Mussolini in these terms: "'Devils they are not, so much as diabolical machines of empty will'. (TVS 177)"

There are two problems here, both of which bear on the novel's presentation of its central protagonist. Firstly, if fascism is portrayed primarily in terms of personality type (as an egotism that results in a vicious voluntarism) then its socio-political dimensions slide from view. It may be that fascism exalts romance of action, individuals of iron will, and an amoral view of power, features that undoubtedly appeal to certain psychological types, but it also promotes doctrines that appeal to social groups because they subserve a particular politics. And these doctrines (Blutsgefühl, Lebensraum, anti-semitism, militarism, Aryan suprematism) have historical consequences. The Vulgar Streak doesn't evade this issue; it is addressed when Vincent, finally grasping that his actions have had consequences, takes responsibility for April's death and for Maddy's unhappy marriage. But because this recognition of culpability is presented in allegorical terms, the novel is stuck with a curiously decontextualised view of fascism as a cult of action that is seen in turn as a primarily psychological phenomenon. The second problem is related to this textual emphasis on 'action' as a key to fascism. For 'action' is too abstract an epithet. There is a world of difference between Meursault's gratuitous act of murder and Vincent's attempt at self-disguise, or, to make a historical parallel, between Hitler's invasion of Poland and Chamberlain's strategy of appeasement, but they are all 'acts'. One needs to know what aim is being driven at and by what means it is to be achieved—by what kinds of action, violent or peaceful, for a start. Fascism cannot be reduced to 'action' without serious elision, because it is bound up with historically determinate socio-political objectives and methods, which are thereby obfuscated.

Yet this necessary specificity is blocked by the novel's allegorical deployment of Vincent as an exemplum. His allegorical function is in any case confusing, as I have suggested, since he is mainly depicted as a social fraud and not as an exponent of action at all. The novel tries to get round this complication by having Vincent interpret his attempt at class subterfuge as the form that his action took. This enables him to repudiate action and, by implication, fascism: "I have proved...upon my little personal stage, that force is barren. Conceived in those hard terms of action-for-action's-sake nothing can be achieved, except for too short a period to matter. I have proved that, have I not?". (TVS 226) Well, no. Vincent is actually brought low by his involvement with Halvorsen and not by his act of imposture; had he not passed counterfeit money, stood as accessory to Halvorsen's act of murder, and colluded in his mistaken identity as a baronet, he might well have continued as he was. Vincent has relied on an assimilative strategy that has failed, but this neither makes him an exponent of 'action' nor proves that 'action' is foredoomed to impotence. But of course this is Vincent's self-interpretation, and it is not clear that the novel upholds it. In keeping with its persistent shifts in register and discourse, The Vulgar Streak concludes on a characteristic note of indeterminacy. During their last, inconclusive meeting, Martin and Vincent canvass a number of interpretations of the latter's behaviour and toy with several strategies for defeating the class system (fraud, bluff, revolution, quietist indifference), but no interpretation or strategy receives authorial sanction. The issue of social justice is laughed away, and we are reminded that this is not a political tract but a work of fiction. Its lasting images

44
are of suffering and pain: the ‘dark and tongue-tied multitude’ from whence Vincent came, Maddy’s tear-stained face, and the protruding tongue and black face of the hanged man in the hall.

**V**

*The Vulgar Streak* may not be persuasive as a political critique of fascism, but it probes its psychological well-springs, in the process offering a compassionate portrayal of its human costs that is far removed from Lewis’s willingness to sanction the exercise of power in *The Art of Being Ruled*. He had in that text required rulers to rule ‘by force, ostensibly, responsibly, as does (to the great disgust of our western liberals) the soviet or fascist government’. *(ABR 94)* But in the draft of his letter to Wells he indicated how much he had moved from such views, noting of Julien Sorel’s adoption of the ‘ruthless’ Napoleonic code in his life: ‘What a poisonous word “ruthless” is—what thrills it administers to a horde of small sensationalists’. *(L 332)* Lewis’s rejection in the 1920s of any social order based on the concept of equal rights for all led him to defend one that was based on a separation of functions and a division between masters and men. This, he later claimed defensively, was a position derived from Stoicism, in which ‘the true “art of being ruled”’ was represented as ‘a manner of jujitsu for the governed—who are so much the weaker party in their encounters with government’. *(RA 183)* It was an inegalitarian position that wasn’t just vulnerable to a number of ethical or political objections but was also completely unrealistic, positing as it did a radically stratified world in which ‘puppets’ and ‘natures’ lived in splendid isolation.42

Alan Munton has suggested that a lack of practical political experience led Lewis to advance his more objectionable arguments. I would add another factor, namely his overvaluation of the autonomous intelligence.43 As we have seen, Lewis defended a position in which the work of the intellect was opposed to the work of power and, further still, was demarcated from the realm of politics altogether. *The Art of Being Ruled* made this point repeatedly, and Lewis reiterated it in *The Enemy*: ‘I advance the strange claim (as my private Bill of Rights) to act and to think non-politically in everything, in complete detachment from all the intolerant watchwords and formulas by which we are beset. I am an artist and my mind, at least, is entirely free’. *(L 27)* But of course nobody’s mind is ‘entirely free’. However laudable we may find appeals to objectivity and disinterestedness, we belong in complex, interleaved ways to particular communities and networks of interlocution, and there are always, as Habermas has it, unavoidable connections between knowledge and human interests.44 Despite his avid participation in the debates of his day—his involvement, in other words, in the intellectual life of his community—Lewis resisted assimilation to that community, choosing to defend an unsustainable individualism. I would argue that in the 1920s and early 1930s this resulted in a lack of insight into his own cultural formation and historical situatedness. Lewis’s advocacy of balance (a perspective beyond action and reaction) at this time tended not to approach the Aristotelian ‘mean’ but rather to fetishize the stance of one who could be entirely above the fray. Despite the playful ironies involved in his adoption of the ‘Enemy’ persona, Lewis was undoubtedly drawn to the role of the outsider, and this role perhaps limited his understanding of his own location in the society he so fiercely criticized.

**NOTES**


5. Blast 1, ‘Long Live the Vortex!’, unpaginated manifesto.

6. It is worth noting here that in this respect Lewis’s politics kept pace with his aesthetics, a fact that shows just how deeply his artistic avant-gardism was coloured by his political aspirations. In Blasting and Bombardiering Lewis wrote: ‘We are the first men of a Future that has not materialized. We belong to a “great age” that has not “come off”. We moved too quickly for the world. We set too sharp a pace. And, more and more exhausted by War, Slump, and Revolution, the world has fallen back.’ Blasting and Bombardiering (1937; London: John Calder, 1982), p. 256. Hereafter BB. This memorable obituary of the period should be read in conjunction with ‘Super-Nature Versus Super-Real’ (also 1937), in which Lewis admitted that Vorticism’s presupposition of ‘a new human ethos’ had come to nothing and concluded: ‘What has already happened—that can be said at once—is that modern art, of the highly experimental sort advocated in these essays and manifestos, is at an end. It is all over except for the shouting—of the rearguard, as they fly, but who, true to best traditions of contemporary journalism, affect to be advancing, while they hurry off the stricken field’. (WLA p. 306)

7. It is precisely this structure of feeling that Waugh so brilliantly captures in his portrayal of Sniggs and Postlethwaite in the ‘Prelude’ to Decline and Fall.


9. Earlier in the text, Lewis acknowledged the dangers of veering too far in the direction of control: ‘We should remember what we owe to our machines, which are our creatures. “Remember the machines!” would be a good watchword or catchword. We are imbuing them with our own soullessness. We only have ourselves to thank if things turn out badly as a result’ (ABR p. 27).

10. See, for example, ABR pp. 92-94.

11. Thus Lewis: ‘All marxian doctrine, all étatisme or collectivism, conforms very nearly in practice to the fascist ideal. Fascismo is merely a spectacular marinettian flourish put on to the tail, or, if you like, the head, of marxism: that is, of course, fascism as interpreted by its founder, Mussolini. And that is the sort of socialism that this essay would indicate as the most suitable for anglo-saxon countries or colonies . . .’ (ABR p. 321). Going on to compare Mussolini’s reforms with Lenin’s, Lewis concluded of Italy: ‘What will shortly be reached will be a great socialist state such as Marx intended, rigidly centralized, working from top to bottom with the regularity and smoothness of a machine’ (ABR p. 321).

12. Lewis wrote of Farberman: ‘We could not, I think, have a better guide, or one whose conclusions correspond more nearly with those I am expressing throughout this essay’ (ABR p. 89).


14. See ABR pp. 72-73. Lewis was deeply critical of the insidious (because invisible to most
people) power of what he called the ‘educationalist state’: ‘the vote of the free citizen is a farce: education and suggestion, the imposition of the will of the ruler through the press and other publicity channels, cancelling it. So “democratic” government is far more effective than subjugation by physical conquest’ (ABR p. 106). For further critical comments about parliamentary democracy, see also ABR p. 70 and pp. 321-23. Given Lewis’s deployment of Rousseau later in ABR, the following remarks from the Social Contract are not without interest: ‘The English nation thinks that it is free, but is greatly mistaken, for it is so only during the election of members of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, it is enslaved and counts for nothing. The use which it makes of the brief moments of freedom renders the loss of liberty well-deserved.’ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Social Contract and Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind, ed. Lester G. Crocker (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), pp. 99-100.

15. See also his claim, during his polemic against transition, that unlike Eugene Jolas and his associates he was looking for a genuine socio-political transformation ‘of a more revolutionary order, into an order of things radically different from the “capitalist state.”’ Wyndham Lewis, The Enemy 3 (1929), ed. David Peters Corbett (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1994), p. 25. Hereafter E3.


17. Lewis (in dismay) quoted Green as follows: ‘Where the Greek saw a supply of possibly serviceable labour . . . the Christian citizen sees a multitude of persons, who in their actual present condition may have no advantage over the slaves of an ancient state, but who in undeveloped possibility, and in the claims which arise out of that possibility, are all that he himself is’ (P, p. 11).


19. Lewis was clear as to the kind of person required for the ideal functioning of democracy, just as he was equally clear that this ideal was the purest utopianism: ‘The ideally “free man” would be the man least specialized, the least stereotyped, the man approximating to the fewest classes, the least clamped into a system—in a word, the most individual. But a society of “free men,” if such a thing could ever come about, which it certainly could not, would immediately collapse’ (ABR, p. 151).


21. This French context was familiar to Lewis. I have not been able to ascertain whether he had read Berenger, but he knew Fouillée’s work (he refers to Fouillée in The Art of Being Ruled).


23. Datta, Birth, p. 70.


25. A citation from Dostoevsky in ‘Essay on the Objective of Plastic Art in Our Time’ is apposite in this context: “If ever a formula is discovered which shall exactly express our wills and whims, make it clear what they are governed by, what means of diffusion they possess: a formula mathematical in its precision, then man will have ceased even to exist. Who would care to exercise his will-power according to a table of algorithms? A man would become, in such circumstances, not a human being, but an organ-handle or something of the sort” (WLA, p. 205).


29. *ABR*, p. 319. Rousseau argued that if ‘there were a nation of gods, it would be governed democratically’ but, since there is not, ‘so perfect a government is unsuited to men.’ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 71. He concluded that ‘it is the best and most natural order of things that the wisest should govern the multitude, when we are sure that they will govern it for its advantage and not for their own’ (*SC* p. 73).


32. See also *TWM* pp. 20-21 and p. 34. Lewis in *Blasting and Bombardiering* once again emphasized that his primary concern was with the fate of the arts: ‘But neither the imperialism of the Soviets, nor the Spartan programmes of Germany or Italy, leave much room for any thought but that of action. And Action, as a religion, is apt to set up a climate as unsuitable for artistic pursuits as the most narrow of theocratic regimes’ (*BB* p. 263).


34. One can see why the book appealed to Wells. It not only attacked the class system along Wellsian lines but also displayed empathy for the blighted lives it depicted. Empathy was a marked feature of Wells’s best work.


36. There were, for Lewis, direct links between Machiavelli, Stendhal, and Nietzsche on this point: ‘All the great characteristics of Machiavelli’s, as of Nietzsche’s, thought are traceable to a passion for action. It was on the agent-principle, as it may be called, that these philosophies were built . . . Stendhal . . . was only partially dependent on a hero of action, of whom he was not at all times very sure. But action, in one obvious form or another, was also his god.’ Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Grant Richards, 1927), p. 159.


39. See *L* p. 310.

40. Vincent is described as ‘empty’ and ‘mad’ on several occasions. See *TVS* p. 31, p. 139, p. 173, and p. 178. Lewis writes of Hitler in *The Hitler Cult*: ‘Physically, he is an insignificant blur. My view is that he is like that all through, as regards texture; but that a dynamo—or if you prefer a demon—has got inside him somehow. A mechanical activity of unusual drive has to be reckoned with.’ Wyndham Lewis, *The Hitler Cult* (London: Dent, 1939), p. 43. See also Lewis’s endorsement in the same text of Chaplin’s presentation of the Dictator as ‘an entranced medium’ (p. 80).

41. Vincent underscores the allegorical reading when he remarks: ‘“Europe has run amok. In my little way, I reflect—I have reflected—what is biting Europe. *Look how I went on!*”’ (*TVS* p. 225).

43. Lewis made reference to the over-valuation of the intellect in *Rude Assignment*. See RA pp. 43-44.
