# The Sin Against Genius: Settling Scores in *The Human Age*

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It is common to regard Wyndham Lewis' later writings as evidence of a soul humanised, or at least rendered repentant, by the deep distresses of his blindness and wartime experience, yet a close examination of these texts reveals that this interpretation is for many reasons untenable. There is ample evidence, I believe, for thinking that the *Human Age*, with its moralistic, levelling, middle-Eastern "Hell-Boys", who are sexually voracious and even have odd noses, is as implicated in anti-Semitism as any of Lewis' writings, and that, as Willard Gellis noted many years ago, "Lewis never stopped writing his Protocols of Zion."[1] Less controversial grounds for dismissing the prevailing pity and self-pity surrounding the 1950s writings can be located in Lewis' use of religion, which far from being an act of modesty, a final reconciliation with the demands of charity towards his fellow man, can be shown to be a logical development of Lewis' long-standing attempt to find legitimators for negative judgements, sometimes very extreme ones, on other human beings. The received wisdom to which I refer has its roots in Hugh Kenner's criticism, but has been put in an admirably clear form by Daniel Schenker in his recent *Wyndham Lewis: Religion and Modernism*,[2] and I shall take Schenker as my orientation point, outlining some elements in his position and offering a commentary upon them before demonstrating, I hope conclusively, that Lewis was in fact far from turning to Christ, and was rather, merely invoking the divine hierarchy in order to attack old enemies in the name of God. It should be noted that the motivation of this essay is not itself primarily moral, but emerges from a larger project which studies Lewis' career as data of human psychological difficulties in the face of increased population density, and proposes various evolved cognitive modules for the regulation of social relations. On this view Lewis' writing provides ample and detailed evidence of the working of these modules as they attempt to deal with an environment very different from that in which they evolved and in which the average value of any individual to other individuals in the immediate social context has fallen so low that conflict is more common than co-operation. Lewis' flirtation with religion in the *Human Age* is thus, for me, an interesting example of an experiment with one particular legitimation technique. More focused scholars of Lewis' work may wish to neglect this background, and I shall not insist upon it here.

In a long reading of *Snooty Baronet* during which he argues that the novel marks the emergence of an explicit concern with human failings, selfishness, and lack of objectivity, Schenker moves to *The Revenge for Love*, a book which he sees as being a wholly new departure:

> Lewis shows us the other side of his savage indignation, a pastoralism that the harshness of the satire deliberately obscures from view. Here the angry prophet is moderated

1 Willard Leon Gellis "The Poetics of Reaction: A Study of Wyndham Lewis", dissertation submitted at New York University, 1970, p. 315.

2 Daniel Schenker, *Wyndham Lewis: Religion and Modernism* (University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa and London, 1992).

> by the good shepherd, and the insistence upon a radically transcendent absolute is replaced by a willingness to accept an immanent one.[3]

The fact that this interest in a supposed immanence is temporary, and replaced by a fascination with the apparently transcendent god of the *Human Age* does not bother him, and I suspect that this peculiar phrasing was used to conceal the commonplace critical opinion that *The Revenge for Love* is the first of Lewis' books to place a value on the feminine. Valerie Parker is quoted with approval: "'[it] takes love seriously, and suggests that, like art, it demands loyalty and dedication'",[4] and Schenker offers his own tribute. Victor is a second-rate painter, and Margot "has no visible talents", but

> Victor and Margot do love one another, and that love, though often sentimental, is absolute: it does not change according to the advantages or disadvantages or disadvantages their relationship brings them [...] This immutable love gives them heroic stature in a world caught up in self-gratification.[5]

This feminine love "emerges as the novel's highest good",[6] but Schenker is not insensitive to the problems. He apologises again and again for Margot's inanity, her melodramatic tone, her "encrustation of B-movie dialogue", but accepts the traditional argument that Lewis is concerned, for the first time, to show that the common man or woman has value in spite of such failings. One might, though, see the characterisation of Margot as so exaggerated as to justify the charge of patronisation. "Pity would be no more, if we did not make somebody poor" in spirit. But, misled by his belief that this is a warm and affectionate novel, Schenker asserts that the book has an "intensely *personal* quality", as opposed to, say, *Tarr*, where Lewis maintains "a long emotional distance from his material" despite its autobiographical nature. This distance is, I think, more adequately described as scorn, not a notably dipassionate emotion, and hardly surprising since Lewis was dealing with elements of his own life. But Schenker seems to be under the impression that hatred, scorn, and contempt, are indicative of indifference, and that only the positive emotions may be said to generate involvement, indeed that they are sure evidence of it. As a result he mistakes the sentiment of *The Revenge for Love* for sentimental involvement, and has not sufficiently considered the fact, recognised at the outset of his discussion, that the book "has many elements of a popular best-seller".[7] Like Schenker, I find the final paragraph of the novel very moving. Percy Hardcaster reads of the deaths of Victor and Margot, and is afflicted by a pang of conscience:

> But meanwhile a strained and hollow voice, part of a sham-culture outfit, but tender and halting, as if dismayed at the sound of its own bitter words, was talking in his ears, in a reproachful singsong. It was denouncing him out of the past, where alone now

3 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 160.

4 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 162.

5 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 162.

6 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 165.

7 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 162.

> it was able to articulate; it was singling him out as a man who led people into mortal danger, people who were dear beyond expression to the possessor of the passionate, the artificial, the unreal, yet penetrating, voice, and crying to him now to give back, she implored him, the young man, Absalom, whose life he had had in his keeping, and who had somehow, unaccountably, been lost, out of the world and out of Time![8]

However, the fact that I weep whenever reading this is a tribute to its engineering, not to Lewis' humanity. There is no other passage in his canon so obviously written in "Kaltes blut [...] The temperament of the duellist".[9]

However, Schenker sees this new discovery of the rights of the ordinary sensual man as continued and developed in *Self Condemned*,[10] but suddenly realising that this might be misinterpreted he assures us that Lewis was not becoming a humanist, and that this novel "continues to argue [...] that concern with the human must be rooted in an apprehension of the divine".[11] The evidence offered in favour of this reading is Rotter Parkinson's observation that René Harding's vision is "analogous to the Vision of the Saints":

> But it is not in any way connected with saintliness. What this system amounts to, in reality, is a taking to its logical conclusion the humane, the tolerant, the fastidious.[12]

Schenker regards the word "fastidious" as the key term, "balancing 'humane' with its suggestion of the continuing need for careful discriminations among the things of this world, and reminding us that Lewis' religious sensibility remains hieratic rather than mystical".[13] This is a point of considerable importance, though it overstates the religiosity of *Self Condemned*, and it introduces a concept which will be central to our reading of *The Human Age*. Schenker terms this an understanding of the "scaled world", but I prefer to take his own hint and regard it as a fascination with hierarchy.

By stressing the apparent reconciliation with human fallibility in *The Revenge for Love*, and with order, in *Self Condemned*, Schenker prepares the ground for the answers he will offer to the major queries posed by *The Human Age*, problems he conveniently and accurately summarises:

> [H]ow did a writer without strong religious convictions in the traditional sense find himself writing about God and the Devil? And what value should we assign to the heterodox Christian theology that emerges from these works?[14]

His answer is that the Christian supernatural scheme offers a principle of scale which finds a meaningful place for imperfect man. Pullman's discovery of this fact is the subject of the narra-

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8 *The Revenge for Love* (Cassell: London, 1937), p. 422. See Schenker, pp. 163–4, and the discussion on p. 165, where he strangely thinks the voice, clearly that of Margot, an "anonymous Great Mother".

9 Lewis interviewed by Louise Morgan in her *Writers at Work* (Chatto & Windus: London, 1931), p. 48.

10 *Religion and Modernism*, pp. 166–7.

11 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 167.

12 *Self Condemned* (Methuen: London, 1955), p. 95. Schenker, p. 167.

13 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 167.

14 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 169.

tive of both *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*, in which he shelters beneath the umbrella of power provided by, first, the Bailiff, and later, the devil (Sammael) himself. At last, after much internal conflict, he realises that neither offer a place in which man has value, and that only god can provide such a thing.

Schenker is thus right, up to a point, in contradicting Fredric Jameson's remark that Lewis' afterlife is "utterly lacking in transcendence" and is "resolutely materialistic", that "God is [...] one powerful angel among many, and the conflicts in this afterworld are little more moral (but no less ideological) than those of the Cold War",[15] as Sammael says. It is not wise, Schenker replies, to take the word of the devil, but to a third party this seems to have missed Jameson's criticism, to which we shall return in the course of subsequent analysis. It is abundantly clear that Pullman's growing conviction of the reality of the supernatural is a central subject of the narrative, and that the distinction between human and divine is declared to be the only guarantee of human value. There is no question as to Lewis' wishes, but one may wonder if Jameson is not correct in judging that Lewis failed to realise them through the logic of his story, thus inadvertently facing himself and his reader with quite opposite conclusions.

One small point relating to this model must be dealt with before we return to the examination of Lewis' exposition. Later in his account Schenker, following Kenner,[16] supposes that the variant endings of the radio script, in which Pullman is accidentally flattened by the foot of an angel, and the printed text, where he is saved by two of god's soldiers, is due to the fact that "Lewis' eventual attachment to God seems to have caught even Lewis by surprise", and so he was able to conceive of man as having a more meaningful destiny. If this were so, the basic analysis shared by Schenker and myself, which assumes that Lewis had already reached the basic principles of his theology, and was only embodying them in his writing, would be nonsense, and indeed the whole tenor of the book up to that point would be rendered unintelligible. But we can save Schenker from himself by referring to D. G. Bridson's account of the matter:

> [...] the dramatic climax of the broadcast required a body – so a body had to be provided. Only Lewis and I knew that the pulped mass of blood and bones described so graphically by the Narrator was really the body of Satterthwaite's friend the gardener's boy – and not Pullman at all. This little matter would have been cleared up, of course, at the start of *The Trial of Man*, if ever that work had been heard on the air. Like Sherlock Holmes at the Falls of Reichenbach, in fact, Pullman merely *seemed* to be obliterated. Of such devices are sequels and good radio drama made![17]

This unfortunate scholarly gaffe out of the way, we can return to our examination assuming that the book, though not without developments, and in fact implying a remarkable one, is based on a scheme which sees god as the ultimate source of worth.

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15 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 169.

16 Hugh Kenner, "The Trial of Man", in Wyndham Lewis, *Malign Fiesta* (Caldar & Boyars: London, 1966), p. 234.

17 D. G. Bridson, "'The Human Age' in Retrospect", in Jeffrey Meyers, ed, *Wyndham Lewis: A Revaluation* (Athlone Press: London, 1980), p. 240.

As can be seen in Schenker's discussion of *The Revenge for Love*, Lewis is supposed to have become reconciled to the stupidity of man, and in *The Human Age*, Schenker continues, this insight is raised to the level of a philosophy, "The Theology of Imperfection",[18] a doctrine suggesting that "man should be valued not because he can be godlike but because, on the contrary, he is imperfect".[19] Pullman's disquisition on the intelligence of angels is taken as the text:

> Perfection repels me: it is (it must be) so colossally stupid. Here – in Third City – we are frail, puny, short-lived, ridiculous, *but* we are superior, preferable to the Immortals with whom we come in contact.[20]

Schenker thinks this "quite a turnaround for a writer who had spent most of his career as a practitioner of satire, that fine art of gibbetting human beings after you have held them up to high standards and found them wanting", and so allows Lewis to have solved "the long-standing problem of how to see man as a limited creature without seeming to hate him for his limitations". I cannot see, myself, that it produces a net increase in charity, and surely a swapping of the price tags does not deserve to be seen as profound, and, surely, if anything, qualifies as hubris. This aside, if Schenker's contention were true we should not expect to find the surpassing cruelties of the Dis scenes appearing in Lewis' work. On the face of it they seem as misanthropic as any in Lewis. His answer to this is ingenious and deserves serious attention, not least because the question of Hell and responsibility for it will emerge later as central to our understanding of this book.

Schenker proposes that Dis was intended by Lewis as a satire on satire:

> [...] the more fully acquainted Pullman becomes with Sammael, the more he appears an accurate caricature of the Wyndham Lewis responsible for all the works extending from *Tarr* to *Snooty Baronet*. He chiefly occupies himself, as did Lewis in his satires, with overseeing the "Surgery of Morals" [...] The "Punishment Centres", where most of the damned receive their tortures, offer a final solution to human stupidity beyond the wildest dreams of a Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, who could only make his fellow men suffer one at a time.[21]

Sammael is the ultimate satirist, "an idealist of the spirit", who hates man "just for being man",[22] and has taken on the administration of Dis because god compelled him to. He makes no pretence to like or admire human beings, and does not object to punishing him, but this is not a priority, and in fact he now wishes to give up playing Devil to God. In Schenker's view this represents "the climax of a movement away from satire, which we have been observing in Sammael's creator since the 1930s".[23] If this is so then his project ought to succeed, and Sammael

18 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 168.

19 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 174.

20 *The Human Age* (Methuen: London, 1955), p. 165.

21 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 176.

22 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 179.

23 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 179.

should join the author as a reformed character. Schenker has told us that Lewis' change, if it is that, is a worthy one. Surely Sammael's desire to stop punishing man is also respectable. But Schenker overstates the comparison between Lewis and Sammael, and though I shall accept much of the argument so far, it is evident that the dark prince is not taking the same path as Lewis himself. His proposed "Human Age" is unlike Lewis' own development in that it plans the abolition of the distinctions between man and supernatural which Lewis had discovered and was explicating in this very book. He represents what Lewis seems to suggest is the false compassion of humanism, the other road out of his thirties predicament that Lewis did not take, and after initially enthusiastically assisting in the plan Pullman changes his mind:

> when Sammael decides to annihilate the divine [...] he destroys the standard against which man is measured and invariably found wanting. Man's imperfection is the paradoxical source of divine grace because God values man for his perseverance in the face of failure, an exercise of virtue denied even to God Himself. Without the divine, Pullman realizes, the possibility of man's tragic dignity vanishes.[24]

The benefits of the "scaled" world have been hinted at for some time throughout Schenker's account, so it is an anticlimax to be told, at last, that an adversarial god is important because it allows man to conceive of himself as a victim. Without God, there would be no self-pity, a terrible prospect indeed. It is, therefore, a mockery to propose that Lewis "has finally purged satire of its aesthetic and moral content and affirmed the religious function of the satirist as one who guarantees man's humanity by preserving a proper adversarial relationship between man and God",[25] and would lead one to suppose that Apemantus was the oiliest of all the flatterers.

It is at this point that Schenker introduces his idea, based on the discrepancy between the radio and printed versions, that Lewis' "understanding that God values man for his failings" grew upon him and so necessitated a fourth volume, *The Trial of Man*, "that would describe Pullman's assimilation to the divine element and make him, in Kenner's words, 'the first character in any Wyndham Lewis work to achieve a meaningful destiny'." Reference to the quotation from Bridson, above, not only disproves Schenker's argument, but also suggests that *The Trial of Man* was not an addition suddenly conceived in the heat of revelation. This is confirmed by a letter from Lewis to his editor at Methuen, J. Alan White, of 26 January 1955: "You remember that Sammael's idea was to combine the best of the Human spirit with his Angel's nature: and in the last book of the series there is to be a final volume in which this is debated."[26] These points are important because the mistakes lead Schenker to suppose that Lewis was moving closer and closer to the religious absolute, whereas the evidence suggests that this line in his thought had developed before writing. *The Trial of Man* is not, then, a supplement, the absence of which is mildly distressing, because it would have shown Lewis fully committed to Christianity. Instead

24 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 182.

25 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 182.

26 W. K. Rose, ed., *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (Methuen: London, 1963), p. 559.

we must conclude that it was a necessary part of the plan, and, for reasons that demand explanation, Lewis found himself unable to write it.

This problem has not wholly escaped Schenker. After discussing the abandoned opening for *The Trial of Man*, he admits "One cannot ignore the fact that Lewis *rejected* this proposed opening and never returned to complete [it], busying himself during his last months with less demanding projects." *The Red Priest*, he goes on, "serves as a further reminder of Lewis' uneasiness with anything resembling orthodox Christianity",[27] and offers some possible reasons, which, as we shall see, come close to the mark:

> Perhaps Lewis the novelist felt that the obligations of narrative, which include conflict and suspense, made it impossible to write about the genuinely omnipotent God he had lately come to conceive. [28]

He concludes with the suggestion that just as René Harding fails to convert, because "His intelligence was too dynamic, his reason too bitterly bruised, for a static bliss",[29]

> [t]o paraphrase Blake on Milton, Lewis no doubt saw himself as a true poet who was of the Devil's party and would always know it.[30]

I believe that Schenker is far from recognising the significance of these remarks, and will introduce my own view of *The Human Age* by reconsidering the closing paragraph's of the abandoned *Trial of Man*. The scene describes an interview between God and Sammael after the heavenly forces have entered Dis and destroyed the plans for a "Human Age". Sammael is speaking:

> It is as result of conquest, or the equivalent of conquest that you sit there, that you behave in this way. I cannot stop you." God, too rose to his feet. His dense face seemed to become still more packed with something. "It is because your angels defaulted, and came back to me their original leader. You always cook the facts so as to arrive at your melodramatic conclusions."
>
> Sammael stomped up to the table, behind which God stood, and shook his index finger in his face.
>
> "That is heavenly poppycock. All right, President of the Trinity! – Take over Dis, it is certainly more your cup of tea than mine. I wish you joy of this charnel house. But in some way or other I will pay you out for this – old tyrant! Do not imagine that you can put your hand into my pockets (while I am sick in bed) and rob me, Lord God no longer Almighty."[31]

Satan certainly comes out of this with the upper hand, and having driven god into mumbling, reduces him to silence with the accusation that Hell is his responsibility. It is by no means

27 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 184.

28 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 185.

29 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 186.

30 *Religion and Modernism*, p. 186.

31 Appendix to *Malign Fiesta* (Calder & Boyars: London, 1966), p. 228.

certain that these passages were the last pieces of the *Trial* that Lewis wrote, but we do not need to think they are so in order to see that Lewis was coming to realise that although man is in the dock, it is the justice of god's administration that would have to be demonstrated. Who is, indeed, responsible for the tortures of Hell, if Sammael is not? God, presumably. Who has reinstituted them after their abolition? God, of course. Having hung over the book as an undefined and therefore unimpeachable source of right action, God's appearance renders him subject to rational enquiry. In making him a character in a fiction Lewis was undertaking "to justify the ways of God to man". The example of Milton would have been before Lewis, and rather than fail in the attempt – and this passage demonstrates how many difficulties the inherited myth presented – Lewis simply abandoned the project. What is significant is that this is a scenario which can be observed elsewhere in Lewis' career. An absolute is invoked as guarantor of Lewis' position, but the process of invocation makes it vulnerable to criticism, principally Lewis' own, and it collapses, tearing down the work based on it. Certain aspects of this search are embodied in the narrative of *Monstre Gai* and *Malign Fiesta*, making it reasonable to suppose that Lewis was intending to summarise his career to date, ending with the new peace, the invulnerable stability offered by God, but discovered, as Milton did before him, that the supernatural guarantee cannot be demonstrated without making it less than supernatural. We can trace the early parts of this movement through the *The Human Age*.

*Monstre Gai*, for example, begins with a valediction to Lewis-the-stylist:

> The waterman was now only a shadow. At last he had gone behind the moonlight. He had passed through a veil of transparent steel. Out of the smoky grey of the waters he rose, lying outlined through the shining wall of the moon. This deaf, one-dimensional nonentity it would not be possible to recall.[32]

The writer as steersman is here described, for the last time, in an imitation of a manner now discarded, and the past is marked off as beyond recall. We should remember that Lewis intended this book to follow *Childermass*, which was re-issued in a matching form in 1956, so this opening also revokes that book. We know that Lewis had intended *The Childermass* to have a three part structure, a point which has led some critics, like Schenker, to suppose that *Malign Fiesta* is a realisation of this, and that therefore *The Trial of Man* is an addition. The oddity of the four-part form can be explained by the fact that the book was now to serve a completely different function from that originally intended, and the false start original opening section had to be invoked and then cancelled. *Monstre Gai* is a fresh beginning, a new Part One. The Dantesque tri-partite form is thus preserved, and the movement from purgatory to heaven via hell is confirmed. *The Childermass* is taken to stand for all of Lewis' thought up to the post-war period, thus making its banishment a point of no small significance. Pullman's entry into the city is a rebirth, marked, it is worth noting, by physiological changes causing the resumption of

32 *The Human Age*, p. 3.

the normal mundane functions of bladder and intestines,[33] as if to suggest that there had been something quite unreal about Lewis' life up to the post-war.

Pullman's dominating emotion is contempt. He has been in the city only a few minutes when he begins to impress the inhabitants with "a certain high condescension",[34] and to judge his surroundings, commenting to Mannock, his host, that "Vacuous as London is [...] it does not manufacture a citizenry so mentally void as you do".[35] The cause of this "bloated self-esteem"[36] is intellectual pride, as Mannock correctly diagnoses:

> The more Mannock considered it, the more he thought that he might be in the presence of a Schoolmaster: imposingly familiar with the differential calculus, or terribly good at Greek, but not very affluent.[37]

Money, however, is not a problem in Third City, so it can hardly be that which drives Pullman to seek a patron. The course of the book shows him reviewing various elements of his new society in order to see whether it will elevate him above the common ruck of morons. Mannock's club circle is rejected as too stupid, partly because its members are not sufficiently aware of the supernatural circumstances of their existence, and the Padishah as too weak. Pullman is left with the Bailiff, with whom he gradually becomes associated as the book progresses, and eventually joins in exile. Pullman's reasoning before finally committing himself reviews this process:

> He had lived with the Bailiff upon the earth but had not recognized him. He had built all his success upon Bailiff-like rather than Padishah-like interests; and now, here, the Bailiff had acted as a magnet: he had been drawn in that direction at once. And anyhow, where else would he be in this collection of men? Would he be a Fascist, mouthing all that stupid, claptrap, moralistic stuff? Would he be attempting to secure a standing in the social life favoured by Mannock? Would he be inflaming himself in the favour of equality, under the leadership of Vogel, or playing the part of such a leader himself. No. As he had been instructing Mannock, only some men were intelligent. No other creature, natural or supernatural, could be; and for him human intelligence alone mattered. Yes: the natural – supernatural problem (problem for a man among supernatural creatures) was the essence of things here, it supplanted everything else. Odious and monstrous and the Bailiff was, he was the supernatural element, paradoxical as that might seem, most favourable to man.[38]

In the preceding paragraphs Pullman has already argued himself out of conversion to Catholicism, for reasons that are not made clear – we are told simply that "there was a compul-

33 *The Human Age*, p. 11.
34 *The Human Age*, p. 14.
35 *The Human Age*, p. 18.
36 *The Human Age*, p. 53.
37 *The Human Age*, p. 53.
38 *The Human Age*, pp. 266–7.

sion from the past"[39] – but we infer to be connected with his pride. Conversion would mean he would have to "go to Father Ryan, [...] fall upon my knees, ask for forgiveness, and inquire what atonement I can make",[40] which is not compatible with his desire for distinction. This is an error, as Schenker quite rightly points, out, and Pullman will come to see that the divine hierarchy will offer him a secure place. What must be remembered is that Pullman's goals remain the same.

The Bailiff, whom Pullman has already served on earth, represents irresponsible power and wealth, and also authoritarian left-wing politics. I hazard the guess that he is differentiated from Vogel, who is an idealist socialist, through his pragmatism. Meditating on the difference between the Padishah, who uses small birds as messengers, and the Bailiff who uses the telephone, Pullman realises that in "the Bailiff-world of pragmatic exclusiveness [...] there would be no wings [...] except left-wings".[41] Lewis may here be renouncing his own interest in post-war Russia, which was sufficiently well-known for Orwell to mock Lewis as a Stalinist in one of his "London Letters" for *The Partisan Review*.[42]

Pullman's committment to the Bailiff is uncertain throughout the book, where he also feels drawn to god, and various political solutions. His final reasoning, quoted above, leads him to flee Third City under the impression that he has found a secure power, a supernatural absolute in fact, who will legitimate his own position of superiority. In this he is disappointed, since on arrival in Matapolis he finds that the Bailiff is by no means important, and almost unable to protect him, and so switches his allegiance to Sammael, since he is the major source of power. Pullman is gradually learning that the supernatural is graded like the natural, and that he must choose the right protector.

There is more to Sammael than this, and it is related, as Schenker quite correctly supposes, to the resemblance between what the Lewisian satirist does to men, and the activities of Dis. Schenker thinks that the horror of these scenes in the novel shows that Lewis has now gained charity, but, as noted before, if this were so then the plan to abolish the torture of the "sinful" would succeed, and God would not be so upset that he invades Sammael's territory in order to restore order. The problem is that the reason given by Sammael – he claims to hate man simply for being man – is not satisfactory to Pullman unless underwritten by an absolute, and this Sammael himself denies. He is like Sir Michael Kell-Imrie in *Snooty Baronet* in being the possessor of a guiltless conscience, the benefits of which cannot be shared by others. This matters because Lewis requires the right to torture others, and therefore requires justification. Such a controversial statement, flying strongly in the face of all the conventional criticism on Lewis, which supposes him to be becoming more tolerant, must be documented. An intuitive judgement of the torture scenes in Dis suggests that Lewis enjoyed them, but hard evidence is in fact available that he not only found them pleasurable to write, in a general sense, but used

39 *The Human Age*, p. 266.

40 *The Human Age*, p. 266.

41 *The Human Age*, p. 148.

42 George Orwell, "London Letter", *Partisan Review*, 13/3 (Summer), p. 323.

them, like Dante, to settle scores. I shall offer a single conclusive reading to prove this. In one of the cells we are shown a man lying on a camp bed in a sub-tropical scene.

> The pink-skinned nude, whose feet were nearer to them than the bald, very pink head, with its curving white fringe above the neck, was slashed in many places – the wounds seeming quite fresh.[43]

Pullman's guide, Dr Hachilah, explains:

> We have here a Briton – but his tongue is split, so he cannot denounce us! What this rather solitary, but extremely rich, bookworm regarded as a shrewd move was to emigrate, with his capital, as soon as the bloodless revolution started in England, following the first war. There was still time to save all his money, provided he transferred it to a British Colony, good climate, money as safe as houses, lions to hunt in perfect safety – Italy and Greece within easy reach.
>
> Three Cambridge intellectuals, Kings', orthodoxly Sodomitic, had made Kenya their home a year or two earlier, and one, a kind of friend, with whom he corresponded, discreetly advertised the two or three advantages of which were possessed by no other colony. A double-first in Classics or rustication for homosexuality were things which gave cachet to the Cambridge intellectual's views of places and men, and his purchase of a small farm north of Nairobi was in large measure the result.

Despite warnings about the Mau Mau rising, the old man remained in Kenya, thinking there to be no great danger. But his house boy and catamite, we are told,

> entered his sitting-room, one evening, flourishing a long cutlass, at the head of a gang of armed Kikuyu, and proceeded to slash him all over, to hold him down while they slit this tongue, and after that debagged him, and proceeded to ementulation. The bloody remains of his sex was found – where do you think? Thrust into a part of his anatomy very well known to the murderous house-boy."[44]

This extraordinary description is of Charles Prentice, the editor at Chatto and Windus with whom Lewis fell out so seriously in 1932. What little I know about Prentice is found in Richard Aldington's memoir *Pinorman*, which was published in 1954 and may very well have reminded Lewis of his old enemy and given him a number of details with which to work.[45] Aldington tells us that Prentice had "gold rimmed glasses and [a] bald head",[46] and a photograph in the book even illustrates the point.

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43 *Human Age*, p. 408.

44 *Human Age*, p. 409.

45 Richard Aldington, *Pinorman: Recollections of Norman Douglas, Pino Orioli and Charles Prentice* (William Heinemann: London, 1954), pp. 86-89, and 213.

46 *Pinorman*, p. 87.

He was also "an Oriel man" and probably took "fairly high honours in classics".[47] In the late 1940s, before 1948 at the latest, he moved to Kenya, and, Aldington says, died not long afterwards of heart failure.[48] We learn of his love of Italy and Greece, and though we are not told if he was homosexual, his bachelor status and association with Norman Douglas may be taken as hints, perhaps maliciously developed by Lewis. The reference to rustication at Oxford is more mysterious, but even here there is some sort of oblique indication in Aldington's text that Prentice's student years were not happy ones: "One strange result of this Oxford residence, most remarkable in a man so kind and unvindictive, was that he took a very strong dislike to Shadwell, Pater's friend, in Charles's day the Provost [of Oriel]."[49] The phrase "lions to hunt in safety" probably refers to Prentice's use of successful writers as a substitute for his own failed ambitions, a point also mentioned by Aldington:

> He had very much wanted to write, but, with an unusual modesty characteristic of him, decided that he must do the next best thing and publish the authors he liked. This frustrated ambition made him take a curious pleasure in being admitted to a writer's workshop to watch the hopeless struggle.[50]

Further research on Prentice will probably confirm other points of Lewis' description, or at least explain the pretexts, but the case is already cast-iron. Only the cause of death is changed, and the motivation for that is revenge as Hachilah commentary makes blindingly clear:

> "His major sin was not, as at first we supposed it was, the sin of Sodom: it was the sin against Genius."
>
> "What may that be?" Pullman asked.
>
> "It is the sin to the punishment of which Dante Alighieri was much addicted."
>
> "Ah yes, I see", very grandly, was Pullman's stern acknowledgement that he understood.

This is further specified: "With the spite and quarrelsomeness of all your tribe, you made use of your money to persecute and to injure a man under the special protection of God". Further punishments are threatened: "We are not punishing you for that at present. When this *tableau vivant* is over and done with, I shall see to it that you undergo a more active punishment".[51]

Lewis and Prentice fell out over the non-fulfilment of the contract for *The Childermass*, Lewis' failure to correct proofs of *The Doom of Youth* fast enough, and his clandestine placing of books with other publishers. The technical cause of their quarrel, which went to court, was the first of these, making it particularly appropriate that Lewis should take his revenge in the Hell section of what is notionally a continuation of that book. Nothing beyond this is known, but it would

47 *Pinorman,* p. 88.

48 *Pinorman,* p. 213.

49 *Pinorman*, p. 88.

50 *Pinorman,* p. 88.

51 *Human Age*, p. 410.

seem that Lewis suspected Prentice of doing his best to poison the literary world against him. Indeed a hint that this may actually have been so appears in *Pinorman*, when Aldington remarks that Prentice "had a great regard [...] (at one time) for Wyndham Lewis".[52]

Here, then, is proof that Lewis still considered himself a man deserving of special treatment, and now even thought that he was under the special protection of God, thus justifying gruesome revenge on those who had opposed him. To turn moral myself, for a moment, its peculiarly obnoxious quality arises, I suggest, not simply because of the extremity of the injuries, or even because of the gloating tone, but because the complacent performance of these verbal acts in the name of god strikes us as cowardly. A man should have the courage, we feel, to carry the burden of his own hatreds.

The sense of guilt that grows upon Pullman throughout *Malign Fiesta* is not the result of complicity with the performers – he is after all relieved when god arrives with his armies to re-open Dis – but because Sammael makes no reference to an infinitely superior, supernatural, legitimating authority. Indeed he denies that god is anything more than very powerful, doubts whether this is insuperable power, and even wishes to erode the distinction between man and angel, the only aspect of the divine hierarchy which seems agreed upon. This will trouble him very little, since he is capable of hating guiltlessly, but Pullman cannot do so, and therefore needs god. William Empson, commenting on this book, repudiated the use of absolutes for this purpose:

> Very likely there are states of being too high for us to conceive, but then we had better not pretend to talk about them. The result of pretending, as one can see in T. E. Hulme as well as Lewis, is to imply: "Because all men are infinitely below God, some men ought to be free to bully others – the ones who are on God's side, like I am."[53]

The book closes with Pullman gratefully helpless before what he believes to be a force so supernatural that its reasoning is inscrutable, so if it wills punishment, however horrific that may seem by human scales, it is correct for us to accept the action, and even correct for us to perform such actions. But a problem arises, as we have already seen, when god actually appears in the story. So long as he is absent and silent, he is beyond criticism. Lewis, to his credit, had a rational and enquiring mind, and he was not willing, as others more prudently are, to leave their ultimate sanction undefined. His attempts to investigate the principle on which he had based what he hoped would be his master work showed that he made no progress, in an absolute sense, since discovering that his rhetoric could not support guiltless hatred in spite of deleting, or attempting to delete, any explicit moral justificatory claims that might have been used to brace it. The requirements of that remorselessly rational instrument, sequential description and explanation, exposes the concept of god as resting, as Jameson says, on superior power. Dis is guaranteed only by armies, not by a justice beyond our comprehension. Sammael voices this

52 *Pinorman*, p. 89.

53 "Preface" to John R. Harrison, *The Reactionaries* (Victor Gollancz: London, 1966), p. 10.

point in the *The Trial of Man*, and then storms out of the interview, leaving God speechless and in dire need of a defender. But Lewis was not one to forgive a failed hero.