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OBJECTIVITY”: MODERNISM IN  
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AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

BASIC RESEARCH PROGRAM  
WORKING PAPERS

SERIES: LITERARY STUDIES

WP BRP 13/LS/2016

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## **“THE ATTEMPT AT OBJECTIVITY”: MODERNISM IN WYNDHAM LEWIS’S POPULAR AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

This article considers Wyndham Lewis’s autobiography *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937) as an instrument for reassessing modernism and representing it to the wider readership of popular literature. Lewis’s employment of autobiography to conceptualise modernism and position himself within/towards it is a marked step away from his criticism where modern subjectivity, historical approach to the self, and fictionalisation of autobiography are repudiated. Such change cannot be explained only by Lewis’s pragmatic motives of raising his profile in the recent literary history and making money by catering to the audience’s taste for autobiographies. This choice of genre also reflects Lewis’s disillusionment with transformative yet detached modernism, which the First World War proved to have been utopian, but with whose aesthetic standards Lewis wanted to maintain association. In this context, the populist intent of the autobiography can be seen as a means of rethinking the failed modernist attempt at objectivity. With the help of the form of popular autobiography, Lewis playfully subjects to detachment modernism itself, undermining the assumptions of its commitment to difficulty, elitism, and autonomy and highlighting the related tensions within his own aesthetics.

JEL Classification: Z

Keywords: modernist autobiography, Wyndham Lewis, detachment, popular literature.

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# 1. Introduction

One reason why modernist autobiography is often perceived as a suspicious and problematic area of enquiry is that the wide-spread assumptions about the role the author's personality plays in modernist aesthetics and in autobiography make these two notions look incompatible. Few would disagree that one of autobiography's most prominent features is its ability account for the "inward realm of experience" of its author (Weintraub 1975, 823) and that the value and specificity of the genre are intrinsically connected with this "'insider' quality" (Marcus 1994, 5). On the one hand, an emphasis on the inwardness of the experience is a key characteristic of modernist literature, or at least of some its best known novels. Modernism on the whole is still widely believed to represent the so-called "inward turn"<sup>2</sup> towards subjectivity and exploration of mental processes (cf. Eysteinnsson 1990, 26–30). On the other hand, the fact that the inward experience narrated in autobiography belongs to its author, who is in this case identical to the narrator and the protagonist (Lejeune 1989, 5), means that the distance between a literary work and its creator is minimised. This distance, however, is no less a crucial feature of modernist literature than its supposed "inward turn". One of the strongest associations of modernism is with artifice and aesthetic self-consciousness (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976, 25). Modernists are expected to value sophisticated and oblique artistic forms rather than straightforward narration about one's personal experience and emotions, such as can often be found in autobiographies. This New Critical presupposition, which goes back to T.S. Eliot's famous claim in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Eliot 1951, 21), has been especially influential in discussions of Anglo-American modernism. If what is common to the modernism of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Joyce (or "the Men of 1914", in Lewis's famous coinage) is their refusal to inquire into the self's inner realm (Nicholls 1995, 251), then it would be hardly obvious why they had anything to do with autobiography, where such inquiry is natural and inevitable, other than reacting against it. The fact that Lewis was the only modernist of this group who not only disputed the extremities of subjectivism but also wrote autobiographies makes his place within this canon unique and requires explanation.

As a rule, a modernist engagement with autobiography is conceptualised in terms of literary experiment and a movement away from the conventions of the genre. Max Saunders has recently

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<sup>2</sup> Melanie Conroy traces the critical foregrounding of the "motif of a turn toward inner life" in modernist literature from the mid-twentieth century accounts by Erich Kahler and Robert Humphrey to the most recent literary studies of the 2010s concluding that "the alleged inward turn of the modernist novel has become one of the great truisms of academic literary criticism" (Conroy 2014, 121); David Herman similarly observes that in modernist studies "inward turn" is "something of a critical commonplace" (Herman 2011, 249).

argued for the great significance of autobiography in modernist and modern literature, claiming that “modern English literary history is shaped by its conflicting responses to life-writing” (Saunders 2010, 10). His analysis of a broad range of authors including Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound convincingly shows that modernists were strongly drawn to autobiography in their fiction and saw it as something to be criticised, but also reinvented and played with (Saunders 2010, 293). This is also true, perhaps, to a slightly lesser extent, with respect to modernist autobiography, which is generally taken to contest the received generic conventions and oppose the traditional narrative of the self’s development and fulfilment. Maria DiBattista and Emily O. Wittman observe that modernist autobiographies often focus on short periods of time instead of addressing the author’s life up to the point of writing, choose seemingly insignificant episodes for the narration, interfere with the sequence of events and chronology, disfigure the story by omissions and divagations, and “colonize” unfamiliar formats, such as travel writing and promotional materials (DiBattista and Wittman 2014). Overall, the modernists are always expected to transform some received standard of autobiography into a characteristically unusual and challenging work by rethinking the concepts of the self and the personality, experimenting with style, narration and genre of their life-writing, and just being deliberately unconventional in all possible ways.<sup>3</sup>

However, privileging the most daring and original modernist life-writing does not account for autobiographies which, being written by a modernist artist and concerning modernism thematically, are less experimental or do not intend to put formal innovation on display. This is the case with the first of Wyndham Lewis's autobiographies, *Blasting and Bombardiering: Autobiography (1914–1926)* (1937), a popularly written book where the author examines his experience as a soldier and an artist in the years from 1914 to 1926.<sup>4</sup> Although being habitually quoted in the histories of English modernism and the studies of Lewis’s painting and writing, *Blasting and Bombardiering* has been seldom discussed in detail, perhaps, because of the very turn from challenging artistic experiment to a more popular mode of expression it represents. Modernism and popular culture, however, were never mutually exclusive. Recent scholarship has convincingly shown that they absorbed, influenced, and mediated each other in a myriad of ways and contexts (Mao and Walkowitz 2008, 744). Lewis’s popular autobiography is in fact one of the several “modernist memoirs” of the late 1920s and 1930s which sought to provoke a wider

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, William Butler Yeats’s writings collected in volume *Autobiographies* (1955) represent the condition of “modernist fragmentation and alienation” of the individual (Gunzenhauser 2001, I, 76); Gertrude Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) effects a “major shift to modernist autobiography by eschewing the romantic conception of the autobiographical subject [...] to construct herself as a modernist work of art” (Barros 1999, 177); and H.D.’s memoir *Tribute to Freud* (1956) “refuses smoothness and linearity in favor of formal experimentation such as repetition, correction, juxtaposition, and an apparent randomness” (Kennedy 2012, 254).

<sup>4</sup> Before *Blasting and Bombardiering*, Lewis published an untitled short piece about his early years as a writer in a collection of autobiographical essays by different authors, *Beginnings* (1935). In 1947 Lewis finished his second full-length autobiography, *Rude Assignment: A Narrative of my Career Up-to-Date* (1950).

readership's interest in modernism by making the authors who insisted on high modernist impersonality and detachment look more personal and familiar (Rosenquist 2013, 37–38). What makes Lewis's case illuminating is that his appeal to a popular audience by means of autobiography indicates not a break with the system of aesthetic values which preceded it, but a logical, although unexpected, step in the development of his modernism.

As a rule, critics of *Blasting and Bombardiering* focus on the selectivity and bias in Lewis's account of his modernist past (Kenner 1954, 92; Meyers 1980, 232), which are explained by his intention to attract the "ordinary" readers and to convince them that he is a no less important figure in the literary history than such better known modern writers as Pound, Joyce, or Eliot (Rosenquist 2009, 38–40; Parsons 2010, 201–202). However, Lewis's autobiography is more than a belated attempt at his self-promotion and revision of the past. It can also be interpreted as a satire on the history of modernism, which Lewis represents as a movement so utopian and short-lived that, unable to make a real impact, it can only exist as a historical attraction (Rosenquist 2009, 74–76). Drawing on Rosenquist's recognition of the satirical dimension in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, I argue that this autobiography is uniquely modernist because in it Lewis simultaneously elaborates his understanding of what the authentic modernism was supposed to be and challenges the viability of this conception under the present conditions by the very form in which the autobiography is written. The uncommon genre of popular autobiography allows Lewis not only to promote himself and his account of modernism, but also to achieve proper detachment from this movement. Thus, when reassessing modernism, Lewis both remains true to the key principle of objectivity which he locates in the writing of "the Men of 1914", and undermines it catering for the audience and pursuing his pragmatic goals.

I take as a starting point Lewis's reflection on the problem of selfhood and his criticisms of the modern subjectivity, history, and autobiography, all of which raise the question why Lewis decided to write a popular book of this genre in the first place. Then I discuss how some of the principles Lewis takes a basis for his conception of modernism in his criticism are in stark contrast with the pragmatic motivation behind his autobiography, which in some ways closely resembles what he previously disapproved of. After that I consider how Lewis, nevertheless, struggles to maintain continuity between the idea of modernism in his criticism and his autobiography, which is why it is possible to interpret the latter as an important next stage in his evaluation of modernism and its relationships with the audience, not just a book hastily written for the market. I conclude that *Blasting and Bombardiering* is productively conflicted in that it produces a stereoscopic objectified assessment of modernism, allowing Lewis to locate himself both within and outside it, to endorse and eschew it.

## 2. Subjectivity and Autobiography in Lewis's Criticism

I begin by briefly considering Lewis's elsewhere expressed view of the self and subjectivity in their modern condition and of the value of the autobiographical form of expression. By doing so I would like to point out that the fact that Lewis wrote autobiographies is surprising, but not only because of his assumed inclination to artistic sophistication and experiment, which are at odds with straightforward authorial personal narration. Another important reason is that autobiography seems an unlikely genre within Lewis's particular modernism with its criticism of the modern condition of subjectivity and its devaluation of autobiography from an aesthetic point of view. A partial explanation would be to suggest that in his autobiography Lewis meant to propose an alternative, more viable modification of the autobiographical, more in line with his philosophical stance towards subjectivity and the self. This, however, is true only to a certain extent because for Lewis autobiography was also a pragmatic tool whose function was to reach a wider audience. Therefore, Lewis's autobiographies reflect his condescension to this genre inasmuch as they aim to refashion it.

In one of his several non-fiction books written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, *Paleface* (1929), Lewis claimed that he aimed to provide "a new, and if necessary shattering criticism of 'modernity'" (Lewis 1972, 106). This criticism was necessitated by the crisis of the modern subject, which had undergone a "radical translation from a free public life, on the one hand, to a powerless, unsatisfying, circumscribed private life on the other" (Lewis 1972, 102). Influenced by the uniformity of modern industrial, political and cultural conditions, people had been "driven into [their] primitive private mental caves," and art, approximating the condition of this feeble "subjectivity", had mostly become "a zealous parrot of systems and judgements that reach it from the unknown" (Lewis 1972, 103). In other words, the curse of the modern self is that in most cases it is deprived of the public sphere and restricted to its own mental world, making it fundamentally inauthentic and highly suggestable. Such a self is a superficial product of the democratic promotion of individuality, which in fact is being deprived of any freedom by stultifying industrialisation, deceptively impartial progress, ubiquitous advertisement, and the run-of-the mill production of mass culture and the media.

Lewis claims that these suppressive impulses, or susceptibility to them, are at work and can be exposed in "almost everything that is written at the present time" (Lewis 1972, 109). Hence, when he asks if it is possible for modern art to be "anything but 'subjective'," he in fact calls for a more grounded individual expression not only in art, but also in general. In this light, Lewis's autobiographies may be considered along with his criticism as a form of his persistent search for a

more authentic subjectivity than the one whose sham modern manifestations he continuously sought to expose.

However, Lewis's criticism not only denounces the inauthentic "subjectivity" and the modernity it is contingent upon but also sketches a model of the self which is unaffected by the latter's adversary influence and can act with more independence. In *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) Lewis postulates an unbridgeable divide between "Puppets" and "Natures", that is, between a person who, willingly or unwillingly, desires (and deserves) to be ruled and "spared from suffering by insensibility and blind dependence on a will superior to their own" (Lewis 1989, 125) and an individual who is guided by "consciousness and responsibility" (Ibid, 130) characteristic of a creative intelligence of a different order. In *Time and Western Man* (1927) Lewis adopts a slightly less cynical attitude towards "Puppets", proposing that all people "should be compelled to be freer and more 'individualistic' than they naturally desire to be" (Lewis 1993, 118), but the emphasis on the importance a solid self is the same because the self is "our only terra firma in the boiling and shifting world" and to stay this way, it "must cohere for us to be capable at all of behaving in any way but as mirror-images of alien realities" (Lewis 1993, 132). In *Men without Art* (1934), arguing against T.S. Eliot's theory of impersonality, Lewis develops his idea from *Paleface* that being a person essentially entails an obligation to be organised and rely on intellect (Lewis 1972, 78–80). He maintains that manifesting a "personality" does not signal artistic inability in case this word is taken to refer not to "an individualist abortion, bellowing that it wants at all costs to 'express' itself", but to "a constancy and consistency in being, as concretely as possible, one thing—at peace with itself, if not with the outer world" (Lewis 1987, 62). Summarising Lewis's positive account of the self, Andrzej Gąsiorek describes it as "structural and trans-historical", determined by the criteria of "constancy, consistency, organisation, order, and stability" (Gąsiorek 1999, 5–6). In much of his criticism Lewis accuses modern social systems, mass culture and, importantly, the acknowledged modernist art and literature of misguiding and distorting the people's selves, whereas the whole idea of modernism as Lewis saw it was to produce independent art which would correspond to his conception of a consistent and detached self.

Lewis did not expect autobiography to naturally embody this vision of the self. On the contrary, when he set out to criticise the destructive tendencies in modern art and thought, subsuming them under one heading as manifestations of relativistic, dependent on fashion, passively receptive, artistically impotent, and subjectivist "Time-mind", he denigrated autobiography by saying that, along with history and biography, it is "more truly than anything else, the proper expression of [...] *chronological* philosophy" (Lewis 1993, xviii). Lewis did not provide the exact definition of this "philosophy", and it is too complicated and inclusive a notion to consider

here in detail,<sup>5</sup> but later on he makes his point about its connection with autobiography clearer in his discussion Proust. Lewis maintains that autobiography is similar to history, which is always selective, never impartial, and always ideological, being “an account of the Past, seen through a temperament of certain complexion, and intended to influence its generation in this sense or in that” (Lewis 1993, 247). The trouble with history, exacerbated by its scientific prestige, is that it can be easily presented and perceived as unconditional truth and thus can be used as an instrument of ideological manipulation akin to advertisement. The same applies to autobiography, “the history of a person written by himself,” which is essentially merely “propaganda for all that the ‘time’-hero has favoured” (Lewis 1993, 248). In Proust’s novels, which Lewis considers his autobiographies, the author “died as a sensational creature in order that he should live as an historian of his dead sensational self” and this way turned himself “into a historical personage by embalming himself in a mechanical medium of ‘time’” (Lewis 1993, 249). What is wrong with such artistic method is that, according to Lewis, by valorising subjectivity and the author’s past experience the resulting work both misleads and misrepresents its subject. Above all, Lewis declares Proust’s novel invalid as a work of art because its obsession with the past precludes creativity and removes it from the concerns of the present, making it hardly valuable for anyone but its author in his “private mental cave”.

Lewis believed that if modern art and literature are to offer a more penetrating and critical insight into the human self, they have to differ from autobiography. If the self is taken to be a solid, consistent and organised unity, then art, “a constant stronghold [...] of the purest human consciousness” (Lewis 1993, 23), can do justice to it better than a first-person historical account. This does not mean that autobiography is worthless, but, in Lewis’s view, such attempts as Proust’s to turn it into art (a novel) are destined to fail. For this reason, Lewis criticises Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), claiming that because its author is “fundamentally autobiographical [...] scrupulously and naturalistically so,” his accurate representation of his childhood and youth “is not promising material for anything but the small, neat naturalism of *Dubliners*” (Lewis 1993, 98). Unlike Proust’s, Joyce’s “autobiographical” book is not accused of aesthetist bias or propaganda of a subjectivist viewpoint. This time Lewis criticises the autobiographical element of the novel for stimulating what he sees as passively copyist attitude in Joyce’s writing and setting limitations for him as an artist.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Edwards provides the best introduction to “Time-philosophy” (Edwards 1993). The first items on his list of the interrelated ideas that Lewis includes in this notion are the principles which “deny creative power to man, or hand creativity over to a larger power of which man is only an instrument; or similarly deny that history results from men’s conscious decisions, attributing a fatality to it instead” (Edwards 1993, 465).



Lewis's rejection of autobiography is far from wholesale. In fact, it concerns not autobiography a genre, but mostly the uncritical and inartistic use of a romanticised history of the author's life in a work of fiction. In a similar fashion, when Lewis opposes "chronological philosophy", he wishes not to entirely cross out the history of the humanity, but to endorse a rational account of it where past is not merged with present, remaining "a Past in which events and people stand in an imaginative perspective, a *dead* people we do not interfere with, but whose integrity we respect" (Lewis 1993, 223).<sup>6</sup>

From this it might appear that an autobiography that Lewis would write has to be deliberately factual and provide a highly rationalised vision of its author's coherent and organised self and the "events and people" that surrounded it. It is, thus, surprising that Lewis begins *Blasting and Bombardiering* not by reiterating the difference between an autobiography and a work of art but, on the contrary, by claiming that any autobiography is inescapably "a kind of novel" and that he is merely the "hero" of his (Lewis 1937, 1). Thereby, from the outset of his first autobiography Lewis takes an approach which, according to his own criteria, is most likely to result in an inaccurate and deceptive picture of his personality and past, like the one exemplified in Proust's fiction. Even if the autobiography did not misrepresent its author, as, according to Lewis, Joyce's book does not, it would only be an inferior novel hardly worth the artist's effort.

*Blasting and Bombardiering* is clearly written against some of its author's ideas concerning the self and modern art as its most productive form of expression. Lewis seems to compose his autobiography despite his conviction that autobiography is likely to be just bad art; that excessive attention to one's subjectivity deforms the self instead of reinforcing its essential integrity; that writing a history, including the history of one's self, is an ideological act not unlike advertisement. An explanation of this apparent contradiction may lie in the fact that *Blasting and Bombardiering* was designed not to be appreciated as a piece of art, even if it cannot escape being a novel, but to act as an instrument of creating a favourable public image of its author and popularising his conception of modernism. In this case the autobiography's shortcomings as a novel, which Lewis would have been ready to admit,<sup>7</sup> turn into the features that provide its author with the opportunities to create publicity for himself and at the same time address the intricacies of the movement in modern literature he helped to shape, stressing the difficulty of his own position within/towards it.

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<sup>6</sup> Max Saunders suggests that this rejection of history and autobiography notwithstanding, Lewis's criticism in *Time and Western Man* is itself autobiographical, "a self-portrait of himself as 'Western Man' not in terms of 'Time', but as a 'self' that can be abstracted out of time; self-portrait as anti-autobiography" (Saunders 2010, 426). The fact that a piece of criticism, not one Lewis's novels or autobiographies, is taken as an illustration of his engagement with the autobiographical shows how influential Lewis's (and the other modernists') repudiation of autobiography and insistence its separation from art still is.

<sup>7</sup> In a letter to Julian Symons, Lewis wrote: "Very naturally, a page of a novel, such as *The Revenge for Love*, takes me as long to write as twenty pages of *Blasting and Bombardiering*—except where the latter demands more formal attention" (Lewis 1963, 247).

### 3. “Becoming a ‘Popular’ Author”

Lewis’s motivation for writing *Blasting and Bombardiering* was highly pragmatic. The rejected preface to the autobiography makes it clear that Lewis initially conceived the book as a collection of gossip stories and reminiscences about his famous contemporaries hoping to appeal to a popular audience (Lewis 1997) and this way to overcome some of his financial difficulties (Smith 1997, 181–182). Later on Lewis gave up this conception, and the subject of the resulting book is mostly his own life as an artist and a gunner during the First World War, not gossip about Pound, Joyce, and Eliot, a small portion of which is included only in the last, fifth, part. Nevertheless, Lewis insists that in his autobiography he is addressing “not other highbrows like [him]self” (Lewis 1937, 3), but a wider middle class audience, for which he is “now becoming a ‘popular’ artist” (Lewis 1937, 5).

Another intention behind *Blasting and Bombardiering* was to give an account of modern art and literature in 1914–1926 that would emphasise Lewis’s significance within it. Critics agree that Lewis’s autobiography was a reaction to the neglect he faced after the war, lagging behind the better-known modernist writers like Joyce or Eliot. To correct this underestimation of himself, Lewis turns his autobiography from a book of gossip into a “project of retrospective reconstruction” (Parsons 2010, 202) aimed at recovering his pre-war artistic reputation and revisiting, alongside his personal experience, the history of modernist literature. Naturally, this project involved many difficulties. Lewis wanted to restore some of his faded avant-garde fame while at the same time conveying his disillusionment with pre-war attempts at truly transformative revolutionary art and to occupy an honourable place alongside Pound, Eliot, and Joyce in the literary history while retaining the position of an independent artist and critic of modernism outside the fashionable mainstream they belonged to. However, what requires explanation is not only the pains Lewis took to make his indeed uneasy case (Rosenquist 2009, 39–40), but also the reasons why he chose to do so in the genre of popular autobiography.

In *Blasting and Bombardiering* Lewis famously notes that “it is somewhat depressing to consider how as an artist one is always holding the mirror up to politics without knowing it” (Lewis 1937, 4). It is a perfect expression of Lewis’s profound disenchantment with the modernist art after the First World War. Instead of being capable of radical social and cultural change, which was the ultimate objective of Lewis’s pre-war avant-garde movement Vorticism and on which Lewis insisted harder than ever in his post-war pamphlet *Caliph’s Design* (1919), art is defined here as a mere reflection of what it is unable to alter. Of course, by this Lewis did not mean that art should be abandoned altogether, only that this limitation has to be recognised and considered if modernism

was to retain anything of the revolutionary drive that brought it to life. This is why in the late 1920s and early 1930s Lewis works out what Paul Edwards calls “‘critical’ modernism”, accusing the writers of “‘advanced’—that is the only significant—contemporary literature” (Lewis 1993, 22) of practicing “a modernism that simply offered ‘new styles’, or that, pretending to rebel against the conformism of the bourgeois society, was actually saturated with regressive and imitative ideology” (Edwards 1998, 126–127).

Published in the late 1930s, *Blasting and Bombardiering* is an assessment of and a reaction to both his avant-gardism in the years around the First World War and the critical phase in his modernism. Although this autobiography to some extent continues Lewis’s critical project, it represents a different approach to modernism, the one that takes as a starting point not the analysis of literary works or a set of philosophical assumptions, but its author’s personal experience and the one that addresses a different reading public

Lewis repeated that he was writing his criticism not for the highbrow, but for “the general educated man or woman” (Lewis 1993, xi). His aim was to propose a system that would allow them “to read any work of art presented to them, and, resisting the skilful blandishments of the fictionist [...] understand the ideologic or philosophical basis of these confusing entertainments” (Lewis 1972, 109). By the time Lewis was working on his autobiography, however, he became sceptical about the possibility of such enlightenment of the common reader. With a reference to *Time and Western Man*, Lewis acknowledges that he “treated of topics which only a handful of people in England know or care anything about” and admits: “I might as well have been talking to myself all that time and that’s a fact” (Lewis 1937, 5).

It is more likely that by “all that time” Lewis means his period of increased activity “as a philosopher and critic” (Lewis 1937, 5) rather than all his career up to the moment of writing. Still, if we consider this early avant-garde phase as well, the dynamics of Lewis’s relationship to his readership may be very roughly sketched as follows. In the Vorticist journal *BLAST* (1914) Lewis proclaimed that the modern art he was bringing to England “will not appeal to any particular class, but to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people” and this way will “make individuals, wherever found” (Lewis 1969, 25–26). Vorticism was not an art to be appreciated by an already existing audience; it was supposed to elevate the most promising from the audience by transforming them into the only state that makes such appreciation possible—into individuals. Lewis expected his later criticism to perform a function similar to the one which he earlier ascribed mostly to art (although it is important to remember that *BLAST* was a “review” which contained criticism as well as art and literary works). It is evident, for example, from the

introduction to *The Art of Being Ruled*, where Lewis states that this book “is not written for an audience already there, prepared to receive it, and whose minds it will fit like a glove” and, therefore, it “must of necessity create its own audience” (Lewis 1989, 13).<sup>8</sup> *Blasting and Bombardiering*, then, marks Lewis’s refusal to attempt to transform his readership into a critically informed audience of independently thinking individuals by means of political, philosophical, and literary criticism. Lewis declares to leave his sophistication aside to convey his first-hand experience to the plain reader: “Life is what I have gone out to get in this book” (Lewis 1937, 4).

Indeed, the autobiography is not a manual for exposing the workings of ideology, although the story that Lewis tells is partially about its pervasiveness, as the remark about art mirroring the politics shows. Instead, by “becoming a ‘popular’ author” (Lewis 1937, 5), an autobiographer, Lewis wanted to access the audience in such a way that they would finally listen. His objective was to make sense of modernism and of his involvement with it and to communicate this sense to the common reader. This aim required a reversal of the previous, critical, approach because this time Lewis did not need to arm his readers against unwilling acceptance of received judgements. On the contrary, he made great effort to persuade the readers of his autobiography that his understanding of modernism is informed, accurate, and should be trusted unconditionally. Lewis promises to “fix for an alien posterity some of the main features of this movement. No one is better fitted to do so [...] I was at its heart. In some cases I was *it*” (Lewis 1937, 257). This way Lewis presents his subjectivity not as a handicap, but as a guarantee of trustworthiness of his account of modernism. The reader is supposed to take Lewis’s word for it, not recognise its historicism which he criticises elsewhere for being propaganda “intended to influence its generation this sense or in that.”

Curiously, while claiming to be as close to modernism as possible and using this claim to assume narrative authority, Lewis insists that his autobiography is based on the principles of detachment and order, which are foundational in his conception of the organised and independent self and in his idea of what modernist art should aspire to be. In the introduction to the autobiography Lewis explains that he is focusing on the war and the post-war periods because they are over and “can be written about with detachment, as things past and done with” (Lewis 1937, 2). One of the purposes of the book, then, is to “get away from war”, writing about which autobiographically “may be the best way to shake the accursed thing off, by putting it in its place, as an unseemly joke” (Lewis 1937, 4). For Lewis, the war is “a magnet” and the post-war is its

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<sup>8</sup> Nathan Waddell underlines a conflict in Lewis’s attitude to the readers of his political books, noticing that his “elitist preferences consistently brushed up against a very different drive to help interested ordinary people to escape from political oppression of every kind” (Waddell 2015, 132).

“magnetic field” (Lewis 1937, 307), which should be neutralized with the help of proper “inspection” and “*revision*” and by establishing “a principle of order” (Lewis 1937, 6).

The modernist writing of Pound Joyce, Eliot, and Lewis, whom the latter distinguishes as the most significant writers of their generation, likewise stems from detachment: “What I think history will say about the ‘Men of 1914’ is that they represent an attempt to get away from romantic art back into classical art, away from political propaganda back into the detachment of true literature” (Lewis 1937, 252). Lewis equates the artistic efforts of the modernists with his own intentions in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, presenting both his autobiography and the modernist art it revises as attempts to achieve detachment from the politics and the world of “*action*” (Lewis 1937, 266).<sup>9</sup>

Lewis also points out that the principles upon which his autobiography relies are in line with his specific modernist strategies. For example, Lewis’s statement that he is “a fanatic for the externality of things” (Lewis 1937, 9) alludes to the theory of satire and the “*external approach*”, which he discussed in *Men without Art* (Lewis 1987, 103). Also, in the last chapter of the autobiography Lewis reminds the readers about his hostility to “time-philosophy”, but does it in an apology for his “inveterate obtuseness where all that is historic and chronological is concerned. It is because I cannot see things as *biography*” (Lewis 1937, 272). This confession contradicts Lewis’s earlier characterisation of his autobiography as a type of history, “self-history” (Lewis 1937, 7) or “private history” (Lewis 1937, 19) and is hardly justified by the autobiography itself, in which Lewis is obsessed with separating “his own career and ‘epoch’ [...] into periods” (Rosenquist 2009, 40). Nevertheless, these remarks show that for Lewis it was important to indicate a continuity between his autobiography and his modernism that preceded it.

This asserted on the level of principles continuity, however, is carried through in a peculiar way. Deborah Parsons, mentioning that in *Blasting and Bombardiering* Lewis attempts to create “an at least *formally* ‘impersonal’ autobiography, in which the past is presented less through subjective ‘reminiscences’ than the relation of externally focused scenes and conversations,” is quick to add it is “in actual fact anything but impersonal” (Parsons 2010, 201). Indeed, in the beginning of his autobiography Lewis establishes a conversational narrative tone, asks the reader to permit him “a certain informality” (Lewis 1937, 8), and performs accordingly throughout the most of the book. However, the function of this informality is not so much to diminish the distance between the author and the reader as to defamiliarise the experience presented in the autobiography for the

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<sup>9</sup> Resistance to the blind, hurried action, which makes it impossible for an individual to think and for an artist to create, is one of the touchstones of Lewis’s modernism. Lewis comes up with his often quoted dictum, “Truth has no place in action” (Lewis 1969, 105), in a foreword to his post-war exhibition “Guns” (1919) catalogue.

writer. In case of the war experience, it has been suggested that Lewis approaches his war memories “from a detached and ironic point of view” (Hardegen 1998, 76), but the carelessness and occasional sarcasm of Lewis’s recollections<sup>10</sup> may in fact mask a trauma (Wood 2010, 20; Einhaus 2015, 50–52). A very different from the expected high modernist impersonality tone of familiarity also allows Lewis to keep ironic distance from his expired avant-garde personas, including the “leader of the ‘Great London Vortex’” (Lewis 1937, 35–40), the society “lion” (Lewis 1937, 50–53), and “the ‘author of *Tarr*’” (Lewis 1937, 89–95). Coupled with Lewis’s aversion to history, which he paraphrases as his lack of “historical competence” (Lewis 1937, 278), this ironic distance also makes it possible to interpret *Blasting and Bombardiering* as a thorough satire on the modernists busy historicising themselves for the posterity (Rosenquist 2009, 75).

In line with these interpretations, *Blasting and Bombardiering* can be viewed as a consistent articulation of Lewis’s disbelief in the possibility to continue the mission of modernism either by means of avant-garde artistic experiment or by elaborate criticism of modern art, culture, and politics. The ultimate goal of the modernist project as Lewis saw it was to upgrade people’s sensibility with the help of revolutionary art which has not been deprived of its transformative potential by politics or ideology. As a result, the “state of mind of relish, fullness and exultation should obtain” (Lewis 1986, 30) and the actual social change should become possible, or at least people become critically aware of the ideological and political implications of their culture that preclude such change. Both options proved unsuccessful. In case of the avant-gardism of *BLAST*, Lewis “mistook the agitation in the audience for the sign of an awakening of the emotions of artistic sensibility” (Lewis 1937, 35), while in fact Vorticism was perceived as nothing more than “the best joke ever” (Lewis 1937, 40). Lewis’s criticism that followed turned out too complicated, harsh, and, probably, far-fetched to involve the audience, let alone transform it.

The purpose of *Blasting and Bombardiering*, however, is not only to explicitly state disillusionment with avant-gardism and scepticism about ideology critique, while at the same time working to create another public persona of the author. No less importantly, the form of popular autobiography allows Lewis to assess the modernist practice from an outside, deliberately non-highbrow and unambitious point of view. It is an attempt to come to common terms with his readers and show them on the example of the book they are reading that because after the war “artistic expression has slipped back into political propaganda and romance”, the first-rate modernist art is

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<sup>10</sup> In his memories of war Lewis cultivates an image of himself as an emotionally uninvolved observer who “experienced none of the conscience-prikings and soul-searchings, none of the subtle anguish” of the other writers about the war (Lewis 1937, 8) and instead “filled the notebook with Stendhalian observations” (Lewis 1937, 53) and read Proudhon in the trenches (Lewis 1937, 152). It does not mean, though, that Lewis did not recognise the human tragedy of what happened, even if at first it had not been obvious to him (Lewis 1937, 63).

no longer possible: “The attempt at objectivity has failed. The subjectivity of the majority is back again” (Lewis 1937, 252).

*Blasting and Bombardiering* negates modernism by declaring the impossibility of art which would appeal to the public while remaining sufficiently detached from its dominant ideology to be able to transform the society. It also refuses the idea of critical modernism, which is destined to fail to attract readers. At the same time, as Lewis conceptualises modernism through detachment and objectivity, his employment of the autobiographical implies that *Blasting and Bombardiering* is itself somewhat modernist. Unable to upgrade the mass subjectivity or escape it by addressing the highbrow public, Lewis makes use of the genre of the popular autobiography. If it has become impossible to get “away from political propaganda back into the detachment of true literature,” as “the Men of 1914” were struggling to do, then what should be objectified and evaluated with detachment is this failed modernist project itself. The popular autobiography serves exactly this purpose as it eschews both the elitist complexity of Lewis’s critical works and the highly demanding idiosyncratic of his fiction. In his autobiography, Lewis no longer criticises the superficial subjectivity or tries to instruct his readers and make them fit for his ambitious project of revolutionary change. Instead, he conveys his vision of modernism to them in ‘their’ genre, both emphasising this movement’s unfulfilled significance and revealing its limitations, which made it necessary to use the autobiographical form in the first place.

#### **4. Conclusion**

*Blasting and Bombardiering* constitutes a peculiar instance of modernist autobiography where most features typically defined as modernist are absent. The reason why it can hardly be called an “assault on traditional notions of what a self, indeed what life, is” (DiBattista and Wittman 2014, xii) is Lewis’s belief that such an assault, which he also recognised in the writing of his modernist peers, is harmful to the self and should be resisted. Nevertheless, the most remarkable feature of Lewis’s autobiography—its unexpected adjustment to the readership of the popular literature—does not follow from the elaborate criticism of modernism which Lewis proposed in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Neither Lewis’s conception of the consistent, detached, and independent self, nor his conviction that a valid modernism has to be an objective artistic expression opposed to propaganda and capable of advancing actual social change can explain the popular form Lewis’s autobiography takes.

One way to look at the unsophistication of *Blasting and Bombardiering* is to interpret it as a gesture against the experimentalism of the modernisms which, unlike his own, managed to gain

popularity and appreciation. On a pragmatic level, Lewis may be said to have written this autobiography to foreground his role as one of modernism's originators and to earn more by selling the book to an audience wider than the typical readership of his criticism and fiction. It may help to explain why Lewis decided to compose a highly biased history of himself despite the fact that in his own estimation it would only amount to a second-rate novel exhibiting all the weaknesses of the "chronological philosophy". At the same time another part of Lewis's intention was to conceptualise and soberly reassess modernism, which was nipped in the bud by the First World War and therefore had not been able to fulfil its objective to forge an aesthetics of detachment and independence. In this context, the choice of the form of popular autobiography may be considered as a self-reflexive commentary about the unattainability of these highbrow modernist aspirations and the necessity of a more direct address to a less sophisticated reader.

The concept of detachment binds together Lewis's conceptions of what should be foundational in the self and in modernist art. It is also crucial in his autobiography. However, to accept that modernism represented in the autobiography is absolutely isolated from the present as a phenomenon "past and over", as Lewis invites the readers to do, would mean to overlook how he also playfully re-enacts the principle of detachment in a different way. By leaving his home ground of stylistic and aesthetic innovation and nuanced ideology critique to write a popular autobiography, Lewis managed to achieve the ultimate detachment from modernism and occupy a position on its very edge. In *Blasting and Bombardiering* Lewis at the same time moves away from the modernist practice and continues it by other means, criticises it for its futility and popularises its principles, proves it dead and brings it to life.



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