

THE EVOLUTION OF WYNDHAM LEWIS'S POLICY, STRATEGY, AND TACTICS: 1910–1939

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The following discussion proceeds chronologically through Wyndham Lewis's career, and suggests that the very clearly differentiated periods into which his work seems to fall when approached analytically can be explained as a development of the strategy he adopted towards the reading public. The piece was written in 1991 as a summary of the interim conclusions reached during work on reactinos to Lewis during this period, and offers a very preliminary attempt to express this in terms of replicator theory, an attempt that I did not have the courage to present in depth with any later version.

But you have trespassed here and you must listen. – I cannot let you off before you have heard, and shown that you understand. = If you do not sit and listen, I will write it all to you. YOU WILL BE MADE TO HEAR IT! = And *after* I have told you this, I will tell you why I am talking to a fool like you!¹

It struck one contemporary, Ford Madox Ford, that the early Lewis was a stuntman trying to reject the respectable novel of verisimilitude in favour of something racier, and more likely to appeal to the mood of the contemporary public.

They don't want vicarious experience; they don't want to be educated. They want to be amused...By brilliant fellows like me. Letting off brilliant fireworks. Performing like dogs on tight ropes. Something to give them the idea they're at a performance.²

¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr* (Knopf: New York, 1918), 26.

² Ford Madox Ford, *Portraits from Life* (New York, 1937), 290. Quoted by Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy* (Routledge: London, 1980), 29.

Ford's Lewis goes on to what is more likely at the heart of the case for a new fiction:

"What's the good of being an author if you don't get any fun out of it;... Efface yourself?... Bilge!"

Thus liberated by fiat, the author is not obliged to be a humble workman, or an earnest teacher, but is free to seek pleasure as irresponsibly as his reader. Though this position became modified during the 1914–1918 war, and again during the thirties, Lewis continued to write as if his delight in composition were a principal subject of his works. Most critics get no closer than calling this "energy", though I. A. Richards did better when noting of the Lewis's tone in *Time and Western Man*, that "he appears to enjoy himself prodigiously through almost the whole of the discussion; in view of its subject matter, an astounding triumph of gusto." For much of the first half of his writing career Lewis conceived of the reader as a spectator of the author's athletic competence. They were strollers who wished to be amused by somersaults performed upon a stage, not educated by soapbox solemnities. This attitude is a dominant characteristic only in the *Blast* manifestos, the early fiction, large sections of *The Childermass*, and perhaps in parts of *The Apes of God*, though this strikes me as, strictly, a moral not a "non-moral" satire. Yet, as Richards's remark suggests, it was also evident in the more educational writings of the twenties where it appears to save a situation, like the clown troupe in a circus. Illness almost certainly accounts for the comparative weariness of the thirties work, though he could still put a brave face on it, silencing the supposed crowd of listeners in *One-Way Song* with a very passable image of enthusiasm: "Let me do a lot of extraordinary talking. Again let me do a lot". But bravura could not replace gusto.

Ford's reminiscence, which might otherwise be dismissed as evidence, is confirmed by the *locus classicus* for any discussion of Lewis's posture towards his readership in the period up to 1919, the Tarr-Hobson colloquy, a passage of

which is the epigraph to this essay. It also suggests certain modifications to Ford's presentation. Tarr, for example is less genial, more predatory, than the Lewis described by Ford, where he is at least a little concerned with providing a service. Tarr insists upon being heard, communication taking on the attributes of an act of violence, possibly sexual. While it is plausible to suppose that the difference suggests a change of attitude, Ford's version being an earlier stance, it is not necessary to regard them as incompatible. As early as 1908-9, the period described by Ford, Lewis had written a story, "Les Saltimbanques" around the theme of the mutual hostility between audience and entertainer:

The merriment of the public that their unhappy fate compelled them to provoke, was nevertheless a constant source of irritation to these people. Their spirits became sorer and sorer at the recreation and amusement that the public got out of their miserable existence. Its ignorance as to their true sentiments helped to swell their disgust. They looked upon the public as a vast beast, with a very simple but perverse character, differing from any separate man's, the important trait of which was an insatiable longing for their performances.³

There is a difference, admittedly, between Hobson, a mere individual, and the many headed beast of the crowd, but fictional characters are so indeterminate, unless they are openly modelled on the living or once living, that they take on a degree of plurality. Given this, it may still seem that to hate your audience for trapping you is a long way from trapping your audience because you hate it, yet they may simply be the poles between which the frustrated performer oscillates, this acrobatic being in fact also part of the show. Tarr appears to be his own agent in the passage quoted above but elsewhere in the conversation he appears as rather more of a circus freak:

As Tarr's temperament spread its wings, whirling him menacingly and mockingly above Hobson's head, the Cape Cantab philosopher did not think it necessary to reply. = He was

³ "Les Saltimbanques", *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Lafourcade (Black Sparrow Press: Santa Barbara, 1982), 237.

*not winged himself. = He watched Tarr looping the loop above him. He was a droll bird!
[...] His Exhibition flights attracted attention. What sort of prizes could he expect to win
by his professional talents? Would this notable arriviste be satisfied.*⁴

Tarr may be both menacing and mocking but he is ultimately only a droll, an exhibition. There is a faint suggestion that it will be Hobson, or one of his wingless kind, who will be the presenting the rewards. For all his talents Tarr emerges from this passage as a dependent. His master is a puny scion of the *ancien régime*, that is true, but Tarr is a client nevertheless.

Even when his has been said the Hobson conversation and “Les Saltimbanques” still clearly offer incompatible models of authorship. Though there are similarities the effort needed to reconcile them can be avoided by seeing them as presenting alternative futures for the artist-entertainer. The Cornac and his wife remain subdued to the slavery of their profession, and the ingratitude of the relentless “public that they could never get free of”. Tarr, on the other hand, as might be expected of the authorial persona of a first novel, makes his escape, jeering at the sterility of his passive audience, and to prove the point takes a jester’s revenge by knocking off Hobson’s hat in a ceremony of decapitation and decoronation.

After the war Lewis swung away from the fiction where his thought remained implicit and where it might, for all he cared, be overlooked by a reader whose eye never left the high-wire. There is no danger of such a thing happening to *The Art of Being Ruled*, and *Time and Western Man*. As has already been said this shift did not require that previous strategies be abandoned, merely that they be subordinated, nor was this a swift move made overnight. Between *Tarr* and *The Art of Being Ruled* Lewis experimented freely in search of a new form. *The Caliph’s Design* (1919), with its embedded fable, represents a transitional stage, as does, in a different way, *The Lion and the Fox*.

⁴ *Tarr* (Knopf: New York, 1918), 22.

With this book Lewis abandoned the privileges of an artist-writer and took on the responsibilities of the teacher, but it is hardly professorial in tone, even by today's standards. In practical terms this meant that he began to be noticed for the first time in staid and professional journals - E. K. Chambers in *The Year's Work in English Studies*, and Bruce Beddow in *The Teachers' World*⁵ for example - and that his delight in self-display was no longer treated as a slightly distasteful quirk which was only forgivable because just what you'd expect, after all, from an "artist". Chambers found the book "irritating, with its painful effort after phrase-making", and went on to reprove Lewis for poor, irrelevant, and, what is worse, unconvincing scholarship. Beddow's review, on the other hand is favourable, but points out that this is not really a scholarly book, but something for the general reader and "amateur minds".

A sequential account of the development of Lewis's relations with his readers is forced to follow two different chronologies at this point; that of composition, which puts *The Lion and the Fox* first, and that of publication, which gives *The Art of Being Ruled* priority. Having suggested that it was with the first of these two books that Lewis made his move into educational territory it is perhaps proper to return to his public history, and the second stage of this colonization. His journal publications of this period are not inconsiderable in number or length, and though by the media-star standards of his career from 1926 onwards, Lewis was not widely known or read, he was hardly invisible. His shift from the role of intellectual artist-clown towards that of Professor was performed in the open and those that cared to watch could do so. Such a reader would have noticed that during the years 1919 to 1921 Lewis's output tended to resemble *The Caliph's Design* in being polemical art criticism with ancillary social criticism attached. *The Tyro* comes from the same stable, but loops back a little to *Blast*,

⁵ E. K. Chambers, "Shakespeare", *The Year's Work in English Studies*, 1927, ed. F. S. Boas and C. H. Herford (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1929), 154-5. Bruce Beddow, "The Orange Box: A Miscellany: No. 58. - A Mixed Bag", *The Teacher's World*, 36/1200 (26 Jan. 1927), 875.

with which it has more in common than the later *Enemy*. If it is necessary to put a date to this change then it might as well be the publication of “The Long and the Short of It”, an article in *The Evening Standard* (28 April 1922) which stands neatly on the border between the gaiety of the pre-war and the new found sobriety by then well established as the post-war boom collapsed into the depression. The article, which issues advice to women about skirt lengths (“At forty the fine calf should appear. Before that the leg is too lean.”), has little importance in the context of Lewis’s major work, but it is the first piece in which Lewis concerns himself solely with the popular culture of his time, a theme which was to preoccupy him for the next ten years, a fact which distinguishes his writing from the scholarly indifference of Joyce and hostility of Pound. More significant still is “The Strange Actor” of 1924,⁶ a piece which is sometimes referred to as Lewis’s first outright political statement, though the 1914 piece “A Later Arm than Barbarity”,⁷ which is largely concerned with foreign policy, has at least as strong a claim. After this there is a gradual acceleration in the frequency of philosophico-political articles: “The Young Methuselah” (March 1924), “The Dress-Body-Mind Aggregate” (May 1924), an “Art Chronicle” in *The Criterion* for July 1924, “The Dithyrambic Spectator” (Apr. and May 1925), “The Foxes’ Case” (October 1925), and, the culmination of the series, *The Art of Being Ruled*.

The reasons for Lewis’s switch are too complex and too many to discuss in detail here, but it is worth pointing out that although the war is a major factor, the importance of the “post-war”, which Lewis dated between November 11th 1918 and the General strike of 1926, is perhaps of even greater significance. It is tempting, for example to see something in the fact that his “Caliph’s Design – Tyro” period co-incides almost exactly with the economic boom which

⁶ “The Strange Actor”, *The New Statesman*, 22/563 (2 Feb. 1924), 474-76.

⁷ *The Outlook*, 34/866 (5 Sep. 1914), 298-9.

followed the end of the war, and that when the depression began to bite in the early twenties he turned increasingly to politics, aware at last that the condition of England had been quite changed by the war. Lewis was quite open about the tardiness with which he recognized these altered circumstances. In *Blasting and Bombardiering*, for example, he describes his life 1914-1918 life as the crossing of a bridge:

*And the principal figure among those crossing this little bridge - that is me - does not know that he crossing anything, from one world into another. Indeed, everybody else seems to know it except him.*⁸

In *Blast 2* he had written that “it seems to me that, as far as art is concerned, things will be exactly the same after the war as before it”, which is a useful indication of what Lewis wanted to happen. Predictions are often projections. He remarks, only a line later, “It is quite useless speculating on the Future unless you want some particular Future”. In the light of this remark I would suggest that we may see the first articles after the war as a false start, written with the wish, and under the impression, that it would be possible to take up his career from the point at which it had been interrupted. *The Lion and the Fox* represents a stage between this ignorance and *The Art of Being Ruled* which sets out to map the new landscape. Indeed I think it plausible to suggest that the second book was written in some sense as a response to the Labour government of 1924, a political landmark and sign of the times which would have been hard to miss even if you were buried in Machiavelli. Explaining the excellent press of the Shakespeare book Lewis, thinking of politics, remarked “There was nothing in this book to annoy anybody”,⁹ though he might have added that there was plenty if you happened to be a scholar of Shakespeare. Nevertheless his study of Shakespeare does make a move towards the controversial sociology of *The Art of*

⁸ *Blasting and Bombardiering* (Eyre and Spottiswoode: London, 1937), 2.

⁹ *Rude Assignment* (Hutchinson: London, 1950), 160.

Being Ruled, but it remains within the neutralized zone of literary scholarship, and though it signalled a major recommitment of talents, as noted above, it could not be said to have brought him into contact with the major concerns of the educated reader, who was fulfilling to the letter Thomas Mann's remark that "In our time the destiny of man presents itself in political terms".

One notable feature of the reception which greeted this new Lewis is the absence of any sense of shock. None of the reviews that I have yet seen are surprised that the painter and novelist has suddenly put forward claims as a social philosopher, a nonchalance which oddly enough, and for reasons to be discussed later, was never repeated with such unanimity. No solid conclusions can be drawn from this fact, but a plausible hypothesis would be that the reviews of 1926 were by people who did not know of his earlier writing, had forgotten, or had followed Lewis's writing, and so were able to see the new book as a further move in a gradual process. Thus established as a social and literary critic his previous reputation seems to have dropped out of the public consciousness and no incongruity was felt, though the appearance of the much less direct *Lion and the Fox* out of sequence had the result of puzzling readers and forcing them to read it as an illustration of *The Art of Being Ruled*, rather than a predecessor.

Despite the fact that none of the reviewers felt that Lewis had made a striking change of direction, there is a steady suspicion that he is not in fact on home ground. *The Saturday Review* referred to the book as a "pretext" for the delivery of Lewis's opinions; *The Nation and Athenaeum* began its review "Mr. Lewis at least has all the arrogance of genius"; even Eliot writing in *The Criterion*, the only place where there is a hint of awareness of the oddity of an artist writing such a book, suggests, with delicate obliquity, that Lewis "unable to realise his art to his own satisfaction, [has been] driven to examining the elements in the situation -

political, social, philosophical or religious - which frustrate his labour".¹⁰ These doubts are clearest in the *TLS* review in which Lewis's logical method of a typical argument is called into question :

Its ground is an observation, usually acute, and from that the conclusion is "intuited", not inferred.

For an artist this would be of no consequence, but for a writer setting out to give "an analysis of modern European society" it is a more serious flaw, the reviewer implies. What is required is demonstration, yet Lewis gives only facts and assertions, and, like an aphorist, omits everything between. A similar point is made in *The Nation and Athenaeum*, which describes his sentences as "semi-detached", his chapters as "detached", and the sections as "standing in their own ground". William MacDonald in *The New York Times Book Review* remarked of this non-sequential construction:

*It can be begun almost anywhere and read with as much enjoyment as would be derived from reading it straight through from beginning to end, and there is no need to master one section in order to comprehend another.*¹¹

From the technical point of view, then, Lewis's sociology would appear to be "badly written", or "fantastic and bizarre to the verge of lunacy", as one sociologist, Lyford P. Edwards, said.¹² Nevertheless I should want to suggest his "aphoristic" and unjointed method is from being a boshed attempt at a philosophical style, but a rhetoric not intended to daunt the "university professional with Kant at their finger-tips"¹³ but some other class or classes of readers. The nature of readership Lewis wanted for these books must then be

¹⁰ Anon, "Books at Glance", *The Saturday Review* 141/3672 (13 Mar. 1926), 339. Anon, "Aristotle Up to Date", *The Nation and Athenaeum* 39/8 (29 May 1926), 210. T. S. Eliot, "A Commentary", *The New Criterion*, 4/3 (June 1926), 420.

¹¹ William MacDonald "Burning Democracy in Effigy: An Obituary of Freedom and a Vision of a Feminist World", *New York Times Book Review*, (10 Oct. 1926), 1, 30.

¹² Lyford P. Edwards, "Book Reviews", *The American Journal of Sociology*, 32/5 (Mar. 1927), 858.

¹³ *Blasting and Bombardiering* (Eyre and Spottiswoode: London, 1937), 106.

addressed. Looking through the reviews it becomes clear that his books tended to impress everyone except those, Chambers for example, proficient in the subject concerned. Lewis was a highly gifted popularizer, indeed Lyford P. Edwards compared him to Will Durant, but this is not enough to explain the reputation he gained; and both Richards and Empson, no fools in philosophical terms, were impressed by his commitment to the interpretation of modern thought in terms of its consequences for the arts, a point which made up for the lack of originality in the theses he proposed. Lewis seemed to have moved into the sober fields of analysis, explication, and comment, but he had done so with the intention of broadening his readership rather than making contributions which would be recognized by other workers in those disciplines, or, as he himself claimed, defending the characteristics of his art and fiction. This is not to say that his rhetoric is empty, or that he didn't care what he said, rather that the personal element in his writing remained undiminished despite appearances; there was a great deal in what he said, but the fact that he said it mattered more to Lewis. Before my reader assumes that this is intended as a moral criticism I may as well say that it seems to me that in Lewis we are confronted with a universal condition made startlingly clear. *Cui bono?*² is a good question to ask of any book (or anything), but as stated it is rather too compressed, too general, to be of much use. As part of an attempt to rearticulate this question it will be worth digressing to discuss the aims and motivation of artists, writers, and their audiences in terms of Richards Dawkins controversial "meme" theory. My understanding of this concept is entirely literary, that is to say journalistic, and I will use it here in a form which would in all probability seem a travesty to its creator.

We have become used to the propositions that ideas are our creatures; that they have no characteristics apart from those intelligible to the subjective consciousness; and that they are the servants or tools of that consciousness. This

is an unwarranted, one might say anthropocentric, group of assumptions, and they pervade abstract literary theory as comprehensively as empirical, explicatory, or analytic criticism. The socio-biologist Richard Dawkins has already proposed an alternative idea of ideas in his “non-genetic kind of replicator which flourishes only in the environment provided by complex, communicating brains”, an hypothesis he terms the “meme”. It may be as well to offer a summary and some extensive quotations to illustrate this concept since I intend to use its premises to derive fairly sweeping conclusions concerning literature. To begin with Dawkins’s general definition:

*A meme should be regarded as a unit of information residing in the brain. It has a precise structure, realized in whatever physical medium the brain uses for storing information.*¹⁴

An exact definition of the nature of its structure must wait upon advances in brain science, but it is with the phenotypic effects - “its consequences in the outside world” - that a literary critic and historian is mainly concerned, and of these we know rather more:

The phenotypic effects of a meme may be in the form of words, music, visual images, styles of clothes, facial or hand gestures, skills such as opening milk bottles in tits, or panning wheat in Japanese macaques. They are the outward and visible (audible, etc.) manifestations of the memes within the brain. They may be perceived by the sense organs of other individuals, and they may so imprint themselves on the brains of other individuals that a copy (not necessarily exact) of the original meme is graven in the receiving brain. The new copy of the meme is then in a position to broadcast its phenotypic effects, with the result that further copies of itself may be made in yet other brains.

The next question is “How do a meme’s phenotypic effects contribute to its success or failure in being replicated?” Dawkins replies “Any effect that a meme

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1982, repr. 1990), 109. All other quotations from Dawkins are taken from this text, pages 109-112. An earlier and longer discussion of memes will be found in *The Selfish Gene*.

has on the behaviour of a body bearing it may influence that meme's chance of surviving", and adds:

But just as promoting bodily survival is only part of what constitutes success in genetic replicators, so there are many other ways in which memes may work phenotypically for their own preservation. If the phenotypic effect of a meme is a tune, the catchier it is the more likely it is to be copied. If it is a scientific idea, its chances of spreading through the world's scientific brains will be influenced by its compatibility with the already established corpus of ideas. If it is a political or religious idea, it may assist its own survival if one of its phenotypic effects is to make its bodies violently intolerant of new and unfamiliar ideas.

This list makes no pretence to completeness, and we may therefore risk adding a concept of particular importance for aestheticians and critics. (In the following remarks I use the term "memotype" to refer to the meme, as defined above, plus its first level phenotypic effects. For a poem this would be the pattern in the brain, plus its external correlates such as a particular patterning of the speech mechanism, of sound waves, of the ear drum; and a pattern of ink on a page. No reference is intended to possible extended effects, such as a publishing company or an *eisteddfod*.)

First we may say that a meme will enhance its chances of survival if it provides the host brain with some kind of reward, or pay-off. This is not essential, as is evident from Dawkins's example of the catchy tune, which perfectly exemplifies a memotype which makes more use of the mnemonic structure of the human mind than of its willingness or approval. The meme is able to copy itself into the brain almost will-nilly, whereas a more complicated memotype, such as a poem of fifty lines, will have to persuade its host subjectivity that it is worth the time spent in memorization. It is, of course, perfectly clear that the tune may have benefits, a pay-off, for the host subjectivity, and that this probably contributes to its survival. The likelihood of a purely parasitic memotype does not seem large, and it could be that anything of which we are

conscious has a pay-off, though we may loathe it as thoroughly as I long to be rid of the Alka-Seltzer jingle learned quite inadvertently in 1976: “Plink, plink, fizz/ What a relief it is”. In spite of this it has persisted in my brain for fifteen years, at the time of writing, and now got as far as being typed out in this essay. Not much, for a memotype of this kind, but every little helps.

Members of the class of memotypes which we term literature are, on the whole – Imagist poems would be an exception – too large to spread in this way, or to rely solely on the co-operation of the subjectivity. Poems therefore also equip themselves with mnemonic advantages as well as a considerable subjective pay-off. Prose works of literature may be working a very different and in some ways more interesting kinds of strategy. Whereas a poem seems to rely on the verbatim reproduction of its phenotype, extended works in prose – novels, books of philosophy, memoirs, academic criticism, for example - do not do so, in fact could not do so because of mnemonic limitations. There are several ways of describing what may be going on in such a case. It is possible that the relationship between the meme and its phenotype is of a different order altogether. The primary phenotype is a disposable vehicle for a complex meme which then perpetuates itself in other ways. In a novel for example the plot might be such a meme, and its future existence may depend on its being narrated in miniature (novel readers spend much of their time retelling stories, as do film goers) or on its exercising a control over the actions of the host, or on its appearing in a novel written by the host.

More likely, as it seems to me, is the concept of multiple memes. A work of extended prose is a phenotype of not one but many memes, rather as the human body is the product of many genes. The difference is that whereas the unholy alliance between the genes persists so as to construct another vehicle similar to the first, the memes break apart during copying, and may perpetuate themselves in quite different ways thereafter. (I might as well say at this point that this is one

of the two main ideas which I think will prove to be of interest in a study of Lewis.) Memes are not limited, on this view, to one replication process, as are genes, but can make use of a wide variety of phenotypes in order to survive. I suggest, in passing, that this accounts for the common-sense belief, denied by semantics, that there are several ways of saying the “same thing”.

One might conclude from this account that short works, sonnets for example, are mono-memic, but since much poetry passes on as fragments this does not seem to be as likely as the concept of co-operating groups of memes, some of which sometimes break away and begin new lives, as nursery rhymes perhaps. And since we are able to write prose paraphrases, very bulky ones indeed if conscientiously done, there is every reason to suppose that the memes transmitted by poetry could be as flexible as those of prose, only efficiency militates against it.

One further point has to be made about memes and their habits before an attempt is made to explain the position of the “author”, and consequently the reader. It is obvious from the diverse morphology and differing life cycles of animal and plant life that genes use a wide range of survival policies; and it is prudent to assume that a similar breadth will be found amongst memes. I shall concentrate on only one such policy here, mentioning others as they appear relevant to a discussion of Lewis’s career.

That there may be a difference between the meme with great mnemonic advantages, but a low pay-off, and that which makes a high pay-off at the sacrifice of its mnemonic fitness, is evident. (Verse could be described as an attempt to reconcile these two demands with maximum advantage.) The first policy aims for a rapid and wide spread. It provides only a low pay-off and consequently the co-operation of the host subject is unlikely, so the chances of an individual meme copying itself are small, and the likelihood of its getting into a position from which it can rapidly make multiple copies even smaller. The

second policy aims for a spread which is slow but sure. Because of the high pay-off the host subjectivity is induced to assist, and the chances of any particular example producing copies are increased. Over lengthy periods of time, then, we would expect the second strategy to show a steady growth curve, perhaps never reaching very great numbers of copies, while the first would go through periods of very wide distribution, suddenly falling back to almost nothing.

A fictitious illustration may make the point clearer. Imagine that the popular song “Give Me Your Sympathy” (1917), and “The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock” were published simultaneously and that very careful records were kept of the distribution of each right up to the present day. In the summer of 1917 “Give Me Your Sympathy” was the song of the season in England, and sung, hummed, and known to almost every serving member of the armed services of the British Empire. Within weeks of its arrival in France it was spreading into neighbouring French regiments and had a foothold amongst the German army. Within a year the return of wounded soldiers to various Dominion states had ensured that it had a world publication that could hardly have been achieved with the press alone. By the spring of 1918 the number of brain copies extant numbered in excess of 35,000,000, most of whom had not seen a printed version or heard a professional rendering other than that on a gramophone, and many not even that. Printed copies exceeded 100,000. “Prufrock” on the other hand came out in a limited edition of 350 copies and was immediately a great success when read out at Garsington Manor, while at Cambridge I. A. Richards was reading them out aloud at tea-parties. Ezra Pound was soon ordering a second copy to pass on to Joyce, and Conrad Aiken gave them as Christmas presents. Despite this no further edition was called for until 1925. However, the number of people able to quote from the poem by the spring of 1918 numbered a little over 3,000, and a further 5,000 worldwide knew its title. By the end of 1919 “Give Me Your Sympathy” had ceased to

spread through the population. This was partly due to the fact that many of those who had hosted copies found that they were unable to remember it without the context of the war. Another important factor in its decline was the emergence of “The End of a Perfect Day”, which now replaced “Give Me Your Sympathy” as the hit song of the music halls. The number of people able to sing part of the song began to decline, mortality being a significant, and memory failure the main cause. Eliot’s poem had made small gains, a mere 500 new quoters, but the publication of his volume *Poems* in 1919 far from distracting attention from the earlier poem seemed to cause an increase in demands for copies to buy and borrow. New readers were drawn to the book by the recommendations of friends, and those who found their mental copy of the poem fading strengthened it by re-reading. The trends thus established continued through the century until 1967 when “Give Me Your Sympathy” could be quoted by under 50,000 people, only a few of whom could remember more than the chorus. “Prufrock” now existed in nearly 100,000 printed copies and was a standard text in universities world-wide. Something like twice this number were able to quote from it, though only a thousand or so knew it from beginning to end. So the situation rested until “Give Me Your Sympathy” was re-recorded with new music, by a shrewd and touching crooner. Within a few weeks it was known to 40,000,000 Americans.

Though it is convenient to talk of memes as having a policy, just as it is to speak of genes “trying” to reproduce themselves, we must at some time attempt to back out of the subjectivist metaphor, replacing it with a sober picture of the meme as an inert structure which survives because its characteristics interact with its environment in such a way as to make copies of itself. There is no absolute standard of fitness; what succeeds today may fail utterly tomorrow, simply as a result in a change in the weather. Like genes, the memes, that are likely to survive such vicissitudes are those which are able to make use of a

system which responds more quickly and certainly to changing conditions than chance mutation and selection. Consciousness, which enables the gene carrier to learn, to manipulate its environment with a minimal time lag is such a system. The consciousness has very recently acquired the ability to manipulate its own genes, and those of other animals and plants upon which it depends, thus producing adaptations in a matter of years which would previously have taken thousands. Memes, however, have been benefiting from this facility of consciousness for very much longer, partly no doubt because consciousness has become so reliant on these useful structures for its own survival that every one of us devotes a good deal of time to their acquisition, adjustment or redesign, and promulgation. We are all full time memetic engineers. Usually we specialize in some particular group, which we identify in terms of its phenotypes, the memes themselves being at present something we cannot touch directly. The practice of literary composition is just one of these habits.

An author then is a meme technician, not, I believe, a creator. Such a consciousness receives memes, works upon them through the medium of their phenotypes, and then re-launches them. The work undertaken will have one main aim: to increase the meme's fitness in the prevailing environment. This involves the subsidiary task of adjusting the balance between mnemonic fitness and its capacity for subjective pay-off. (My primary concern here is with pay-offs made directly to the subject by literature, but brief mention should be made of works which make their pay-off in an indirect form via the objective world. (Again this distinction is a theoretical one only.) Such works, which come under the headings of science and technology, benefit the reader by enabling him to manipulate the external world to his satisfaction or benefit. Scientific theories also have considerable subjective pay-offs, just as literature can have technological power, in the field of bee-keeping perhaps. Einstein has become famous not through the technological power of his theory, of which the vast

majority of people are ignorant, but because of the pay-offs provided by popularized versions.

The author's work is arduous and would hardly be undertaken did the memes did not provide a pay-off for this service too. If there were varieties in the past which did not do so then they have unsurprisingly ceased to be current. This reward has several aspects: the sense of satisfaction after composition (which Eliot compared to that of excretion), the sense of having demonstrated talent, and the sense of having produced something of use to other subjects, all these are plausible descriptions. But the single most important reward is permission for the subject to identify itself with, project itself into, or overwrite itself on (all these metaphors seem possible) the meme. Thus the subject is interested in the meme's survival in a way in which it would not otherwise be. It tends to overestimate its contribution, and as a consequence also exaggerates the possible influence it may exert over other subjectivities. This misjudgment can only delight the "will to power", and it is so great a delight that even Dawkins himself falls prey to its blandishments, and recommends the meme as the best hope for personal survival.¹⁵

It will now be possible to review the earlier discussion of Lewis's policy shifts and describe them in a way which will at least gesture towards the complexity of the situation.

When Tarr tells Hobson that he "WILL BE MADE TO HEAR IT" he is, I suggest, exemplifying Lewis's early attitude to his audiences, in which little allowance is made for the opposing subjectivity and its needs. Force is expected to compel the reader into receiving a copy of the meme, and the pay-off, if there is one, is not mentioned. It does however surface in his remarks to Ford, where the artist is also presented as an active performer (meme generator), and the audience as a passive receptor (meme carrier), but this time it is admitted that

¹⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1976; 2nd ed. 1989), 199.

the audience will benefit, be “amused” (“if they can be said to withdraw from the muses who were never in their company”, as Coleridge put it). As I have already remarked, this difference does not necessarily indicate a change of mind, but rather an anxiety. In “Les Saltimbanques” this doubt is fully realized in its most frightening form, for the artist. The performers find that they are as much dictated to as dictating, as much the victims of their audience’s memes as the audience is of theirs. One might almost say that it was Tarr’s nightmare. Even when looping the loop above Hobson he seems aware that this is only ambiguously and uncertainly freedom or the exercise of power.

I suggest that this early work is intoxicated with the concept of exercising power over an audience and that its reluctance to address the question of pay-off is explained by a reluctance to even consider this audience as more than a passive medium into which the artist’s memes may be copied. But at least this nervousness shows that it is conscious of a more complicated relationship with the audience, in a way, for example that Pound’s picture of the artist as the vital force penetrating the inert vulva of the public does not. (It is not sufficiently noted that Lewis’s Vorticist period writings consistently picture the artist as female.) The change in Lewis’s attitude which is evident in the major books of the 1920s is not, though, ultimately a moral one. It would be wrong to suggest that having ignored the claims of his audience before and during the war he attempted to redress this by turning to the production of memes which might have some larger pay off for their hosts. Ultimately the policy will remain the same, while the strategy and tactics used to gain this end will differ. The goal of a writer is to spread the memes he takes to be his, and Lewis must have been sufficiently dissatisfied with the publishing record up to 1919 to think that a change was worth while.

The Lion and the Fox, then provides an example of an attempt at a new strategy. Most significantly of all Lewis enters into co-operation with an already

established meme culture, the reputation of Shakespeare. This is a major development for a man who has put a lot of effort up to this time in excluding his reading and its influence from his writing. Stirner is symbolically ejected from *The Enemy of the Stars* by being thrown out of the window in the form of his *Einige und Sein Eigenkeit*; and Arghol destroys his library because “These books are all parasites. Poodles of the mind”, a remark which, apart from being fundamentally in agreement with Dawkins, again shows how worried Lewis was at this time of becoming the carrier of another’s memes. With his first book of the 1920s he overcame this fear, reasoning that he could better propagate his ideas by linking them with others already current. This is the standard method of propagation, and in fact the one I am myself using here. That Lewis was forced back on to this most commonplace of strategies is no sign of weakness, but rather an indication of recognizing the fundamental characteristics of modern culture. In an environment where memes are present in vast numbers a new meme which denied its relationships would have so many enemies that its chances of survival would be seriously reduced, unless it had very strong mnemonic or technological advantages. So it is good strategy to make friends, or a least make a circle of acquaintances, and catch a ride. In choosing Shakespeare Lewis was playing safe. Copies of the *The Complete Works* were to be found in school desks world-wide, and it had a very special place as a cultural talisman in the Anglo-Saxon vanity case. Stiff competition for a place on the bandwagon could be expected, but Lewis was no mean rhetorician and for every Chambers who was irritated by the “phrase-making” there would be dozens of general readers who would be delighted with it. He couldn’t expect to sweep the world with such a book, but it would be widely reviewed, and fairly widely read amongst the intellectuals. In addition, there would be a chance of becoming part of the received wisdom of Shakespeare lore, and of spreading his ideas to those who had never heard of his writing. Put like this it makes it appear as if *The Lion*

and the Fox were written with the aim of surreptitiously planting some of Lewis's concepts in textbook notes. Absurd though this sounds, it is a fate which no writer would sniff at, provided that this was not his only achievement. The monument need not be signed.

With *The Art of Being Ruled* his strategy changes again, and in two directions. Though his study of Shakespeare had been in some sense an academic study, its primary goal was not educative, and its subject lacked contemporary urgency. In his next work Lewis tried to attract readers by offering to teach them the truth about the world of today. The book closes with a quotation from Parmenides which will do much to make this new position clear:

I wish to communicate this view of the world to you exactly as it manifests itself: and so no human opinion will ever be able to get the better of you.

The reader is promised an exact picture of the world, and in doing so Lewis is claiming scientific accuracy for the account on offer. But it is the subsidiary offer which is of more significance. The memes of *The Art of Being Ruled* are described as having an inoculatory effect. Once you've read this book you will be protected against any other thinker who wishes to impose his view upon you. It's a little like "protection", but judging from the way in which we leap at such offers, whether they come from religion, systematic philosophy, politics, or social custom, human beings find them very attractive. The readers of Lewis are no exception, and most, if not all of his devotees seem to me be drawn and held by the immunity which he hawks about; the "antidote to everything", as Hugh Kenner puts it. One disciple of the thirties, Hugh Gordon Porteus, wore black hats and long coats in the Lewis style, even modifying his voice to conform to the pattern. A high price to pay for security, but perhaps worth it for a vulnerable and impressionable type. This offer of protection is not a strategy much evident in *The Lion and the Fox* where Shakespeare comes out unscathed, as its hero in fact, and a model. *The Art of Being Ruled* is bolder in employing a

technique whereby established figures are invoked only in order to assert difference.¹⁶ Rather than hitching a ride and staying there (a prudent policy unlikely to bring great success) Lewis gambles on attracting attention by ostentatiously jumping off again. It should be noted at once that this is hardly new, even for Lewis, and is in some sense a return to the personal philosophy of the pre-war and war-time years. “Everything but yourself is dirt” said Arghol.

The strategies of the *The Art of Being Ruled* are at once novel and retrogressive in terms of Lewis’s development. He moves into new territory with his educational program, but returns, after an aberration of self-effacement in *The Lion and the Fox*, to more familiar ground with his doctrine of the independent self. What he does there is of the greatest significance for any study of his readership. Tarr, the acrobats of “Les Saltimbanques”, the Lewis of Ford’s reminiscence are all on show, discrete from and contemptuous of their audiences. In his new persona Lewis offers a space on his right hand into which the reader may interject themselves, rather as the meme encourages the author to overwrite himself upon it. It comes as no surprise, therefore, when later his disciples are found interceding with this stern Lewis-the-Father in order to save deserving victims, Bergson usually, from his stern law.

Though his polemical works *Time and Western Man* and *Paleface* received extensive coverage in the press, both popular, and literary, I do not propose to discuss them at length, since they are essentially extensions of the urge that motivated *The Art of Being Ruled*, and the reader strategy first used in that book does not undergo adjustments deserving of lengthy discussion. There are no dramatic shifts of aim such as that discussed above, and it is significant that Lewis considered these books, with the exception of *Paleface*, and the addition of

¹⁶ This technique only works if the audience understand your references, and some idea of the problems Lewis faced in this respect can be gauged from Alan Kemp’s review of *The Childermass* in *The Sketch*, 143/1850 (11 July 1928), 89-90, where his Joyce passage is described as “Mr Wyndham Lewis parodying something American”.

The Childermass and *The Apes of God*, to be parts of a larger whole, “The Man of the World”, thus displaying a desire to bind all his separate works together much as in the ordinary process of composition phrases are connected to make sentences, sentences to form paragraphs, and so on up to the level of book. This goal of transforming a cobbled mass of words into a seamless “grand” sentence has afflicted many writers, Pope and Wordsworth being two, but it troubled Lewis relatively early in his career, and never reappeared. An interpretation of this desire in terms of meme strategy seems worthwhile but it will make more sense when seen in the light of Lewis’s use of fiction.

Despite the unity of purpose evident in the late 1920s works there is some point in very briefly examining the way in which the fictional counterparts of the polemical works were presented. Having evolved a strategy for readers of his polemical prose which offered pay-offs, and discovered a way of asserting the splendid isolation of its author without disgusting the larger part of the potential readership, Lewis now turned to the publication of the two works of fiction on which he had been at work since the war, *The Childermass* (1928) and *The Apes of God* (1930). Both of these benefit from the techniques used in *The Art of Being Ruled*, the niche for the reader being refined yet further; but it was to the question of pay-off that Lewis now turned his attention. It has been often said that his fiction is his philosophy dramatized, a statement which, though fair, should not be taken to imply identity. While it is true that Lewis was re-articulating his ideas, his memes, the result was to offer readers something quite new. There is a little more to this than merely putting a new style round an old content, and again discussion in terms of memes and pay-offs will make this clear. A memotype affects a reader in two ways. When the meme is copied, more or less exactly, into the data storage system of the reader an affect will result, and its continued presence will produce further affects. This is what we are accustomed to call the importance of an idea. But the processing of the

phenotype, the meme transmitter, will also produce an affect in the reader. Pay-offs may be made in either part, those in the meme being, arguably, more important or longer lasting. In his critical works Lewis had paid a great deal of attention to the grand pay-offs of the meme, and only now turned to concentrate on the phenotype and its rewards. But it is axiomatic that the meme A must have phenotype A1, and no amount of will power can change this B1. To recast a sentence it is necessary not merely to repack the meme thing in a different wrapper, or pour the fluid into a different container. If a writer wishes to alter the phenotype of his ideas, yet not make major changes in them, then he will have to either combine the ideas with others, the interference causing a different phenotype to emerge, or fragment them and arrange for their reassembly during reading. The risk of the first strategy is that the memes will never be able to rid themselves of their companions and so emerge again in their old forms. However they will probably have been transmitted in a form sufficiently close to the original to be counted a success. The second policy offers a higher chance of exact transmission, but a slightly increased risk of total failure, in which case the memes remain fragmented.

Lewis's critical writing had already shown evidence of the fragmentation technique, as *The Nation and Athenaeum* reviewer had noticed, and it was a simple move for him to push this to its ultimate conclusion in his fiction. If asked "What does a fragmented meme look like?", I would answer: "*The Childermass* or *The Apes of God*". But fragmentation is not a discovery of Lewis's, and any fiction which undertakes to present a thesis indirectly will be forced to make use of it; allegory, for example, is a fragmented meme, the various parts being carefully distributed through proxies and substitutes while the syntax of the meme is preserved intact. Lewis not only fragments his ideas but jumbles the pieces afterwards, and no attempt is made to preserve logical units intact, with the result that it is impossible, for example, to identify figures such as the Bailiff or

Hyperides with propositions in an argument, as critics wish to. The reader is quite unable to decide whether a speaker in the 1920s fiction, in which *The Apes of God* should be included, presents a pro or a contra Lewisian argument. The figures from this period are different in this respect from their predecessors, in *Tarr* and the “Wild Body” stories, or any that came afterwards, in having a thesis broadcast in particles throughout a simple dramatic situation, as in *The Childermass*, or a picaresque narrative, as in *The Apes of God*. Later, from *The Vulgar Streak* (1941) on, Lewis would plant larger blocks with a plodding care.

As far as the reader is concerned the consequences of this “irrational” technique of distribution are best understood in relation to the work’s pay-off. In a work such as a simple allegory, where an argument is distributed evenly through a number of figures the reader is invited to spectate at what Coleridge called “the drama of reason”, the pay-off being partly located in the thesis which results, and partly in the infinitely complex satisfactions arising from the spectacle of fictional human action, arising largely from narcissistic but not necessarily personal vanity. *The Childermass* does not reason its case, rather it arrives with a thesis pre-constructed but unrecognizable in its powdered state. In the course of reading this thesis is reassembled, thus affording the reader the unusual pleasure of feeling the argument coalesce within him; he does not so much observe the drama of reason as undergo it. This is also a feature of *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man*, where it is part of the machinery used to make room on the dais for the reader; and it goes some way to explaining why Lewis fanatics identify themselves so closely with their idol. The case of Porteus has been mentioned, but even the presumably more resistant Eliot has commented:

I have observed that Mr. Lewis has this in common with Henry James: that when people write sympathetically or appreciatively about him, they tend to mimic his style. I detect traces of this mimicry - more properly, magnetism - in the recent book by Mr. Hugh Kenner. I

*detect traces in this piece that I have just written: you may have noticed that it is not quite in my Times-Literary-Supplement-leading-article manner.*¹⁷

Such effects can also, as Eliot suggests, be attributed to mnemonic qualities rather than a willed act on the part of an imitator.

Before passing on to the next major shift in Lewis's strategy, and to consider what may be a change in policy, it will be worthwhile to glance at an example of Lewis's habit of recycling earlier work since it not only illustrates his attempt to saturate the market with versions of his statement in the hope of reaching as broad a readership as possible, but also shows him attempting to remedy a flaw in his original strategy..

In July 1927 Lewis finished the preparation of a book of short stories, and the volume appeared in November under the title *The Wild Body*. With the exception of two sections from *The Apes of God*, it was the only fiction of any substance that he had published in the nine years since *Tarr*. If his devotees expected something fresh they were disappointed; this new book was a gathering of nine much revised pre-war and wartime stories which Lewis had intended to put on the market as early as 1917, and two very weak pieces written in the early twenties. It is a puzzling thing for him to have put out at this moment, and anyone glancing over the early versions, or through the many war-stories that he omitted, becomes more perplexed still. Why republish these now, why revise them, and why leave out so much material of at least as great a value? The answers to these questions lie in the sort of reputation Lewis had acquired by the end of 1926, and the first few months of 1927. *The Art of Being Ruled* and *The Lion and the Fox* were widely reviewed, but as has been noted above there was very little evidence that anyone thought of the author of these books as a painter-novelist turned critic. The problem is apparent from the *Westminster Gazette*

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, "A Note on *Monstre Gai*", *The Hudson Review*, 7/4 (Winter 1955), 526.

review of *Time and Western Man*¹⁸ where it seems that his earlier literary career had been almost obscured by his work as a painter, itself now close to being forgotten:

As a writer Mr. Wyndham Lewis has become prominent quickly. It is not always remembered that before the war he saw the bearing of the modernist movement in Continental art and was for some time the solitary outpost of that movement in England. His business is now the philosophy and invective, and in an astonishingly short time he has revealed himself as possessing one of the most vigorous minds, as well as one of the most forceful and provocative pens among living authors.

All very gratifying except that it labels him as one-time painter, recently introduced to the literary court, and as a critic-philosopher only. But the credentials he had presented in his new books made such a mistake possible indeed pardonable, and realistically he could not expect the bulk of the reading public, which is aged between 20 and 35 to know his pre-war and wartime stories, or remember *Tarr*. Somehow the reading world must be reminded of this earlier Lewis, and the ideal way to effect this would be to reprint his novel and collect some of the stories. By the end of 1928 both these goals had been achieved, and in addition *The Childermass* had made its appearance, thus confirming his reputation as a “creative” writer as well as a “destructive” critic.

This was a necessary part of his strategy because *The Art of Being Ruled*, *Time and Western Man*, and the magazine *The Enemy*, all staked a large part of Lewis’s importance on his being an practitioner as well as a doctor of the art of writing. At the tactical level it allowed him a degree of levity not otherwise permissible, and more importantly it guarded against the riposte that all this unrestrained and hostile criticism sprang from envy and was a substitute for genuine creation. Though there is no need to assign a particular cause to Lewis’s decision to hurry out a volume of fiction in 1927, Eliot’s brief but well aimed remark on *The Art of*

¹⁸ C. F., “An Attack upon Time”, *Westminster Gazette* (2 Nov. 1927), 8.

Being Ruled, part of which is quoted above, did not nudge him into it is a plausible candidate:

The artist in the modern world, [...] is heavily hampered in ways that the public does not understand. He finds himself, if he is a man of intellect, unable to realise his art to his own satisfaction, and he may be driven to examining the elements in the situation - political, social, philosophical or religious - which frustrate his labour. In this uncomfortable pursuit he accused of "neglecting his art". But it is likely that some of the strongest influences on the thought of the next generation may be those of the dispossessed artists.¹⁹

If his friends could defend him with such words what might his enemies do?

The second two questions - why revise? and why omit? - can be answered together. Given the need to re-instate his earlier career, and publish a book of fiction soon when neither *The Childermass* nor *The Apes of God* were nearly ready, Lewis was driven back to his earliest writings. He had the choice of *The Enemy of the Stars*, *The Wild Body* group of stories, his war fictions, and *Tarr*. Unfortunately he considered none of these suitable for unrevised reprinting, and the work inevitably would inevitably hold back his plans, so he began work on the shortest of them, *The Wild Body*. Revision seemed necessary from several points of view. He felt that his technique had improved, remarking in the "Foreword" to the book that the material "seemed to me to deserve the hand of a better artist than I was when I made those few hasty notes of very early travel"; and he was at this time still nursing the concept of his many varied works somehow carrying a single message, the master-meme. Revision then served to polish and integrate early work into a larger plan. The revisions are not of great significance beyond the fact that they tend to make the pieces more homogenous in manner with his more recent and forthcoming writings. Where articles and connectives had been dropped in the first versions to give a "cubist", and un-academic texture, these

¹⁹ T. S. Eliot, "A Commentary", *The New Criterion* 4/3 (June 1926), 420.

were restored. There was no question of passing the pieces off as new, but Lewis wished simply to avoid the reader regarding them as archival curiosities.

The need to appear contemporary also determined his decision to pass over his very many war-time writings. 1927 saw the beginning of the rush of war books, and Lewis may well have realized from social contacts that the war was pre-occupying many of his contemporaries. Perhaps he wished to avoid comparison, or being pigeon-holed as another shell-shocked war writer brooding over old battles, as he said of Herbert Read in *One Way Song*. No firm conclusion is possible from such speculations, interesting though they are, and for some of the reasons underlying his desire to withhold the war writings we must look instead to the question of compatibility. The “Wild Body” stories are not firmly located in time, existing in an ill-defined “pre-war”, and a reference to F. W. Bain’s *Digit of the Moon* (1898) only gives “The Soldier of Humour” the vaguest sort of date.²⁰ This made them suitable exhibits for the author of *Time and Western Man*, whereas war stories, even good ones, would have appeared passéiste documentary, and as a consequence have a less plausible kin relation with the metaphysics of his critical writings. *Tarr* also had strong philosophical components and contained nothing to connect it with a date from a textbook like 1914–1918 (in 1928 Lewis dropped the original preface in which, to satisfy the needs of another situation, he had attempted to suggest historical relevance), yet it too needed line by line revision to make it a plausible part of the output of the 1928 incarnation. But he could hardly put all this into words and so described it as a stylistic revision only:

I have always felt that as regards form simply it should not appear again as it stood, for it was written with extreme haste, during the first year of the War, during a period of the illness and restless convalescence. Accordingly for the present edition I have throughout finished what was rough and given the narrative everywhere a greater precision.

²⁰ Lewis was probably reminded of the book by the Medici Society’s 1913 reprint.

The Wild Body was not as widely reviewed as any of its immediate predecessors, and the reception was lukewarm, though no one complained about the age of most of the pieces. The general consensus was that the volume was uneven, “The Soldier of Humour” being almost dispensable, and the majority of reviewers were behind Empson, one the earliest in the field, in finding the last two stories “lamentably thin”,²¹ though Cyril Connolly went out of his way, perhaps wilfully, to acclaim their “romping colloquial gusto” as the book’s climax.²² The only justification for the publication of this uneven bundle of material was that it would restore Lewis’s reputation as an artist-writer, and in this it barely succeeded, perhaps even losing him the favour of those who had supported *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man* because they could, with a great deal of torsion, be taken as defenders of belle-lettrist norms. Alan Kemp, book reviewer for the society magazine *The Sketch*, had been a loyal supporter, and gave *The Wild Body* a very favourable write up; but he closed his remarks with a long quotation from “Bestre”, and asked “I wonder whether this kind of language lies in the mouth of the vigorous accuser of Gertrude Steinism.”²³ Such admirers had already been instrumental in making it seem that Lewis was aligned with the established and fusty literary world, so were no loss; but *The Wild Body* could not repair the damage, and by the time *The Childermass* appeared the following year it was too late. Besides, all his fiction would now tend to be seen as the work of “the London critic”, as *transition* called him.²⁴ Though not directly relevant to the discussion of Lewis’s evolution of a reader strategy this episode in his career needs to be remembered because the error of planning by which Lewis allowed his opponents to label him without any difficulty as artistically sterile was to have consequences for the rest of his

²¹ William Empson, “Where The Body is...”, *The Granta*, 37/827 (2 Dec. 1927), 193.

²² Cyril Connolly, “New Novels”, *The New Statesman*, 30/765 (24 Dec. 1927), 358.

²³ Alan Kemp, “The Literary Lounger”, *The Sketch*, 140/1820 (14 Dec. 1927), 566.

²⁴ Eugene Jolas, Elliot Paul, Robert Sage, “First Aid to the Enemy”, *transition*, no. 9 (Dec. 1927), 169.

life. Indeed, the failure to reassert himself as a heavy-weight of creative as well as critical prose has perhaps more effectively inhibited the growth of his status than any other single factor. It was not only disadvantageous in itself, but prevented him from recovering from the political campaigning of the thirties into which he had thrown himself as an alternative means of achieving a public. It is to this phase of his life that we must now turn.

The two periods of Lewis's career so far discussed may be labelled and briefly characterized in terms of the leading command issued to the reader of his books: in the first period this is "Listen (to me)", and in the second "Think (like me)". The differences are those of strategy, while the policy, the spreading of his memes to other minds, remains the same. In the third period, 1931-39, there is an almost complete revision of strategy, tactics and, surprisingly, policy also. Since this had great consequences for Lewis's reputation at the time, and has permanently damaged it since to such an extent that all his earlier books tend to be read as if arising from the same impulse, it will be prudent to attempt some preliminary description of the change before looking at the nature of specific works. One way of doing this is to attempt a characterisation similar in form to those given above for periods one and two: "Act (do what I say)". A little more detail can be added by expanding the descriptions to include subsidiary commands and those which seem almost inaudible due to suppression. The combinations and stress can be represented with the aid of capitals, exclamation marks and brackets:

Period One: LISTEN!, [Think].

Period Two: Listen, THINK!, [Act].

Period Three: LISTEN, think, ACT!!

The strategy adopted during Period two was in fact a very successful one, and though Lewis's sales were not spectacular, at least partly because his books were so expensive, he had a solid reputation in England, where he commanded a

review in the *TLS*. In the United States the position was less secure, and the signs of a loss of interest could be seen in the failure of *Paleface* to find a New York publisher, the first of his books to do so. Nevertheless, he could hardly be said to have been obscure in the United States. R. P. Blackmur had given *The Lion and the Fox* a very good review in the first issue *Hound and Horn*,²⁵ and even if *The New York Times Book Review*, did think he was the author of *In a Blue Moon* at least they were enthusiastic.²⁶ *transition* thought him worth replying to at great length, and Joyce began to incorporate Lewis into “Work in Progress”, both very strong indications that as memes Lewis’s ideas were doing extremely well. Yet he was not satisfied. The reason for this, I propose, was that he had put himself forward as a writer and painter driven to criticism, and had based his tone and address on this formidable authority. Consequently when the reading world gave decided to accept him as a critic solely the tactics of his books had been outflanked. What he had hoped would appear as Olympian judgment now seemed only sour grapes, lofty and sardonic humour could now be interpreted as sneering envy which could too easily be dismissed by hostile readers. Worse still, when his two major pieces of fiction appeared in 1928 (*The Childermass*) and 1930 (*The Apes of God*) they were taken as extensions of the critical work, and not the other way around as Lewis wished. By 1931 it was plain that his bid for a position in the first rank of literary figures had failed, and though he had a very high position as a critic it could not be expected to endure, and anyway his pride resented any inferior position. In response to this Lewis turned away from the “highbrow” intelligentsia, and towards the “middlebrow” magazine reading public. This was a remarkable thing for him to do, and an explanation of the kind I have given is not alone sufficient to account for it. Lewis also needed money, and serial publication in *Time and Tide* or *Everyman* offered much higher

²⁵ R. P. Blackmur, “Hubris”, *The Hound and Horn*, 1/1 (Sep. 1927), 42-7.

²⁶ Richard Le Gallienne, “The Gentle Shakespeare Still Defies Analysis”, *New York Times Book Review*, (20 Nov. 1927), 9.

rewards than could be obtained from the publisher's advances which his books never in fact earned in sales. The financial consideration tipped the balance and in the 1930s he ceased to be competing with Joyce and Virginia Woolf in catching the ear and attention of a sophisticated readership, and addressed instead an audience whose principle concern was contemporary politics.

One result of this was to change the stress of his leading commands, as noted above, a point which can be supported simply by remarking that only one of Lewis's book titles takes the form of an order: *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* (1937). It is not clear whether this is a reluctant response to a new situation (Lewis was theoretically opposed to "action"); or whether it was in fact a not unwelcome means of exercising further power over his readers. Despite the quietism of his satirical writings it seems more likely that the latter option is a fair assessment, especially so when we realize that the dream of the captive audience had remained with Lewis and now re-emerged with sinister connotations. It surfaces, for example, with chilling clarity in the apparently genial *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), where he assesses his prospects for the next few years:

Of course the "big noise" is in the main a phenomenon of mass-advertisement. What it would be more exact to say is that myself and a few other people are now likely to have our turn at the loud-speaking mechanism, because the times are rapidly changing. People are more ready for such messages as mine to-day than they were yesterday. Time's revenges!

A reader in 1937 would have seen this choice of metaphor against the background of the microphone triumphs of the European dictators, and it would hardly be surprising if they found it heavy with veiled threats. This aside it is important to remark that although Lewis is still prepared to contemplate an audience coerced, or trapped, into a position where it must pay attention, by 1937 he had moved from being an entertainer, through an intermediate position where he regarded himself as a wise man talking to other intellectuals, and then

to an evangelist, an imparter of “messages”. The stunt man described by Ford is content merely to be a sight, and Tarr needs only to feel that he has been heard, like a Jehovah’s Witness, but the Lewis of the mid and late thirties had an urgent need to exert an executive influence, and thus it is no surprise that it was during this period that he began to acquire followers, disciples, and converts.

By presenting his thought in a form tied to contemporary politics, and by directing his major effort to the production of magazine articles Lewis was abandoning the strategy which hopes to steadily increase the numbers of readers rather than aiming for a very wide spread, as described above. It is as if he had lost patience and decided that rather than sit and wait for his smouldering reputation to burst into flames he would tumble a heap of combustible polemics and some highly volatile opinions on to it to get a good blaze. He began in 1931 with a series of articles in *Time and Tide* on Hitler, a prescient choice which probably gained him more notoriety than all his previous books put together, and provoked the first separate publication largely concerned with his work, Cecil Melville’s pamphlet *The Truth about the New Party (and much else besides concerning Sir Oswald Mosley’s political aims, the “Nazi” movement of Herr Adolph Hitler, and the adventure in political philosophy of Mr Wyndham Lewis)*. With this and the bitter correspondence in *Time and Tide* Lewis became a figure of controversy. *The Apes of God* had hardly stirred up such a venomous and potentially damaging storm, and the crescendo in the title of John Gawsorth’s study of Lewis, *Apes, Japes and Hitlerism* (1932), indicates their relative importance.

It has become a commonplace of discussions of his reputation to remark that Lewis made the grave error of reprinting these articles as book, thus fixing what would otherwise have been an ephemeral error. But it is clear from the correspondence columns of *Time and Tide* that the damage took place there before a very large journal reading public. The book and its reviews, which were

mostly favourable, only confirmed what had already occurred, and was in fact still continuing. When the Hitler articles ended in February 1931 the correspondence continued, and subsequent articles such as the series of pieces on Youth Politics (reprinted as part of *The Doom of Youth*) to which Chesterton and George Lansbury, amongst others replied, also drew fire. In moving into politics Lewis's goal had been to gain a larger readership, and an influence which would manifest itself in action. The first of these was easily achieved, but the second eluded him, perhaps because his strategy now too openly had designs upon the reader. *The Art of Being Ruled* had offered its readers inoculation against other political philosophies, but in his journalism of the thirties, particularly from 1935 onwards when he was actively attempting to sway public opinion concerning foreign policy, Lewis was issuing a clarion call. Now he not only wanted people to hum his tunes but dance to them as well. While we do not, as we should, recognize that thinking someone else's memes through is an act of obedience, there is no doubt in our minds that to act in accordance with instructions is so, and a great deal more than textual rhetoric is needed if the self-protective inertia of the individual is to be overcome and action result. Lewis did not have access to such means of persuasion.

It seems hardly necessary to say that this new policy was a disaster, or that it failed because Lewis's judgement of Hitler was faulty, but if we examine the thirties and think simply in terms of the percentage of the reading population aware of some of Lewis's propositions, in other words in terms of the meme theory sketched earlier, an alternative view emerges. While it is true that his attempts to effect practical action had no important consequences, the by-product of this new stance was a notoriety so enduring that it persists even now. In the short term it was also extremely effective, and his pronouncements were known to a greater number of people than at any time before, and perhaps since; but this was brought about at a cost. Though the numbers of readers increased,

the geographical spread shrank until Lewis was effectively published only in England. Between the New York edition of *Filibusters in Barbary* (1932) and *America, I Presume* (Howell Soskin: New York, 1940) Lewis published almost nothing outside the United Kingdom with the only significant exceptions being two magazine articles, one on Ernest Hemingway, the other an excerpt from *Count Your Dead*. Politics is in a sense always local politics, a fact which drastically limited the market for his books. Lewis did nothing to help this by preparing his political remarks, *Left Wings Over Europe*, *Count Your Dead*, and far more importantly the many periodical articles he was still publishing in popular magazines, as extended commentaries on London newspaper reports. This was inevitable given that he was trying to intervene in current affairs and wanted to see the results directly. An interesting sidelight on such works is provided by the popular reputation of his equally time-bound attempts to make amends for his errors. Of the latter all that remains in the literary consciousness is the fact that they backed Hitler, but the apologies, *The Hitler Cult* and *The Jews, Are They Human?*² have become so characterless that they have taken on the evil savor of their predecessors. Writings of this kind, it appears, can only do harm. If we assume that Lewis had been correct in his diagnosis, and that the corrupt democracies had crumbled to be replaced by some mixture of fascism and socialism, his polemics would have been quickly forgotten in detail, though their general character would have remained, perhaps benefiting him socially and providing, metaphorically, a place near the microphones. Whether this would have assisted the spread of the ideas put about in earlier books can only be guessed at, but it is certain that the bad name his new policy in fact gave him has been a considerable weapon in the war of the memes that has been waged since by scholars, critics, and literary historians who have invested a little of themselves in the reputation of some other writer. Without the considerable success of Lewis's bid for a large audience in the thirties none of this could have

happened. He had inadvertently inoculated the reading public against his own ideas.

Lewis left England in 1939 with an almost unmarketable reputation. He was extremely well known in England as a supporter of Hitler (the exact justice of this is beside the point), and his contemporaries had re-read and categorized his earlier works, both pictorial and literary, with this in mind. The thirties had been a gamble for power and it had cost him everything he had built up by his previous career. The war years were neither completely wasted nor blank, but nothing of any great weight was written in this period. There was material to hand but the recent disasters had left him without a clear strategy. He was forced to go through another transitional stage similar to that which produced *The Lion and the Fox*, this time the product being a worthy book on American history.