

FORD AND LEWIS: THE ATTRACTION OF OPPOSITES

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Modernists, in general, did not go to war. That the cataclysmic events of the First World War were reflected in the work of Eliot, Woolf, Pound and other key modernists is no surprise – but Woolf’s portrait of the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Smith, in *Mrs Dalloway*, Eliot’s account of existential post-war despair in *The Waste Land*, or Pound’s lament for a lost generation in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, were not based on direct experience of battle. For genuine Modernist responses to the war, rooted in the blood and mud of the battlefield, we need to turn to the work of two contrasting figures, Wyndham Lewis and Ford Madox Ford. Lewis enlisted as an artillery officer, and saw action on the Western Front, where he nearly died from trench fever, and was also the subject of bombardment by Zeppelin. Ford, still known as Hueffer at the time, was sent to France aged 41, and suffered concussion following an explosion at Bécordel-Bécourt in July 1916. Their shared experience of the dangers of war offered them membership of a club that was closed to a good many other contemporary writers, and it is as least possible that it might have engendered some mutual respect. This essay aims to explore the commonalities in their respective approaches to their wartime experiences.

The differences in the public personae of Lewis and Ford are well-documented. It is usual to see Lewis as the self-proclaimed “Enemy”, managing to antagonise everyone in the extended group of bohemian intellectuals based in the London of the immediate pre-war years. Ford, in contrast is seen as an almost avuncular figure, with connections that spanned high- and middlebrow literature. Given the somewhat incestuous nature of the London literary scene of the Edwardian period, it is not surprising that the careers of Lewis and Ford became intertwined from 1909, when Ford published Lewis’s first work, the short story ‘The Pole’ in *The English Review*. Lewis included an extract from *The Good Soldier*, still entitled *The Saddest Story* at that point, in the first issue of *Blast* in 1914, which was also

the year when Ford lectured at the Rebel Art Centre, and when Lewis completed a painting commissioned by Ford and Violet Hunt. Ford and Lewis also appear in each other's work: Ford's novel *The Marsden Case* (1923) features a character, George Heimann, based on Lewis. Ford also good-humouredly reports Lewis's attack on himself, Conrad and James as outdated, outmoded has-beens on several occasions, most comprehensively in *Portraits from Life* (1937). Lewis is, according to Ford, in particularly combative and dismissive mood. After declaring that Conrad, James and Ford are "vieux jeu", he says:

[People] don't want to be educated. They want to be amused....By brilliant fellows like me. Letting off brilliant fireworks. Performing like dogs on tightropes. Something to give them the idea they're at a performance. You fellows try to efface yourselves, to make people think that there isn't any author, and that they're living in the affairs you...adumbrate, isn't that your word? ... What balls! What rot!¹

Ford and Lewis, then are presented by each other as belonging to different generations, with different world-views. For his part, Lewis presents several anecdotes about Ford, who is referred to quite often in his autobiographical work *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), most entertainingly when discussing the prospect of war. At one point, Lewis reports a conversation between Ford and his hostess, Mrs Turner, at a country-house gathering. She was of the opinion that England would not go to war, because Liberals would not go to war. Lewis agrees.

Ford sneered very faintly and inoffensively: he was sneering at the British government, rather than at us. He was being the omniscient, bored and sleepy Ford, sunk in his tank of sloth. From his prolonged siesta he was staring out at us all with his fish-blue eyes – kind, wise, but bored....

Well, Ford," said Mrs Turner, bantering the wise old elephant. "You don't agree!"

"I don't agree," Ford answered, in his faintest voice, with consummate indifference, "because it has always been the liberals who have gone to war. It is because it is a Liberal government that it will declare war."²

And, days later, as Lewis points out, it did. Politically, too, then, Lewis and Ford are markedly opposed, Ford's innate conservatism contrasting with the more extreme views of Lewis, who leaned dangerously close to fascism, but who was not, pace the title of Fredric Jameson's book³ a fascist.

Lewis and Ford's careers and lives were already closely connected, then, and the occasion of war gave them a further common bond, as each eventually enlisted, and each observed at first hand the nature of the conflict.

In terms of their literary output, Ford's principal response to the war was to channel his energies into the production of the tetralogy which remains his foremost achievement in fiction. Lewis did not directly write about the war in his fiction, but produced a vivid memoir in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, an account of his life and times from 1914 to 1926. This work was published in 1937, a decade after the group of publications that Max Saunders identifies in his introduction to *Some Do Not...* as those commonly held to be "the major books of the First World War,"⁴ appearing roughly ten years before Lewis's memoir. Saunders mentions Blunden's *Undertones of War*, Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, and Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, all published around 1927-28. He then argues that in fact the crucial books of the war were published earlier, in the early to mid-twenties: Montague's *Disenchantment*, Mottram's *Spanish Farm* trilogy, and of course Ford's *Parade's End*.

Those volumes, appearing whilst the war was still fresh in the consciousness of the readership, are, without question, vital to an understanding of the British reaction. Moreover, it may be argued that, while Ford's sequence is clearly mainly about the war, it is also a portrait of a society in a state of flux immediately before the conflict, a portrait which then is extended in the final volumes to offer a panorama of early twentieth century English society. Lewis, in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, offers an account of a portion of his life that covers precisely this period. In doing so, he presents a sprightly portrait of the times, and offers some interestingly detached comments about himself. He explicitly connects the autobiographical mode to the fictional. In his introduction, he writes:

This book is about myself. It's the first autobiography to take only a section of a life and leave the rest. Ten years about is the time covered. This is better than starting with the bib and bottle. How many novels are tolerable that begin with the hero in his cradle? And a good biography is of course a sort of novel. So you first encounter the hero of this book a few months before the outbreak of war, blissfully unconscious of its sinister proximity, on the right side of thirty but with much European travel behind him, in the course of which he has collected a strange assortment of clothes, of haircuts, of exotic mannerisms. ... When you have been made thoroughly to understand what the

war made of him, you bid him adieu. What has happened to him after that is unbelievably romantic. But that is another story⁵.

This introduction offers a tantalising glimpse of another world (“unbelievably romantic”) that seems as if rooted in the pages of a novel. Of course, to most readers of the standard biographies of Lewis, by Paul O’Keeffe⁶ and Jeffrey Meyer⁷, the idea of his later life being “unbelievably romantic” is, to say the least, difficult to square with the image of the cantankerous and wilfully antagonistic figure portrayed in those biographies.

Whilst it is clear that Lewis’s concentration on what he called “the surface of life” – “I am not an anatomist”⁸ he wrote – contrasts sharply with Ford’s infinitely subjective impressionism, there are, nonetheless, some points of intersection in their approach, and these will be briefly sketched in what follows. It cannot be gainsaid that *Parade’s End*, particularly in the battlefield scenes, owes much, as would be expected, to Ford’s own experience in the Welch Regiment. Even though the work is fiction, then, it is legitimate to read it as much as autobiography as Lewis’s work.

Lewis’s memoir deals with his life in the year or so after the war began, but before he enlisted as a gunner. He, perhaps surprisingly, mixed in elevated circles, describing one dinner party at Claridges at which he was an object of some amusement to the assembled titled and distinguished politicians and their wives. Lewis offers some insight into the character of the men on the fringes of power, rather like Tietjens in *Parade’s End*. Lord Curzon, a “very able administrator” according to Lewis, is described as in a state of “painful, staring ruminations,” a state which foreshadowed his being passed over for the post of prime minister in 1923 in favour of Baldwin. Lewis describes him in the earlier encounter:

Doubtless he knew all along that the dice were loaded against him. he understood that men of his open and unbending stamp in England are never allowed to reach the highest offices of state. They are reserved for birds of another and duller feather. Such men are too proud, they are not sufficiently pliant; they do make ideal servants and are from the start suspect in the Bankers Olympus.⁹

In *Parade’s End*, Tietjens is apparently such a character. He stands for an almost impossibly upright moral code that abhors the compromises of political advancement. That Tietjens is in this category is

recognised by General Campion in an exchange on the golf course. “You brilliant fellows!” he says, “The country, or the army, or anything, could not be run by you. It takes stupid fools like me and Sandbach.”¹⁰

Tietjens is presented by Ford as an outsider, a man uncomfortable in his own time, and effortlessly superior intellectually to those around him, not unlike the image Lewis cultivates of himself, both in *Blasting and Bombadiering*, and elsewhere, for example in his first novel *Tarr*, where the titular character is an avatar of the author. Here is Macmaster, observing his friend and colleague on the train journey to Rye, and reflecting that he has put his career at risk by challenging his superior, using what Macmaster calls “sheer brain work”:

[T]here sat Tietjens, in his grey tweeds, his legs apart, lumpish, clumsy, his tallowy, intelligent looking hands drooping inertly between his legs, his eyes gazing at a coloured photograph of the port of Boulogne beside the mirror beneath the luggage rack. Blonde, high-coloured, vacant apparently, you couldn't tell what in the world he was thinking of. The mathematical theory of waves, very likely, or slips in some one's article on Arminianism.¹¹

This vivid visual portrait is similar to the method used by Lewis when in his most aggressively external mode. Here is his initial description of Alan Hobson, the English artist, from the opening section of *Tarr*:

But for Hobson's outfit, Tarr had the most elaborate contempt. This was Alan Hobson's outfit: a Cambridge cut disfigured his original manly and melodramatic form. His father was said to be a wealthy merchant somewhere in Egypt. Very athletic, his dark and cavernous features had been constructed by nature as a lurking-place for villainy and passions: but Hobson had double-crossed his rascally sinuous body. He slouched and ambled along, neglecting his muscles: and his full-blooded blackguard's countenance attempted to portray delicacies of common sense and gossamer-like backslidings into the inane that would have puzzled any analyst unacquainted with his peculiar training.¹²

This seems to be close to Ford's method, at least in terms of objective description, in *Parade's End*, so these two stylists are not as far apart from each other as is sometimes supposed. Both use the external detail of the character's features to suggest something about the condition of the character's mind: the “tallowy, intelligent looking hands” of Tietjens echoed in Hobson's “rascally, sinuous body.”

Moreover, Ford's description of Tietjens is not far removed from Lewis's of Ford "sunk in his tank of sloth".

Turning now to the ways in which the two writers represented war, it is possible to see correspondences in their descriptions. In particular, both *Blasting and Bombardiering* and *Parade's End* deal with the way in which the war was conducted, and, tangentially at least, offer a critique which focuses on the futility and human waste of the conflict. It is noticeable that in a novel whose central character is sent to the front, and in an autobiography in which the subject is also a combatant supporting the infantry, there is actually little in the way of direct description of the heat of battle. Rather, both protagonists seem reluctant to confront the immediacy of combat, but focus instead on the aftermath of fighting, often in somewhat abstract terms. In this respect, there are some surprising similarities in their work. Here is Lewis, describing the aftermath of an encounter with the enemy:

That evening we evacuated our pill-box under a perfect fusillade of shells.... In the distance, I turned to look at this obnoxious death-trap, as one turns to look back at a mountain, whose top one has just visited, once one is down below. The sunset had turned on its romantic dream-light and what had been romantic enough before was now positively operatic. A darkening ridge, above a drift of Saharan steppe, gouged and tossed into monotonous disorder, in a word the war-wilderness; not a flicker of life, not even a ration-party – not even a skeleton:... We turned away from this brainless bustle, going on all by itself, about an empty concrete easter-egg, in a stupid desert.¹³

Lewis does not directly criticise the rationale behind the war here – though he does elsewhere – but it is clear from the imagery he uses, which echoes Eliot's recurrent images in *The Waste Land*, that he sees the war as an exercise in futility. The "obnoxious death-trap" that he is escaping here is physically a wilderness, but it is also "brainless" "empty" and "stupid". The juxtaposition of the physical and mental emptiness, as it appears to the intelligent onlooker, is an instructive one. Elsewhere in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, Lewis develops this theme; having explained to his reader the nature of warfare as experienced by a gunner ("A gunner does not fight. He merely shells and is shelled")¹⁴ he describes the devastated landscape that was produced by the relentless battery, in terms that suggest the futility of the exercise:

What had we expected to see? Something, at all events. Whereas we gazed out over a solitary and uninhabited steppe. There was nothing. [...] before us

stretched, terrible in its emptiness, the land we had come to explore. [...] The inner fastnesses of the Sahara could not have developed a more inaccessible air of unearthly remoteness.¹⁵

Lewis's vivid and painterly evocation of the devastation left by the conflict is paralleled in Ford's description of the scene confronting Tietjens at the beginning of *No More Parades*. Ford presents the scene as if it were a painting, and elements of it suggest some of the wartime work of John Nash or Lewis himself. Despite its focus on the man-made structure, its bleakness is reminiscent of the tone adopted by Lewis in his depictions of the battlefield:

When you came in the space was desultory, rectangular, warm after the drip of the winter night, and transfused with a brown-orange dust that was light. It was shaped like the house a child draws. Three groups of brown limbs spotted with brass took dim high-lights from shafts that came from a bucket pierced with holes, filled with incandescent coke, and covered in with a sheet of iron in the shape of a tunnel.¹⁶

The broken-down appearance of this makeshift shelter echoes Lewis's description of the pill-box in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, and demonstrates how similar their outlooks were. Both authors are at pains to highlight the drudgery and monotony of modern warfare, and its distance from the noble sentiments expressed in the propaganda of the time.

In *No More Parades*, just before the death of O9 Morgan, Tietjens recalls bitterly the day he enlisted, when he observed at the war office the ludicrous business of the devising of a ceremony for the disbanding of a Kitchener battalion. In the passage that gives the novel its title, he reflects on the absurdity of the ceremony and its refusal to admit to the realities of war:

Well, the end of the show was to be: the adjutant would stand the battalion at ease: the band would play *Land of Hope and Glory*, and then the adjutant would say: *There will be no more parades...* Don't you see how symbolical it was – the band playing *Land of Hope and Glory* and the adjutant saying *There will be no more parades?... For there won't. There won't, there damn well won't.... No more Hope, no more Glory, no more parades for you and me any more. Nor for the country....nor for the world, I dare say...None....Gone...Napoo, finny! No...more...parades!*¹⁷

Both authors have evoked the uselessness of war, but in each case the central character, whether the fictional or real, is sufficiently duty-

bound to fight in a conflict they despise, and the familiar modernist images and allusions of waste, emptiness, decay and meaninglessness inform their representations of their states of mind.

Despite the similarities in subject, Ford and Lewis remain almost as opposed as Lewis's blustering characterisation of their respective attitudes might suggest. *Blasting and Bombardiering*, despite the sober subject matter is a jaunty book, even when the author is encountering piles of bodies in the trenches. *Parade's End* is much more anguished, and despite generally avoiding descriptions of carnage, paradoxically conveys more graphically the horrors of war and its effect on the individual psyche. But as Lewis says, "the Great War is a magnet" and the post-war its magnetic field."¹⁸ Both authors are drawn into that field, and despite the sharp differences in tone, there are sometimes moments where their attitudes and expressions intersect, as we might expect from two such figures, for whom, like so many of their generation, the war must have remained the central episode of the lives.

NOTES

- 1 quoted by Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life Vol II: The After War World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 188-189
- 2 Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937) p. 63
- 3 Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979)
- 4 Ford, *Some Do Not...* edited by Max Saunders (Manchester: Carcanet, 2010) p.xiii
- 5 Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 1
- 6 Paul O'Keefe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000)
- 7 Jeffrey Meyer, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980)
- 8 *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 9
- 9 *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 59
- 10 Ford, *Some Do Not...*, p. 81
- 11 *Some Do Not...*, p. 20
- 12 Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*, edited. by Scott Klein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p. 9

- 13 *Blasting and Bombardiering* p.168-9
- 14 *Blasting and Bombardiering* p. 131
- 15 *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 138
- 16 Ford, *No More Parades*, edited by Joseph Wiesenfarth (Manchester: Carcanet, 2011) p.9
- 17 *No More Parades*, p.27
- 18 *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p.307