

WYNDHAM LEWIS' *HITLER*
CONTENT AND PUBLIC RECEPTION: THE TRUTH

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For various reasons students of modernism are taking more interest in Lewis, and unsurprisingly they pick up the most highly-coloured pieces first. Nor is this wrong, for many of the clichés about him are so close to being defensible as makes no difference, at the level of academic literary discussion. But it gives little promise of breaking the deadlocked and dreary trench-warfare of Lewis criticism to date, a battle in which regularly launched moralistic assaults are repelled with special pleading and belle-lettristic apologetics. For those with historical or psychological interest in Lewis' career this stand-off is valueless, and it is therefore good to see a piece such as Andrew Hewitt's article in *ELH*, "Wyndham Lewis: Fascism, Modernism, and the Politics of Homosexuality";¹ trying, as Lytton Strachey said in another context, to get in between the two warring sides. His position is straightforward. Fredric Jameson, another critic in no-man's land, has missed the point in his well-known analysis of proto-fascism in *Hitler*, for "it is neither aesthetics nor politics which is at issue here":

I will argue that Lewis' analysis of modernity – his critique of contemporary politics, and his original enthusiasm for Nazism – is structured taxonomically in terms of an analysis of homosexuality.²

The examination, as promised, is strongly tilted towards psychology, a tenable position and one which I would endorse, though deploring the use of Freud this late in the day and preferring to see Lewis' career used as a case study within a darwinised modularity psychology, the subjects being conscience and misanthropy.³ However, Hewitt's essay is at root, and quite properly, a psychological elaboration of an historical narrative, a narrative in which Lewis' mistaken evaluation of Hitler's Nazi party is compared to his experiences in a transvestite bar and then articulated through his many remarks on homosexuals. Unfortunately this history is not sound, Hewitt having missed the importance of the underlying programme, a defence of the Aryan peoples and their culture from traditional enemies, which made Nazism of importance to Lewis. More consequentially still, the error is compounded by Hewitt's concentrating on Lewis' admittedly great interest in homosexuality in order to strengthen his claim that this fascination is the thematic centre of the historical narrative itself. This puts Hewitt in the extremely odd position of obscuring, like a devoted admirer indeed, the polemical elements of the book, which concern racial conflict and anti-Semitism, by subordinating them to a supposed psychologi-

1 Andrew Hewitt, "Wyndham Lewis: Fascism, Modernism, and the Politics of Homosexuality"; *ELH*, 60 (1993), pp. 527–44.

2 Hewitt, p. 527.

3 This field has begun to find its way into the popular press, but no reports are satisfactory substitutes for Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, ed.s, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1992), and Lawrence A. Hirschfeld and Susan A. Gelman, eds., *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge U.P.: Cambridge, 1994).

cal motivation. This subordination would be appropriate if it were adequate to explain Lewis' political drive, but Hewitt neither demonstrates that this supposed obsession is of sufficient power to generate the phenomena observed, nor does he give us any explanation of how these phenomena would be so caused. Because he cannot explain these facts, he downgrades their importance through neglect, and we are left with the feeling that Lewis' single-minded animus against the Jews is an unmotivated epiphenomenon, and thus perhaps trivial compared with his queer fascination with the world of "Lesb and So."⁴ This is not to object against the attribution of psychological mechanisms, for there is no reason why a psychological theory should not be able provide an acceptably rigorous causal account of Lewis' political attachments, and indeed my own view is that a discussion of the evolutionary psychology of hatred would be a strong candidate for this function. But the psychology must wait upon a clarification of the history, the content and reception of *Hitler*. In rejecting Hewitt's suggestion that "*Hitler* leaves us with two crucial images [...] the transvestite [...] and] the homosocial exoticists of patriarchy";⁵ and by hammering home Lewis' racial emphases in order to provide a third, at least, I shall plod and will cut no dash beside his supernatural lightness, nor have I any comparably charming magic to offer. It is the undoing of spells, only, that is my business. With a bewitching interpretative kiss Hewitt has created an evanescent Fairy Prince worthy of the American political romance of the 1990s, but from the European shore, and I am a European, this can only seem to be an evasion of the toad.

Hitler has been universally misrepresented, by those who seek to whitewash it and by others who paint it as a black tabernacle dripping with gore. Even the most basic facts about it have to be established. Perhaps the most important of these is that it was conceived and composed as a book, and was not, as is reported in all studies of Lewis that discuss the matter, a revision and collection of hastily written articles. Lewis' own description is simply false:

How I came to have the idea of writing these articles was as follows. I went to Berlin recently on business and there I spent some weeks. But I found myself at once encompassed by a strange political unrest. Generally inattentive to politics, I found it impossible to escape from *these* – not so much because I agreed with the matter or tone of them (indeed, I am exceedingly sceptical about, and unresponsive to, all "nationalist" excitements whatever), as because there was an unmistakable accent of passion and of impressive conviction in this particular agitation that I had not met with before upon the European scene.⁶

For a contemporary magazine reader unacquainted with Lewis' earlier writing this may have been sufficient, but to an initiate of *The Art of Being Ruled* it is suspiciously feeble, and anyone who has read *The Childermass* and *The Apes of God*, with their ominous swastikas, Aryan heroes and devious Jews, should be astonished by this bland hypocrisy. We may, in any case, be reason-

4 Wyndham Lewis, *Hitler* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1931), p. 21.

5 Hewitt, p. 535.

6 *Hitler*, p. 5.

ably certain that Lewis had been thinking about the National Socialists long before arriving in Germany, and his biographer, Jeffrey Meyers, believes that Lewis had even gone so far as to persuade Lady Rhondda, the editor of *Time and Tide*, not only to publish his writings once written but actually to commission them and finance the necessary travel.⁷ His interest in German politics had been growing since 1927 at the latest, and we know that as early as September 1928 Lewis was in Munich observing the Nazis,⁸ but he would hardly have wished again to see things at first hand if it had not become suddenly clear at the Reichstag elections in September 1930 that Hitler was on the brink of achieving power. Certainly, the book's production was so rapid (it appeared as a serial in January 1931 and between covers in March the same year) as to make it appear an occasional work, but the weakness of Lewis' explanation, and the coincidence of his visit with the Nazi electoral watershed, suggests that we are faced here with a premeditated study got up as a spur of the moment report. Confirmation of this point can be found in the fact that the manuscript was substantially finished by the first week of January, Charles Prentice, his editor at Chatto & Windus, writing to Lewis on the 12th to accept the book, which he had evidently read in its entirety:

I enjoyed the Hitler book very much, and have described its contents to the firm. The length, about 40,000 words, especially if parts to be serialized, imposes, we are afraid, a publishing price of 6/- [...]⁹

If the manuscript was substantially finished by this time, then the book cannot be avoided as a careless piece of financial opportunism or cobbled journalese. I shall argue here that, on the contrary, the book is a deliberate development of Lewis' ideas, and so shows many signs of careful construction.

Nevertheless, though not a touristic by-blow *Hitler* is ephemeral in a way which none of his preceding books, and very few of his articles, would have led us to expect. It is a radical departure for him, an experiment in what was to become his basic mode of expression during the 1930s. What appears to many to be carelessness – and *Hitler* is both poorly researched and mendacious – can also be regarded as colloquialism. Critics are agreed that the works of the thirties abandon the “highbrow” audience, cease to be competing with Joyce and Virginia Woolf for the ear of a sophisticated readership, and turn instead to that of an audience whose primary concern was contemporary politics. As Lewis remarked in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, “For one person who reads you if you write about Machiavelli, there are a hundred who will read you if you write about Earl Baldwin or Mr Roosevelt.”¹⁰ But the reasoning behind this shift in Lewis' policy is barely understood at all. To represent it as a tailspin into which he precipitated himself by an aberrant book on Hitler is, I think, to ignore the difficulties which his liter-

⁷ Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 187. However, Meyers does not give a source for this suggestion, and I have myself not seen any document supporting it.

⁸ Bernard Lafourcade, “Chere Mrs Lewis”, *Enemy News*, 12 (Spring 1980), pp. 14–15.

⁹ 12 January 1931, Chatto and Windus letterbook 131, p. 156.

¹⁰ *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1937), p. 6.

ary career had run into during the years 1927 to 1930. Rather, we should see that *Hitler*, and all his writing of the following decade, formed an attempt to build up a new career founded on a fresh reading public, and to involve himself in the social reform – or, more accurately, covert resistance to racial enemies – which he considered necessary. Consequently, in *Hitler* we can see Lewis trying to address political commentary, a new subject for him, rather than the theory which had preoccupied him hitherto. This necessitated a new manner, the colloquial, and a new publishing technique, the serial followed by a book.

Public acclaim was always a goal for Lewis, but it is equally clear that the following he desired was principally an intellectual one. Up to 1930 he had been prosecuting, with growing impatience, a strategy which would at the worst slowly build up his standing. The failure of *The Apes of God*, the marketing of which is a good example of that impatience, provoked him to abandon the educated classes, and seek instead the fickle and short-lived approval of large magazine-reading audiences. Rather than sit and wait for his smouldering reputation to burst into flames he seems to have decided to tumble a heap of combustible polemics and some highly volatile opinions on to it to get a good blaze. But there is more to it than that. The populism of *Hitler* is a logical development of the interventionist political stance taken up during 1926 and subsequent years.

Because it now seems that this decision has ensured that Lewis remains on the margins of respectable modernism we tend to assume that his twin-pronged policy was a complete failure; that, as Hugh Kenner says, “Lewis’ reputation underwent in 1931 an occultation from which it never recovered. His books stopped being reviewed at all?”¹¹ But again, the history which led Kenner to this remark is wrong. The misconception is universal, even the standard biography¹² remarking that *Hitler* received only four reviews, when in fact there were, to my knowledge, at least forty, not counting pre-publication announcements.¹³ With errors of this kind it is hardly surprising that other parts of the contemporary reception have been misunderstood. A discussion of the public controversy around *Hitler*, and particularly that around the journal articles, will not only show that one branch of his plan can be seen as a qualified success, but will also illuminate *Hitler*, which has been so inaccurately read largely because we have forgotten the early debate, and so mistakenly imagine that its thesis is subtly indeterminate and Lewis’ supportive investment indeterminable.

Charles Prentice seems to have been pleased with the manuscript when it was shown to him, but remarked that “as few of your readers understand German, as much of the German as

11 Hugh Kenner. *Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1954), p. 85.

12 *The Enemy*, p. 190.

13 The standard printed listings of criticism relating to Lewis, including reviews, can be found in Bradford Morrow and Bernard Lafourcade, *A Bibliography of the Writings of Wyndham Lewis* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1978), pp. 269–352, and in Jeffrey Meyers, “Wyndham Lewis: A Bibliography of Criticism, 1912–1980”, *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 37 (Jan.-Mar. 1980), pp. 33–52, but both are inadequate in their listings of contemporary reception. Much of the research in the present article is based on material in the clipping files of Chatto & Windus, now held in Reading University Library, and on items located by the present writer. I am grateful to Chatto & Windus for permitting me to consult their archive, and Michael Bott, the Keeper of Archives and Manuscripts at Reading, for his expert assistance in using this collection. Though every effort has been made to provide complete citations for reviews held in the Chatto collection many come from minor provincial papers, and copies are hard to trace.

can be translated should be translated” and that “I think that if you could make it a bit clearer what a ‘Credit-crank’ really is, the popular reader would benefit accordingly.”¹⁴ This was, as far as can be discerned from surviving letters, the first time that Prentice had given Lewis detailed advice concerning the address and register of his work, and the reason is perhaps that he was aware of the intention to seek a new audience, and was offering some guidance in reaching a reader, a “popular reader”, who would have been quite excluded from *The Art of Being Ruled*, and indeed from *Paleface*, though that book represents a step towards populism. This consideration was also, I suspect, behind his decision to hold the price down to 6/- (7/6- would have entitled Lewis to a more advantageous grade of royalty). In the same letter he promises on behalf of Chatto to “do our utmost to get the book out just as soon as we possibly can”, and *Hitler* was rushed through the press ahead of Lewis’ *The Diabolical Principle* which had been accepted some time before. Prentice commented on publication: “Absit omen, but if Hitler were shot dead this afternoon, the book could not be subscribed at a better moment.”¹⁵ Taken together, these small pieces of evidence indicate a concerted effort to tap a market with only medium ability, a limited book budget, and passing interests, and Prentice seems to have had quite a large say in the book, judging from a later letter in which he discusses the illustrations proposed by Lewis: “Lawrence’s black nudes I don’t think would reproduce well, and I believe the reader would appreciate something more practical instead.”¹⁶ The initial objection can be discounted instantly, given that Prentice feels the need to back it up; and the term “practical” is unintelligible when one considers the nature of the reproductions that actually appeared, for these quite lack the Lawrence painting’s close connection to the textual argument (it was undoubtedly intended to illustrate the core chapter, “Analysis of the Exotic Sense”). What he is hinting at is that if the book is to sell, then the pictures must be as inoffensive, and undemanding as those in a newspaper. He got his way.

Bearing these things in mind, we can see that *Hitler* is in a sense an apprenticeship. The awkwardness that characterises his manner in the articles selected for *Time and Tide* arises from Lewis’ difficulties in suppressing his own hierarchy of interests, which would privilege the intellectual over the informational, in favour of one which responded to events as they happened. The reviewer in the *Modern Scot* cited “empiricism”¹⁷ as one of the book’s major failings, but didn’t notice that Lewis was straining for this quality, and that the book was bad because neither its facts nor its rationale were solid. Lewis’ account of the origin of his interest in Hitler is an attempt to fake this empiricism. It will be as well to make the motives for the deception plausible.

At the beginning of 1931 Lewis may not have been much read outside a small circle of intellectuals, but his name was very well known even in the daily press, and reviews of his work were common in nearly all journals with pretensions to quality. His move into politics

14 12 January 1931, Chatto and Windus letterbook, 131, p. 156.

15 Prentice to Lewis, 26 March 1931, Chatto letterbook, p. 131.

16 Prentice to Lewis, 11 February 1931, Chatto letterbook, 131, p. 549.

17 Anon. “Wyndham Lewis on German Nationalism.” *The Modern Scot*, 2 (Summer, July 1931), pp. 175–8.

required some explanation, even though it need not be watertight or comprehensive. But given his wish to appear an objective expositor he could hardly begin by declaring "I have had an interest in anti-democratic politics for some time, since the war certainly. And when a politician like Hitler, with a position in some ways isometric to mine, particularly on the question of race, seemed likely to become a force in European affairs, I very much wanted to examine him and his movement at close quarters, to see whether he really fitted into the pattern of my philosophy." Besides, any reasoning which cast Lewis as too much of a thinker would defeat the purpose of the major tactical change which he had made in his manner of addressing the reader. For the first time he was endeavouring to conceal his superiority rather than exaggerate it, a modification which one reviewer who knew the earlier work, L. p. Hartley, noticed immediately. Hartley also saw how difficult Lewis found it:

Anything that Mr. Wyndham Lewis writes has the flavour of literature even when (as is obviously the case with "Hitler") it has been written in haste and in a deliberately popular style which does not flow quite easily from the author's mannered and fastidious pen.¹⁸

This problem was one that Lewis never solved, either in *Hitler*, where he abandons the attempt during the chapters on race (the heart of the book as I see it), or in any of the popular books which followed. Nevertheless, the intention had been to write rather as if he were the ordinary sensual man, in Berlin on business, recording and interpreting his impressions, and though he never, at any stage in his life, succeeded in pitching his voice in such a way as to establish a relationship based on equality with his reader, *Hitler* is by no means his worst attempt. But the major difficulty was that he was not much interested in exposition, and simply used this as a front for apology. The result is a volume whose plan is at variance with its argument. A review of the book's structure, and comparison with the polemic which is broken and distributed through it, will make this clearer.

There are six sections to *Hitler*. In the first, "Berlin", Lewis offers his deceitful explanation of the volume's origins, a sketch of Berlin's decadent night-life, and a brief description of the political turmoil of the capital's streets. The second, "Adolf Hitler – The Man and the Party", is on the face of it a general exposition of Hitlerism. He discusses Hitler's anti-Semitism and his pacific intentions, and explains why it is that such a politician needs a quasi-military organisation. In the third section, "'Race' and 'Class'", Lewis offers a discussion of the rather puzzling fact that Hitler's socialism is based on the cohesion of those of the same race rather than the same class as in Marxism. He admits that he regards "class" distinctions as too fluid, or unreal, to be of much use politically, except as a divisive tool to destabilise the societies of your enemies, and that he much prefers the comparative rigidities of race. In the fourth section, "'Youth-Movement' Becomes 'Hitler-Movement'", which is a flat interlude, Lewis explains that Hitler politicises Youth in a way very different from that in the Anglo-Saxon countries, where the

¹⁸ "The Literary Lounger", *The Sketch*, p. 154 (15 Apr. 1931), p. 82.

young are flattered simply on account of their being young, and in order to divert them from political thought. In Germany, the young are invited to take part in politics. The fifth section, “All That is Not Race in This World is Dross”, attempts to explain race thinking. He begins by defining the meaning of the term “Blutsgefühl” (blood-feeling); digresses to discuss its opposite, the “exotic sense”, and returns to Hitler’s biological exclusivity, admitting that he finds it rather odd. Hitler’s belief in Aryan supremacy is presented to the reader, and Lewis concludes that though interesting, and possibly right in so far as technology goes, it has no application to the Arts. The section concludes with discussion of the apparently contradictory fact of a national party holding a doctrine like that of the “Blutsgefühl”, which cuts across normal state boundaries. Lewis expresses the hope, and the expectation, that Hitler will honour the blood-feeling of his ideas, rather than the more limited German nationalism, which superficially looms so large.

The sixth section of the book describes “Hitlerist Economics”. Having explained that the Nazis would repudiate the war debt, and suggested that Britain and several other countries would be well advised to do the same thing, Lewis then turns to the general principles of Hitler’s economic theory, which he explains are like those of the Social Credit thinkers. These sections are written with what Richard Aldington charitably termed “obvious irony”,¹⁹ though a good deal worse can be justly said of the stumbling pantomime in which Lewis affects to be bored by the cranky details of Social Credit. The scorn is a banal pre-emptive technique. Having anticipated resistance on the part of the reader where Social Credit is concerned, he employs a mock-rejection to provide camouflage for his advocacy. The section closes by suggesting that Marxist thinking is closer both to traditional economics and to traditional capitalism than is Hitlerite Social Credit, and includes a number of dark hints that it is international finance that is strangling Europe. The “Conclusion”, which appears to have been written during February 1931 (it quotes from several newspapers published at the beginning of the month), makes no substantial addition to the items listed above.

The first thing that strikes one on looking over this summary, is how little the book actually manages to tell the reader about Hitlerism. There is almost nothing about its origins, its party structure, or its manifestos. As Clennell Wilkinson, the reviewer for *Everyman*, remarked, “It was positively a feat to fill so many pages and give so little information [...] there is not one single item of fresh information for anyone accustomed to read the daily newspaper and one or two magazines.”²⁰ The reason for this is straightforward: *Hitler* is not an exposition, but a defence structured around possible objections to Hitlerism. Turning again to my summary, we can see that Lewis listed five features of the movement that a British reader would be likely to find objectionable or ridiculous (its apparent violence, its anti-Semitism, its racialism, its nationalism and its economics) and then attempted to provide reasons why such judgements would be premature or unfounded. This policy is informed by a set of operating assumptions so important to him at this time, and later, that they can be referred to as the genetic core of his thought.

¹⁹ Richard Aldington, “Hitler as the Saviour of Germany”, *Sunday Referee* (19 July 1931).

²⁰ “Wyndham Lewis on Hitler”, *Everyman*, 5 (2 Apr. 1931), p. 303.

Political circumstances varied in the next twenty-five years, and consequently the embryological consequences of this codical centre also varied, but the codex itself remained substantially unchanged.

Hitler is based on the assumption that the cultures and states of northern Europe are disintegrating, partly because of the effects of technological innovation on social structure, partly because of socialism based on class interests (Lewis had no objection to socialisation founded on what he regarded as more substantial differentiations between men, such as race), and partly because their moral expansiveness had caused them to lose confidence in their own procedures and to take a sentimental and supinely respectful interest in the cultures of others, a failing Lewis discusses at length under the title "The Exotic Sense", where it is described as "an unexamined pest in the latterday european democratic societies"²¹

This instability was, Lewis held, being exploited by several sources, but largely by the dispersed remnants of the once great Semitic empires, and as early as page 38 Lewis can be found reporting the Nazi insistence on a "battle of ideas, with people of jewish origin always identified with the tendencies that are destructive of the european, or 'aryan,' ethos."²² The Jew is permitted to reply, in a drama staged by Lewis, that "coming as he generally does from Tartary, he cannot be expected to be much attracted by carol-singing, protestant hymn-music, or the teutonic Royal-Academicism of official painting", and in any case the difficulties of the Aryans came from their own technical inventions. Little comment is made, Lewis carefully steering off in the opposite direction – "I will not pursue this argument" – but the discussion continues for another three pages, the Nazi insisting that the pollutions of Jazz and Negro art come from America, a country whose culture is "judeo-american rather than european-american", the implication being that there is a deliberate cultural poisoning in progress. In reply to this confrontation Lewis observes that the Jews do indeed govern England, but they do it rather well, and that although "feminine, and in many ways very unpleasant" the Jews exist and have to be accepted, and in the United States and the western European states the Jews are more integrated and less objectionable than in middle Europe:

In short, upon that hypothesis, is not the Jew here, from the Hitler standpoint, disinfected and anglicized? – just as in the States he has been transformed (that yankee Abraham or "Abie") into a true Western product – presented, to crown everything with a wild white Irish Rose! How, under such circumstances, could Abie "remember Carthage"?²³

Carthage, *we* should remember, was the last great Mediterranean empire based on a Semitic culture, and Lewis' invocation of it here should leave no doubt that the view of history as racial conflict was on his mind.

²¹ *Hitler*, p. 119.

²² *Hitler*, p. 38.

²³ *Hitler*, p. 41.

A few pages later the subject of Europe rises again, this time in connection with the divisive effects of “class” socialism. In the past these “wars’ of brother against brother” were “*domestic* disputes and feuds”

But now the whole Earth looks on, with delight, hatred and scorn (or actively participates) in the inner readjustments of our social system. It would have been better to keep these adjustments strictly private and domestic.

This leads Lewis into an excursus that is uniquely unguarded:

This broadcast and cosmic advertisement, so much gratuitous publicity, for domestic issues, is reminiscent of another stupidity – namely, the use of great numbers of asiatic and african troops in the War – *stupid*, that is, if you desire the good of Europe – *intelligent* if you desire its destruction.

I am not so much arguing here that the european civilization ought not to end, as merely pointing out *how* that destruction is being brought about. It is a subject of constant speculation how the Roman Empire came to collapse – some say Christianity, others say Mosquitoes. There is no mystery at all – it is an “open conspiracy” – about the Fall of Europe. In a word, it is the result, in the first instance, of an enormous new factor – machinery and industrial technique. In the short space of a century science turned our world upside-down. Secondly, the world being upside-down and inside-out, the shrewd parasite (existing in all times and places) psychologically an outcast as regards our settled structure, took advantage of this disorder and consequent bafflement to sting us all to death. Of course historians in the future will assert that it was Influenza, or the pranks of the last Roman Kaiser. But we know better.²⁴

The villains are identified two pages later as “agitator” and “Geldmensch”:

When *two nations* fall out, the armament-king and chemical-king rake in the shekels. [...] When two *Classes* fall out it is the same thing.²⁵

Little comment seems necessary upon this, its anti-Semitism being all too obvious when the passages are juxtaposed, though it is considerably less so in Lewis’ own, deliberately arranged, text. However, we can develop our understanding of this period in Lewis’ thought by following up the phrase “open conspiracy”; which we find leads us to H. G. Wells (it is Wells’ term for the organisation of scientific minds that would eventually replace the scandalous chaos of the democracies), and will ultimately point to the continuity of this view of Europe with Lewis’ earlier writings. This is not the only location in which Wells figures; elsewhere in *Hitler* Lewis explains that the German “identifies the Jew with everything that is inimical to the society to which he belongs – the political and cultural system of the Aryan World” and that “To deal with this situation Anti-semitic Societies have recently been formed. The principal one has its offices

²⁴ *Hitler*, p. 73.

²⁵ *Hitler*, p. 75.

in Paris. (Mr. H. G. Wells is a member of its committee.)” I have not been able to ascertain the truth of this parenthetical remark, but think it entirely plausible. Wells had, after all, recently observed in his *Short History of the World* that

The theme of history from the ninth century B.C. onward for six centuries is the story of how these Aryan peoples grew to power and enterprise and how at last they subjugated the whole Ancient World, Semitic, Aegean and Egyptian alike. In form the Aryan peoples were altogether victorious; but the struggle of Aryan, Semitic and Egyptian ideas and methods was continued long after the sceptre was in Aryan hands. It is indeed a struggle that goes on through all the rest of history and still in a manner continues to this day.²⁶

Wells and Lewis seem to have been in occasional contact during 1930, when they met for what Lewis called an *Apes of God* lunch,²⁷ providing an opportunity for Lewis to learn of Wells' interests, but their association seems to have begun a few years earlier, in 1928 when Lewis sent Wells the typescript of his fiction *The Childermass*, Wells writing on 24 January to say how much he had enjoyed it.²⁸ Lewis' reply is cautious, but the burden is unmistakable:

There are some things in which I am perhaps even obsessedly interested (the questions of art aside) which likewise interest you very deeply: and you have possessed in me for two or three years a reader who has come more and more to respect what you do (I am speaking not of your genius as a storyteller – that would be an impertinence on my part to speak of in that way – but your outlook on our world, of which I take it *Clissold* was a fairly complete expression. Also I refer to articles I have from time to time read, dealing with the questions of war and Peace, which partly because I was a soldier maybe and have especially reflected on that question, struck me very much.) That is why I sent you a copy of *The Childermass*, and I am overjoyed to hear that it met with your approval.²⁹

The points of comparison between Lewis and Wells are very numerous, but it will be necessary here to list only a few of them. They shared an interest in non-democratic social revolution, they believed that the last European war had been suicidal, and that there was a grave danger of another. One might even note that much of the opening section of *The Childermass* is plainly modeled on the sketch of the lunar sunrise in *The First Men on the Moon*. But most importantly they agreed in their view of European and Mediterranean history, a view omnipresent in *The World of William Clissold*,³⁰ a book deeply permeated by the topics of race and racial conflict,

²⁶ H. G. Wells, *A Short History of the World*, quoted from *The Works of H. G. Wells: Atlantic Edition*, Vol XXVII (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1927), p. 121.

²⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 200.

²⁸ 24 January 1928, in *Satire & Fiction* (London: Arthur Press, 1930), p. 28.

²⁹ To H. G. Wells, ca. August 1928, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. by W. K. Rose (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 180.

³⁰ H. G. Wells, *The World of William Clissold: A Novel at a new angle* (London: Ernest Benn, 1926). 3 vols. This is, apart from the historical writings, the neglected locus classicus for Wells' interest in the Jews.

and which Lewis had presented in elliptical and symbolic form in *The Childermass*. The suggestion that Lewis' book concerns an anti-European threat has been put forward before, notably by Alistair Davies in his unpublished Cambridge thesis and in an article "Wyndham Lewis' Fiction of Conspiracy".³¹ Davies' argument, as was pointed out by correspondents, was unsatisfactory, yet his suggestion that Lewis believed the northern European states to be under threat, largely from the international Semitic world, is, I think, correct. We need not go, as Davies did, to the arcane myths of the Munich secret society, the Thule Gessellschaft, to find a source for Lewis' view. *The Outline of History* is more than adequate, for there we find Wells not only referring to race conflict, as quoted above, but consistently binding past and present together, even in casual remarks, as in the passage already quoted, or when in talking of the Roman destruction of Carthage he observes that

Rome triumphed over Carthage, but the rivalry of Aryan and Semite was to merge itself later on in the conflict of Gentile and Jew. Our history now is coming to events whose consequences and distorted traditions still maintain a lingering and expiring vitality in, and exercise a complicating and confusing influence upon, the conflicts and controversies of to-day.³²

These are richly suggestive thematic similarities, and, given Lewis' letter to Wells and the remarks in *Hitler*, indicate that Lewis believed, with Wells, that the conflict between Aryan and Semite was an important part of contemporary events. In *The Childermass*, for instance, we see Lewis making the same movement to overlap past and present, asserting that race history may be used to explain the "conflicts and controversies of to-day". This text, Lewis' most extraordinary production, is a complex object, and short of an entire volume of commentary no satisfying discussion could perhaps be given. I shall confine myself here to a brief exposition of a few elements in the opening pages. It may be as well to set the scene. *The Childermass* describes a desert area, separated from a large city by a river. In a camp by the river large numbers of men – the women are apparently elsewhere – are petitioning for entrance to the city. The men are dead, and the city is, purportedly, heaven. Each day an official, The Bailiff, emerges from the city and crosses the river to his court, where he interviews the petitioners, discussing philosophical issues and assessing the "reality" of the souls, this reality being the main criterion for entry. The crowds of souls are divided into those who support the Bailiff, and those who do not, the enemies being led by a mysterious figure, Hyperides, who claims that the Bailiff is a criminal, that the city is not in fact heaven, and that some vast and cynical manipulative deception is being put over upon the waiting masses. Hyperides' supporters dress in "classical" clothes, sport an occasional swastika, and refer to their leader as the "the last Aryan hero".³³

31 Alistair Davies, "Wyndham Lewis: A Study of the Cultural, Social, and Political Ideas of Wyndham Lewis, with reference to their influence upon his literary theory and practice, 1908–1937" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Cambridge University, 1981), and "Wyndham Lewis' Fiction of Conspiracy: *The Childermass*", *Enemy News*, 16 (Summer 1982), pp. 22–32. For subsequent correspondence see issues 17 (Autumn 1982), and 18 (Autumn 1983).

32 *Short History of the World*, p. 187.

33 Wyndham Lewis, *The Childermass* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1928), p. 253.

The book opens as follows:

The city lies in a plain, ornamented with mountains. These appear as a fringe of crystals to the heavenly north. One minute bronze cone has a black plume of smoke. Beyond the oasis-plain is the desert. The sand devils perform up to its northern and southern borders. The alluvial bench has recently gained, in the celestial region, upon the wall of the dunes. The “pulse of Asia” never ceases beating. But the outer aeolian element has been worsted locally by the element of the oasis.

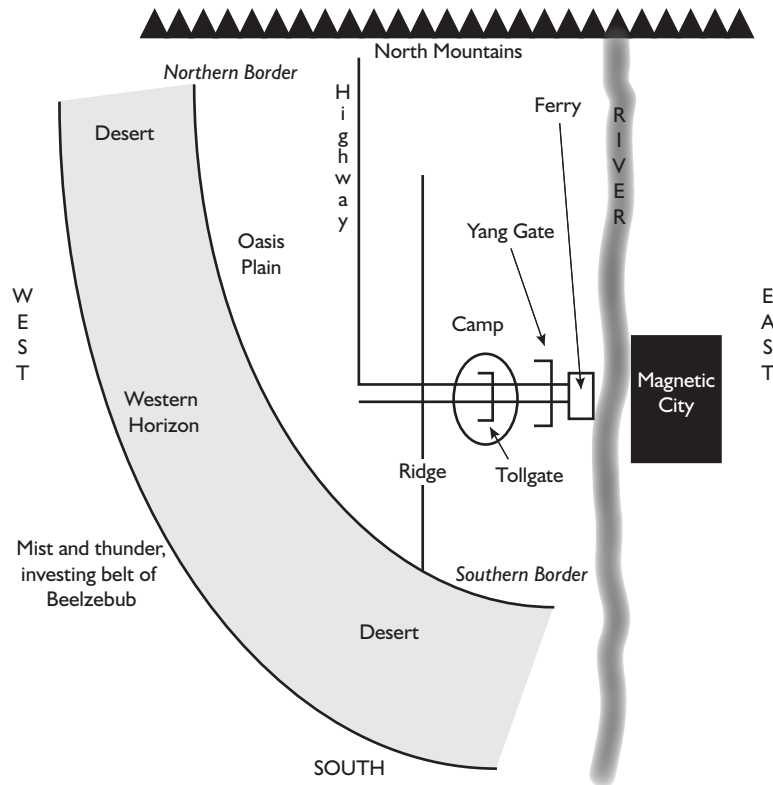
The approach to the so-called Yang Gate is over a ridge of nummulitic limestone. From its red crest the city and its walls are seen as though in an isometric plan. Two miles across, a tract of mist and dust separates this ridge from the river. It is here that in a shimmering obscurity the emigrant mass is collected within sight of the walls of the magnetic city. To the accompaniment of innumerable lowing horns along the banks of the river, a chorus of mournful messages, the day breaks. At the dully sparkling margin, their feet in the hot waves, stand the watermen, signalling from shore to shore. An exhausted movement disturbs the night-camp stretching on either side of the highway—which when it reaches the abrupt sides of the ridge turns at right angles northward. Mules and oxen are being driven out on to the road: like the tiny scratches of a needle upon this drum, having the horizon as its perimeter, cries are carried to the neighbourhood of the river.

The western horizon behind the ridge, where the camp ends inland, but southward from the highroad, is a mist that seems to thunder. A heavy murmur resembling the rolling of ritualistic drums shakes the atmosphere. It is the outposts or investing belt of Beelzebub, threatening Heaven from that direction, but at a distance of a hundred leagues, composed of his resonant subjects. [...]

With the gait of Cartophilus some homing solitary shadow is continually arriving in the restless dust of the turnpike, challenged at the tollgate thrown across it at the first milestone from the water-front. Like black drops falling into a cistern these slow but incessant forms feed the camp to overflowing. Where the highway terminates at the riverside is a ferry station. Facing this on the metropolitan shore is, to the right, the citadel, rising plumb from water, a crown of silver rock, as florets towers arranged around its summit.³⁴

This is a very puzzling description, particularly because it is so precise topographically. Taking this as a hint that the terrain is important I shall draw the scene as a map, imagining myself standing at the Ferry with my back to the Magnetic City.

³⁴ *Childermass*, pp. 1–2.



So far we are not perhaps much the wiser, but the reference to the metropolitan shore is a valuable clue. If this map is reflected so that West becomes East, it is revealed as an abstract map of Europe, with the river representing the Atlantic, and the Magnetic City standing in for New York, a magnetic city par excellence. This identification would hardly be surprising to anyone who has approached Manhattan by sea or rail and seen it rising “plumb from the water”, and in fact Lewis had very recently observed the city at first hand in mid-1927, just before intensive work on *The Childermass* began. There is, naturally, more to this reference, as we might expect from Lewis’ characterisation of American culture as “judeo-american”, yet confirmation of this point comes from a truly surprising source. Lewis’ admiration for and interest in Henry Ford is well-documented, in *The Art of Being Ruled* for instance,³⁵ and it is therefore of considerable importance to find Ford, or his delegates, writing of New York in the following terms in his *International Jew*:

New York is the greatest center of Jewish population in the world. It is the gateway where the bulk of American imports are taxed, and where practically all the business done in America pays tribute to the masters of money. The very land of the city is the holdings of the Jews.

No wonder that Jewish writers, viewing this unprecedented prosperity, this unchecked growth in wealth and power, exclaim enthusiastically that the United States is the Promised Land foretold by the prophets, and New York the New Jerusalem.³⁶

³⁵ Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1926), p. 429.

³⁶ Henry Ford Sr., “Jewish History in the United States”, in *The International Jew: The World’s Foremost Problem*, ed. by G. F. Green (nd, no place), p. 15. The article in this modern reprint claim to be selected from Ford’s *Dearborn Independent*.

I cannot prove that Lewis read this passage, but the likelihood is high; the Magnetic City is even once named as the New Jerusalem.³⁷

We are now in a position to make the next major interpretative step, building on the recognition that the issue of race is almost certainly being invoked here. What is the heavenly north, and why do the dead souls at the mercy of the Magnetic City emanate from its mountains? The answer to this is that the north, vaguely defined, is the origin of the Aryans, and the highway an abstract representation of their migrations, discussed extensively in Wells' historical writings, and of course elsewhere. If we look, for example, in the 19th chapter of the *Short History*, "The Primitive Aryans,"³⁸ we find Wells describing this movement, from central Europe into the old world of the Mediterranean, and westward into the areas now known as France, Britain and Spain, as the central theme of history from the ninth century BC onwards for 600 years. Lewis' own version of this perhaps owes a good deal to other writers, such as Rosenberg,³⁹ who supposes a more northerly, a colder (crystalline) origin, but the point is clear. In broad terms Lewis and Wells agreed, and in *The Childermass*, sent to Wells for approval, this scheme determines the landscape of the opening pages. The mountains in the "heavenly north" represent the aboriginal home of the Aryans, the route of the highway describes their migration, down to the Mediterranean and then across to the western edge of Europe, where they are now camped in a demoralised condition, petitioning for entrance into the Jewish-dominated revolutionary future. The deserts correspond to the Middle East and North Africa, the ancestral home of the diabolical Semites, and the event which has brought the Aryans low is the Great War, to which Lewis alludes in his title. The Childermass, the massacre of the innocents, is 28 December, which is also the day conscription was ratified by the cabinet of His Majesty's Government in 1915. We read elsewhere in Henry Ford that "'Wars are the Jew's harvests' is an ancient saying."⁴⁰

It is not known with any certainty when these ideas became of importance to Lewis, but I am inclined to think that though long present in his thought they rose to dominance only after 1926. Before this time, in the *Art of Being Ruled* for example, Lewis was still a millennialist in his anticipations of a benevolent unrolling of history, while afterwards we find him preaching a vigorous programme of intervention to save Western man. When we see *Hitler* against this background it becomes readily intelligible as an attempt to remove various objections to the only political movement in Europe that seemed likely to address the crisis that Lewis perceived. The polemical structure of the book can, now, be summarised. Europe is in danger. Hitlerism might be the solution (it is certainly the only force that has any promise). There are some objections to Hitlerism, but they are not sufficient, in view of the crisis that faces us, to discredit the movement.

³⁷ *The Childermass*, p. 143.

³⁸ *Short History*, pp. 117 ff.

³⁹ For a fuller discussion of Lewis' interest in Rosenberg see my "Two Filibusters in Barbary: Wyndham Lewis and Alfred Rosenberg", forthcoming.

⁴⁰ *International Jew*, p. 39.

Hitler, on this view, is a book about the race, culture, and unity of the northern European peoples, and it is a continuation of the thesis presented in the *Paleface* essays. Moreover, it has strong links with *Time and Western Man*, *The Childermass*, the revised *Tarr* of 1928, and *The Apes of God*. In the first of these Lewis examined the abstract philosophical and literary details of the erosion of the western mind, with a heavy emphasis on Jewish thinkers, the second presented a broad and allegorical representation of the history on which the view rested, combining it with a vivid representation of the way that the Europeans were being reduced to childlike passivity by a mass culture which had fallen into the hands of their traditional enemies, the Semites. *Tarr* was revised, by the addition of a Jewish character, Pochinsky, in order to present, in part, an anti-Jewish allegory of the causes of the Great War, a crucial stage in the destabilisation which Lewis was indicating.⁴¹ And in *The Apes of God* a great mass of material, much of it based on his own observations of contemporaries, was produced to describe in fictional form the decay and degeneration in a particular western city. It is hardly necessary to point out that one of the major structural polarities of that latter novel is between the enfeebled Europeans, Dan Boleyn for example, and the cunning Jew, Archie Margolin for instance, who battens on the chaos. Scholars have tended to avoid these connections, and those that have drawn attention to them, Davies and Ayers for example, have done so in a way that has, understandably, discredited argument along these lines. The contextual relationships of *Hitler*, and Lewis' motivations for writing it, have thus been obscured, and our understanding of the contemporary response to these writings, which was considerably more acute than anything since, has suffered as a result. That the book was in some way a catastrophe for Lewis' career has been recognised by many scholars, as if through fog, but the precise details have never been made clear. Now that the framework and background of *Hitler* has been revealed an attempt at clarification need not seem hopeless.

Lewis' claims to be an objective reporter of facts, are, as I have indicated above, a flimsy veil for an altogether more considered piece of suasion, and it should be pointed out that Lewis' five *Time and Tide* articles exactly represent the polemical skeleton of the book, rather obviously so in fact. The correspondence that was stirred up concerned itself very largely with stripping away the inadequate covering, though it did not get right to the heart of the matter. The first public response to the articles appeared on 31 January 1931, in the correspondence columns.⁴² Two of the series of five articles had appeared: a general survey of Hitlerism and its aims, and a piece describing German low-life. The first letter was from Frederic A. Voigt, the German correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, and one of the most distinguished and respected journalists of his time. He began at what then seemed the heart of the matter: "Sir, – It is quite clear that Mr. Wyndham Lewis has simply been stuffed with Nazi propaganda." Voigt was mainly concerned to rectify Lewis' account of the street-fighting, where the Nazis were presented as unarmed, and despite obvious irritation he preserves a reasonable balance: "Revolvers, pistols,

41 This point was first made by David Ayers, *Wyndham Lewis and Western Man* (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 140.

42 "Letters to the Editor", *Time and Tide*, 12 (31 January 1931), pp. 126–7.

knuckle-dusters and knives are continually being found on the persons of the Nazis, who are at least as well armed as the Communists." In his reply Lewis described Voigt as a "very hot [...] partisan of the communists", which is hardly justifiable from the evidence in the letter.⁴³ Lewis seems to have thought that Voigt was an unknown, remarking that he "is, I understand, an international journalist". The ignorance is hardly surprising since "I [Lewis] never read the *Manchester Guardian*, which I regard as one of the most insidiously wrong of all great political newspapers in England". In fact, Voigt was thought of as a paragon of integrity, a reputation he seems to have deserved, for as early as 1938 he denounced Stalin's Russia as the "ultimate wickedness".⁴⁴ At the time of his exchange with Lewis he was known as the man who had in 1926 exposed a secret arrangement which allowed the Reichswehr to evade the Versailles treaty by developing its weapons on Soviet territory. He had even been quoted in the Reichstag itself as an authority on the matter. If Lewis had known anything of Voigt's distinction he would surely have exercised circumspection in his remarks. As it was, his tone and his accusations can only have made him appear incompetent to anyone with an interest in foreign affairs.

In the second of the letters Cicely Hamilton rejected Lewis' description of *Berlin Westens* as lurid sensationalism, to which he rather weakly replied that she was a kill-joy. In the third, Cecil Melville, who was later to review *Hitler* and write a pamphlet on Lewis' "adventure in political philosophy",⁴⁵ genially questioned the truth of Nazi promises of peace. Lewis ignored this last letter, and it is important to ask why. Voigt had questioned the impartiality and accuracy of the reporting with regard to the street-fighting, Cicely Hamilton had claimed that Lewis was indulging in the tricks of the yellow-press, both of which Lewis felt able to deal with, but Melville began by granting Lewis the right to be funny – "Mr. Lewis is right in writing in an impressionist manner about the Berlin *mise en scène* before getting down to an examination of Hitlerism *per se*." – then dismissed his interpretation of Hitlerist intentions:

Their *revangiste* policies appear to offer short cuts to the solution of their problems which I do not think can be solved that way; indeed, I fear that they may prove to be but short cuts to further catastrophe.

Melville is referring here to Lewis' misunderstanding of Nazi feelings towards Europe. Hitler, Lewis said in his first article, was full of "wildly 'idealist' [...] proposals for the 'conquest of the Western soul', and the founding of a peaceful confederacy of 'Aryan' states." It will be sufficient to note that one commentator remarked instantly that Nazi policy was motivated by a desire for revenge, not a charitable blood-feeling as Lewis believed. They were indeed interested in "conquest", but not of the soul only. Melville contributed no further correspondence, and the point was not taken up by any other writer, though in a later review Richard Aldington gave it an attractive formulation:

⁴³ Wyndham Lewis Replies to his Critics", *Time and Tide*, 12.6 (7 February 1931), p. 150.

⁴⁴ In his *Unto Caesar* (London, 1938), quoted in the entry for Voigt in the *DNB*.

⁴⁵ *The Truth about the New Party* (London: Wishart, 1931). Melville reviewed *Hitler* for the *New Statesman*, 1 (23 May 1931), p. 469.

I heartily agree with Mr. Lewis (and with Hitler, if he says so, too) that the late War was a great Civil war; but it wasn't a Civil War because we are all Germans. (This may be the British Tommy speaking – if so, I apologize.)⁴⁶

At this stage the most pressing thing seemed to be Lewis' inaccuracies, and his unquestioning acceptance of Nazi reports. Initially this heckling seemed more useful than otherwise, and Prentice regarded it as an opportunity. The first announcement of *Hitler* that I have come across appeared at the end of January, and the bulk of them followed in the first two weeks of February.⁴⁷ Chatto and Windus were not anywhere near publication, which they managed on 26 March, but the weekly correspondence in *Time and Tide* was clearly excellent publicity and some advantage had to be taken. Both Hamilton and Voigt had submitted replies, repeating their original charges, and were joined by a new correspondent who preferred the shelter of a pseudonym, "The Walrus". He was the first to say that Lewis' politics could be approached as those of a painter:

Mr. Wyndham Lewis is an impressionist artist working in words instead of paint, and he is really no more concerned with facts and things as they appear to normal minds, than a vorticist is with the world as it looks to normal eyes.⁴⁸

He suggested a series of similar articles: "Miss Gertrude Stein on Russia, Miss Edith Sitwell on the gold problem, and Mr. Billy Bennett on the League of Nations". Lewis had been reproved for mere ignorance before, but here for the first time Lewis' intellectual credentials as a social critic had been called in question, a significant moment. The Walrus suggested that an artist is concerned, or able, only to demonstrate personality or point of view: "'Genesis' is not the expectant mother that you and I know – but it is Epstein. Wyndham Lewis' *Germany* is not the Germany that any ordinary observer knows – but it is Wyndham Lewis." If you do not realise this, then you end up like Voigt:

I think that Mr. Voigt takes Mr. Wyndham Lewis a little too seriously. No doubt the latter takes himself seriously, but that is by the way.

Lewis, I have suggested, switched to political commentary largely because he wanted to establish himself as a figure in contemporary affairs. Before the Walrus's letter it seemed as if he had made a good start. The opinions were being challenged, but he was worth challenging, and Lewis had the temperament of a salamander in any case so was able to enjoy eruptions of controversy. But the "Walrus" forecast, accurately, a future of notoriety without respect:

I for one would rather enjoy such interludes in this time of depression than read the studied accuracies and judicial views of grave and normal persons like Mr. Voigt, whose

⁴⁶ Richard Aldington, "Hitler as the Saviour of Germany".

⁴⁷ *News Chronicle* (26 January 1931); *Times Literary Supplement*, 30.1514 (5 February 1931), p. 98; *Glasgow Herald* (5 February 1931); *Inverness Courier* (6 February 1931); *Observer* (8 February 1931), p. 6; *Week-End Review* (14 February 1931).

⁴⁸ "Hitlerism", *Time and Tide* 12.8 (21 February 1931), pp. 221–2.

only merit is that they know what they are talking about, while Mr. Wyndham Lewis demonstrably does not (as if that mattered!).

Hugh Kenner's remark about "occultation" has already been quoted, and it is appropriate here to attempt to salvage something from that view. The "Hitler" articles, not just the *Hitler* book, did, it is true, damage Lewis' reputation, but in a way rather different from the straightforward suppression which Kenner suspected. Statistics may be of some use here. The following table lists the numbers of reviews and citations for the years 1930 to 1933.⁴⁹

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Reviews</i>
1930	61
1931	106
1932	149
1933	57

Such figures tell us merely that Lewis was much talked about, so long as he continued to publish books and articles. When he slowed down, as he did in 1933 due to illness, he passed from the consciousness of the periodical journalist and reader. His new strategy had succeeded in one sense – he was a name on a scale which he had not been since 1927 and 1928 – but he had failed to gain the loyalty of these ephemeral producers and consumers, and the attempt to gain it had lost him what standing he still had with intellectuals. Lewis' failure is not difficult to explain. The vaunted objectivity, the claims to be a reporter, were so easily penetrated, and the axe-grinding of the book ensured that he lost stature not only with his educated audience, but also with the new popular readership. With regard to the last he had made a fatal underestimate of general intelligence. As the remarks of Wilkinson quoted earlier show, the politically-minded reader could not be fobbed off with a rehash of somebody else's journalism. This deceitful screening of intent was naturally irritating, the more so when the nature of the polemic was examined. However, the correspondents in *Time and Tide* had not exposed Lewis' motivations, indeed Voigt appears to have overlooked the significance of the fourth article, on "Blutsgefühl", because it was so silly (he remarked that "in his first three articles (though not in his fourth) Mr. Lewis is not wholly frivolous"⁵⁰). So the importance of this exchange in the history of Lewis' reputation is not so much that it revealed his interest in race, the reviews of the book were to do this, but rather that for the first time in his life Lewis had been challenged and beaten from the field. He had trespassed into current affairs and had been rebuffed and exposed by one of the best known authorities on German politics. No sensible estimate can be given of the damage done to his general standing in the London literary world by Voigt's remarks, but there is every reason to suppose that it was considerable. This might not have mattered for another artist, but Lewis had claimed much of his prestige on the grounds of his superior acumen, and here were dull people, possessed of literary equipments much inferior to Lewis' own, running rings

⁴⁹ Information from my own unpublished bibliography of Lewis criticism, 1911–1995.

⁵⁰ "Hitlerism", *Time and Tide* 12 (21 February 1931), p. 221.

around him. With the reviews themselves this crisis deepened. On the one hand, his credentials as an incorruptible and objective observer, already damaged by *The Apes of God*, were cancelled by reviewers who convicted him of straightforward falsification; and on the other, his intelligence was questioned by those who pointed out that the dupe of Hitler could not, after all, be so bright as had been imagined. But, most importantly, the racial basis of the volume was exposed, and Lewis found himself having to take the sort of analysis he had hitherto been dishing out to his contemporaries. The top was lifted off his book, and its clockwork and hidden passengers exposed. Moreover, the code had been broken and delivered to the public, and anyone who cared to look over Lewis' more recent works could now find, without much trouble, that they were based on an identical version of racial and cultural history. *Hitler*, in other words, took a lot of the mystery out of Lewis, and for a public that believed, as many readers still believe, that a truly "creative writer," like God, is nothing without faith, this amounted to near complete deflation.

Clennell Wilkinson's *Everyman* review has already been quoted as one of the first pieces to note the poverty of Lewis' documentation. It was also one of the first to raise the issue of dishonesty. "It might be an interesting experiment to put a successful literary man" to the task of explaining Hitlerism, "we might get a flood of light at last":

And what do we find? It would hardly be unfair to answer "Nothing". Here is a mere "write-up" of the Nazi case, entirely uncritical, vague and unsubstantial.⁵¹

There is more than a faint suggestion here that Lewis has betrayed his reader, a point that recurs throughout these notices. Lewis was not quite the success that Wilkinson took him for, but there seems little reason to dismiss the remark entirely, and it serves as a useful reminder that by ordinary standards he was widely known and respected. The dissatisfaction that took him into political agitation was very much of Lewis' own making, and seemed incomprehensible to an outsider. Wilkinson remarks, with evident bafflement, on the macaronic and hackneyed style of the book, effects which Lewis clearly worked very hard at in an effort to produce a jazz journal for wide consumption, and observes that apart from a few affectations "it would be hard to believe that the book was written by anyone of established literary reputation". Wilkinson's confusion was not unusual, and though for analytic convenience I shall discuss in discrete categories those who saw Lewis as foolishly mistaken, and those who saw him as cynically deceptive, several reviewers made both points, an inconsistency symptomatic of indecision. But the confusion is understandable, and in my opinion both judgments are true if properly targeted. In dealing with the violence and anti-Semitism of the Nazis Lewis was quite deliberately publishing falsehoods. In arguing that Hitler had no "revangiste" aims in Europe he was sincere and mistaken. To say this is not, of course, to offer any excuse. The point is simply that Lewis was deeply and genuinely interested in European racial and cultural solidarity, and was fooled by the care with which Hitler disguised his narrow Germanic patriotism as this barely more

⁵¹ "Wyndham Lewis on Hitler", *Everyman*, 5 (2 Apr. 1931), p. 303.

respectable ideal. No satisfying explanation for this error can be given, though it seems almost certain that Lewis wrongly supposed Rosenberg, with whose writings he was familiar, to have been very much more influential in determining party policy than was in fact the case.⁵²

Though most reviewers seem to have felt that Lewis was less than candid in his reporting, a good number were more generous and assumed that much of what he had to say about the character of Nazism was the result of his gullibility. In the *Evening Standard* Harold Nicolson, already working with Mosley in the New Party, attributed Lewis' "religious fervour" for Hitlerism to the fact that he had "no sense of humour".⁵³ The New Party, it should be remembered, was looking to Mussolini for a model at this time. The *Scotsman*, while seeing that Lewis was "definitely an advocate" of Aryanism, reported that "he is too much inclined to accept the Hitlerites at their own valuation",⁵⁴ and the *Spectator* was similarly understanding when it said that Lewis "evidently believed almost everything which his Hitlerite informants told him",⁵⁵ while the *Week-end Review*, which began by convicting Lewis of dishonesty, excused him, inadvertently, by saying that he "had the Nazi case pumped into him, and has swallowed it whole":

Like the peers in "Iolanthe" he "never thought of thinking for himself at all".⁵⁶

Reviewers were, in all likelihood, misled by the ineffectiveness of Lewis' lies, and concluded that no man would deliberately print such transparently false reports with the intention of deceiving; he must actually believe them himself. The *Glasgow Herald*, for example, thought the book "only saved from being mischievous by the fact that it is too silly to be taken seriously":

It is a monument of pretentious inaccuracy. Mr. Lewis does not know German (as his frequent blunders in translation make amply clear) and certainly does not know the German National Socialists.⁵⁷

The *Christian Science Monitor* also obscured Lewis' mendacity by reminding its readers that "Mr. Lewis is a poet, a philosopher, a serious thinker, though his humour sometimes runs away with his judgement".⁵⁸ The poet-philosopher is liable, on account of his fine frenzy, to be an unreliable guide, we are to understand, though none the less interesting for that.

Damaging though this reputation for silliness might have been to Lewis it is very much a minor part of the reception, and those who thought they saw "The – yes – the ingenuous Mr. Lewis",⁵⁹ as the *Bookman* charmingly called him, were much less numerous than those who detected "deliberate and frigid lying".⁶⁰ The mere fact of support for Hitler would have done Lewis no good, but the manner of his presentation was perhaps more influential. The writer

⁵² See my "Two Filibusters" referred to above.

⁵³ "A Searchlight on Russia's Devouring Machine: Will Its Operators Pause in Time?", *Evening Standard* (2 Apr. 1931).

⁵⁴ Anon, title not known, *The Scotsman* (6 Apr. 1931).

⁵⁵ Anon, "Mr. Lewis Amongst the Nazis", *Spectator*, 146 (18 Apr. 1931), pp. 642–3.

⁵⁶ Anon, "Mr. Lewis Passes on Hitler", *Week-end Review*, 3 (25 Apr. 1931), p. 626. The song is in fact from *H.M.S. Pinafore*.

⁵⁷ Anon, title not known, *Glasgow Herald* (30 Apr. 1931).

⁵⁸ Anon, "Hitler Explained", *Christian Science Monitor* (16 May 1931).

⁵⁹ Collin Brooks, "Europe in Transition: The War of Ideologues", *Bookman*, 80 (May 1931), p. 117.

⁶⁰ Anon, "A Worker's Notebook: A Futurist Has Visions", *Daily Worker* (27 July 1931), p. 2.

who bears false witness is naturally less welcome than the writer with outrageous opinions, and the writer who thinks so little of his audience that he doesn't even bother to tell good lies is less welcome still. A mere handful of pieces accepted Lewis' account as honestly meant,⁶¹ a few regarded him as the dupe of circumstances, but the vast majority suspected foul play. A medley of remarks will bring home the prevalence of the accusation. The pieces are arranged in chronological order.

Graphic: "Of what he has learned he claims to have written 'as an exponent not as a critic nor yet as advocate. But if he is not advocate he is a very sympathetic apologist of a very remarkable man.'⁶²

Birmingham Post: "[...] Mr. Wyndham Lewis purports to be an exponent and not defender, it is clear that his impressions [...] derive from Hitlerite sources."⁶³

Times Literary Supplement: "Mr. Lewis shows how far he is from being a mere exponent. [...] How far the parade which accompanies it all is an expression of that rather swaggering romanticism affected by a large section of modern German youth is a question which Mr. Wyndham Lewis forbears to ask – perhaps fortunately as the answer might have tempered the warmth of his exposition."⁶⁴

Week-end Review: "The natural sympathies of many readers of the Week-end will perhaps be with the Nazis, rather than with their Communist opponents. But to represent the former as innocent, unarmed lambs led to the slaughter; to talk about the police being in league with the Communists 'to beat and shoot the Nazis' [...] this is to put too great a strain upon the credulity of Mr. Lewis' readers."⁶⁵

Isis: "Mr. Wyndham Lewis is not often a bore, but should, I think, always be suspected. [...] The vehemence with which he insists on his impartiality would alone be sufficient to prove the contrary, but the book reads like a none too subtle journalistic puff, and anyone who reads it and comes to the conclusion that, after all, Hitler is an innocent pacifist would have to be supremely simple."⁶⁶

Bulletin and Scots Pictorial: "one can't help feeling at times that the writer's sympathy is a little too apt to take all the Hitlerian arguments at their face value."⁶⁷

Daily Worker: "As far as the rational argument goes the book is valueless, and such information as it gives (mixed up with 'blood-feelings,' etc) is definitely misleading."⁶⁸

61 Only two seem worth mentioning on this score: L. p. Hartley, "The Literary Lounger", *Sketch*, 154 (15 Apr. 1931), p. 82; R. A. Scott James, title not known, *Yorkshire Post* (21 May 1931).

62 Anon, title not known, *The Graphic* (11 Apr. 1931).

63 Anon, "Aspects of Hitlerism", *Birmingham Post* (14 Apr. 1931).

64 Harold M. Stannard, "Hitler and His Movement", *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 (16 Apr. 1931), p. 296.

65 Anon, "Mr. Lewis Passes on Hitler", *The Week-end Review*, 3 (25 Apr. 1931), p. 626.

66 E. T. L., title not known, *Isis* (6 May 1931).

67 Anon, "The Hitlerists Explained", *The Bulletin and Scots Pictorial* (7 May 1931).

68 M.H.D., "Reading Notes", *Daily Worker* (29 May 1931), p. 4.

Granta: “[...] the patent falsifications of *Hitler*. [...] It would be idle to go on tugging at such tatters of journalist and partisan absurdity”⁶⁹

Liverpool Post & Mercury: “It is [...] amusing to see the self-styled ‘Enemy’ or ‘Diogenes’ thumping someone else’s political tub with polite little apologies for the nonsense talked by his hero.”⁷⁰

Clarion: “Mr. Wyndham Lewis claims that he has attempted to write an unprejudiced account of Hitlerism, but it is quite clear that he is attracted towards the personality and power of this Austrian leader”⁷¹

Daily Worker: “Mr. Lewis may worship his hero, but he seems to know singularly little about him. If he does know anything about him, this nauseating adulation of the Nazi leader, and the painting of his gang of bloodthirsty hooligan followers as angels of peace, can only be characterized as calculated, deliberate and frigid lying.”⁷²

Jewish Chronicle: “It is impossible to accept the statement of Mr. Wyndham Lewis that he here ‘comes forward as a detached exponent [...]’ [...] His professed neutrality does not prevent him from trying to prove that the militant leader of the ‘storm-detachments’ is really a ‘man of peace.’ [...] It is not surprising that he is driven to lengthy quotations from Machiavelli in support of so indefensible a thesis.”⁷³

These reviewers were, as is suggested by my discussion of the opening pages of *The Childermass*, the correspondence with H. G. Wells, and the argumentative structure of *Hitler*, quite correct. It was a book that set out to deceive and misrepresent. But Lewis had too much contempt for the reading public to be skilful in such manoeuvres, and the transparent style of his new “popular” manner was more readily penetrated than the allusive and involuted texts that had preceded it. Very little new evidence was needed to question his points, but in fact the Nazi party was much in the news during the first months after publication because of a fracas at Hamburg which made Lewis’ remarks on the pacific and law-abiding Nazis look still more absurd. The *Scotsman* put the point mildly when it said that “The recent Hamburg outrage, though its perpetrators may be disowned by Hitler, does not strengthen the case for Hitler”⁷⁴ and by mid-April, when Stannard reviewed the book for the *Times Literary Supplement* the evidence was regarded as quite conclusive:

69 B. “O, Wild West Wyndham...”, *The Granta*, 40 (29 May 1931), pp. 469–70. B. is probably Jacob Bronowski. The attribution is tentative, and based largely on the self congratulatory reference to some criticism of Lewis which appeared in *Experiment* 3, the student magazine to which Bronowski was a contributor. The only other known piece by Bronowski referring to Lewis, “D. H. Lawrence”, appeared in *Experiment*, No. 7 (Spring 1931), pp. 5–13, and perhaps suggests that Lewis was on his mind at this time. The coincidence of the initial is rather weak evidence in favor of this hypothesis, but at least does not contradict it.

70 Anon, “The Nazis”, *Liverpool Post & Mercury* (17 June 1931).

71 Anon, “Hero-Worship”, *Clarion* (July 1931).

72 Anon, “A Futurist Has Visions”, *Daily Worker*, (27 July 1931), p. 2.

73 Anon, “The Hitlerist Party”, *Jewish Chronicle* (4 September 1931).

74 Anon, title not known, *Scotsman* (6 Apr. 1931).

It is also alleged that the Nazis do not stick at murder, whereas Mr. Lewis tells us that the movement is weaponless and that it proposes to get control of Prussia, and through Prussia of Germany, by purely legal means. Recent events [...] have made further comment on this view superfluous.⁷⁵

Consultation of the sales figures for *Hitler* at this time leads one to conclude that the Hamburg event, combined with the many unfavourable reviews, was of great importance. For the first month, March to April, sales were excellent, Chatto binding and dispatching nearly a thousand copies, half the entire print run.⁷⁶ Then something seems to have gone wrong. In the next month, April to May, only a hundred copies were required, and these were not exhausted until the beginning of June. After this time sales were very slow, and the last entry in the ledger records that the remaining 250 copies were pulped in July 1941. This was partly due, doubtless, to the fact that public interest in Hitler waned rapidly, but equally it suggests that the book had gained a bad name, as well it might. *Hitler* was from the first hard to take, and the unfolding of events in Germany was almost daily revealing it as an inadequate and untrustworthy guide, the latter point being the principal short term cause of the collapse in Lewis' standing.

A general sense of Lewis' unreliability was common, and most recognised that the book was a transparent apology for Hitlerism, but very few were able to identify precisely the features of the Nazi movement that interested him. However, despite a rather fuzzy understanding of Lewis' principles there was a definite feeling that Nazism was, as Reginald Berkely in the *Saturday Review* said, a "clothes horse whereon to air opinions".⁷⁷ The writer in the *Adelphi* brought this more nearly into focus by remarking that the book was "enlivened with echoes from his old familiar themes of the child-cult, the 'exotic' neurosis, the class-war, the sex-war, the dark laughter complex, and all the rest of it",⁷⁸ but it was Cecil Melville's *New Statesman* review that located the exact nature of the continuity:

Arriving in Berlin one day, he must have pounced gleefully upon the Hitlerist phenomenon, happy to find in it a new peg upon which to hang many of the social-philosophic ideas he expounds. For in *Hitler* are to be found again many of the attacks he made in his earlier books upon the things to which this *Blutsgefühl* is opposed – e.g., social disintegration and racial defusion [sic.]. [...] Hence also his acceptance of Hitler's "*Blutsgefühl*" as the bugle call to battle against all these false gods of the modern world; as the rallying of the forces of race-concentration against diffusionism; as the stiffening up of the White Conqueror against the temptation of Exoticism. In a word: Hitler's *Blutsgefühl* for him is the materialisation in action of his own social philosophic ideas, the personification, in one typical German of one untypical Englishman's demand

75 "Hitler and His Movement", *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 (16 Apr. 1931), p. 296.

76 Information from the Chatto and Windus production ledgers at Reading University Library.

77 "The Dictators", *Saturday Review* (11 Apr. 1931), p. 535.

78 Anon, "Shorter Notices", *Adelphi*, 2 (May 1931), p. 182.

that the Western World must draw together and stand aloof from the allurements and influence of what is inferior to it, and, being inferior, contaminating.⁷⁹

One might quibble here with the word “inferior,” since it is possible to present Lewis’ position as advocating resistance to what is hostile, and holding that western culture is, as he says through Shakespeare, “a poor thing, but our own.”⁸⁰ But the case would be doubtful, and it in no way detracts from the fact that Melville saw clearly what was motivating Lewis at this time, and had in fact formed the core of his thought for some years. Melville’s lead was followed almost immediately by a writer, possibly Jacob Bronowski (who is mentioned in *Hitler*), in the Cambridge University magazine *The Granta*.⁸¹ The connection observed by Melville is correctly said to be the only thing in the book worth discussing. Bronowski remarking that Lewis’ views on the street fighting, and Hitlerite economics were mere fluff, “partisan absurdity” unworthy of attention; but “what makes this book worth analysing is not Nazi hysteria but Mr. Lewis’ doctrine, a more stable and considerable thing”:

Its connection with Nazi doctrine is through the doctrine of *Blutsgefühl* (blood feeling or affinity); so that it is pertinent to examine how Mr. Lewis’ version of this differs from that version, say D. H. Lawrence’s which he attacked in *Paleface*. Roughly, Mr. Lewis uses *Blutsgefühl* as a basis for an intellectual assertion: he values Mediterranean and particularly Renaissance culture, believes it to be endangered by affectations of primitive non-Mediterranean cultures, and therefore identifies it with its original Aryan practitioners with whom, he believes, lies the only hope of saving it.⁸²

That is *Hitler* in a nutshell, and any reader who absorbed it would have had the freedom of Lewis’ oeuvre to date. I am far from certain that anyone during Lewis’ lifetime was able to unwrap the polemic of *Time and Western Man*, the *Enemy*, *The Childermass*, *Tarr*, and *The Apes of God* in the sort of detail which I have indicated is possible. Nevertheless it is obvious that the general relation between Lewis’ cultural theory and his political thought was now understood. Unfortunately I can present no concrete evidence to demonstrate that these two pieces were widely influential in the intellectual world, but it is surely not unreasonable to presume that a review in the *New Statesman* would be so, and if my identification of “B.” as Bronowski is correct, then one may be sure that this view was given prominence in Cambridge whenever Lewis was discussed. From this less than fragile base we are able to confirm that Lewis’ disgrace and internal exile in the thirties can, as everyone has always thought, be largely attributed to *Hitler*, but in addition we may hazard the suggestion that this was not so much due to the book itself as to the unkindly light which it shed upon his earlier works. It is an understanding that we would

⁷⁹ “Blutsgefühl”, *New Statesman and Nation*, 1 (23 May 1931), p. 469. This review is anonymous, but may be safely attributed to Melville on the grounds of numerous similarities with Melville’s *New Party*: the error “defusion”, for example, is found in both texts.

⁸⁰ *Hitler*, p. 108.

⁸¹ B., “O, Wild West Wyndham...”, *Granta*, 40 (29 May 1931), p. 469.

⁸² “O, Wild West Wyndham...”, p. 469.

do well to recover, not in order to give Lewis his graduating marks, for the man is dead, but in order to clarify the political record and clear the way for a causal psychological account.