

*Against the Stream: Criticism of the
Stream-of-Consciousness Genre in
the Works of Wyndham Lewis
and D. H. Lawrence.*

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The stream-of-consciousness genre includes some of the finest works of modernist prose, but two important modernist writers, D. H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis, explicitly rejected the kind of depiction of consciousness which we find in Dorothy Richardson, Joyce and Virginia Woolf. We must add, however, that they had little in common apart from this dislike of the stream-of-consciousness genre, and their alternatives to it lay in opposite directions. Indeed, Lewis parodied and satirised Lawrence, and the latter thought that in his work "Wyndham Lewis gives a display of the utterly repulsive effect people have on him, but he retreats into the intellect to make his display".¹⁾

In his critical and theoretical works and in his novels, Lewis opposed the 'time children', that is to say, those who attempted to portray in their writing a Bergsonian sense of 'duration'. Somewhat paradoxically, though, his own satirical methods, for example in his portrayal of human beings as mechanisms, are close to Bergson's ideas about the causes of laughter. His works contain extensive condemnations, caricatures and parodies of Joyce and Virginia Woolf and he was particularly severe in his criticism of Gertrude Stein, seeing only a kind of simulated childishness, a false naivety, in her hypnotically repetitive style. He believed that the aim shared by these writers, of giving a sense of the quality of life as it flows through our consciousness, leads to solipsism; the sensation of life becomes important precisely when one has ceased to believe in life's reality.

The attempt to combine the arts is one of the typical features of modernist works, as we can see, for example, in the 'painterly' structure of *To the Lighthouse* and in Joyce's use of counterpoint in *Ulysses*. We might expect Lewis, a writer and painter, to have been sympathetic to this mixing of the arts, but in fact the opposite is the case:

It may be that as a painter I find it easier to be logical and, at least in writing, to remain technically intact, and do not make allowance enough for the itch, so often found in the writer, to do a little painting in words, or to play the musician. I do not propose to go into that question here. But for our present purposes let us imagine a person so complexly talented that he could with equal effect express himself in

musical composition, painting, sculpture or writing—Samuel Butler's ideal person. I think, then, that we should find that person's writing would show little tendency to divest words of their symbolism or to distort them nor to do imitational or 'literary' music, nor to tell stories in paint. The rather shallow 'revolutionism' that consists in a partial merging of two or more arts would be spared him.²⁾

Lewis is thus opposed to that structuring of prose fiction by using analogies from other arts which is such a typical feature of the stream-of-consciousness genre. Lewis saw himself as the 'enemy' of any contemporary artistic movement or style which had gained popularity or prestige, and internal monologue, another typical feature of the stream-of-consciousness genre was high on his list of targets. He thought of it as the opposite of satire, which must restrict itself to the depiction of externals and explicitly rejected the idea of letting the reader into the minds of his characters in order to "see the play of their thoughts".³⁾ *Men Without Art*, in which this argument appears, had its genesis in notes he made for his novel *The Apes of God*, about which he claimed "no book paid more attention to the outside of people".⁴⁾

The 'Apes' of the title are untalented self-styled artists, wealthy amateurs who almost prevent the creation of true art by, for example, forcing up the price of studios in which genuine artists could work. The satire is intended as a kind of modern 'Dunciad', one of the points of resemblance being the fact that most of the immediate butts of the satire were insignificant and are now largely forgotten. Indeed, T. S. Eliot spoke of Lewis's using "howitzers against card houses".⁵⁾ But behind the "card houses" lie the more imposing edifices of Virginia Woolf and Gertrude Stein, as we can see in some of the incidental parodies in the novel, and Joyce himself is caricatured in the figure of Ratner. The novel takes the form of the initiation of a naive 'ladylike' young men into the world of the 'apes' under the tutelage of his patron, Zagreus. The latter is himself an ape, even though he is a disciple of Pierpont, a character who never appears, but whose views at times seem to resemble those of Lewis himself. Lewis's external portrayal of his personae leads to the creation of caricatures of a grotesque kind. In itself, this manner of writing is a repudiation of the stream-of-consciousness writers, but there are also more explicit satirical jibes at and parodies of that genre of writing.

Fredigonde, the principal grotesque of the prologue, was created, according to Lewis, as a criticism of the internal monologue seen as a universal method. It is, he argues, an effective way of portraying only the aged, young children, half-wits and animals. As the main character in the Prologue, Fredigonde's presence broods over the rest of the novel. She is a high-priestess of gossip, the activity which the apes substitute for the creation of art. Lewis's method in the portrayal of Fredigonde is to contrast external reality with her stream-of-consciousness, which is described sarcastically as "the day and night cinema that exists immediately

within".⁶⁾ As in his theoretical writing, it is Gertrude Stein, as the most extreme exponent of the interior point of view, who is explicitly attacked. For this purpose, Lewis coined the verb 'to Stein', meaning 'to think as Gertrude Stein writes', and by extension 'to attend to one's stream of consciousness' or 'to conduct an interior monologue' :

Cut off from the optic or tactile connections, Fredigonde passed most of her time in her mental closet, a hermit in her own head. Sometimes she would Stein away night and morning to herself, making patterns of conversations, with odds and ends from dead disputes, and cat's-cradles of this thing and that — a veritable peasant industry, of personal chatterboxing and shortsighted nonsense.⁷⁾

In a description of Fredigonde rising from her chair we have an extreme example of the external style, the exact opposite of interior monologue :

Without fuss the two masses came apart. They were cut open into two pieces. As her body came away from the dense bolsters of its cyclopean cradle, out into space, the skimpy alpaca forearm of the priestly Bridget, a delicate splint, pressed in against the small of the four-square back. It was applied above the region where the mid-victorian wasp-waist lay buried in adipose.

The unsteady solid rose a few inches, like the levitation of a narwhal. Seconded by alpenstock and body-servant (holding her humble breath), the escaping half began to move out from the deep vent. It abstracted itself slowly. Something imperfectly animate had cast off from a portion of itself. It was departing, with a grim paralytic toddle, elsewhere. The socket of the enormous chair yawned just short of her hind-parts. It was a sort of shall that had been, according to some natural law, suddenly vacated by its animal.⁸⁾

This is typical of Lewis's satire in that Fredigonde is made to seem both animal-like and mechanical at the same time.

When Virginia Woolf's characters are roused from their inner thoughts or reveries the 'reality' which bursts in upon them is often banal and in no sense more important than their inner thoughts. For Lewis, however, this outer reality takes precedence. Fredigonde, awoken by her maid's call is "no longer in the cast of her private photo-play : she is being heavily miladied".⁹⁾ The impersonal pronoun 'one', frequently used in the inner monologues of Virginia Woolf's characters, is mocked by Lewis :

Had one come up (lout that one recognised one was) and dropped a brick — come out with a hearty spanking sex-epithet as an instance, of the real said-roundly, brawny and bollocky, brew — arriving foul-mouthed in the presence of this beastly virgin — with the savage hiccup bred of a black Pilsner — then one would have understood ! One would have apologised. One would have been in the wrong. One would have felt sorry. One would have blushed too !¹⁰⁾

A more specific parody is that of the official car which weaves its way through the London streets and through the consciousness of various characters in *Mrs*

Dalloway, described by Virginia Woolf in the following way :

..... — oh ! a pistol shot in the street outside !

“Dear, those motor cars,” said Miss Pym, going to the window to look, and coming back and smiling apologetically with her hands full of sweet peas, as if those motor cars, those tyres of motor cars, were all *her* fault.

The violent explosion which made Mrs Dalloway jump and Miss Pym go to the window and apologise came from a motor car which had drawn to the side of the pavement precisely opposite Mulberry’s shop window. Passers-by, who, of course, stopped and stared, had just time to see a face of the very greatest importance against the dove-grey upholstery, before a male hand drew the blind and there was nothing to be seen except a square of dove grey.¹¹⁾

This mysterious and dignified limousine becomes a vulgar petrol-wagon in Lewis’s satire :

But there was a sharp explosion. That van again ! Like a bad penny, cracking off as it went, the thing had turned up. It had rushed past him with its bomb. SHELL IS SO DIFFERENT. He grinned after it, it was a thing that was a music-hall turn, the clown-van. He and the clown-van played peep-bo in Bloomsbury, each had a distinct role who could doubt. The thing had recognised him immediately : it went petarding into the next street, tail up. What a van !¹²⁾

The resurrection of Mrs Ramsay in the minds of Mrs McNab and Lily Briscoe (in *To the Lighthouse*) finds its parodic equivalent in Fredigonde’s snobbish fear lest she be ‘buried’ in her maidservant’s consciousness after her death, and brought to life again in that lowly person’s dreams. We are also meant to have in mind here Joyce’s idea of ‘The Dead’ in his short story of that name.

There are other incidental parodies of Gertrude Stein and Joyce in the novel. Dan, a moron because he “thinks like Gertrude Stein writes”,¹³⁾ does indeed at one point begin to think in her ‘continuous present’ style : “It was the trick of mothering that was being his undoing”.¹⁴⁾ In *Ulysses*, Bloom’s bodily sensations are described from within, whereas Lewis presents Dick Wittington’s in an external way :

..... Dick flung his body into a sofa (which gasped in its wheezy bowels) and then slightly eructated, with a heavy zigzag movement up his body, the back of his flat occiput becoming for a moment as stiff as a poker-from hair en brosse, flourishing straight up into the air in the same plane as his neck, and so in a sheer undeviating drop to his coccyx, against the high-backed squatting apparatus to which he had brutally committed his person. Once more a ball of wind made its way irresistibly up his neck. His trunk shook, contracted and relaxed, to assist the slight explosion.¹⁵⁾

In this way Dick is equated with his noisy Bugatti ; to see inanimate things as having as much life as human beings is a recurrent feature of Lewis’s satire. Joyce is caricatured in this and in an earlier novel, *The Childermass*. Lewis was also responsible for an unfavourable comparison between Joyce’s Bloom and Dickens’s Mr Jingle. Joyce replied by incorporating Lewis’s point of view into his characteri-

sation of Professor Jones and other figures in *Finnegans Wake*.

We need to ask whether Lewis offers a satisfactory world-view or style as an alternative to those of the stream-of-consciousness genre. We do not know who the mysterious Pierpont is, whose reported views occupy such a large place in the novel, for he never appears. His opinions are close to those of Lewis himself as stated in his critical works, but within the novel it is not easy to see what we are to make of them, as they are communicated by the 'ape' Zagreus. There is a similar problem in relation to our attitude to the fascist Starr-Smith. T. S. Eliot's very high estimation of Lewis's style is well-known; he thought Lewis "the greatest prose master of my generation".¹⁶⁾ Certainly, his parodies are interesting and his invective powerful, for example in his description of Fredigonde: "The grey cactus welt of her rubber tongue flourishing harshly in the drought of the dessicated head".¹⁷⁾ But this hardly constitutes the new style which Eliot speaks of. Geoffrey Wagner's conclusion seems fair: "The *Apes* is his attempt to create a new language, but even this work is highly dependent on innovations in language, and punctuation too, that were the result of the detested "time philosophy"."¹⁸⁾ We are given no real alternative to the stream-of-consciousness point of view, the genre is simply stood on its head.

D. H. Lawrence rejected the stream-of-consciousness genre, but unlike Lewis, who opposed the 'time writers' by stressing the external and visual, Lawrence argues for something more deeply 'inward' than consciousness – a 'pristine unconscious' which lies beyond even Freud's 'unconscious'. As an adolescent, Lawrence was acquainted with William James's work, as we can see from a casual reference in a letter written in 1908: "On my stream of consciousness has often sailed a cockle boat carrying your tawny image, but the fragile idea of a letter to you which your boat had in tow got wrecked before it came to harbour and set up motor responses".¹⁹⁾ But fifteen years later he was to see the stream-of-consciousness as the "stream of hell which undermined my adolescence".²⁰⁾ This turning away from William James's idea of the stream-of-consciousness went hand with a rejection of those writers whose works became associated with that term, especially Dorothy Richardson, Joyce and Proust:

Through thousands and thousands of pages Mr Joyce and Miss Richardson tear themselves to pieces, strip their smallest emotions to the finest threads, till you feel you are sewed inside a wool mattress that is being slowly shaken up, and you are turning to wool along with the rest of the wooliness.

It's awful. And it's childish. It really is childish, after a certain age, to be absorberly self-conscious.²¹⁾

Too much attention to consciousness implies an over-valuation of rationality and will, and leads to the idea of the self as a controllable machine. It is essentially a narcissistic view of reality. Whereas Conrad Aiken, for example, saw the evolution

of human beings in terms of a widening of consciousness, for Lawrence, mind was quite simply the 'dead end of life'.

Lawrence's image for consciousness is not a river or stream, but a mirror, which indicates that he thought of it as static and narcissistic. In his works it is sometimes associated with the mirror of the Lady of Shalott, and therefore implies a refusal to face life directly. The mirror is of course associated with the visual sense, and so Lawrence is implicitly rejecting that view of the world which Lewis embraced. Differences in attitude towards consciousness in some modernist writers can be seen in their portrayal of physical impressions or sensations. For the stream-of-consciousness writers, Dorothy Richardson, Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the appreciation of our everyday impressions is an important part of the quality of life. The intrinsic goodness of such impressions is summed up by Bloom's "plenty to hear and see and feel yet" as he leaves the cemetery after Paddy Dignam's funeral. For Lewis, the eye is superior to the other organs of sense, and he is not interested in depicting impressionistically the way in which sights impinge upon our consciousness. For him, the eye is objective, and this idea finds its expression in his 'external' style. Although there are many visual elements in his work, Lawrence opposed undue emphasis on sight. Like Lewis, he associated this with the intellect, but he believed modern life to be too mind-dominated and so felt that more emphasis should be given to the senses of hearing and touch. But in this he does not approach the stream-of-consciousness writers, for he believed that these senses are important precisely because they cannot be fully grasped by our consciousness; they penetrate to a deeper level of understanding, which lies in the unconscious (this conceived, of course, as very different from what he calls the psychoanalyst's "sack of horrors").²²⁾

Lawrence's short story 'The Ladybird' illustrates this conception clearly. Lady Daphne's husband, Basil, has been reported missing during the War. She pays a visit to a hospital for wounded enemy soldiers to meet a Hungarian aristocrat, Dionys Psanek, who was a friend of the family before the War. He is gravely wounded and wishes to die. He represents, as his name suggests, the dark world of the instincts and the unconscious. His inexplicable anger is close to that 'discontent' which Freud saw as the inevitable product of civilisation. Daphne is attracted towards him almost against her will, certainly against her conscious will. As so often in Lawrence's work, consciousness is connected with the image of the mirror; the Count's appeal is to something which lies behind the "mirror of consciousness".²³⁾ Lawrence's attitude towards consciousness, the direct opposite of the stream-of-consciousness writers, is conveyed in his description of Daphne "nailed to her fretful self-consciousness".²⁴⁾ It is precisely to this superficial aspect of her personality that her husband appeals, and so we have established a familiar triangle in Lawrence's work, with two men, representing the opposing forces of consciousness

and the unconscious, struggling for the affection of a woman. Like the Count, Basil has been taken prisoner, but in everything else they are diametrical opposites. Basil is associated not with darkness, but with light, and he comes out of the War with a "higher state of consciousness", which of course is something of a misfortune as far as Lawrence is concerned. He returns to England shortly before the end of the War, and the Count is invited to the family mansion. Daphne is torn between the two forces which the men represent.

Dionys is a member of a secret society, which he compares to the Freemasons, whose members are worshippers of the 'dark sun'. As in the works of Dorothy Richardson, Joyce and Virginia Woolf there is that desire, so typical of modernist fiction, for some form of communion which lies outside the normal ties of family, religion, profession and so on. It is a need for a kind of unanimism or freemasonry which is free from the accumulated falsehoods of an established institution. The two men discuss the nature of the link which can exist between men, Basil speaking for a cerebral 'love' of mankind, and the Count arguing for a more basic 'authority'.

The complex mythical references in the story need not be described here, as my main concern is with Lawrence's attitude towards impressions, in this case, aural impressions. Dionys's mysterious singing appeals to Daphne's subconscious self, and she is drawn towards him. In *Fantasia of the Unconscious* Lawrence describes the way in which sound, as opposed to sight, can act upon our 'lower centres', and Dionys's singing appeals in just this way. Unlike the portrayal of impressions in the stream-of-consciousness genre, in Lawrence they are valuable only insofar as they allow his characters to short-circuit consciousness.

Another of Lawrence's short stories, 'The Blind Man' has a similar theme. Isabel Pervin, whose husband has been blinded and disfigured in the War, is awaiting the arrival of an old friend, Bertie Reid. Her life with her husband since his return a year previously has been one of contentment, and together they have discovered a world of intimacy opened up by his blindness. The opposition between the two men, as in 'The Ladybird' is highly schematic, the large, blind, slow-witted Maurice contrasting with the quick, spare, keeneyed Bertie. Since his blindness, Maurice's wife has found some indefinable strength in him: "There's something strange in Maurice's presence - indefinable - but I couldn't do without it. I agree that it seems to put one's mind to sleep. But when we're alone I miss nothing; it seems awfully rich, almost splendid, you know".²⁵ Dionys had the same effect on Daphne in 'The Ladybird':

No, she had found this wonderful thing after she had heard him singing: she had suddenly collapsed away from her old self into this darkness, this peace, this quiescence that was like a full dark river flowing eternally in her soul. She had gone to sleep from the *nuît blanche* of her days.²⁶

Lawrence criticises the stream-of-consciousness writers because in their works the

conscious mind is never 'put to sleep'. The dark river within contrasts with the shallow stream or mirror of consciousness.

Previously, Maurice had rather disliked Bertie, but from his position of inner strength, he wishes to make contact with the man, to establish an emotional friendship, the need for which is indicated in the moods of black depression which he suffers. Bertie, however, shrinks from any physical contact, this being, of course, precisely the way in which the blind man has come to understand the world around him. His heightened sense of touch brings him nearer to the truth than the clear-sighted Bertie. Yet Maurice cannot do without Bertie (and the intellect which Bertie represents), and the extent of his need is shown in the tragic irony that he cannot see that his passionate offer of friendship has not been reciprocated.

Although our sympathies are largely with Dionys and with Maurice in these two stories, Lawrence seems to be asserting the necessity of a balanced opposition between consciousness and the unconscious. The stream-of-consciousness genre, for him, emphasised too much that view of the world which in our modern society is already too dominant; more attention should be paid to the unconscious which he believed could be reached directly by our relatively 'unintellectual' senses of touch and hearing. Unlike Lewis, Lawrence offers us, not a mere inversion of the stream-of-consciousness genre, but rather a truly alternative way of apprehending the world.

Notes.

- 1) D. H. Lawrence, Preface to 'Bottom Dogs', 1929, repr. in Anthony Beal (ed.) D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism* (1956), 1961, p. 411.
- 2) Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, London, 1927, p. 132.
- 3) Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, London, 1934, p. 115.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- 5) Quoted by Geoffrey Wagner in *Wyndham Lewis, A Portrait of the Artist as Enemy*, London, 1957, p. 253.
- 6) Wyndham Lewis, *The Apes of God* (1930), Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 23.
- 7) *ibid.*, p. 18.
- 8) *ibid.*, p. 28.
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 26.
- 10) *ibid.*, p. 69.
- 11) Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), London, 1968, pp. 16-17.
- 12) *The Apes of God*, p. 80.
- 13) *ibid.*, p. 438-9.
- 14) *ibid.*, p. 115.
- 15) *ibid.*, p. 42.
- 16) T. S. Eliot, 'A Note on Monstre Gai', *The Hudson Review*, 7. No. 4 (Winter 1955), p. 526.

Quoted in Geoffrey Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

- 17) *Apes of God*, p. 23.
- 18) Geoffrey Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
- 19) D. H. Lawrence, *Lawrence in Love, Letters to Louie Burrows*, ed. J. T. Boulton, Nottingham, 1968, p. 11.
- 20) D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1923), Harmondsworth, 1971, p. 203.
- 21) Anthony Beal, *op. cit.*, p. 115.
- 22) *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, p. 207.
- 23) D. H. Lawrence, *The Ladybird* (1923), Harmondsworth, 1960, p. 71.
- 24) *ibid.*, p. 46.
- 25) D. H. Lawrence, 'The Blind Man' in *England My England* (1922), Harmondsworth, 1960, p. 70.
- 26) 'The Ladybird', p. 79.