Wyndham Lewis: Vorticist Theory and Comic Technique

Wyndham Lewis is perhaps the purest and most potent— and the least popular— comic and satiric artist at work in England today. Critics and scholars have almost completely neglected the achievement of this Canadian-born writer, a master of his art. Vorticism was the name he gave to the movement he founded and led at the leading edge of avant-garde art in the early 1910s. He was the most distinguished and influential member of the group of modern English artists that included Delaunay, Picabia, and Joyce. Lewis was born in 1882 and died in 1957. He was a member of the so-called English avant-garde and was one of the most important figures in the history of modern art. He is best known for his influence on the development of modernism and for his role as a key figure in the English art movement of the 1920s.

Lewis was a prolific writer and artist, and his works include novels, short stories, essays, and paintings. He was a key figure in the development of modernism and was one of the most influential artists of the early 20th century. He was a member of the English avant-garde and was one of the most important figures in the history of modern art. He is best known for his influence on the development of modernism and for his role as a key figure in the English art movement of the 1920s. Lewis was born in 1882 and died in 1957. He was a member of the so-called English avant-garde and was one of the most important figures in the history of modern art. He is best known for his influence on the development of modernism and for his role as a key figure in the English art movement of the 1920s. Lewis was born in 1882 and died in 1957. He was a member of the so-called English avant-garde and was one of the most important figures in the history of modern art. He is best known for his influence on the development of modernism and for his role as a key figure in the English art movement of the 1920s.

Again, Lewis is a "minority writer" today probably because his perspective does not seem to be as universal or as catholic as the perspectives of Joyce, Pound or Eliot, or as liberal as the perspectives of, let us say, William Shakespeare or George Bernard Shaw. It will be the aim of the projected dissertation to demonstrate, without engaging in literary controversy, that Lewis is as transcendentally original as his friends and to exonerate him from the charge of egocentric megalomania which is sometimes lodged against him. Hugh Kenner has remarked that "no historian’s model of the age of Joyce, Eliot and Pound is intelligible without Lewis in it;" and, as a matter of fact, Lewis's work is a missing key and necessary complement to the work of his old associates, as well as a thread in itself. His work, like theirs, is compounded of, and forms a comment on, nearly all of the cultural ideas that were in the air in the first half of the twentieth century; like theirs, his themes are carefully combed, woven together and knit up into a new intellectual fabric. Like Pound, Eliot and Joyce, Lewis was careful to hide his true anti-realist, anti-mystical, anti-dialectical motives and sympathies behind an ironic mask and to pretend to be what he actually was not, namely, a revolutionary anarchist. However, perhaps because he chose to wear the mask of the almon, the imposter or literary lion (modelled no doubt on the manners of his former art-teacher, Augustus John), instead of the mask of the clown, the pseudo-believer or literary fox, which his colleagues wore, Wyndham Lewis's counterfeit was taken, by callow reviewers and a demure public unaccustomed to the bellowing of bull-roarers, at face-value.
But surprisingly, and in spite of the mask, Lewis, like Eliot in his potentially misleading note to The "Assemblage," was frank enough, as we might say, schoolmaster enough, to reveal his own motives and to indicate the precision of his own art—save that, being also a writer of satire, Lewis reveals and indicates in a way that will not readily be believed, or that at least will not be passively and hypocritically accepted. To illustrate this last point: Lewis once annexed Edward Caird's description of the Cynic philosopher to a self-portrait: "...Now I have supplied you (he wrote) with an analogy against myself for practical reasons, although it has no literal application... I am doing a very different thing from what the Cynic was doing, and I am very differently placed. But certainly I am issuing a 'challenge' to the community in which I live. I am 'criticizing all its institutions and modes of action and of thought.' I 'create disgust,' that I have proved, 'among the ordinary respectable members of the community,' that is to say among the established orthodoxy of the cult of 'primitivist' so-called 'revolution': what I say is 'violently resented,' and I very sincerely hope will awaken thought. Finally, what I say is 'one of those beginnings of progress which take the appearance of reaction.'" (AM, 135): Italics Lewis's). Even had Lewis been nothing more than a satirist, satire in art is of course apt to "create disgust" among the "respectable members of the community". To be firmly but vigorously rejected by his audience is a fate the satirist finds it difficult to escape, even if his satire is indirect, complex, and obscure to them. The function of Lewis's deliberate ambiguity and indirection, like Eliot's, was, as Eliot once wrote, furthermore "to preserve in cryptogram certain actions which, if expressed directly, would be destined to immediate obliteration, followed by perpetual oblivion."

Lewis's manifest of his theoretical 'notions preserved in cryptogram'—to which the other Vorticists seem to have subscribed in 1914—was, when presented straightforwardly, simply that: (1) as a creative force at work in the world, pure change due to fortuitous coincidence in the passage of time is practically negligible, practically insignificant (2) all "historical" theories of art and culture invoking organic concepts of growth in time from social origins—all evolutionary cultural ideas, in short—are henceforth declared suspect as revolutionary propaganda in disguise (3) art-works are not the result of community endeavor (4) art has no utility (5) "scientific" applications of art to real life are invalid (6) artists neither hope nor fear that scientific generalizations will profoundly alter the human condition which art expresses (7) there is no intuitive revelation that is not the result of individual personal human experience (8) there is no progress in art, except to perfection and away from it (9) a work of art is a static, dead, and atemporal thing: it simply exists (10) the artist looks at his subject sub specie aeternitatis, amorally and unconventionally. In short, science cannot "correct" art. A work of art is cold formal dead matter to which organic living things respond and whose forms they attempt to resemble and imitate: "Life," says Wyndham Lewis, "is matter with a fever." Then life has passed from the twentieth century and the fever has subsided, what of the quality of the matter left? This is the question Lewis poses ironically to his contemporaries and it is a conservative question, if not a nihilistic one. As an idealist and a perfectionist, Lewis feels that modern "liberal" and "scientific" ideas of the collective, unconscious, and involuntary progress of human species and its culture are the natural prey of his satire: our only antidote against modern confusion and anxiety—which is due apparently to the inroads made on the security or realms of human value by contemporary applied science—our only antidote, he feels, is the cultivation of our total awareness as individual human beings. To become totally aware, Lewis implies, it is necessary for an individual to model himself on "one of those portamente men of the Italian Renaissance" who takes (though not uncritically) the whole world of human science and culture as his particular and personal oyster.
The projected dissertation will explore Wyndham Lewis's art theory and his conic and satiric technique in an attempt to isolate the "common ground" of his images— an attempt to locate not so much the figure in the carpet as the carpet itself. Such a search for controlling frames of reference or unifying matrices is necessitated by a characteristic of Lewis's style which Horace Gregory categorized quite accurately when he noticed that, in his early work especially, Lewis was attempting to write "without cliches". There is, in fact, scarcely anything in his novels altogether (characters, not plot, nor narrative) that is conventionally admirable. Yet there is much to be admired nevertheless. Lewis's creative output has been enormous: it can be divided into four parts for convenience: (1) the paintings (2) the theoretical writings (3) the fiction (4) the polemics. Critical discussion of the paintings we leave in other hands; critical discussion of the occasional pieces, the polemics, will be included in the dissertation only as occasion calls for it. I shall deal primarily with (a) an analytical presentation of Wyndham Lewis's philosophical position (b) an analytical presentation of his aesthetic and his theory of imagination (c) an exposition of six major works of fiction, namely, Terr (versions of 1918 and 1928), The Aces of God (1930), The Revenge for Love (1937), Self Condemned (1954), The Red Priest (1955), and his magnum opus, The Human Age (in four sections: Childermass, "Konstre Cal", "Align Fiesta", The Trial of Man", 1928-56) (d) a summary chapter in review, and (e) an appendix containing a survey of Eliot's Vortex.

The summary chapter in review will contain a discussion of the Vortex as a symbol in the works of Wyndham Lewis. We shall see that it had its inspiration in Aristophanes' phrase, "Vortex is king, having driven out Zeus!" and that, in its various contexts, the Vortex is a symbol on the one level of understanding, "below good and evil," for electro-mechanical induction, for violence, for human involvement in the human condition, for turbulence--- in short, for inarticulate subhuman forces; while on a higher level of understanding, "above good and evil," the Vortex is a symbol for movement which comes to a point, for hierarchical order, for the totally aware individual, for divine detachment from the human condition, for Cartesian occlusion, for true Shakespearean or Shavian non-partisan liberality--- in short, for inarticulate supernatural forces. The projected dissertation, therefore, will be a vortex par se, arranged on a pattern of organization favored by the Vorticists themselves, leading from the specific, private and the particular to the general, the universal and the common: the inductive approach. Psychically, legenmaly, ideomachy and academically, we shall find, are the four elements which enter into a novel of ideas as it is composed by Wyndham Lewis. His interest in this sort of intellectual epic struggle or soul-heros conflict--- as was Jonathan Swift's interest, in The Battle of the Books--- is the result of his "rage for order", his passion for "clear, distinct ideas." The work of art, in each case, represents a symbolic resolution of that conflict of ideologics, a resolution which can never be reached in real life or in the little schools of modern art theory, for there psychic or temperamentally peace and repose cannot even be declared, much less enjoyed, on quite the same scale.

Note: Wyndham Lewis died in England at the age of seventy-two, March 7, 1957, while the stencils for this prospectus were in preparation.

John H. Edman
I've often wondered, as I sat and thought about literature and how it is taught, why authors were cagey about what they wrote and put hidden meanings in every quote. Why didn't the author say what he meant? What's the mystery for, in any event? Don't explications just waste our time? What is the point of scanning a line? The poet's style—is it really important? Why does he tell us to do what we oughtn't? What are the morals he's trying to preach? Do we have to remember the author of each? Why are these writers so gloomy and sad? What makes an analysis good or bad? Why tear apart poems until they are wrecks? And why do all of them talk about sex? Did the poet really believe what he said? How can we know what he meant if he's dead? My prof informs me that Kilmer's no good, but his "Trees," at least, can be understood. I'd stand under them, 'ere "Under Milk Wood." If the author's a mask, how can you tell? (Maybe that's the reason he doesn't sell.) It all depends on your point of view, and what the symbols mean to you. All this we know, yet none knows well how to kill the time until the bell.

—John Edman

Lionel Sharp

(in collaboration with the English 1B staff of 1957)