

Walter Allen

## The Roaring Queen

ON 14 APRIL 1936, in a letter to Father Martin D'Arcy, S.J., Wyndham Lewis wrote: "My short novel *The Roaring Queen* is also now finished and Capes are doing it." Five months later, the book was listed among the *New Statesman and Nation's* selected novels for the autumn, but it does not seem to have been advertised either in that periodical or in *The Times Literary Supplement*, though advertising space was found for forthcoming novels by, among others, C. Day Lewis and Stevie Smith. Then, sometime in November, Lewis had a letter from G. Wren Howard, a director of the house of Cape, expressing concern about the possibilities of libel in the novel. Lewis replied, though it is not certain that the letter was ever sent:

Libels I did not discuss (nor did you, although you are at least as well acquainted with the world I made fun of) because there is no libel there. But in any satire there is always the possibility—indeed almost the probability that someone or other (either with a grudge against the author, or with a keen business sense and a desire to turn an honest penny) will come forward and claim financial compensation for an alleged "libel". What happens then? The publisher, in nine cases out of ten, refuses to go to the court with it, however ill-founded the charge. He just hands over the money to the claimant, if necessary suppresses the book, and that is not only disagreeable for the publisher, but also for the author.

Under these circumstances, and since I myself have been a conspicuous sufferer in that matter, it is only natural that I should wish to have your *absolute assurance* that there was nothing in my book that you would not be prepared to stand by. . . .

Your letter, I need hardly say, is disingenuous. For to say in this particular case that you carefully read yourself and accept a book satirising the world in the midst of which you live—accept it in all good faith, so to speak—and then all of a sudden discover that it is swarming with atrocious libels, is plain nonsense.

At the very start it was open to refuse the book at sight: to say to me: "Look here, I know the business in which I am engaged has its anomalies and absurdities, like all walks of life, but I am after all engaged in it, and I don't propose to publish satires about it. Besides, I might make myself unpopular with some of my eminent colleagues." That I should have entirely understood. Indeed, I told you that several publishers had refused it; that in the nature of things the *small* publisher would be afraid of publishing it for fear of offending his big colleagues, and that the big publisher would hardly feel very genial about it. . . .

In the event, though Lewis had passed the proofs, *The Roaring Queen* was not published, and the book world, which was the world Lewis was making fun of, has remained undisturbed by it for thirty-six years. Libel is a matter for lawyers, and whether *The Roaring Queen* was technically libellous I do not know. Most of the characters identifiable in the novel—or presumed by the curious to be identifiable, which is something else—must be dead by now, and some were dead in 1936. But it doesn't need much imagination or much knowledge of human behaviour to realise the controversy and the heat *The Roaring Queen* would have sparked off if it had appeared in 1936. Assuredly, all the characters would have been "recognised," however weak the evidence, and I find it puzzling to understand Cape accepting the novel in the first instance. There is, for example, the reference by an anonymous character to "Geoffrey Bell, who is reader for *Hector Gollywog and Ogpu*, who in his capacity of novel-critic of the *Sunday Messenger* writes the most glowing accounts of the books that reach him as critic from the firm to which he belongs, as reader." Anyone at Cape's must have known that this could refer only to the poet and journalist Gerald Gould, who was for years the chief novel-reviewer of the *Observer*.

Today, of course, after a third of a century, positive identification of the characters in *The Roaring Queen* is much less easy. The only people more quickly and easily forgotten than best-selling novelists are the journalists who review their works, and it is to these categories of human beings that the characters of the novel mainly belong. Indeed, when a positive identification of an original can be made, it can be made, except in one instance, only on the basis of some degree of specialised knowledge that the common reader is unlikely to have. For the other characters, one is largely in the realm of intelligent guess-work, since Lewis, as it seems to me, was often incorporating in a single character traits from more than one original and, still more often, was satirising not specific persons so much as trends he discerned in literary fashion and in the marketing of books.

The one unmistakable character, today as in 1936, is the central character, Samuel Shodbutt, who can only be Arnold Bennett, and a very

funny caricature of Bennett at that. I think it an unfair one, but that is beside the point: one doesn't expect fairness in satire, and in any case Lewis believed he had justification for his satire. Bennett had in fact been dead five years before the novel was due to be published. Indeed, Lewis dates the action of the novel fairly specifically when he describes Shodbutt as a "Canute of 1930." That Shodbutt is meant to be Bennett is clinched by the fact that in the proof copy of the novel there is a page on which the initials A. B. appear instead of S. S.

The aspect of Bennett that Lewis is satirising is that described by Richard Hughes in an article in *Encounter* in 1963:<sup>1</sup> he is recalling the time when he discovered—and he was the first Englishman to do so—the early novels of William Faulkner:

... Those were the days when Arnold Bennett was running his book-column each week in the *Evening Standard*. Bennett had then a greater influence on book-sales than any other critic before or since (people trusted him particularly because his critical style was so open and commonsensical: it was never his way to puff or over-praise a book, however much it had interested him). Being fresh from America, Bennett asked me one night at dinner what was new there, and scribbled the name "Faulkner" on his hard evening cuff.

Apparently Bennett wrote off at once to New York ordering the entire Faulkner oeuvre.

Having got it, Bennett wrote a paragraph in his column, as a result of which *Soldier's Pay* and *Mosquitoes* were published in London with Hughes's memorable introductions.

Hughes represents an estimate of Bennett as a reviewer and a maker and breaker of reputations quite different from Lewis's. All they have in common is a recognition of Bennett's enormous power to persuade the reading public to read and perhaps to buy books. Nevertheless, Hughes's article throws some light on an episode in *The Roaring Queen*. When Rhoda Hyman tells how she had plagiarised the novel of an "unknown American" Shodbutt denies that there can be any such person:

"The Americans are not allowed to neglect their authors—I see to that!" Shodbutt blustered, in a paroxysm of boastfulness. "That is fairly well known I think! They can neglect *ours* if they want to. That's another matter. I don't care about that—we do it ourselves!" He chuckled among his long rabbit teeth. "But I won't have them neglect theirs—and what's more they know it!"

It is one of the funniest passages in the novel, and with Richard Hughes's article beside one, one can see where Lewis could have got it from. Hughes quotes from Bennett's *Evening Standard* review of *Soldier's Pay*:

Last year I made some fuss in this column concerning the young American novelist, William Faulkner, who had been mentioned to me in conversation by Richard Hughes, author of *A High Wind in Jamaica*. No American, and even no American publisher, whom I asked about Faulkner, had ever heard of him. I sent to New York for his books, but could get only one, *The Sound and the Fury*, and that not without difficulty. Strange that Americans have frequently to be told by Englishmen of their new authors!

The first printed fuss made about Theodore Dreiser's first book was made by an Englishman. *Sister Carrie* fell flat in the United States until a review of it by myself was republished there. Then Americans said: "Who is this man Dreiser?" and *Sister Carrie* began to sell in America. That was thirty years ago. Yet Americans say that English critics sniff at American novels.

**B**UT WHY DID LEWIS single out Bennett as the target of his satire? In *Rude Assignment*, an autobiographical work published in 1950, he refers to the "era of puff and blurb in place of criticism" and says: "That started with Mr Arnold Bennett, when he turned reviewer and star-salesman for the publishers, and was the godfather of as fine a brood of third-rate 'masterpieces' as you could hope to find anywhere." He saw Bennett as the arch-representative of the commercialisation of literature, of the promotion of book-publishing to big business; though in *The Roaring Queen* he doesn't fail to make the distinction between Bennett the Edwardian novelist and Bennett the all-powerful book-reviewer.

Bennett had in fact been under criticism for several years before his death. Questionings of his achievement as a novelist were almost common form and were a product of what is now called the generation-gap, inevitable at a time when the novelists the young found exciting were Joyce and Lawrence. Bennett was conscious of this; as he wrote in a letter in 1928: "I have long been aware that some of the younger generation despise me. (The feeling is not mutual.)" Then, his public presentation of himself could easily be construed as comic and vulgar, self-complacent and Philistine. This side of him was summed up by the poet Roy Campbell, a friend of Lewis's, who wrote of him in 1928 that he "quite openly admits, in the *Evening Standard*, in his weekly tips to young poets, that he places his insurance policy, his clothes and his belly a long way before his brains: and that he considers it a far greater privilege to be Mr Bennett—and pay his grocer's bill, than to be Homer—and die in poverty." Indeed, as will become clear, a great deal of the comedy of *The Roaring Queen* and of its mechanisms is based upon these attitudes towards Bennett, which were far from being Lewis's alone.

<sup>1</sup> Richard Hughes, "Faulkner and Bennett", *ENCOUNTER*, September 1963.

As early as 1920, for instance, he had appeared as Mr Nixon, the book-reviewer, in Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*—Pound was of course a close friend of Lewis's. Mr Nixon has gained a steam yacht from the proceeds of writing, as Bennett had done, and he assures Mauberley, "As for poetry, there is nothing in it," and advises him to "Follow me, and take a column," as he had done in the years before the first war in the *New Age*, to which both Pound and Lewis had contributed.

But beyond all this, there was a personal basis for Lewis's attack on Bennett, whom he believed had done him down over the years. In a letter to Hugh Walpole written in January 1920, Bennett describes a dinner-party at Osbert Sitwell's:

Very good dinner and the most fantastic and hazardous service. Sickert was there. He is, I regret to say, becoming rather mannered; but his imitations of his old and intimate friend George Moore are still priceless. Wyndham Lewis was also there—in grey flannel. He left early—piqued, as some said, by remarks of Sickert.

Seventeen years later, we have Lewis's version of the dinner party in his autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering*:

At this dinner-party Sickert began talking about *Tarr*. I could see Bennett didn't like it. I think Sickert saw that too, for he went on talking about it more and more, at every moment in more ecstatic terms. I did not engage in the conversation. I saw that Bennett was extremely annoyed; and when at last Sickert said: "Here we've been talking about it for a quarter of an hour. The author has said nothing. But I don't think it matters *what* we say about it, one way or the other!" Bennett threw himself back in his chair at this, and stammered out crossly, "Oh, I shouldn't say that. I shouldn't say that!"

Naturally it was aggravating of Sickert to make Bennett talk about a "young author's" book for half an hour. For I saw only too well that as an old hand he had resented this ordeal. So much irresponsible jealousy had been more than he could stomach. *Tarr* had been made to stink in his nostrils. Bennett had an age-complex as big as a house. I knew that Sickert had made me an enemy though he hadn't meant to, for he is the kindest man in the world.

Lewis goes on:

For a number of years Arnold Bennett was a kind of book-dictator. Every week in the pages of the *Evening Standard* he "dictated" what the Public should read. And more or less the Public obeyed. He was the Hitler of the book-racket. The book-trade said he could make a book overnight. If he praised it on Thursday evening, by the weekend it was selling like hot cakes. And he became inordinately proud of this accomplishment. He loved power in the way that a "captain of industry" loves power.

The "author of *Tarr*" under this Dictatorship spent his time in a spiritual concentration camp—of barbed silence. . . . This John Keats would have had much more porridge if this particular Hitler hadn't taken a dislike to the cut of his hair. If

Letters were Life, I am persuaded, I should have been beheaded. My head would have "rolled in the sand."

Lewis concludes his account of the episode:

As Sickert and I left the Sitwells that night (in 1922 or 3) I reproached him for having been so vehement with Bennett. But Sickert exclaimed against my retrospective objection. "Nonsense! Why shouldn't he hear it! Of course he should be told—that and a lot more! *Quel comédie*—that such people as Arnold Bennett should be in a position of that sort—it is only in an age like ours that they could be! That one should have to talk to such people about *books* at all! Why should one be asked to meet such people? It is absurd that a Bennett should be referred to, for anything except the time of a train or the cost of a bicycle lamp! Pfui!"

This outburst of Richard Sickert's should be set side by side with the comments on Shodbutt of the painter Richard Dritter. Dritter is plainly based on Sickert, who died in 1942, as is clear not only from the similarity of opinion and expression and certainly not because he is depicted as a painter with a beard, a detail which has led one unwary commentator on the novel to identify him with Augustus John, but also because of the reference to "his master, Whistler," like whom "he has a tongue to his credit as well as a brush."

*THE ROARING QUEEN* opens with Samuel Shodbutt, chief reviewer of *The Morning Outcry* and chairman of The Book of the Week Club, en route to a weekend party at Beverley Chase, the Oxfordshire mansion of the Wellesley-Crooks, there to meet the other potentates of the book-racket, the chairmen of rival book-clubs, other reviewers, authors and so on. Before the party is over he will announce the next week's choice of The Book of the Week Club. When he arrives, he meets many old enemies, prominent among them being Mrs Rhoda Hyman. Who is Mrs Hyman? Or rather, who is Mrs Hyman's original? I think there can be no doubt at all that she is, surprisingly, Mrs Virginia Woolf. I say surprisingly because she doesn't fit in in any way with what I suspect are our present impressions of Virginia Woolf. She is anything but a speaking likeness and is obviously not intended to be one; and the fact, as we are told, that her father was a literary journalist and that she has associations with Cambridge would certainly not be enough to pin the identity upon her. Yet she is based on Virginia Woolf all the same.

In his presentation of Rhoda Hyman Lewis is doing two things at once: he is dramatising Bennett's relationship with Virginia Woolf and also expressing his own reactions towards her. Bennett's attitude towards Virginia Woolf, and hers to him, was always ambivalent. In *The*

*Roaring Queen* Shodbutt's first encounter with Rhoda begins:

And if the gaze of Samuel Shodbutt fell more ponderously in one place than another, it oppressed, if anything, more peculiarly that drooping intellect-ravaged exterior of the lanky and sickly lady in Victorian muslins—the greater and more world-famous of the pair of mid-proud, vacantly staring—for no banns ever published would devirginate either of those colossal spinsters. Yes! there, beneath his very eyes, wilted pretentiously the very woman who had but a few months ago written a vile supercilious pamphlet all about Shodbutt. And it had been a very insulting piece of work indeed. So the highly finished languor of the patronising queen of the highbrow world (whose pen had but yesterday allowed itself to be facetious at the expense of the scribbling grocer puffed up into a Brummagem critical Lion) attracted the darkest sparks from his smouldering eye-socket—and Shodbutt's chin was puckered like a disgruntled patch of ocean ruffled into a snarling surface by a storm—and the drooping extremities of his moustache whiskered dankly the contemptuous corners of his mouth.

Well, Virginia Woolf had indeed written a pamphlet to do with Arnold Bennett, a pamphlet called *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*, published in 1924. It is very amusing. Mrs Woolf reports Bennett as having said "that there was no great novelist among the Georgian writers because they cannot create characters who are real, true and convincing," and she adds: "And there I cannot agree." The Georgian writers are Mrs Woolf herself, Joyce, Lawrence, Forster, Lytton Strachey and T. S. Eliot, and the pamphlet is an attack on her immediate predecessors in the English novel, Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy. It is Bennett, because he has supplied her with her text, who has to bear the brunt of the attack. The Mrs Brown of the title is an old lady sitting in a railway carriage: she is human nature. "With all his powers of observation, which are marvellous," says Mrs Woolf, "with all his sympathy and humanity, which are great, Mr Bennett has never once looked at Mrs Brown in her corner." Bennett as a novelist is disposed of—in much the same way and to the same degree as the generation of novelists after her disposed of Virginia Woolf. But the difference between them was not simply a difference between generations: it was a difference between attitudes towards the art of the novel, and they were both conscious artists dedicated to their literary form. In this sense, they were enemies, for it seemed as though if one were right the other must be wrong. They attacked each other on aesthetic grounds.

At the personal level it was rather different, for there was at least a grudging respect on both sides. On 1 December 1930, they found themselves together at a dinner-party. It had been engineered, Virginia Woolf thought, by Bennett himself to enable him to "get on good terms" with her. She

adds—it is from *A Writer's Diary*—"Heaven knows I don't care a rap if I'm on terms with B. or not." She goes on to tell how she drew Lord David Cecil into the conversation. "And we taunted the old creature into thinking us refined." It is not a pleasant piece of writing, but that the effect of the meeting on Mrs Woolf was considerable is shown by the fact that, recording it the day after, she says: "this left me in a state where I can hardly drive my pen across the page."

We have Bennett's account of the meeting. He wrote to his nephew: "Last night I was at Ethel Sands' and had a great pow-wow with Virginia Woolf. (Other guests held their breath to listen to us.) Virginia is all right." One gets the impression that in their encounter the "old creature," who was sixty-three as contrasted with Virginia Woolf's mere forty-eight, appeared much the more naïve of the two. But a year later, under the heading "Saturday, March 28th", we find this in Virginia Woolf's diary:

Arnold Bennett died last night; which leaves me sadder than I should have supposed. A loveable genuine man; impeded, somehow a little awkward in life; well meaning; ponderous; kindly; coarse; knowing he was coarse; dimly floundering and feeling for something else; glutted with success; wounded in his feelings; avid; thickclipped; prosaic intolerably; rather dignified; set upon writing; yet always taken in; deluded by splendour and success; but naïve; an old bore; an egotist; much at the mercy of life for all his competence; a shopkeeper's view of literature; yet with the rudiments, covered over with fat and prosperity and the desire for hideous Empire furniture, of sensibility. Some real understanding power, as well as a gigantic absorbing power. These are the sort of things that I think by fits and starts this morning, as I sit journalising. . . . Queer how one regrets the dispersal of anybody who seemed—as I say—genuine: who had direct contact with life—for he abused me; and yet I rather wished him to go on abusing me; and me abusing him. An element in life—even in mine that was remote—taken away. This is what one minds.

Lewis's attitude towards Virginia Woolf was, I think, much less complex than Bennett's. She was a member of "Bloomsbury," and his references to Bloomsbury are generally fairly contemptuous, both because it was part of the literary Establishment and because of his intellectual views. And then she was a friend of the art critic and painter Roger Fry, who Lewis all his life believed had done him down early in his career as a painter. Before writing *The Roaring Queen*, Lewis had already published a criticism of Virginia Woolf in his book, *Men Without Art*, in 1934. We know from her diary how concerned she was, before its publication, about what Lewis might have written of her. On Thursday, 11 October 1934, she writes:

A brief note. In today's *Lit. Sup.*, they advertise *Men Without Art*, by Wyndham Lewis: chapters

on Eliot, Faulkner, Hemingway, Virginia Woolf. . . . Now I know by reason and instinct that this is an attack; that I am publicly demolished; nothing is left of me in Oxford and Cambridge and places where the young read Wyndham Lewis. My instinct is not to read it. . . . Why am I so sensitive? I think vanity: I dislike the thought of being laughed at: at the glow of satisfaction that A., B. and C. will get from hearing V.W. demolished. . . .

Three days later, she had either read Lewis's book or the reviews in the Sunday papers:

This morning I've taken the arrow of W. L. to my heart: he makes tremendous and delightful fun of B. and B: calls me a peeper, not a looker; a fundamental prude but one of the four or five living (so it seems) who is an artist. That's what I gather the flagellation amounts to. . . . Well, this gnat has settled and stung: and I think (12.30) the pain is over. Yes, I think it's now rippling away. Only I can't write.

Nevertheless, for the next three weeks or so the references to Lewis and his book recur in her diary, and perhaps for good reason. On 19 October, Stephen Spender reviewed *Men Without Art* in the *Spectator* and wrote that Lewis had attacked Mrs Woolf with a "great deal of malice", which great deal of malice, Lewis believed, Spender found in his reference to "the obvious imitation of episodes in *Ulysses* to be met with in *Mrs Dalloway*." Lewis had written of these imitations:

In our local exponents of this method there is none of the realistic vigour of Mr. Joyce, though often the incidents in the local "masterpieces" are exact and puerile copies of the scenes in his Dublin drama (cf. the Viceroy's progress through Dublin in *Ulysses* with the Queen's progress through London in *Mrs Dalloway*—the latter is a sort of undergraduate imitation of the former, winding up with a smoke-writing in the sky, a pathetic "crib" of the firework display and the rocket that is the culmination of Mr. Bloom's beach ecstasy).

This indebtedness of Mrs Woolf to Joyce, which cannot, I think, be denied, is surely the basis of Lewis's making Rhoda Hyman bestow on herself the diploma for The Year's Cleverest Literary Larceny. The comedy is the more farcical when we discover that the larceny is from an unknown American who, it is suggested at one point in the misunderstandings of conversation, may be Sinclair Lewis.

AND NOW WE ENTER into the realms of surmise. I doubt whether at this date other characters can be identified positively. The most one can do is to give reasons for intelligent guesses, in the full knowledge that the guesses may be utterly wrong. According to Mrs Wyndham Lewis, in a letter to the publisher, "Nancy Cunard was the main figure in the book." By this I assume she means Baby Bucktrout. Mrs Lewis

goes on to say that "most certainly she did not object even if she had recognised her satirical portrait"; and it appears that after reading the novel, Miss Cunard wished to publish it at her Hours Press, in France. But Lewis needed an advance on royalties, which was against her practice as a publisher of small editions of *avant-garde* works.

In this, Nancy Cunard's behaviour towards Lewis seems to have been characteristic; but whether one would have spotted Baby as Nancy Cunard without Mrs Lewis's word for it I do not know. There are problems of chronology. In the novel, Baby is a girl in her late teens trying to seduce a young gardener with *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was published in 1928, as her primer. In fact, in 1930, the date of the action of the novel, Miss Cunard was 34. Certainly, in a rough-and-ready way, the presentation is in character. Miss Cunard, the daughter of the famous hostess Lady Cunard, was one of the great rebellious figures of the 'twenties and 'thirties, a beautiful woman notorious for her flouting of the conventions and her passionate support of left-wing causes, a bohemian when the word still had a meaning. She had known Lewis all her adult life and had sat to him for a portrait. The original of characters of many novels in the inter-war years, among her avatars are Iris March, in Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat*, and Lucy Tantamount, in Huxley's *Point Counter Point*. According to Daphne Fielding, in *Emerald and Nancy*, a memoir of Miss Cunard and her mother, Nancy suffered as a child under the tyranny of a governess named Scarth: one is tempted to equate this lady with Lewis's Miss Corse, who carries Nancy, kicking and biting, under her beefy arm when she is discovered riding piggy-back on the young gardener. And though the seduction episode, with its satire on Lawrence's novel, needs no explanation, it is tempting to relate it to an incident in Nancy's girlhood. According to Daphne Fielding, Miss Scarth discovered that she was reading Elinor Glyn's novel, *Three Weeks*, the wicked book of the period. "A frightful rumpus" ensued, from which Nancy was rescued only by the intervention of her mother's great admirer, George Moore.

However, if we can identify Baby Bucktrout with Miss Cunard then we may have some tenuous clue to the identity of the Roaring Queen himself, Donald Butterboy, the homosexual undergraduate whose novel, *It Takes Two to Make a Bedroom-Scene*, is to be Shodbutt's next choice of The Book Of The Week Club. Butterboy is presented so much as the undifferentiated stereotype of the effeminate young man, the "flaunting, extravagant queen" as one might

say, that he could have been based on any number of young men and young novelists of the time. But the modern reader will probably think first of the late Brian Howard, mainly because it is in him that the stereotype of the homosexual as we know it now is most plainly seen. Michael Holroyd in his life of Lytton Strachey sums him up: "Wit, poet, critic and friend of the famous, Brian Howard dazzled Eton, Oxford and London during the 'twenties and 'thirties by his exotic manner of living and of conversation." He appears in the novels of Evelyn Waugh as Ambrose Silk in *Put Out More Flags* and as Anthony Blanche in *Brideshead Revisited*, and Waugh describes him in his autobiography as "mad, bad and dangerous to know." He did in fact write a poem called "Two It Takes to Make a Flower," but, alas, it was not written until seven years after Lewis wrote *The Roaring Queen*. Had the novel not been suppressed, it is more than likely that Howard would have reviewed it, since at the time he was one of the fiction-reviewers on the *New Statesman and Nation*. I did not know him, but since he praised my own first novel generously I am bound to think he was a good reviewer. He had also, as a boy of fifteen at Eton, published a satirical piece that takes swipes at Lewis in the *New Age*. There was obviously much more to Howard than appears in Donald Butterboy.

The possible clue to Butterboy's identity is that in the novel *Baby Bucktrout* is reluctantly engaged to him. I am pretty sure that Nancy Cunard was never engaged to Brian Howard, but that they were close friends is certain. Indeed, at one time, according to Daphne Fielding, she declared that she loved him "in every possible way." Miss Fielding goes on:

Though he admired her beauty and respected her idealism, the knowledge of her being physically in love with him was distinctly uncomfortable. As he told his mother, "Nothing could deter her or make her dishonest. . . . If she were younger and less ill and attracted me, I'd marry her, I almost believe."

She published his poems from The Hours Press.

Baby is the niece of Mrs Wellesley-Crook, the great hostess of Beverley Chase; and since Beverley Chase is located in Oxfordshire I suppose the mind inevitably turns first to thoughts of Garsington and Lady Ottoline Morrell. I am certain Lady Ottoline was not the model for Mrs Wellesley-Crook, and it seems to me likely that many hostesses went to her making. Part of her, though, is probably derived from Nancy's mother Lady Cunard. Like Lady Cunard, Mrs Wellesley-Smith is American in origin. Lady Cunard came from San Francisco: Mrs Wellesley-Crook has been a "Crook of Chicago, with a verandaed chateau in the South, in the Old

Dominion, where she was connected with the aristocratic Blackwood Toys." Lewis had known Lady Cunard for the greater part of his life and in *Blasting and Bombardiering* he writes of her with considerable warmth. Their first association seems to have been in 1914, when Lewis was running the Rebel Art Centre with the painters C. R. W. Nevinson, Cuthbert Hamilton and Edward Wadsworth. Lady Cunard commissioned them to decorate some handkerchiefs, scarves, candles and fans to be used as favours at a party. It appears to have been the only commission the Rebel Art Centre was offered. Later, during the first war, when Lewis was a subaltern on leave from Flanders, he attended Lady Cunard's dinner-parties and on one occasion, according to Peter Quennell, he was invited to luncheon to meet the Prince of Wales. It must have been a memorable occasion:

Wyndham Lewis accepted the invitation, contrary to his usual practice; but he was taciturn and pensive and self-absorbed, and, as soon as they had sat down to luncheon, produced from his pocket a small pearl-handled revolver, which he placed beside his wine-glasses. Did he mean to assassinate the Prince? Was it his intention to commit suicide? At all events, a crisis threatened; disengaging herself from the guest of honour, she turned her attention at the first opportunity to Mr Wyndham Lewis's "pretty little pistol," admiring its workmanship and the elegance of the design, handling it as if it had been a Fabergé Easter Egg or an enamelled Georgian snuff-box, at length with an absent-minded smile dropping the weapon into the bag she carried; after which she turned to the Prince and resumed her social duties.

AT THIS POINT, the quest for identification must stop. There is, for instance, little Nancy Cozens, aged eleven-and-a-half, the author of *Bursting Ripe*, which, on the strength of Samuel Shodbutt's review, had sold twenty-five thousand on the day of publication. Of course we think of Daisy Ashford, whose *The Young Visitors* had been introduced by Sir James Barrie. But *The Young Visitors* was published in 1919, and Nancy Cozens is in no real way modelled on Daisy Ashford. Lewis was cramming into *The Roaring Queen*, set in 1930, all his observations of publishing gained in a lifetime of writing. But one sees how his mind worked, and it was the mind of the comic writer. The foil to Nancy Cozens is the four-times widowed, eighty-six-year-old Mrs Boniface, whose *Footsteps in the Sand* had won the Best First Novel of the Year Award. The fact of the infant prodigy had bred, as it were, the notion of the senile prodigy.

Other characters, like Osorio Potter, seem to me to be like minor figures who have strayed out of Lewis's much more important satire on the

world of the arts, *The Apes of God*. *The Roaring Queen* is a farcical footnote to that work, a footnote in which he takes satirical swipes at the trends in literature and society that he disapproves of, the cults of the detective novel, the tough Western, the homosexual novel, the youth cult, the Negro cult. All are summarily parodied; as too is the form of the novel itself, which is the Peacockian novel of Aldous Huxley.

As a novel, *The Roaring Queen* obviously has no great distinction. It is a *jeu d'esprit*, a squib, but it is authentic Lewis, and only he could have written it. It goes along at a spanking pace and it is very funny, not only as a cartoon of the book world of the day but, more precisely, as a caricature of one of its most famous inhabitants. Shodbutt is in character throughout, and in his rendering of him Lewis reaches considerable comic heights. Witness the scene in which Shodbutt and his wife discuss how he came to choose *It Takes Two to Make a Bedroom-Scene* as the Book of the Week:

"It was the last line that decided me. It carried me off my feet."

"Mine too!"

"The last line. On the last page. I said *This is the goods*. And I'm not often wrong. I could tell it at a glance."

"There was the one in the middle. . . ."

"I remember! It went deeply—a *line only*. Marvellous. I never read the middle of a book. . . . I never read more than the last page. Balzac said he

knew what a book was like without even opening it. I can't say that—that's more than I can claim—I take off my hat to Balzac. He was a *genius*! No. I have to *open* them. It's no use—I admit it, I have to open them. But I never need to go further than the last page. . . . If that doesn't stir me I just shut it up with a bang, and mark it N. G. But give me the last page—and I'm infallible. Infallible.

"You would be infallible even if you never opened. . . ."

"No. No. Balzac—*Balzac!* I must *open* it!"

"You do yourself an injustice."

"No. I can't tell if a book has genius unless I open it. No, Joanie—not without opening it."

"But Sam, darling, often you *haven't*. It has been sufficient for me to *tell* you, in a nutshell. . . ."

"That is true. Nutshell. Yes!"

"It is perfectly marvellous the way *the slightest hint*—why one word sometimes is enough. I have known you to decide upon the title alone."

"That is true, yes. There have been times. I have often done that. A title—I *have* done it with only the title. But that's risky, Joanie! Risky!"

"I think your flair is unbelievable! I am positive that if you told Balzac the little I have sometimes told you, he could never have been able to judge unerringly—to judge as you have always done. Not even Flaubert could!"

"Ah *Flaubert!* I take off my hat to Flaubert! Flaubert was a genius! He would have told at once—even if the book had never been written."

"I believe he could! But so could you—you know you could. . . ."

There, it seems to me, we see unmistakably Lewis's affinities as a comic writer with Dickens and Ben Jonson.

## Mortimer Forest

All afternoon the drone of a saw has fanned  
with resin over this bank of vibrating pines;  
with each completed sever, falling an octave,  
the one, only, sound of another human  
in all dead, hot, black Mortimer Forest.

I have seen the place; clearing, sawdust, tarpaulin,  
pipe-dottle, that is all, never the man.

If it stops now and I go there I will find,  
to mark hard work for so long, long weeping ranks,  
curtailed, seasoning in glutinous tiers,  
and dust, dust red wood-ants perpetually sift.

Peter Reading