On ‘Personal Statement’

Alan Munton

Lewis’s unpublished ‘Personal Statement’ (as I have called it, drawing upon the first sentence) was written in Canada in 1941. It was apparently to be the first chapter of a short book or pamphlet, perhaps resembling Anglosaxony: A League that Works, which was published in Toronto in that same year. Perhaps it was a false start for that book. Mention of Hitler being photographed at his field headquarters suggests that it was written after the German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. This event may account for the tentativeness of Lewis’s argument: Britain, Canada and the Soviet Union were now allies, and Lewis has to reconsider his long opposition to Marxism and revolution. He wants to cast off the politics of the 1930s that he knew had so damaged him, but he struggles to find the language to do so. The dangers of civil war are often mentioned, but he never specifically names the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39.

The tone and purpose is apologetic: ‘I detect flaws in my reasoning: but, much more [...] accuse myself of having a one-eyed heart’. But the apology, once begun, dissolves into inert metaphors: at that point, the jury in a case of capital punishment. Elsewhere there are clockwork and watches, a lamb chop, irresponsible remarks about a man beating his wife, and strangest of all, an actor in a burning theatre endeavouring to speak to burned corpses. These are all deflections from his main purpose. But what is it that he really wants to say? It soon becomes apparent that Lewis himself does not know. He ends by defending his own rightness on such matters as primitivism in literature and art, and satire in fiction, and concludes with a quotation from his long poem One-Way Song of 1933. This is hardly relevant to a crisis of belief in wartime and he must have realised this, for soon after the typescript finishes in mid-sentence.

Yet there are good things, and humane things, here. Lewis wants to extricate himself from his failure as an intellectual, one who has not recognised the sufferings of the poor. The assertion that ‘I would join any majority that was strong enough to get action’ is an abandonment of his assertion at the end of the First World War (in which he fought) that ‘Truth has no place in action’. The most important statement is this:

My mistake consisted, I think, in not keeping enough in the forefront of my mind the sufferings and humiliation of the poor – the underpaid and undernourished multitude of people [...] who[m] the party [of ‘intellectuals’] was founded to protect, and set free.

The reader should look for this theme as it recurs. It seems to me very possible that Lewis is considering whether he can now support Communism. He shies away from that, but his admission that during the 1930s he should have recognised that people would ‘probably have to’ go to war is significant. That was the position of the anti-appeasement left, a position held most strongly by the European Communist parties. Lewis – the great appeaser and pacifist – is struggling to say that he had been wrong, and there had never been an alternative to opposing Germany and Hitler.
Contributors

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Paul Edwards curated Wyndham Lewis Portraits at the National Portrait Gallery in 2008, and is preparing to do the same for a major Lewis exhibition at the Fundación Juan March in Madrid for 2010.

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