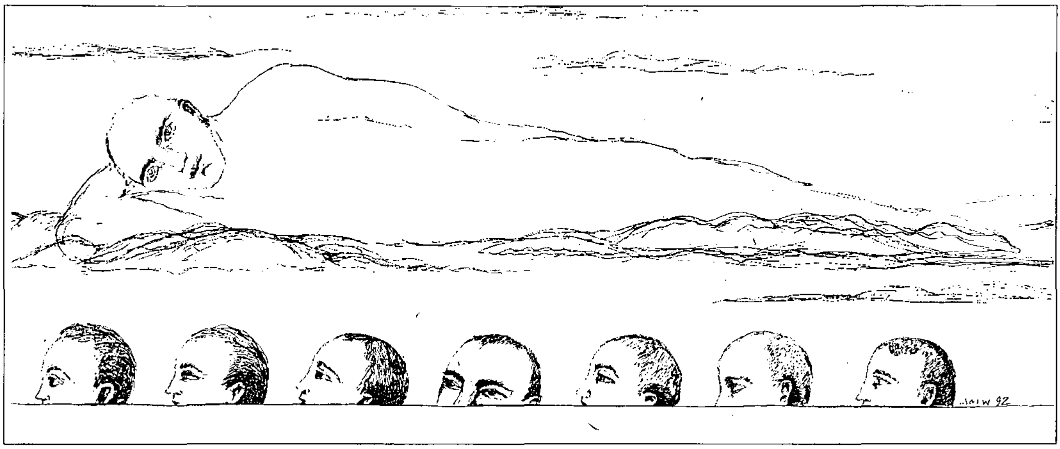
Wyndham Lewis and the Moronic Inferno

by J.O. Tate



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Looking back today at the achievements of the heroic modernists, we must do so with at least some degree of ambivalence. The presence of those colossi has receded with the passing of the years; and we no longer regard them as they themselves taught us to do. Yet they still loom on the mental horizon, and we continue to live in their long shadow.

Eliot, Pound, Joyce, and Lewis—"the men of 1914," as Wyndham Lewis himself named them—remain vital today because of the continuing viability, the relevance, and the diagnostic power of their best work. We still live in Mr. Eliot's *Waste Land*, like it or not. Madame Sosostris is still in business and sees "crowds of people, walking around in a ring" in the Unreal City. Of course, there have been some changes. The "other testimony of summer nights" are now distributed, in the best modern way, to schoolchildren. I am told that "the young man carbuncular" is now on Retin-A, and that "the typist home at teatime" is a data processor who no longer "lays out food in tins" but rather nukes it in her microwave.

I think too that the citizen who menaces Leopold Bloom in the "Cyclops" section of *Ulysses* continues to harass us via the daily news. He still doesn't "grasp" the "point." In that sense, Pound's Mr. Nixon (from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*) is still the embodiment of the literary/publishing racket. Literature is news that *stays* news; and that Poundian prescription applies as well to much of the work of his peer, Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957).

The prophetic quality in Lewis's work is one that he himself ironically deprecated, in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937—the first installment of his autobiography): "It is somewhat depressing to consider how as an artist one is always holding the mirror up to politics without knowing it. My picture called 'The Plan of War' painted six months before the Great War 'broke out,' as we say, depresses me. A prophet is a most unoriginal person: all he is doing is imitating something that is not there, but soon will be." But even so, to recognize the prophetic quality of Lewis's writing (as well as his painting) is not to claim for it any *predictive* authority, in the ordinary sense. We would not go to Wyndham Lewis, any more than we would to Ezra Pound, for anything so humble as practical advice. The rantings of Pound say nothing to the student of politics, in the common sense of that word; yet something may be gleaned from them if they are carefully sifted—insight into art and cultures, the integrity of craftsmanship, the implications of massive debt. The man in the street could have told Pound that Mussolini was somehow *not* Jefferson—but when does a self-appointed "genius" heed the common or the obvious wisdom? Wyndham Lewis in his *Hitler* (1931) fell flat on his face refusing to acknowledge what was already transparent. He thought that Herr Hitler was a "man of peace" and that anti-Semitic outrages were routine street theater. Wyndham Lewis was wrong about that, wasn't he? No, his political sense was flawed by an internal agenda that sometimes blinded him. It is his *visionary politics*, not his journalism, that retains a prophetic power today.

That agenda, I would say, can be understood by bearing in mind two ideas. The first is the Cartesian mind/body split—one which Wyndham Lewis did *not* see as a division to be overcome (as Eliot did his "dissociation of sensibility"). The second is the Nietzschean injunction to rise above the herd, to which we may attach Lewis's modernist presumption of the superiority of the artist. A great deal that is off-putting or baffling about Lewis's (and Pound's) writings can be explained if not justified by an assumption that the purpose of politics was to provide a platform for the artist. That was what civilization was supposed to be—a society in which an honest artist could make a living. If prescriptive leadership was necessary to secure the artist's peace, so be it—whatever it took to pacify the mob, the ones who need to be told what to do.

The great irony, of course, is that a man like Wyndham Lewis—a cantankerous contrarian, among other things—was and would have been the last individual useful to any totalitarian government for the very reason of his unflinching individualism. And when he was an old blind man, to some degree he came to grasp the point. But even so there is something salvageable and much of value in the social cri-

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tique, fictional vision, and satiric insight of Wyndham Lewis in his most elitist and unrelenting guise.

Set apart by his birth (on a yacht moored at Amherst, Nova Scotia), and as an only child by his father's absence and by his mother's intense love, Lewis was always "the Man from Nowhere." He himself claimed that the Continent, where he studied life and art in Madrid, Munich, and Paris, undid the effects of his English education at Rugby and the Slade School of art. But Lewis would not be satisfied to be the young lion of British art—he wanted something more and exploded in at least two other directions while personifying the latest developments in avant-garde art in England. He began writing stories, sketches, and essays as early as 1908, and later led the Vorticist movement after his feud with Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Bloomsbury ruined his career as a painter. His early writings culminated in his Vorticist revolt in *Blast* I (1914), that movement itself blasted by the First World War, in *Tarr* (1918), and in *The Wild Body* (1927). Lewis had already done more than most artists do in a lifetime; but when he returned from the war, his peers T. E. Hulme and Gaudier-Brzeska were dead and his career at a dead end. It was time to go "underground" and take on the *Zeitgeist*.

Wyndham Lewis, more than any other writer, represents the penetration of Continental ideas into Britain and the English speaking world in the early 20th century. Precisely because of his "outsider" status and nature, he stands apart from the Anglo-American tradition of political and social thought—we hear little from him of the parliamentary mode, of "politics" in the ordinary sense, and not until *Rotting Hill* (1951), of ordinary bourgeois and civic concerns. Though Lewis cited Burke approvingly in his old age, there is little sense of traditional polity, or of a Madisonian sense of the balance of powers, in his work. We hear instead of Schopenhauer, Proudhon, Sorel, Bergson—of an "illegitimate" and radical tradition of speculation and extremity. Lewis has reminded more than one reader of Dostoyevsky in his gift for dramatizing ideas and in his sensitivity to intellectual crisis. Both modernist and modern, Lewis's sense that settled ways of thinking had been made irrelevant by the destruction of the old world did not make him a political prognosticator, but it did lend him a power of prophetic insight into a radically new world.

In his last letter to his old mentor, T. Sturge Moore, Lewis looked back on his wild ride through a violent time—a course that was not yet over, when he wrote in 1941:

> How calm those days were before the epoch of wars and social revolution, when you used to sit on one side of your work-table and I on the other, and we would talk—with trees and creepers of the placid Hampstead domesticity beyond the windows, and you used to grunt with a philosophic despondence I greatly enjoyed. It was the last days of the Victorian world of artificial peacefulness—of the R. S. P. C. A. and London Bobbies, of "slumming" and Buzzards cakes. As at that time I had never heard of anything else, it seemed to my young mind in the order of nature. You—I suppose—knew it was all like the stunt of an illusionist. You taught me many things. But you never taught me *that*. I first discovered about it in 1914—with growing surprise and disgust.

Lewis's sense of the treacherous nature of "reality"—of the deception of appearances—is here expressed as personal experience when it was also intellectual conviction. In either case, his apprehension of the century has been confirmed by events; and his insights seem now to be incisive CAT-scans and instructive X rays of a new order, a qualitatively different kind of society.

The proto-Fascist politics of *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) are a species of irony. Lewis has turned Machiavelli on his head, writing a treatise on how to be ruled rather than instruction for a ruler; but the conditions of politics have been changed forever, and the ruler will never be so simple and so humane as a Cesare Borgia. The new mass-world of urban democracy, advertising, the rapidly developing media, behaviorism—the manipulative agents are more numerous, more deceptive, and more powerful than ever. Lewis knows how to break down "the individual" so there is nothing left that cannot be controlled. In a passage that anticipates our monstrous routine, he shows how the rulers do the job:

> The more classes . . . that you can make him become regularly conscious of, the more you can control him, the more of an automaton he becomes. Thus, if a man can be made to feel himself acutely (a) an American, (b) a young American, (c) a middle-west young American, (d) a "radical and enlightened" middle-west young American, (e) a "college-educated" dentist who is an etc. etc., (g) a "college-educated" dentist of such-and-such a school of dentistry, etc. etc.,—the more inflexible each of these links is, the more powerful, naturally, is the chain. Or he can be locked into any of these compartments as though by magic by anyone understanding the wires . . .

We have become so inured to the Art of Ruling today—"education" instructs us in such convenient categories—that our comprehension has been dulled along with our sense of outrage. Wyndham Lewis is a pertinent instructor in how we are set against each other, for the advantage of the ruling powers: the class war, the sex war, racial division, the generation gap, etc. As Terence Hegarty pointed out ten years ago, Lewis saw that "freedom" can be a highly useful illusion, as for example the triumph of feminism: "[A]n important economic function of feminism, as political exploitation, is 'the releasing of the hordes of idle women . . . for industrial purposes.' . . . In the day-to-day arena of ordinary life, this aspect of 'women's liberation'—by which most women, like most men, spend their time doing other people's work rather than their own—removes the last bit of real freedom possessed by any persons of low or moderate means." Lewis's ability to penetrate the surface of statist propaganda anticipates the contemporary

Lewis's ability to penetrate the surface of statist propaganda anticipates the contemporary situation by more than half a century.

situation by more than half a century. His disassembly of the progressive mind-set is still instructive today, as when he notes that "[male inversion] is as an integral part of feminism proper that it should be considered a phase of the sex war. The 'homo' is the legitimate child of the 'suffragette.'" Such observations, however, constituted only a part of Lewis's reaction to what he called a "moronic inferno of insipidity and decay."

Time and Western Man (1927) shows how the cults of infantilism, sentimentality, nostalgia, "democracy," "time," modern physics, relativism, advertising, mechanization, Bergsonian flux, Spenglerian dialectic, and subjectivity are expressed in and through such characters as Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Charlie Chaplin, James Joyce, and various philosophers of the one-way song of the modern progressive mentality. Lewis prescribes as a potent antidote to the erosion of contours, the melting of forms, and the collapse of external reality the calm of classical certitude, the hard shell of firmness, even the stasis to which he drove his satirical vision in a titanic effort to stop time.

The Childermass (1928) has been described by Hugh Kenner as "simply *The Art of Being Ruled* dramatized." This Dantesque fantasy of the afterlife shows that state to be a grotesque parody of the one we already live in, with superb passages of mock-Joyce and ersatz Stein. The static puppet show of the politics of heaven is a visionary nightmare that will always be "true." Pulley, Satters, and the Bailiff are a moronic inferno in themselves, effigies of Joyce, Stein, and the *Zeitgeist* who would today—in less heroic times—be represented by lesser but not more sinister apes (Harold Brodkey, Alice Walker, and Bill Moyers?). *The Childermass* is probably the peak of Lewis's verbal resourcefulness—a work to classify with *Sartor Resartus*, the Alice books of Lewis Carroll, and *Finnegans Wake*.

Lewis's biggest book, *The Apes of God* (1930), is also still true, though it is a highly focused and specific satire of individuals and trends. Never mind that it was to the wistful sensitives of Bloomsbury what Jack the Ripper was to so many tarts. The book should be thought of as a prophecy of the 1960's and as an indispensable Baedeker to the art world of today, in which a pile of dirt is "a statement" and the visual arts are inextricably tangled with the politics of drugs, rock and roll, the fashion industry, pornography, money, and the world view that sanctions Robert Christo's shrinkwraps, Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," and the AIDS quilt as works of art. Certain little questions that do not get asked today—about the lack of creativity, of integrity, of mind—are framed forever in Lewis's immortal representation of a fraudulent *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The depiction of preposterous puppets who actually think they are alive is intended to remind us of something that is still forgotten—namely, that we are not supposed to seem dead until we *are*. The phrase "Night of the Living Dead" should denote an interesting horror movie—not the New York art and publishing world now or Bloomsbury then.

Men Without Art (1934), containing famous attacks on Hemingway and Virginia Woolf, is another assertion that we live in a world without that indispensable thing we talk so much about and have so little of. Lewis's own books, some say, lacked in that quality itself to some degree—the first two essays I have cited are eccentric and hard going; the second two fictions are static in the extreme and not for everyone, though I think that in their unrelenting demands they are modernist masterpieces. After *Snooty Baronet* (1932), Lewis abandoned the puppet-images he had overemphasized and mellowed sufficiently to write novels that were not only more humane in tone and substance but were also more accessible and appealing. He had lost, however, none of his obsessive power and little of his prophetic touch. *The Revenge for Love* (1937)—perhaps the greatest political novel of this century—is a superbly crafted work that shows the strained relation between the phony parlor-pinks of Britain and international communism in the context of the Spanish Civil War as well as the price there is to be paid when human reality is distorted by ideology. His most readable and traditional work, *The Revenge for Love* shows how much Lewis gained when he let go some of his determination to avoid sympathetic characterization itself in order to avoid sentimentality and clichés. Is it necessary to add that this great novel, being politically incorrect, was no success—except in the ways that matter most?

After Wyndham Lewis spent what he called "World War No. 2" in the United States and Canada, he returned to a diminished Britain that he portrayed in the stories of *Rotting Hill*. Once again a war had blasted away much of his reputation. When he started over this time, he had to do so in his old age, and as he did so he began to lose his sight. But he never lost his internal vision, his verbal energy, his courage, or his savage humor. In "My Disciple" he shows an ape of himself who has mastered the new world of art appreciation for the masses. Mr. Gartsides will be an art director in a new college—and here Lewis anticipates what has happened to American education in the last thirty years. "If only he could learn to paint. . . ." But "Wyndham Lewis"—a character in the story—ironically *approves* of Gartsides' regarding art as an "uproarious racket," since that is how the tonier parasites had always done the job.

Toward the end of his life, Lewis seemed to have gained perspective on his extraordinary existence even as he lost his sight. *Self-Condemned* (1954) reviews his self-destructive path in leaving England during the war and the larger theme of the necessary results of his top-lofty self-absorption. The protagonist was condemned by himself and by no one else; but the narrative also condemns self as a preoccupation. *Self-Condemned* contains Lewis's truest self-portrait in the picture of René Harding, and in the representation of his wife Hester, what amounts to an apology to his own spouse for the hard time she had endured with him. René Harding winds up as only a "glacial shell" at a mediocre college—obviously a fate worse than death. But Harding was not Wyndham Lewis, who was productive until his demise. He returned to his vision of the next world in his sequels to *The Childermass*, *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*; finished *The Red Priest*; and had begun *Twentieth Century Pallette* before he died. The last phase of Lewis's career was perhaps even more astonishing than his outpouring in the 20's. And though I have not said much here about his life as an artist, the recognition that has lately come to him should be cited. Wyndham Lewis has taken his place in the history of modern art as well as literature, and such great paintings as *The Surrender of Barcelona* have their place in the record of his achievement alongside the familiar portraits. It is doubly right that we remember Lewis's representation of them first when we bring to mind the images of Eliot, Pound, Joyce, Edith Sitwell, and Stephen Spender.

Wyndham Lewis received a tremendous recognition from the few people we could call his peers. Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* cannot be comprehended (if that is possible) without accounting for all the allusions to Lewis, his works, and his attacks on Joyce. Eliot called Lewis "the only writer among my contemporaries to create a new, an original prose style . . . the most fascinating personality of our time." Pound communicated with Lewis during five decades and placed him in the *Cantos* more than once. W. B. Yeats admired *Time and Western Man*, *The Childermass*, and *The Apes of God*, and rightly compared Lewis to Jonathan Swift. Such was but some of the esteem accorded to the visionary who honored, and who erected, monuments of unaging intellect.

Wyndham Lewis expected "the herd"—that is to say, ourselves—to respond gratefully to his heroic demands and scathing representations. His view of humanity—icy, abstract, Hobbesian, and removed from the liberal tradition—has been seen as Fascist, inhuman, and cruel. To some degree, he acknowledged that himself. The trouble is, of course, that sentimentality and vanity keep us from acknowledging the truth of an impersonal contempt. Small-minded Lilliput, coarse Brobdingnag, and preposterous Laputa (complete with its academy) have been and remain valid models of our world. Dean Swift's wisdom is so uncomfortable that it is relegated to children—and professors.

The *saeva indignatio* of Wyndham Lewis made him the historical counterfoil of Joyce, the opposite of D. H. Lawrence, and the male chauvinist nightmare of Virginia Woolf. As the self-styled "Enemy" of modern dissolution, he was the champion of objectivity, space, reason, and order. He was the poet of the *outside* of things, and stood against all mush and gush, rejecting mediocrity, romanticism, and regression. Modern British literature is inconceivable without him, but he has not any more than Swift receded into the purely historical museum world to become only a relic of his day.

Wyndham Lewis comes to mind often these days, and not only when we remember such characters as Tarr, Pulley and Satters, Horace Zagreus, Vincent Penhale, and René Harding. He comes to mind when we consider that until recently Pee-Wee Herman was thought to be just the person to instruct the nation's youth. He comes to mind when we consider apes of God like Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, and Julian Schnabel. He comes to mind when we routinely slip-slide in the slop of smarm that passes for public discourse today. He comes to mind when we consider the brave new world of interactive television, "virtual reality," and the multiculturalism promoted by the powers that be.

Above all, he comes to mind when we recall some of the illusions of Modernism itself—particularly the thought that a great work of art has the power to change the world. The reactionary modernist certainly had something to react against—not only the seizure of his charisma by phonies and bureaucracies, but also the departure of the "herd" for the exit marked "easy way out." Just as Pound's Imagism degenerated into "Amygism," so did "modern art" and Vorticism turn into the smiley faces finger painted by the Gartsides of this world. "Art" became "self-expression"; "poetry" can be "taught"; "the personal is the political." In a "democracy," the custodial engineer gets to write the curriculum.

Considering the drone of the media, the complacency of the established powers, and the cud-chewing indifference of the citizenry, we have today better reason than ever before to appreciate not only Wyndham Lewis's prophetic exasperation but also why he considered his fellow creatures a herd. ◇

The Wife Beater's Punishment (With Commentary)

by Richard Moore

When he knocked out her tooth
(a beautiful incisor)
he lost his wife—plain truth:
he didn't recognize her.

Those verses sad and gory,
feminists brash and clubby,
began with a true story:
a wife thus bashed her hubby.

But *woman in a craze*
beats up her man in tales
lacks credence nowadays.
In fiction, thugs are males.

In life—I'll make a sonnet
and add—*don't depend on it.*