

Wyndham Lewis and Literary Modernist Studies

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Lewis's relation to modernism is very much like – and in fact reflects – the fortunes of modernism itself in the last century: first marginal, then central, then savagely attacked, reduced to a grotesque caricature, and finally (perhaps) on the rise again. In this regard, he is perhaps the unlikely standard-bearer for modernism's fortunes and the best test of its current status.

Present in London in the 'teens of the last century, Lewis both coined the term "men of 1914" and was a key one of them, along with Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot. With typically modernist brio, Lewis thus anointed himself and a few of his friends as the arbiters and inventors of the most important artistic and cultural movement of his – perhaps of any – time. Lewis was motivated in part in this regard by F. T. Marinetti's 1911 and 1913 visits to London. Promoting the aesthetic and cultural vision of Futurism, Marinetti exercised a magnetic pull upon both Lewis and that other modernist impresario, Ezra Pound. Animated by Marinetti's visit and excited by his version of a new cultural production that would cut away the decaying flesh of a civilization he saw as gangrenous and septic, Lewis quickly put together what may be the founding document of English

modernism: *BLAST!* A proto-typical “little magazine,” *BLAST!* featured radically explosive typefaces, irreverent lists of those who should be “blasted” away and those who should be “blessed” for their innovation, and an indigenized version of Futurism called Vorticism. As described in *BLAST!*, Vorticism took Futurism and made it more dynamic, alive, vibrant, and explosive. It set the stage for the emergence of modernism as a radical break with the immediate past, a rejection of all soft-headed Victorianisms, and a repudiation of the effete art of the 1890s. As an opening salvo in what we might now call a culture war, it is the prototype of the “shock and awe” approach to cultural renewal. Its energy, affinity for Futurism, and call for widespread “creative destruction” naturally caught Pound’s attention, and the two became key impresarios, promoters, arbiters, and producers of early English modernism.

I’ll return to the divergence in these two founders’ fates shortly, but for now I just want to note that they had very different trajectories, and even today suffer from radically disparate reputations, despite their common importance. We might, in fact, think of Lewis as the occulted aspect of the Pound era, the evil twin who had to be disavowed to allow modernism to flourish – that is, to achieve hegemonic centrality in the academic and artistic institutions that came to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. To

borrow from Benjamin, we might even say that there is no document of the Pound era that is not also at the same time a document of the Lewis era. Of course, such claims are in several ways patently perverse: modernism as Pound avec Lewis – take that Virginia! But as I hope to show in the few minutes remaining, there is something to even such perversion that might help tell us something about the future of modernist studies today.

The first step in the divergent paths taken by Pound and Lewis – and by their critical reputations – emerges from the fact that modernism was never singular and coherent. Rather, it was a protean set of wildly divergent and often conflicting responses to a sense that history was beginning anew, that the world could be reshaped, and that art had a central role to play in transforming human experience, culture, and society. The hard, clean-edged, spare neoclassicism originally espoused by Lewis and codified by Pound as the prescription for Imagist poetry was only one aspect of the modernist ferment. As it gave way to more elaborate, internally-focused, and occasionally vaporous works like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Ulysses*, and Eliot's post-conversion poetry – not to mention the transcription of passages from Thomas Jefferson verbatim into the *Cantos* – Pound changed with the times.

Lewis, on the other hand, fought against such betrayals of the hard – Futuro-Vorticist – aesthetic he first voiced in *BLAST!* Though Pound's

experiments in the *Cantos* do not, a great majority of the psychological and spiritual work of other modernists drew upon the relativistic philosophy of time articulated by William James and Henri Bergson. James originated the notion of “stream of consciousness,” and Bergson argued that the experience of time, its “duration,” was more important than any supposedly objective measure of it. Woolf, Richardson, Ford, Lawrence, HD, Joyce, Mansfield, late Eliot, late Henry James, all took the bait and produced works that deviated from the neo-classicism of Futuro-Vorticism in their at-times narcissistic renderings of consciousness’s fumblings towards self-awareness. Eternally watching themselves in mirrors, texts, windows, doorways, caves, country gardens, and the projected minds of others, the subjects in these writers’ works became emblematic – enragingly so – for Lewis of decadence and the failure of modernism finally to break with Victorian sentimentalism and Romantic vapourings.

Adopting a principled – which is to say intransigent – opposition to such a betrayal, Lewis took on a satanic persona, anointed himself “the Enemy,” and began his career as a brilliant satirist. In the process, Lewis became something of a discursive missile, detonating upon impact with the “time philosophy” of Joyce, Woolf, and Picasso among. Most prominently in *Time and Western Man* and *The Apes of God*, Lewis savaged all works

that he saw as time-based and overly influenced by Bergson. Wittily, and with the kind of scorn one can only imagine a dyed-in-the-wool modernist sustaining, Lewis clinically attacked his confreres.

All explosions feature at least some degree of blow-back, however, and when you make yourself into the projectile, there's a good chance you are going to go up with the target. This is what happened to Lewis. In his vituperation – his insistence on what he imagined to be the original impetus, aesthetic, and validation of modernist innovation – Lewis managed to alienate himself from virtually all the figures we now think of as central to it. Castigating them for giving up the hard neo-classicism which he saw as not only the essence of modernism, but the only way to redeem a decadent society that seemed bent upon solipsistic self-destruction, Lewis didn't just burn his bridges, he set the charges, lit the fuses, presided over the detonation, ignited the wreckage that wasn't already on fire, trod the ashes into the mud, hosed down the site, and scattered leaves on the remains so that no trace that a bridge had ever existed could be detected. It was destruction on a scale Yahweh would have been proud to own – and it ultimately claimed Lewis more than any other modernist as its victim.

Lewis's staunch insistence on remaining the enemy, on inhabiting the margin from which he could more effectively snipe at those he imagined to

be betraying modernism's promise, meant that he missed a crucial transition in the history of modernism: from avant-garde to vanguard. Almost, it seems, while Lewis was sleeping, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, and Joyce went from experimental *enfants terribles* to mandarins. Driving and in turn validated by the New Criticism's burgeoning dominance of academic literary criticism, the figures associated with high modernism became institutional mainstays, the original power of critique embodied in their aesthetic experiments co-opted to become the "official opposition" to modernity's alienation and isolation. As modernism achieved respectability and mainstream appeal, Lewis continued to exist on the periphery. His satirical attacks on "soft" modernist tendencies are wickedly funny in their own way – there's something delicious about his reckless heaping of scorn upon such icons as Woolf and Joyce. But in alienating those he attacked, his attacks also alienated those who were passionate about studying those he attacked.

Worse still, they showcased his troubling tendency towards authoritarianism and totalitarianism. Though he was not alone in turning to fascism and anti-Semitism as he sought alternatives to the social decay he perceived around him, Lewis' alienation of those who might otherwise have defended him ensured that when his politics became a problem, he was on his own. The combination of personal, artistic alienation and detestable, ill-

conceived politics was a toxic sea from which few, if any, cared to rescue him.

I'd like to return to Pound now, to draw what I think is a telling comparison. Prone, like Lewis, to authoritarian pronouncements, Pound also embraced fascism; he produced radio broadcasts supporting Mussolini, escaped a trial for treason by being declared criminally insane, and was for a long time nastily anti-Semitic. When Pound was captured by American forces at the end of World War II, he could well have been shot in short order for treason. But interventions on his behalf by influential figures in the world of modernism saw him instead incarcerated in St. Elizabeth's hospital for the criminally insane. The good friends he made as modernism's number one impresario not only stood by him and commiserated. They also went to work, and three years into his incarceration Pound was awarded the prestigious Bollingen prize for his Pisan cantos. This award was the first step in what we might call Pound's rehabilitation, both as a person and as a leading figure of modernism. The second major step in that rehabilitation was Hugh Kenner's installation of Pound as *the* key figure of modernism in his massively influential *The Pound Era* in 1971. A mere 26 years after he stepped off the firing line and into St. Elizabeth's, and only a year before he died a free man in Venice, Pound was officially restored to the very centre of

modernism. Though Kenner's account of modernism is by now very much out of fashion, and Pound's reputation is no longer separable from his politics, Pound remains to this day a central figure in any account of modernism, his works in no danger of going out of print, and a small industry of scholarship on him thriving quite nicely.

So much for Pound – but what about Lewis?

Lewis never committed treason and was never declared criminally insane for his political activities. But nor was he ever redeemed by either his peers or future critics. Though both he and his phrase “the men of 1914” were at one time central to critical accounts of modernism, his constant antagonism of other modernists has meant that as the tides of critical interest have turned, he and his work have been stranded: there was no Bollingen prize for Lewis, nor any *The Lewis Era* to insist upon his importance. Where those he had helped establish in their literary careers repaid Pound in sterling, those Lewis had alienated not only left him to his own devices but also left him out of account. The result has, in the long term, been the near-total loss of Lewis' work from the world of modernist studies. Very little, if any, of his work is currently in print since the dissolution of the Black Sparrow Press, and his status as a straight, white, man who wrote often vicious attacks on Jews, women, people of colour, and just about anyone he

could sit long enough to fire has meant that very little scholarship has been produced lately as well.

Indeed, instead of *The Lewis Era*, Lewis got *Fables of Aggression*, Fredric Jameson's devastating portrait of Lewis as "*the Modernist as Fascist*." Published less than ten years after *The Pound Era*, *Fables of Aggression* put paid to any chance of Lewis' reputation being recovered in the twentieth century. Jameson is a brilliant critic, and his book defined Lewis for generations of critics outside the small circle of Lewis enthusiasts that persists no matter what the critical winds. In an irony Lewis would have had to enjoy, though perhaps not embrace, while *The Pound Era* has gone out of print and been superseded by more lively and ecumenical accounts of modernism, *Fables of Aggression* has recently been reissued. Lewis has come to a real pass: a class set of his seminal modernist novel *Tarr* can't be had either new or used today (I tried), but a critical work that attacks virtually everything he ever wrote is readily available. Pound's sins, and those of his advocates, seem to recede steadily into the past as new work continues to be produced, while Lewis's adhere to him like pitch and are even renewed in the critical consciousness, forestalling the kind of critical attention his work truly deserves.

This situation need not persist, however. The rejuvenation of modernist studies in the last ten years, and its insistence upon attending to works that have routinely been excluded from the field, presents an opportunity for reviving scholarly interest in Lewis. The world of modernist studies has changed dramatically in the last ten years, expanding the temporal, geographical, and material boundaries of modernism and challenging the old accounts of it as a decidedly white, male, and snobbish phenomenon. These changes have been salutary, and have rejuvenated modernist studies on a global scale. But Lewis remains largely on the outside, characterized as the bad modernist, the standard bearer for modernism as fascist, totalitarian, homophobic, ethnocentric, misogynist, and so on. It's a case of dual misrecognition: on the one hand, Lewis is presumed to be central to the old high modernism, when he was clearly oppositional to much of it, and to most of its practitioners; on the other hand, he is thought to be so well known that we need not revisit his work. We know he's a fascist, so why bother confirming the obvious?

But maybe something important is about to take place. Maybe the re-release of *Fables of Aggression* signals an anxiety about the new modernist studies. Maybe it indicates a fear that Lewis will be recovered in the expansion of modernism to include those routinely excluded from it. Maybe

the re-issue of Jameson's book protests too much, and the time is in fact just right for a return to the scene of modernism; for a return that will validate its messy contradictoriness, its infighting, its enemies, as well as its fellow travellers. Maybe exhibitions like this one can help inaugurate a richer understanding of modernism that finally breaks from the official narrative produced by those most scarred by Lewis's attacks. Maybe we will finally be able to reanimate the study of Lewis on a scale commensurate with his importance to modernism – as something more, something much more, than just the crazy editor of *BLAST!* Doing so does not require that we whitewash his attacks on fellow writers or his deplorable politics. Rather, it allows us to put them into illuminating relation, and to begin the work of recovering a major figure of modernism for a generation of scholars whose only knowledge of his work is second-hand at best. Maybe, just maybe, The Lewis Era is finally beginning to dawn.