“A MEGRIM OF HUMOUR”: 
LAUGHTER, HUMILIATION, 
AND THE METROPOLITAN IMPASSE OF 
MODERNISM IN WYNDHAM LEWIS’S TARR.

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1. Introduction

When Tarr, Wyndham Lewis’s first novel, was published by the Egoist Press in July 1918 after its abridged version was serialized in The Egoist, it was duly accompanied by statements of endorsement from Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Lewis’s avant-garde colleagues. Writing in the Little Review in March 1918, Pound praised Tarr, the central character of the novel, as a “man of genius surrounded by the heavy stupidities of the half-cultured latin [sic] quarter” (424). Reviewing Tarr half a year after Pound in The Egoist, T. S. Eliot called attention to the novel’s quality of “humour,” which he explained as “the instinctive attempt of a sensitive mind to protect beauty against ugliness; and to protect itself against stupidity” (105). Eliot and Pound share the emphasis on the stupidities depicted in Tarr, which may be considered as typical of the period of early modernism when these writers joined forces to attack what they regarded as signs of cultural decadence around them. In their argument, the artist needs to recognize and fight against the stupidities surrounding him in order to carve out a space for his own artistic innovation. According to Eliot, humour—or “real humour” in his words—may be enlisted as valuable protective armour in such a fight. However, in the latter part of his essay, Eliot turns the argument to a slightly unexpected direction.

Humour, indeed, protects Tarr from Bertha, from the less important Anastasya, from the Lipmann circle. As a figure in the book, indeed, he is protected too well: “Tarr exalts life into a Comedy,” but it remains his (private) comedy. In one scene, and that in contact
with Kreisler, Tarr is moved from his reserve into reality: the scene in which Tarr is forced out of Kreisler’s bedroom. Here there is another point of contact with Dostoevsky, in a variation on one of Dostoevsky’s best themes: Humiliation. This is one of the most important elements in human life, and one little exploited. Kreisler is a study in humiliation. (Eliot 105-6; emphasis in the original)

In this passage, humour is now considered to be too protective. From this angle, Tarr is seen to be overindulged by his “private” sense of humour, and that is why he is subject to a brutal encounter with “reality” later in the story. Eliot’s name for this neglected reality is “humiliation.” Yet apart from characterizing it as “one of Dostoevsky’s best themes,” he offers little explanation for his sense of its great importance; nor does he go on to explicate what ensues from the clash between humour and humiliation in Tarr.1

As a version of modernist Künstlerroman, especially one that was published after the author’s avant-garde project of Vorticism in 1914, Tarr is often read in connection with the aesthetics and politics of early modernism in England. Some scholars emphasize Wyndham Lewis’s (auto-)critique of avant-garde individualism and especially its relation with the tangled question of national characters (Sheppard; Peppis); others focus on the deeper psychopathology of the Vorticist aesthetics that the novel dramatizes through its portrayal of artist characters (Trotter; Gąsiorek). Most readings of the novel agree to consider the structure of the narrative in terms of the absolute opposition between “Art” and “Life,” a theory provided by Tarr himself at a later point in the novel. Yet comparatively little attention has been paid to the violent clash between humour and humiliation in the story that Eliot pointed out but left unexamined in the early review. In this paper, I propose to take up the problem from the point Eliot left it. From the early travelogues of the pre-war years to the satire of the 1930s, and especially in some key essays such as “Inferior Religions” and “The Meaning of the Wild Body,” Lewis famously developed a theory of laughter as a core of his idiosyncratic modernist aesthetics. Reading Tarr in terms of humour and humiliation will enable us to place Lewis’s first novel within the complex process
of the formation of his theory of laughter. The story of Tarr will reveal a disturbingly close connection between humour and humiliation, a connection so intimate that we might almost regard them as each other’s shadow. This recognition will also allow us to shed new light on the complexity of Lewisian laughter and illuminate its political character and some of its crucial ambiguities within the historical context of the period around the First World War.

Part VI of Tarr is titled “A Megrim of Humour,” where Tarr gains a momentary recognition of the serious flaw of his sense of humour after his violent encounter with Kreisler (it is the scene Eliot mentioned in the passage quoted above). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, megrim originally meant migraine, a recurrent, throbbing headache that affects one side of the head and is often accompanied by nausea and disturbed vision; it also means vertigo or dizziness. Other meanings of the word are depression, low spirits, whim, or fancy. Combining the sense of high spirits and that of physical discomfort, the phrase “megrim of humour” is thus rather oxymoronic. However, I shall suggest that Lewisian laughter in Tarr is marked by the moments of clash between humour and humiliation, and the “megrim of humour” best encapsulates the sudden sense of dizziness and discomfort we experience as readers when we encounter such moments. It is this megrim of humour, and the aesthetic/political effects of humiliation that inevitably accompany it, that I shall explore in what follows.

2. Humour as Immaturity

Tarr is set in the international community of artists and quasi-artists in Paris before the First World War. The story focuses on two young men who inhabit the margins of this bohemian community: Frederick Sorbert Tarr and Otto Kreisler. At the beginning of the novel, Tarr, an English artist, makes up his mind to terminate the relationship with his German girlfriend, Bertha, regarding her mediocrity as a blemish on his artistic ambition. Yet through his conversation with Bertha, his determination degrades into indecision, leaving the two in a condition of emotional
stalemate. Meanwhile, Kreisler, a German art student, leads a destitute life, deprived of financial support from his father and a former friend. His passion for Anastasya, a beautiful cosmopolitan girl, remains unrequited; increasingly frustrated, Kreisler brutally rapes Bertha, whom he meets at a ball that ends in complete disorder because of his violent practical jokes. Unable to forget Bertha, Tarr starts to hang around with Kreisler while starting a flirtation with Anastasya. Yet the romantic foursome quickly disintegrates when Kreisler challenges Soltyk, a Polish art dealer, to a duel, kills him by accident, and commits suicide in a police cell near the border between France and Germany. After Kreisler's death, Tarr decides to marry Bertha when she confesses that she is now pregnant with Kreisler's baby, while he continues to see Anastasya.

Almost all interpretations of the novel turn on the contrast between Tarr and Kreisler. Compared with Kreisler's psychopathology and his miserable end, Tarr's aloof intelligence seems to be given better treatment by the author. Indeed, whether or not one chooses to endorse Tarr's philosophy of Art and Life, earlier critics of the novel often regard him as a character who receives Lewis's explicit approval. Tarr is often given a chance to deliver a tirade and assert his own superiority over others, a gesture not too distant from that of Lewis in his Vorticist manifestoes in Blast. According to the narrator, Tarr is often called "[h]omme égoiste." In Tarr's own words, "[the artist's strong emotionality's] first creation is the Artist himself, a new sort of person; the creative man" (T 29; emphasis in the original). In the first page of Blast 1, Lewis announced a Vorticist principle of independence for the artist:

Blast [sic] will be popular, essentially. It will not appeal to any particular class, but to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people, TO THE INDIVIDUAL. The moment a man feels or realizes himself as an artist, he ceases to belong to any milieu or time. Blast is created for this timeless, fundamental Artist that exists in everybody. (Blast 1, unpaginated)

This is echoed by Tarr's following statement to Anastasya, with a more explicit tone of elitism: "I believe that the best has in reality no Time
and no Country” (T 235, emphasis in the original). This doctrine of independence is combined with contempt for those mediocre people that cannot attain such self-creation: most explicitly Kreisler, who heads down a path of self-destruction, dogged by a humiliating sense of dependence on others. According to Tarr, Kreisler’s fate was a result of “an attempt to get out of Art back into Life again, like a fish flopping about who had got into the wrong tank” (302). Understood along this axis of opposition, the difference between Tarr and Kreisler would be absolute.

Yet as many critics are quick to point out, one of the problems with this line of interpretation is that Tarr’s self-creation is more often asserted by himself than objectively demonstrated, and the narrative of the novel offers no scene which convincingly presents his artistic attainment. Moreover, Tarr’s tirade is frequently contradicted by his listeners. Bertha dismisses his speech as “this rigmarole” (67). When Anastasya quarrels with him, she shouts, “Twenty-five francs to be your audience while you drivel about art?” (305). Even at an earlier scene, Hobson pooh-poohs Tarr by saying, “You contradict yourself” (35). Indeed, in spite of his declared contempt for sexuality, the famously compressed ending of the novel presents Tarr engaged in a series of affairs with women who replace Bertha and Anastasya but still reproduce the “stodgy” domesticity of the former and the “swagger” sex of the latter. Tarr’s sexuality repeats the pattern of oscillation between the two types of women; as such, his future is trapped in a movement as predictable as that of a “pendulum” (320). As in the case of Kreisler, it is not “Art” but “Life” that determines Tarr’s future destiny.

As the first novel of a modernist, and one which certainly drew on the author’s real-life experience for its material, Tarr is often compared with other works of modernist Künstlerroman, such as James Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916) and D. H. Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers (1913). Künstlerroman, or the novel of the artist, is often considered to be a version of Bildungsroman, a novel which follows the growth of its central hero from childhood to maturity (Levin 41-42). Yet a comparison with these works only serves to foreground the difference of Tarr and confirms its hero’s inadequacy as a satisfactory figure of the artist. As Scott Klein observes, it is true that the novels of Joyce and
Lawrence also subject their central characters to the process of “pervasive ironizing” (xxiii) that effectively unsettles the readers’ guileless trust in the certainty of their heroes’ achievement. Yet the ambiguity of their destiny also allows us to project a desirable, more satisfactory future beyond the end of the novel. For example, Joyce’s Stephen resolves “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (276), while Lawrence’s Paul Morel decides to walk “towards the city’s gold phosphorescence,” declining to follow his dead mother “to the darkness” (464). Although the conflicts between the artists’ visions and their unsympathetic environment remain unresolved, these endings emphasize the heroes’ unquenched ambitions and foreshadow the figure of a mature artist, a harbinger of the new and transfigured world. In light of this prospect, even the absence of the work of art, which Ernst Bloch sees as characteristic of the novel of the artist, paradoxically becomes, in Fredric Jameson’s words, “a hole in the present which marks the place of a Utopian future to come” (Archaeologies 125).

It is exactly such invocation of the Utopian future that is lacking in Tarr’s entirely predictable future movement between the two types of women. Nor is there any struggle with “accidents of birth” that the artist needs to go through to reach “perfect conditions somewhere,” in Anastasya’s opinion (T 235). In Hugh Kenner’s words, Tarr is typically “the Lewisian Man from Nowhere” (32); Tarr does not provide any scenes of its hero’s childhood nor the process of his formation, thus effectively breaking the affinity with the plot of Bildungsroman that exists in the form of typical Künstlerroman. Yet this does not mean that Tarr as a novel does not pose the question of maturity to its characters. On the contrary, the narrative constantly hints at their cryptic immaturity. In the opening conversation with Hobson, Tarr is observed to look “a complete child” (T 25) and his impromptu lecture on Art is compared to a “childish sport” (27). His immaturity is also observed by his girlfriends; Bertha used to say to him, “You were too young” (67), while Anastasya remarks, near the end of the novel, “You haven’t grown up yet” (296). In fact, childishness is one of the features shared by Tarr and Kreisler. Kreisler is repeatedly described to behave “like a child” (119, 176, 198, 269). In his duel with Soltyk, Kreisler “was now a Knabe. He was young and
cheeky” (271). As the narrative progresses toward Kreisler’s abject death, his childish behaviour worsens, until he pretends to be playing make-believe even when he prepares a noose for suicide, “like a boy preparing the accessories of some game” (285). If Tarr’s immaturity implies that his freedom is only another name for a childish irresponsibility, Kreisler’s suicidal make-believe reveals a darker possibility that such a lack of growth might in the end condemn one to the fate of self-destruction and a complete obliteration of a Utopian future.

From the late 1920s onward, Wyndham Lewis famously launched his savage critique of “the Child-Cult,” first expounded in Time and Western Man (1926) and described most memorably in the satirical portrayal of the Finnian Shaws, or “God’s own Peterpaniest family” (498) in The Apes of God (1930). For Lewis, the Child-Cult indulged by the rich amateurs was one of the clearest symptoms of the general social decay that afflicted the post-war Western countries and was particularly harmful to the authentic creation of adult, professional artists. We may be able to see an embryo of this post-war social critique in the dilemma of immaturity embodied by the main characters in Tarr.

However, more significant in this context is the connection of this problem with Lewis’s polemic against “the English Sense of Humour.” In an early scene of the novel, Tarr castigates “English humour” for providing the English youth—including himself—with an imperfect training for facing real-life problems. According to Tarr, humour, the defining characteristic of the English people, is “nothing but a first rate means of evading reality.” On the surface, it allows them to deaden their feelings and protect themselves with “this envelope of cynicism,” thus serving as an “excellent armour in times of crisis or misfortune.” Yet paradoxically, because of such protective armour, “the man inside” remains unhardened and oversensitive, while it also enables him to keep “the immense reserves of delicacy, touchiness, [and] sympathy” (T 42) within. In other words, “English humour” encourages one to develop a division within the self—hard exterior and soft interior. Thus, Tarr blames “English humour” both for paralyzing the all-important sense of reality and allowing him to remain soft and immature inside. Tarr’s polemic against humour is consistent with Lewis’s own argument in the
1915 preface to the novel. With the wartime situation in mind, Lewis recommends his public to drop “the maudlin and the self-defensive Grin” which, in his diagnosis, exhibits “the worship of the ridiculous” and prevents them from facing “the fact of existence” at the time of national adversity (14-15, emphasis in the original). As in Tarr’s polemic, humour is regarded as an over-developed means of self-defence that makes one’s grasp on reality tenuous. In this connection, humour itself becomes a symbol of the national immaturity. Given this agreement between Lewis and Tarr, it is possible to read the story of Tarr as an illustration of Lewis’s polemic against the English sense of humour.

In discussions of Lewis’s ideas of humour and laughter, most critics focus on the early influence from Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic and its gradual transformation to Lewis’s own in the “Wild Body” stories (Lafourcade; Sherry). Here I would suggest that it is also important to consider Lewis’s complex reaction against “English humour” in order to understand the formation of his theory of laughter. The question of humour is a constant point of reference for the manifesto of Vorticism. In the notorious “Blast & Bless” pages of the Blast 1 (1914), Lewis both celebrates and attacks English humour; humour is “blasted” as the “Arch enemy of REAL” (17) while it is also “blessed” as “the great barbarous weapon of the genius among races” (26). This contradiction between the two aspects of humour—as a symptom of self-defensive delusion and an expression of aggressive energy—may be resolved with reference to Sigmund Freud’s theory on the same topic. The advantage of Freud’s theory can be found in the terminological distinction between jokes and humour that are often mixed up both in Lewis’s work and also in the popular usage. According to Freud in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious (1905), various joke techniques enable one to overcome the inhibition from censorship by disguising repressed wishes; thus, the pleasure of laughter at jokes is characteristically released “from sources that have undergone repression,” namely, the unconscious (134). Yet insofar as the pleasure of jokes is derived from the repressed energy of the unconscious, they are always implicitly or explicitly “tendentious” or even aggressive, as in the cases of Jewish jokes and obscene jokes.

However, in a later essay titled “Humour” (1927), Freud comes
to make a sharper distinction between jokes and humour and prizes the latter over the former because, according to Freud, humorous attitudes, especially when addressed to oneself in a moment of danger, possess a degree of dignity that is wholly lacking in aggressive jokes. Freud argues that humour enables one to reject the claims of reality and assert the triumph of ego; this is made possible only by shifting the mental emphasis from the ego to the super-ego. The adult-like super-ego, privileged by a certain mental distance from the ego’s actual predicament, allows it to underestimate or disregard its possibility of suffering. In a memorable expression by Freud, humour comforts the intimidated ego by saying: “Look! here is the world, which seems so dangerous! It is nothing but a game for children—just worth making a jest about!” (166). The essence of Freudian humour therefore lies in belittling the world of reality and reducing it to “a game for children.”

Thus, the two faces of Lewis’s humour—as self-defence and an aggressive “weapon”—seem to correspond to Freud’s distinction between humorous attitudes and aggressive jokes, although Freud and Lewis don’t share views on their respective values. While Freud notices the closeness of the humorous denial of reality to “the regressive or reactionary processes” in psychopathology (163), he still appreciates the value of humour since it helps one to withstand suffering from a harsh reality. On the other hand, Lewis seems to see a greater danger in such humour than in aggressive jokes because the former encourages one to behave like “children” under the delusion of “the maudlin and the self-defensive Grin.” For Lewis, such child-like self-delusion is especially harmful in the context of the First World War. Lewis writes in an article in Blast 2 (1915) that the “Englishman seems to consider that a Grin (the famous English ‘sense of Humour’) covers a multitude of sins” (11). Here, humour comes to be seen as a symptom of collective complacency that refuses to recognize their involvement in the violence of mass slaughter. Therefore, Lewis’s argument against humour demands that we recognize the aggressiveness within ourselves, the repressed energy that Freud ascribed to jokes. Hence the frequent intersection of comedy and tragedy in Lewis. As the Vorticist manifesto claims, “We only want Humour if it has fought like Tragedy” (Blast 1 31). In “Inferior Religions” (1917), Lewis suggests
that “Laughter is the representative of Tragedy, when Tragedy is away.” Without resolving Freud’s worries about “tendentious” jokes, Lewis paradoxically recommends aggressive laughter instead of self-defensive humour insofar as it is both a vicarious discharge, and recognition, of the violent energy that has been hidden from consciousness by means of the “English Sense of Humour.”

3. The Metropolitan Impasse

However arbitrary it may seem, Lewis’s identification of the sense of humour with Englishness is not entirely his wilful invention. T. S. Eliot in his review of Tarr confirms that “Humour is distinctively English” (105). According to Simon Critchley, before the late seventeenth century, “humour” signified “a mental disposition or temperament.” But “the association of humour with the comic and jocular . . . arises in the period of the rise of the modern nation state, in particular the astonishing rise of Britain as a trading, colonizing and warring nation after the establishment of constitutional monarchy in the Glorious Revolution of 1688” (71; ellipsis mine). The modern sense of humour was widely believed to be an English invention in eighteenth-century France. Whether humour was really invented by the English or not, this view is relevant to our discussion as it enables us to elaborate on the questions of humour and nationality in Tarr.

Fredric Jameson argues that Lewis’s awareness of various national traditions led him to write a novel that provides a “portrait gallery of international Bohemia in the prewar City of Light” (Fables 90), in which a shifting network of cosmopolitan characters produces a “national allegory” of the nation-states that were heading to the final collision in the First World War. This does not mean that each individual character of Tarr is meant to represent his or her national characteristics in isolation (such as Tarr as a “typical Englishman” or Kreisler as a “typical German”). Rather, the international setting of Lewis’s Paris transforms the allegorical system of the novel into a “sheer, mobile, shifting relationality of national types” (91) in which each character’s (mis)recognition of each
other’s national types is ultimately determined by the all-encompassing structure of differences and hostilities. However unstable it may seem, Jameson suggests that “the pan-European allegory” of Tarr still provides a provisional solution to the particular representational dilemma of the period. In the period of imperialism, a transnational movement of monopoly capital widens the gap between the lived experience of each nation and its structural involvement in the wider international situation. From this angle, Tarr’s international, metropolitan perspective may be seen both as a critical reflection on “the increasing inability of English life to furnish the raw materials for an intelligible narrative code” and as an attempt to achieve an “aesthetic totality” that overcomes such limitations at the level of epistemology (94-95).

Thus, at one level, Tarr’s (and Lewis’s) polemic against “English humour” is exactly such a critical reflection on the inability, or unwillingness, of English liberal perspective to perceive the violent reality of competing Western imperial nations. After all, according to Tarr, humour is “nothing but a first rate means of evading reality.” Such criticism may be especially relevant to the first other English character Tarr encounters in the novel, Alan Hobson, whom Tarr scorns as “the dregs of Anglo-Saxon civilization . . . the lees of Liberalism” (T 34; emphasis in the original; ellipsis mine). In Tarr’s critical gaze, Hobson is revealed to be a specimen of “bourgeois-bohemians” that embodies the spirit of hypocritical humour as he disguises his superior wealth with deliberately shabby clothes—“a shabbiness you have not merited by suffering neediness” (33).

Yet at another level, the narrative also adds a curious twist to this seemingly straightforward ideological critique by making Tarr himself another character deeply contaminated by the same spirit of “English humour” (as he himself confesses in a subsequent talk to Butcher). Insofar as Tarr’s symptomatic immaturity is blamed on the English sense of humour, this point brings us back to the issue of the novel’s residual connection with the genre of Bildungsroman, conventions which, according to Franco Moretti, underwent a sudden transformation and strange death at the time of early modernism. For Moretti, Bildungsroman in nineteenth-century Europe was a literary form that performed a great
symbolic task of containing the unpredictable change of modernity by representing it through the figure of a youth growing to maturity. However, from around the end of the nineteenth century, the task became insurmountable as it became more and more difficult to accommodate the rich subjectivity of youth within the powerful social institutions that were becoming increasingly impersonal. In such a world, the narrative of maturity turns out to be an unattainable goal, and the figures of youth come to endure the dilemma of immaturity in traumatic encounters with crushing, impersonal institutions (230-233). We can combine the argument of Moretti and that of Jameson since the growing power of impersonal social institutions was itself generated by the movement of transnational capital in this period. From this perspective, we might consider the pan-European allegory of *Tarr* as a formal attempt that takes over the task of *Bildungsroman* insofar as it was the growing power of transnational capitalism that hastened the collapse of the latter while also posing the representational dilemma to which the former was a symbolic, if provisional, reply.

Yet if this is indeed the case, why is the dilemma of immaturity blamed on characteristics of the sense of humour that both Tarr and Lewis see to be distinctly English, that is, national? At this point, we need to revise Tarr’s polemic against humour and explore the possibility that it is not only “English humour” but also the traits of nationhood themselves that pose the dilemma of immaturity for the characters in *Tarr*. The argument may seem rather paradoxical because, according to Jed Esty, it was the discourse of nationhood which used to lend its symbolic power to the narrative of formation to achieve its task, i.e. to contain the unpredictable change and expansive force of modern capitalism within the figure of a maturing youth. Improving on Moretti’s point, Esty claims that it was only within the collective destiny of “national historical time” that the classic *Bildungsroman* was able to narrate the process of maturity and “reconcile the open-ended time of an expansive modernity and the cyclical time of local tradition” (75). Given this symbolic bond between nationhood and maturity in *Bildungsroman*, we might say that the association between nationhood and immaturity in *Tarr* is perverse only on the surface; this is because at a time when the gulf between the
domestic experience of a nation and the structural reality of transnational capitalism widens, it is exactly the perspective of a national experience itself that now imposes a narrow limit to any attempt at bridging the gulf and reaching toward the international or global reality. In “The Meaning of the Wild Body” (1927), Lewis quotes the following sardonic remark of Schopenhauer: “He who is proud of being ‘a German,’ ‘a Frenchman,’ ‘a Jew,’ can have very little else to be proud of” (CWB 158). We can also understand the certain degree of advantage conferred on Anastasya from this perspective. As she says to Tarr, “My parents are Russian. =I was born in Berlin and brought up in America. =We live in Dresden” (T 213). As a Russian-German cosmopolitan with American upbringing, Anastasya claims a wide transatlantic perspective that cannot be easily available for others trapped in their national experiences. Thus, in the world of the pan-European national allegory of Tarr, it is not only “English humour” but also the fact of his nationality that Tarr, or any other character in the novel, needs to outgrow in order to overcome his or her immaturity and become an ideal self-creating artist.

Yet as will be clear enough, Tarr is not a Bildungsroman, and the pan-European allegory is ultimately a double-edged device to surmount these difficulties. On the one hand, the international community of Paris enables them to behave as expatriates and distance themselves from the narrow confines of their mother countries. On the other hand, however, their expatriate status doesn’t necessarily guarantee any epistemological privilege for them since such a standpoint might be a result of their easy dependence on the metropolitan environment: an environment that develops to be international only because of its structural centrality within the system of transnational capitalism. Indeed, trapped within this environment of “impersonal institutions” (Moretti 233), the characters’ horizon might remain narrowly private, as the novel announces from its very first paragraph:

Paris hints of sacrifice. =But here we deal with that large dusty facet known to indulgent and congruous kind. It is in its capacity of delicious inn and majestic Baedeker where western Venuses twang its responsive streets, and hush to soft growl before its statues, that
it is seen. It is not across its Thébaïde that the unscrupulous heroes chase each other’s shadows. They are largely ignorant of all but their restless personal lives. (T 21)

It is thus neither coincidental nor surprising that the main preoccupation of Tarr in the novel—how to manage his relationships with women such as Bertha and Anastasya—impresses the readers as entirely, and rather meanly, personal. Meanwhile, the description of the Bonnington Club, where Kreisler engages in a bizarre practical joke at a ball, comically illustrates a shaping force that the metropolitan environment wields over the group of helpless “bourgeois-bohemians.” The interior of the Club building was deliberately designed to be ambiguous so that it can serve multiple purposes; as a result, the “Club became athletic or sedentary according to the shifts and exigencies of this building’s existence. The members turned out in dress clothes or gymnasium get-up as the building’s destiny prompted, to back it up” (146). In this passage, it is not their independent wills but “the building’s destiny” that commands the lives of these metropolitan expatriates.

To a large extent, the cultural significance of Tarr can be found in its ironic commentary on the double nature of the metropolitan environment in this period: its advantages and drawbacks for individual artists.9 In a famous essay titled “Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), the German sociologist Georg Simmel offers a keen observation on this double nature of the metropolis. In Simmel’s view, the depersonalized space of the metropolis paradoxically facilitates and debilitates the potential of individuality all at once:

From one angle life is made infinitely more easy in the sense that stimulations, interests, and the taking up of time and attention, present themselves from all sides and carry it in a stream which scarcely requires any individual efforts for its ongoing. But from another angle, life is composed more and more of these impersonal cultural elements and existing goods and values which seek to suppress peculiar personal interests and incompatibilities. (338)
On the one hand, Tarr’s euphoric stroll in the city street in the following quote seems to serve as a perfect illustration of the former aspect: “Tarr felt the street was a pleasant current, setting from some immense and tropic gulf, neighboured by Floridas of remote invasions” (T 50). However, the other, more ominous possibility of the city life finds its nightmarish realization in Kreisler’s experience. His Paris room “looked like some funeral vault” (77). For Kreisler, the room of his French girlfriend was like a “[c]ell of the unwieldy tragic brain of the city, with a million other similar cells, representing the overwhelming uniform force of brooding in that brain” (110). The city dwellings come to disclose their mournful, or indeed “tragic,” face when their uniformity spells death to the individuality of their inhabitants. Even though the metropolitan advantage might give them a chance to escape from the narrow confines of their nationality, the overwhelming force of the city space might eventually crush their lives into insignificance after exploiting them as tiny cogs in its impersonal machinery.

This observation suggests that our picture of Tarr’s commentary on the metropolis is complete only when we recognize a mutually complementary relationship between the experience of Tarr and that of Kreisler. From another angle, we can suggest that it is only because the parallel narrative of Kreisler shoulders all the disastrous possibilities of the dependence on the metropolitan space that Tarr is allowed to indulge in a comic battle with the consequences of his own immaturity. At this point, it is crucial to recognize not only the “Oedipal nightmare” (O’Keeffe 377) but also a grotesque reversal of classic Bildungsroman in the fate of Otto Kreisler. Apart from his unsuccessful career as an art student, Kreisler’s predicament began when his father married Kreisler’s former fiancée; moreover, his friend Volker, whom Kreisler used to sponge off of, shifts his favour to Soltyk, the Polish art dealer. Deprived of their financial support and increasingly destitute, Kreisler comes to conceive a plan to vent his frustration on Soltyk on a false ground of a triangle love affair involving Anastasya: “Anastasya now provided him with an acceptable platform from which his vexation might spring at Soltyk. There was no money or insignificant male liaison to stuff him down into grumpiness. ‘Das Weib’ was there” (T 121). In fact, Kreisler’s
subsequent encounters with Bertha and Tarr play only an insignificant part in this mad series of displacement, where the objects (his father, his former fiancée, Anastasya, and Soltyk) and the reasons (sex and money) of Kreisler’s hatred swiftly take the place of each other. In order to assuage his feelings of humiliation, he finally resorts to the conventions of the duel, arbitrarily asserting his honour as a German “Freiherr” (263) which is compromised by Soltyk. By willingly becoming a national type, Kreisler covers up his humiliation with dishonour that can be repaired in the armed exchange. In other words, if the traditional heroes of Bildungsroman slowly mature into a symbolic figure of the nation, Kreisler quickly regresses from a metropolitan expatriate into a childish play-acting of the ferocious national stereotype. Kreisler’s regression effectively illustrates the fragility of both the metropolitan advantage and the pan-European allegory of the novel as a solution to the impasse of symbolic immaturity.

4. Laughter and Being Laughed At

In his insightful argument on the emergence of modernism, Raymond Williams claims that “the changing cultural milieu of the metropolis” had provided a great stimulus and a special privilege for the artists and intellectuals of the early twentieth century. As a centre of the ever-expanding imperial networks, the metropolis created “the simultaneous cosmopolitan access to a wide variety of subordinate cultures” (44). At the same time, the metropolis also allowed these artists and intellectuals to liberate themselves from “their national or provincial cultures,” encouraging them to join in “a novel and dynamic common environment” where the medium of their own practice—namely, language—was the only constitutive factor of their community (45). However, Williams also sees a serious limitation to the advantage of what he terms as the “metropolitan perceptions” since there was no stable, viable society to which their artworks could be related. Thus, Williams finally recommends that we see the metropolitan privilege of modernism only as a “specific historical form, at different stages.” According to
him, this exercise of demystification “involves looking, from time to time, from outside the metropolis: from the deprived hinterlands, where different forces are moving, and from the poor world which has always been peripheral to the metropolitan systems” (47).

Satirically exposing the meanness and shallowness of the metropolitan expatriate life in Tarr, Wyndham Lewis seems to agree with Williams’s sense of the ultimate limitation of the metropolitan perceptions. However, by confining his characters within the narrow quarters of Paris, Lewis hardly gives them a chance to dislocate the metropolitan perceptions and see the environment “from outside the metropolis.” In spite of various reasons to go home, both Tarr and Kreisler resist the destiny of repatriation to their respective mother countries. Meanwhile, when they quarrel in a Paris café, they passionately, if inadvertently, engage in savage denunciation of each other’s national characteristics; as a result, they need to take an awkward pause “to allow the acuter national susceptibilities to cool” (T 225).

Preferring to stay in the metropolis, yet unable to shake off their “national susceptibilities,” their horizons are perpetually trapped in the pan-European national allegory consisting of competing Western imperial nations, whose “ultimate, conflictual ‘truth’” is, according to Jameson, always the catastrophe of the First World War (91).

At this point, we can find an unexpected aspect of Lewis’s aesthetic of laughter as an attempt at transcending this particular impasse. In “The Meaning of the Wild Body,” Lewis formulates an absolute distinction between mind and body as a basic premise of his theory of laughter. Jamie Wood points out that this is often understood as a sign of Lewis’s anti-humanitarianism, “with Cartesian dualism remapped as the opposition of the laughing observer to the wild body, as reason to impulse, and as oligarchy to democracy” (393-94). Yet as Wood continues to argue, Lewis ultimately refuses to attribute the vantage position of “the laughing observer” to any particular group of people. Paradoxically, the crux of Lewis’s argument is rather in postulating the position of “absolute observer” from which everything and everyone—including oneself—comes to appear ridiculously absurd. For example, Lewis argues that it is comparatively easy for the French to laugh at the
absurdity of the Germans, or vice versa. Yet “[w]hat is far more difficult to appreciate, with any constancy, is that, whatever his relative social advantages or particular national virtues may be, every man is profoundly open to the same criticism or ridicule from any opponent who is only different enough.” Thus, everyone, including the absolute observer, is equally ridiculous under the harsh light of absurdity. In other words, such a moment of absolute laughter might allow one to go beyond the narrow confines of one’s national perspective, even if temporarily. However, Lewis is also keenly aware of the difficulty of sustaining such an insight; “No man has ever continued to live who has observed himself in that manner for longer than a flash. Such consciousness must be of the nature of thunderbolt. Laughter is only summer-lightning. But it occasionally takes on the dangerous form of absolute revelation” (CWB 158; emphasis in the original).

In Men Without Art (1934), a later work of criticism, Lewis also calls this absolute laughter “inhuman laughter,” but is more sceptical of its possibility. Yet he still postulates a kind of laughter which, although it stops short of becoming “inhuman laughter,” allows us to gain a minimum value of self-reflection. “There is no reason at all why we should not burst out laughing at a foetus, for instance. We should after all only be laughing at ourselves!—at ourselves early in our mortal career” (Men 92; emphasis in the original). Thus, it is toward the moment of this “self-reflexive laughter” (Miller 49) that the poetics of Lewis’s mature period orients us.

With his frequent fits of laughter, and his self-proclaimed battle with “English humour,” we might think that the figure of Tarr anticipates the agent of such reflection. Yet as Michael North rightly points out, “[Tarr] is no more capable of forsaking humor than he is of ceasing to breathe” (130). Even when he makes up his mind to separate from Bertha, Tarr intends to do so in the spirit of humour: “He was giving up play. But the giving up of play, even, had to take the form of play. He had seen in terms of sport so long that he had no other machinery to work with” (T 45). Accordingly, it is only when his machinery of humour starts to creak that Tarr approaches a point of self-reflection:
His sardonic dream of life got him, as a sort of Quixotic dreamer of inverse illusion, blows from the swift arms of windmills and attacks from indignant and perplexed mankind. He, instead of having conceived the world as more chivalrous and marvellous than it was, had conceived it as emptied of all dignity, sense and generousness. The drovers and publicans were angry at not being mistaken for legendary chivalry or châtelains. The very windmills resented not being taken for giants! The curse of humour was in him, anchoring him at one end of the see-saw whose movement and contradiction was life. (243)

This is exactly the moment we feel the “megrim of humour,” when Tarr visits Kreisler’s bedroom and is humiliatingly chased away by his dog whip. Until this point, Tarr has been playing the part of an “obstacle” between Bertha and Kreisler after he came to know the beginning of their strange liaison. Yet by refusing to take the issue seriously, his spirit of humour prevents Tarr from facing the challenge of Kreisler, who is enraged by Tarr’s supercilious attitude. The shock of humiliation grants him a momentary self-reflection on his own meanness.

But Tarr’s behaviour at this point is actually even meaner than he is allowed to notice. When Tarr befriends Kreisler, he doesn’t know that Bertha was brutally raped by Kreisler; she hides the fact to avoid a fight between the two men because she is “anxious for Tarr” (228). In his ignorance, Tarr is disdained by Kreisler: “A question that presented itself to Kreisler was whether Tarr had heard the whole story of his assault on his late fiancée? The possibility of his knowing this increased his contempt for Tarr” (230). Tarr is still kept ignorant even at the end of the novel. He is in no way an “absolute observer”; as T. S. Eliot pointed out, “he is protected too well” by the sense of humour to reach the laughter of appropriate self-reflection.

With the characters lacking any appropriate level of self-knowledge, Tarr turns into a grotesque comedy of self-delusions. Rather problematically, Lewis’s aesthetic of laughter also threatens to degrade into merely “tendentious” laughter as understood by Freud. Certainly, we can observe that Lewis frequently derives his comic effect
from the process of scapegoating, whereby a particular community turns an alien individual or group into an object of their laughter by projecting its internal contradiction onto the other.\textsuperscript{11} It may be seen that Tarr sometimes behaves as the satiric executioner to Kreisler as the central comic scapegoat of the novel. Yet I would contend that this is the point of ambivalence in \textit{Tarr}. In his famous theory of the comic, Henri Bergson regards comedy as a communal regulatory mechanism in which a community rectifies, through violently laughing away, some individual aberrations which threaten the group continuity. But Bergson also calls attention to the experience of being laughed at: “Being intended to humiliate, [laughter] must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed” (187). If “Kreisler is a study in humiliation,” as Eliot says, it is a humiliation of being laughed at that Lewis insistently explores in the psychodrama of Kreisler.

This is not to find any moral value in the figure of Kreisler as a victim of abject humiliations. Rather, the novel repeatedly dramatizes the connection between humiliation and violence. For example, Kreisler is laughed at by Anastasya exactly when he is enraptured by his practical-joking in the Bonnington Club. “That laugh had driven him foaming, fugitive and confused, into the nearest chair. He could not turn round and retaliate at the time. . . . He would go and strike her across the mouth, spit in her face, kiss her in the middle of the dance, where the laugh had been!” (T 154; ellipsis mine). Yet Kreisler cannot move, being paralyzed by his own rage and humiliation. As Steven Connor observes, “Shaming people makes them angry. Sometimes their anger is a flaring refusal of shame. Sometimes it breeds with shame, and becomes a composite anger-shame” (215). In the case of Kreisler, it is as a refusal of and retaliation for the shame he suffered that he flares up into his subsequent violent performance.

Adam Phillips compares the experience of being laughed at to a situation in which someone takes and circulates photographs of yourself that you cannot stand. “The other person or people no longer care to protect, or wholly disregard, the images of yourself that you believe you need to sustain you. Humiliation strips the self of its safeguards” (41). In one of his earliest writings, “Le Père François” (1910), Lewis describes
the antics of a French vagabond who lost his former social position yet still try to keep playing at it “as though it were a theatrical rôle.” He does so because, according to Lewis, “Becoming one’s self would be the brand of the lowest degradation of which man is susceptible” (CWB 281). Kreisler frantically takes up a succession of roles—from art student through mad practical joker to dishonoured duellist—in order to avoid being stripped down to his naked self by humiliation. We might observe a vicious circle in this process, for if laughter rips away the mask of the humiliated, the humiliated may take up another mask all the more desperately for the threat of exposure. Rape, manslaughter, and suicide are the most gruesome consequences of this ever-escalating process. Yet laughter and humiliation might not be as distant from one another as this suggests. Adam Phillips claims, “We only laugh at those with whom we feel we have an affinity that we must repudiate, that we feel threatened by. Ridicule, in other words, is a terror of sociability. We laugh at to sabotage our feeling of being at one with; but the feeling of at-oneness has already happened” (43). Thus, if we can really find the feeling of at-oneness even within the terror of sociability, we might also be able to find a moment when the distinction between laughter and humiliation, or the satiric executioner and the comic scapegoat, ultimately collapses.

From this perspective, we can revise our previous observation on the mutual complementarity of Tarr and Kreisler and see it instead as a suppressed identification between the two. Indeed, Tarr’s absolute separation of Art and Life seems to exhibit a terror of sociability that is a reaction against the feeling of at-oneness. As we have seen, Tarr and Kreisler not only associate with the same women; they also share the dilemma of immaturity and susceptibility to regressive national pride. Moreover, as Michael Levenson notices, the text shows Tarr and Kreisler gradually coming to resemble each other without ceasing to oppose on the surface (141). In a final moment of supreme irony, the narrator tells us that Bertha’s child by Kreisler “bore some resemblance to Tarr” (T 320). Crucially, it is only by combining Tarr’s perspective with that of Kreisler that the novel manages to disclose the limitations of the metropolitan perceptions. After he accidentally kills Soltyk in the duel, Kreisler flees from Paris to reach a town on the Franco-German border:
The day before two Germans had been arrested in the neighbourhood as spies and were now locked up in [the Police Station] until further evidence should be collected on the affair. It is extremely imprudent for a German to loiter on the frontier on entering France. It is much wiser for him to push on at once—neither looking to right nor left—pretending especially not to notice hills, unnatural military-looking protuberances, ramparts, etc.—to hurry on as rapidly as possible to the interior. But the two men in question were carpenters by profession, and both carried huge foot rules in their pockets. The local authorities on this discovery were in a state of the deepest consternation. They shut them up, with their implements, in the most inaccessible depths of the local Police Station. And it was in the doorway of this building—all the intermittent inhabitants of which were in a state of hysterical speculation, that Kreisler had presented himself. (280)

It is because of this pervasive atmosphere of national paranoia, itself created by the military tension between France and Germany, that Kreisler is thrown into the local police station where he commits suicide. As we have seen above, Jameson argues that the “ultimate, conflictual ‘truth’” of Tarr’s pan-European allegory is the First World War, and its metropolitan expatriates are trapped within the all-encompassing structure of mutual hostilities among the nation-states. No character, including Tarr, is allowed to transcend this horizon.

However, rather paradoxically, Kreisler’s desperate flight leads us out of the metropolis to glimpse the reality of mutual hostility as an objective condition that circumscribes the characters’ “restless personal lives” (T 21). Moreover, even after he regresses into the national stereotype, the novel does not present him as the figure who typifies the invasive force of Germany since he is merely misrecognized as a German agent by a paranoid French policeman. Even if this can never be taken as an argument for pacifism, this scene of the Franco-German border is significant insofar as it reveals the outside of the metropolis and forestalls the collapse of the novel’s own allegory by exposing its objective
precondition. Ironically, the delusive action of Kreisler succeeds in uncovering the truth unavailable to the metropolitan perceptions.

5. Conclusion

It is in the collapse of humour and the sudden doubling back of laughter onto humiliation that we can find the deepest, if fitful, insight of the novel. This is achieved, as has been suggested, not by confirming the superiority of Tarr over Kreisler, but by constantly shifting the focus from Tarr to Kreisler and back again. Yet if this reading requires us to offer a greater amount of sympathy to Kreisler than the author seems to invite, it is doubtlessly most difficult for any readers not to be repelled by his murderous and sexist impulses. Indeed, it turns out to be difficult even for the author himself to resist the temptation to see Kreisler as an illustration of psychology behind the ‘German’ militarism. In his 1915 preface to the novel, Lewis declares, “May the flames of Louvain help to illuminate (and illustrate) my hapless protagonist!” (13). Even though the novel itself does not identify Kreisler with the nightmare of German invasion (it is a vision produced by a Frenchman’s paranoia, according to the novel), Lewis forgets the point and becomes an active accomplice in the discourse of British wartime propaganda. This underscores again how difficult it is to sidestep the structure of mutual hostilities.

Yet on the other hand, sympathy with Kreisler has its own problems. Peter Bürger, a German critic, suggests that Kreisler’s grotesque psychology prefigures that of National Socialism and suggests as follows: “It may well have been precisely Lewis’s proto-fascist sympathies, felt from within as it were, which afforded him insights that as far as I can see were not available to those on the left at that time” (135). While Lewis’s subsequent politics may seem to confirm this point, a deep understanding of Kreisler’s humiliations doesn’t necessarily lead us to develop proto-fascist sympathies on our part. According to Judith Butler, an analytical approach to the question of humiliation reveals one’s deep connection with the other and thus the decenteredness of all human subjects. As she quotes from Jean Laplanche, humiliation...
reveals that “a man is not at home with himself in himself [chez lui en lui], which means that in himself, he is not the master and that finally (here, these are my terms), he is decentered” (75). For Butler, this is an ontological ground for our need for ethics. Yet Tarr is definitely not a book of ethics; nor does it approach the question of humiliation with a distant, analytic gaze. Rather, it seems to relish the bitter humiliations of the characters trapped in their comic immaturity. It is only through the “megrim of humour,” and its vertiginous movement between laughter and degradation, that Lewis lets us see the gravest destructive consequences of unacknowledged humiliation. But if this is the reason Eliot claims that humiliation is “one of the most important elements in human life, and one little exploited,” Tarr is both valuable and disturbing insofar as it reminds us of our dangerous ignorance of this troubling emotion.

Notes

1 In a diary entry from March 1921, Virginia Woolf records her conversation with Eliot; she reports Eliot saying, “Humiliation is the worst thing in life” (103). As Christopher Ricks points out, Eliot in his youth often dwelled on the issue of humiliation, a theme that in his later life developed into his concern with the idea of humility. See Ricks, 240-241.

2 However, the only critic who sees Tarr as a straightforwardly heroic (or “Nietzschean”) character is Alistair Davies. The other early critics such as Kenner, Materer, and Jameson find defects in Tarr while still seeing him presented as a positive character in the novel.

3 Tarr: The 1918 Version, 212. Hereafter abbreviated to T. In this paper, I chose to use the edition of the Black Sparrow Press, which reproduces the 1918 version, rather than the recent edition of the OUP, which follows the version Lewis published, with considerable revisions, in 1928.

4 For another, different comparison of Tarr and these novels, see Peppis.

5 The Complete Wild Body, 317. Hereafter abbreviated to CWB.

6 Lewis often suggests that laughter prevents violence by working as a vent for aggressive energies accumulated within the self. See Men Without Art, 93.

7 According to Critchley, the document that confirmed the Englishness of humour was “Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour”
(1709) by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury. Critchley argues that Cooper’s essay is tinted with signs of “British chauvinism” (84).

Moretti’s examples of the novels that describe these youth, which he calls “the late Bildungsroman,” include Robert Musil’s *The Perplexities of Young Törless*, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and Franz Kafka’s *Amerika* (or *The Lost One*), all written between 1898 and 1914.

On *Tarr* as a novel about the psychological effects of the modern city, see also Edwards, 49-50.

From this perspective, we can also see the difference of Lewis’s *Tarr* from the colonial anti-Bildungsroman, such as Joseph Conrad’s *Lord Jim* and Virginia Woolf’s *Voyage Out*. According to Jed Esty, these novels use the figures of immature youth to interrogate the question of colonial modernity and especially its problems of uneven development, thus exploring the zone of “imperial time” (85) beyond the horizon of “national-historical time.” Meanwhile, *Tarr*’s perspective is both widened and constrained by its metropolitan, pan-European setting and it never sheds light on the problems of colonization.

On the question of comic scapegoating, see English, 28-29 and Critchley, 65-76. English especially sees Jewish and women characters in *The Apes of God* as Lewis’s comic scapegoats. See chapter 2, “Imagining a Community of Men: Black(shirt) Humor in *The Apes of God*.”

### Bibliography


“A MEGRIM OF HUMOUR”