WYNDHAM LEWIS' POLITICAL WRITINGS

Wyndham Lewis needs some introduction to the ordinary reader. He was a contemporary (to say that he was a friend might be to attribute to him a relationship he seldom, if ever, enjoyed with anyone) of men like Eliot, Pound and Joyce. With Pound he was co-editor of a journal called Blast. His influence rose to its zenith in 1930 with the publication of The Apes of God, an attack on dilettantism in art, particularly dilettantism as it displayed itself in the Bloomsbury Group.

Lewis' ideas on art are integrally related to his ideas on other subjects. Like Lawrence, he was a philosopher at heart; in both men the tendency to rant and preach obscures a deeply-meditated philosophical system and a thorough knowledge of nineteenth-century thinkers like Carlyle and Arnold. Lewis' philosophy informs his political thought too, as we shall see.

Although he loved posting labels on other people (e.g. "Apes"), Lewis hated to have them applied to himself. His attempts to avoid political pigeon-holing border on the ludicrous. In The Diabolical Principle he describes his politics as "partly communist and partly fascist, with a distinct streak of monarchism in my marxism, but at bottom anarchist with a healthy passion for order." 1 In Count Your Dead: They Are Alive Lewis' spokesman represents himself as a "Bolsho-Tory." To get to the heart of Lewis' system, I intend to ignore all such cover-ups and qualifications, and to attribute to him the viewpoint which I hold he held.

Basically he was an elitist of the Rugby School. What Lewis never managed to say in countless pages of political writing, Arnold puts succinctly in Culture and Anarchy:

> As we grow to have a clearer sight of the ideas of right reason ... and to make the State more and more the expression of our best self, which is not manifold and vulgar, and unstable, and contentious, and ever-varying, but one, and noble, and secure, and peaceful, and the same for all mankind — with what aversion shall we not then regard anarchy ... when there is so much that is so precious which it will endanger!

> In our common notions and talk about freedom we eminently show our idolatry of machinery. Our prevalent notion is ... that it is a most happy and important thing for a man to do merely as he likes. On what he is to do when he is free to do as he likes, we do not lay so much stress. 2

These citations, incidentally, comprise the prologue to one of Lewis' more pro-authoritarian chapters in The Art of Being Ruled. His affinity is evident: Culture is the reign of intelligence and order; Anarchy is the reign of the pernicious time-philosophy.

Time and Western Man is Lewis' attack on the philosophical basis of liberal democracy. To his mind materialism, egoism, behaviorism and liberalism (as well as numerous isms current in the arts) all owe their existence to modern man's foolish, pragmatic capitulation to apparent, temporal reality — to what is material and visible, to the going thing. His underlying objection to such philosophies is that they provide no absolutes, except possibly Flux itself. As against this version of reality Lewis opposes Berkleyan idealism: esse est percepi -- to be is to be perceived -- so that reality is conferred upon an object by the mind of the perceiver, and the Ideal triumphs over the material. Or, if you prefer a pedantic literary analogy, Lewis the champion of Cosmic Order and Harmony triumphs over Whitehead's Mutabilitie, and restores the Earth to the centre of the universe.

The perceiving mind, then, is at the core of Lewis' idealism and elitism. Like Arnold he pins his hopes on the intellect, elevating the judgements of the educated few above the mindless doctrine of what-the-public-wants. Where liberal democracy regards men as roughly equal physiological entities ("self-moving machines" as the Canadian political economist, C.B. Macpherson, has it), Lewis sees men as vastly unequal intellects, and accordingly becomes The Enemy of democracy:

> It is ... in conformity with the "democratic" principle that "mind" is to be suppressed or annihilated. On the same principle we are converted into machines or into "events" in place of persons.... In this way we get rid of that embarrassing thing, the "mind" which gives us (compared to mere tables, chairs or even vegetables and dogs) a rather unfortunately aristocratic colour.... It is not a "democratic" possession, a "mind" — come, own up, Mr. Everyman and Mr. Philosopher: what can "Redman

> Labour" do with a fancy thing like that Hands, arms and legs and two good sharp eyes and two rows of honest teeth: but a mind! No. This mass-democracy can find little use for a mind, except, of course, its group-mind. 3

Another feature of the time-cult repudiated by Lewis is what he calls the "group-rhythm" (c.f. the "interest-group" of James Mill et. al.) Incapable of the intellectual effort needed to get in touch with the ideal "Not-self", great masses of people, motivated by nothing more than selfishness, submit themselves to the flux of whichever political fad most closely mirrors their own desires. They become puppets of some movement or other, and act out their roles mechanically. Feminists comprise a typical group-rhythm. Functionally and traditionally suited to the task of child-rearing, women tend to be emotional rather than intellectual, and ought to be kept in the home. Emotional predominance also characterizes Negroes (with their outrageous jazz dances) and Jews. The same criticism applies to sentimental bourgeois romanticism in the arts: the little-fellow-put-upon roles of Charlie Chaplin, the funny-little-girl cult of Gertrude Stein, the child and idiot heroes of many modern novels.

In Lewis' view of twentieth-century man, group-rhythms and democracy and socialism have prevailed to the extent that society is merely a conspiracy between the pseudo-intellects and the masses to stamp out genius. By way of antidote he wishes to establish a paternalist form of government. In The Art of Being Ruled he writes.

> If the creative minds of the world are indeed forever cancelled and rendered ineffective by the agency of the "unprogressive" mass of men, then they should be protected and rescued.... Instead of the vast organization to exploit the weaknesses of the Many, should we not possess one for the exploitation of the intelligence of the Few? 4

Lewis has no qualms about suppressing the masses. He departs from Arnold and reminds us of Carlyle when he asserts, "A slave is apt to be better off than a penniless 'freeman'." 5 Even the comparatively harmless mass diversion of shopping arouses his ire, so that he writes, "If the bus ticket could not be obtained without a travel permit, the immense labour ... accompanying the ritual of shopping would be spared." 6 Health, wealth and improved family relations would be the result of such a policy, he earnestly declares. Carlyle merges back into Arnold when, near the end of The Art of Being Ruled, Lewis places society in the hands of a small, efficient group of the best educated men:

> I have already given you my reasons for not regarding an honest Inquisition as a bad thing. If it entirely abolished the vulgarization of the best thought – confining popular teaching to a routine in the hands of a small educational bureaucracy – it would have an excellent effect on the higher activities of the human mind. 7

Lewis' ideas are anathema to me, but I feel that they merit consideration by students of political literature. To attack them rationally is pointless: like the doctrines of Roman Catholicism, Lewis' arguments are incontestable if you accept his premises, and nonsense if you don't. The value of his insights is that he knows the Enemy: he understands the materialist basis of modern democracy better than most of its contemporary advocates. His criticisms of its defects, however exaggerated, show us where we are in danger of going wrong. Conversely, a knowledge of Lewis will assist those of us who still believe in democracy to know our Enemy in the form in which it persistently rears its head.

Stylistically, Lewis at first shared the cold remoteness of the school of Eliot and Joyce. As a satirist in The Apes of God, he adheres to what he calls the external method. The Bloomsbury Apes are viciously caricatured, while the author avoids emotional appeals on behalf of his own cause. The maudlin element which invariably accompanies Dickens' satire is absent in Lewis, and we come to fear and admire the man who can keep us at such a distance.

It is a trifle invidious on my part, but historically accurate, to report that later on in his career Lewis descended to the level of the demos. First came a change in his personal fortunes, then a change in literary techniques. As England drifted towards democracy, Lewis found himself less and less of an unacknowledged legislator and more and more of an unpopular, unread, unwanted meddler. He began to rant a la Lawrence, and in a similar political vein. Where formerly he had dealt with the position of the exceptional person in the contemporary world, now he dealt with the effect of contemporary ideologies on the ordinary man. And he began to internalize his descriptions to the point where sentimentality and self-pity crept in.

The Revenge for Love was published in 1937, and deals with a contemporary event, the Spanish Civil War. In this novel Lewis tries to persuade the British public to abandon the communist propaganda fed to it by the B.B.C., and support Franco. Some scenes in this book return us to the world of The Apes of God a

few years later when typical Apes vie with one another in professions of doctrinaire bolshevism. These scenes and the ones set in Spain are accomplished by means of the external method. But Lewis also invites our sympathy for two very ordinary victims of communism, Victor and Margot Stamp, a couple whose domestic situation is at least as "vulgar and cheap" as that portrayed by Huxley in Point–Counterpoint (and criticized by Lewis in palmier days). Lewis is beginning to develop some sympathy for the little-man-put-upon, and his bruised psyche is much in evidence. The Revenge for Love sets the scene for Self-Condemned, a later novel in which Lewis, old and blind at the time of writing, penurious and totally unpopular, abandons the external method for thinly-disguised autobiography.

When England went to war on the wrong side in 1939, Lewis had had enough. Lawrence-like, he set out across the oceans in search of more fertile soil in which to plant the seeds of his political ideas. He settled in (of all places) Toronto, Canada. As a Torontonian I can report that the crop was a failure, partly because most of the Philistines there had never heard of Wyndham Lewis, and partly because a few decent souls who went out of their way to assist him soon came to repent their decisions. Both parties can be found mercilessly and indiscriminately lampooned in Self-Condemned.

Rene Harding is Lewis' spokesman in that book. His sufferings in "Momaco" (Mimico is a suburb of Toronto, and Mom & Co. is perhaps also intended) during the early years of the war reflect Lewis' miserable existence in Toronto. His denunciation of "history" is an extension of Lewis' attack on time-philosophy. Like Lewis, he feels himself the victim of a mass conspiracy to crush "truth" and "genius".

The book is a shameful orgy of self-pity which completely belies the implication of its title. In Lewis' defense, it should be emphasized that Toronto in those days was almost as terrible as his fiece pen portrays it (some of his criticisms, e.g. "sanctimonious icebox," are brilliant). In addition, The Tudor Hotel, where Lewis stayed and where most of the book is set, was and is a shocking place. In the interests of scholarship I once visited the Men's Beverage Room at the Tudor, and found myself rapidly adopting the little-fellow-put-upon mentality. Nevertheless, it was secretly satisfying to imagine Lewis forced to inhabit this place because England had lost interest in his form of politics.

FEETNOTE

1. Cited by Geoffrey Wagner, Wyndham Lewis (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p.70.

2. Cited by Wyndham Lewis, The Art of Being Ruled (London: Chatto and Windus, 1962), p.105.

3. Lewis, Time and Western Man (Boston: Beacon, 1957), p.442.

4. Lewis, Art of Being Ruled, p.89,

5. Ibid, p.372.

6. Ibid, p.101.

7. Ibid, p.417.