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Anti-Individualism and the Fictions of National Character in Wyndham Lewis’s *Tarr*

PAUL PEPPIS

No reader of *Tarr*, Wyndham Lewis’s first-published, most-studied, and arguably best novel, can ignore the central role that nationality plays in the text. As Lewis’s international characters interact chaotically on the streets and in the cafés of pre-war Paris, they spend endless time contemplating their “national” characteristics and justifying their actions in terms of “national character.” They make so much of these topics, in fact, that ever since *Tarr*’s first publication critics have periodically taken them as pivotal to the novel’s meaning. Most such analyses have focused on the psychological drama of the two German characters: Bertha Lunken, the over-sentimental lover of the English painter Frederick Tarr, and Otto Kreisler, the failed artist and financial parasite, whose obsession with the unattainable Russian-German beauty Anastasya Vasek drives him to rape Bertha, to kill accidentally Soltyk (the Russian-Pole he means to kill on purpose), and finally to hang himself. Critics analyzing the novel during times of anti-German sentiment in England and America—after the First and Second World Wars—interpreted *Tarr* as an anti-German tract, reading Lewis’s overly romantic and brutal Germans as literary instruments in a “racial critique,” allegorical representations of their destructive fatherland. Rebecca West, in one of the earliest and most frequently cited commentaries on *Tarr*, called it “a work of art of power and distinction” (69) and Kreisler a “figure of vast moral significance” (67). Nonetheless, she took the actions of Lewis’s German characters as manifestations of national “ugliness”:
In watching Bertha Lunken, the acquiescent sentimentalist, and Kreisler, the murderous clown, whom she evokes by her spurious passions and inspires by her inertia to his most violent atrocity, we have the same baffled feeling with which Europe has watched Germany for the last four years: here are people the whole of whose beings are oriented towards ugliness. (68)

Writing after the Second World War, Geoffrey Wagner echoed West:

Bertha and Kreisler . . . personify together the German romantic nihilism that is the racial criticism of the work. . . . They are tellingly brought together in a brutal erotic clash, symbolic of the social rape Lewis thinks the Germans would like to effect on the society of nations. (237)

By attributing a fixed repertoire of “German” traits to Bertha and Kreisler, however, West and Wagner oversimplified Lewis’s characters, misconstrued his analysis of nationality’s role in personal identity, and thereby reduced the complexity of his novel.

Recognizing such limitations, Fredric Jameson, in his celebrated 1979 study of Lewis’s novels, offered a provocative revisionist approach to Tarr’s treatment of nationality. While Jameson’s is the most sophisticated and interesting analysis of Lewis’s handling of nationality in the novel, it is keyed more to his own theoretical preoccupations than to Lewis’s aims. Like West and Wagner, Jameson interprets Tarr as a “national allegory” in which “the individual characters figure . . . more abstract national characteristics which are read as their inner essence.” But he criticizes partisan interpretations like those of West and Wagner that focus on “a single foreign national essence alone” because such readings use “allegory . . . as the instrument of cultural critique.” In contrast, he contends that Lewis’s treatment of national allegory is more complicated: “A more complex network of interrelations and collisions emerges . . . narrative meaning becomes relational, as momentary alliances develop and disintegrate” (90). Yet Jameson introduces this complex conception of allegory to support his argument that Tarr enacts a transition from “national allegory to libidinal apparatus,” an argument finally intended, he explains, to advance his larger theoretical project of studying the “political unconscious” (6).

In contrast, this essay will historicize Tarr more carefully, working to recover Lewis’s critical aims and situate his fictional treatment of nationality within the intellectual debates and literary practices of his closest contemporaries during the opening months of the second year of the Great War, when he was completing the novel. Its reading draws on and is meant to complement Michael Levenson’s recent analysis,
which begins the project of historicizing *Tarr* by analyzing it in the context of other modernist novels. Levenson persuasively describes Lewis’s fictional attack on nineteenth-century notions of personal identity. He locates Lewis with other practitioners of the modern British novel—James, Forster, Lawrence, Woolf—whose works “engage in a self-conscious assault on a notion of character persistently associated with the nineteenth century” Nevertheless Levenson differentiates Lewis’s novel from those of his contemporaries because they still “sustain nostalgic longing for a whole self,” while *Tarr* refuses such nostalgia. He maintains that *Tarr* attacks the nineteenth century ideal of “the autonomous ego, free and integral,” as restlessly as Lewis and his contemporaries attacked nineteenth century conventions of narrative form (xiii). Levenson is correct in contending that Lewis’s rendering of personal identity and social interaction assails nineteenth century novelistic orthodoxies, but as we’ll see, Lewis aimed his fictional assault even more precisely than Levenson acknowledges.

Previous accounts of *Tarr* have neglected the significance of its original appearance in Dora Marsden and Harriet Shaw Weaver’s “Individualist Review,” the *Egoist*. Though it has often been noted that *Tarr* first appeared in serial form in the *Egoist*, little effort has been made to relate Lewis’s formal strategies and thematic concerns to the works that were appearing in that journal. Once Lewis’s novel is viewed in its original context, however, many of the qualities that have often troubled critics and readers of the text—its two heroes, double plot, and apparently anti-German politics—become comprehensible as strategies in a corrosive critique of the “Individualist” literary, philosophical, and political positions that were being articulated in the *Egoist* by some of Lewis’s closest allies and contemporaries, including Marsden, Pound, and Joyce.

Lewis implemented his critical assault on English Individualism by writing *Tarr* as a harsh satire of a contemporary novel sub-genre that would later be canonized as one of his generation’s central contributions to modern British letters, a sub-genre that articulated and idealized the Individualist world view. Not surprisingly, the best and most celebrated example of that genre, which can usefully be termed the Individualist bildungsroman, originally appeared in the *Egoist*. Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was serialized there between February 1914 and September 1915. Joyce did not term himself an Individualist, and his novel ultimately questions a number of the movement’s tenets, but in the context of the *Egoist*, Lewis easily read *Portrait* as a translation of Individualist ideals into the form of a modern novel: a bildungsroman
that portrays Stephen Dedalus’s maturation into a creative and fiercely independent artist—an ideal Individualist hero. About six months after Joyce’s novel began to appear in the *Egoist*, Lewis returned to the unfinished novel he had started writing seven years earlier. He completed *Tarr* in November 1915; it appeared serially in the *Egoist* between April 1916 and November 1917.¹ To attack Individualism, Lewis made *Tarr* a literary corrosive to the ideology he saw embodied in *Portrait*: it rejects the Egoists’ view of persons as self-defining beings capable of personal liberation, their narrative of persons who transcend the constricting influences of personal history to achieve independence, and their model of the novel as a bildungsroman that represents the progressive education of a single subjectivity.

Once the historical specificity of Lewis’s novelistic assault on English Individualism is recovered, it becomes clear that his rendering of nationality’s influence in personal identity does not serve the reductive and partisan goals of racial critique. Instead, Lewis’s novel deploys, scrutinizes, and ultimately discredits the two competing conceptions of national character that were being defended in intellectual and popular debates at the start of the War: on one hand, the racialist view of nationality as an internal and essential category, the result of a “heredity” that fundamentally defines the character of individuals of a particular “race” or nation, and on the other, the Individualist view of nationality as an external, non-essential category, the result of a restrictive regime of cultural training that persons of sufficient energy, insight, and will can and should overcome.² *Tarr* exposes both of these accounts as reductive, simplifying, and inadequate to explain the chaotic facts of human identity and activity. The familiar critical picture of Lewis as a racial essentialist, on which even Jameson’s useful and complicating analysis relies, fails to describe the dissident modernist’s views as articulated in his first published novel. After the initial year of the War, at least, Lewis was an iconoclastic critic of the deterministic accounts of nationality that were rapidly reconquering popular and intellectual discourse throughout Europe.

To show that Lewis intended *Tarr* as a fictional attack on the ideals of the English Individualist movement, it is necessary to recover the philosophical, political, and literary policies of the “Individualist Review” where those ideals were articulated and Lewis’s novel first appeared. According to the essays of its editor Dora Marsden, the *Egoist* was a libertarian and anti-socialist journal that promoted the radical
individualist philosophy of the German nominalist Max Stirner (1806–1856). Stirnerian individualism had been popular with Anglo-American libertarians and anarchists since Stirner's anti-liberal tract, Der Einzige und sein Eigentum (1845), was first translated into English as The Ego and His Own in 1907. In his polemic Stirner assailed all “fixed ideas” like “God, immortality, freedom, humanity etc. [that] are drilled into us from childhood” as alien constraints on individual freedom: “A ‘fixed idea’ [is] an idea that has subjected . . . man to itself” (83, 55). He sought to discredit and overthrow all such false and restricting ideals by “putting to th[em] . . . the searching knife of criticism” (56). The aim of that critical attack was to release the individual ego from all social and conceptual shackles: “[When] I no longer serve any idea, any ‘higher essence,’ I no longer serve any man either, but—under all circumstances—myself” (482). Stirner’s emancipated ego thus became the sole locus of value in the modern world: “I am owner of my might, and I am so when I know myself as unique” (490). Inspired by Stirner, Marsden embraced his iconoclastic analytical methods in order to expose false ideas, escape repressive institutions, and empower the unique individual:

The irony of “standing for” a thing lies in the fact that the first return the thing stood for makes is to bring its advocates kneeling before it. A man will lie down prone before the thing he “stands for” and serve it, and the one assertion of egoism is . . . that a man shall make it his concern with things to force them to minister to him. . . . The egoist stands for nothing: his affair is to see to it that he shall not be compelled to kneel. (“Views” 244)4

The Egoists’ idealization of the individual and attendant distrust of external constraints led them to advocate a radical form of “Anarchistic” politics that opposed all conventionalizing collectives—especially the liberal state and its various institutions—in favor of a utopian social organization based on the independent coexistence of egoistic individuals. Accordingly, in her editorials, Marsden relentlessly criticized the British state for inhibiting individuality. The Egoists, she asserted, “strive after the abolition of ‘The State’ . . . [and] the subtler and far more perniciously repressive agency of Conscience with its windy words and ideals” (84–85). Huntly Carter, a regular contributor on art and literature, articulated the ultimate social goal of those politics: “If human beings are to move significantly in any direction they must not be tied up in inseparable bundles, called groups, guilds, and
essentially necessarily individualism characteristics Henry, 55), before view, result had them so Character"

national individuals a conception conventionalizing communities. Each must belong wholly to himself or herself. Each must be free to feel, act and choose a path of his or her own" (60).

Their distrust of the state and faith in the individual led the Egoists to interpret “national character” as another of the many repressive and conventionalizing external forces that persons should overcome in the struggle for egoistic liberation. This view opposed the determinist conception that had dominated intellectual and popular discussions of nationality during the late nineteenth century, which took nationality as a hereditary category that essentially defined the character of individuals from a particular nation. That account had been encapsulated, for example, in an 1865 article entitled “Hereditary Talent and Character” by Sir Francis Galton, the father of the Eugenics movement so popular among British scientists and intellectuals in the decade before the Great War (Rose 136–37). “The Hindu, the Arab, the Mongol, the Teuton, and very many more,” Galton wrote, “have each of them their peculiar characters . . . [which] are transmitted, generation after generation, as truly as their physical forms” (61). In contrast, the Egoists interpreted nationality as a culturally constructed category, the result of the institutional training that persons receive in particular national contexts. Such training was inherently anti-individual, in their view, because it aimed to conventionalize persons, to replace unique characteristics with “national” traits validated by the state. As Stirner had rejected obedience to “the fatherland” on the grounds that it was yet another “‘fixed idea’ . . . that has subjected . . . man to itself” (37, 55), Marsden, in an editorial at the start of the War, attacked the “State’s men” for exploiting patriotism in order to discourage individuality and preserve the “status quo”:

A steady pressure . . . latterly has been put upon the young (the old matter less) to substitute without questioning l'esprit de corps for the egoistic spirit. . . . Th[e] constructive sense which the cult of esprit de corps utilises with such wide-spreading effects . . . provides the underlying design of “Order,” of which laws, regulations, the entire maintenance of the status quo, are but the subsequent steps taken to keep such orders permanent. (“Quid” 502)

According to the Egoist, artists were especially inclined toward individualism and resistant to restrictions on creativity and action. Leigh Henry, the journal’s music critic, described artistic creation as an essentially individualistic process: “The works of a creative artist are necessarily the statement of his personal desires and the record of his personal experience and achievement, and their value is proportionate
to the development of his individuality.” Since creativity is “proportionate” to individuality, “it is absurd to attempt to limit creative activity by existing standards, as such limitation can result only in an inadequate mode of expression” (147). Thus the task of the modern artist must be to realize the Individualist ideal of personal liberation, to resist and overcome all external and conventionalizing influences. Occasional contributor and Imagist poet John Cournos, in an article celebrating the Vorticist sculptor and war casualty Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, cast the late sculptor’s life as just such a struggle for creative independence against external constraints: “Gaudier-Brzeska’s career . . . illustrates the difficulties which beset the path of the modern artist, groping to extricate his personality from the existing confusion of influences and movements” (137). Reflecting that vision, the Egoist promoted artistic and literary movements that demonstrated creative independence and antagonism to established aesthetic conventions and cultural institutions, especially Imagism and Vorticism.5

Given the Egoist’s individualistic philosophical, political, and artistic agenda, it is little wonder that Marsden and Weaver agreed to serialize A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. They would have read Portrait as a translation of the Individualist movement’s ideals into the form of a modern novel, the Individualist “education story” of Joyce’s young provincial protagonist, Stephen Dedalus. In Joyce’s bildungsroman the Egoists discovered a formal correlate to their narrative of the autonomous, individuating ego: Portrait follows Stephen from his childhood to young adulthood, tracing his development from the son of a conventional middle-class Irish Catholic family into a creative, unique, and fiercely independent young artist. In his search for a “mode of life or of art whereby [his] spirit can express itself in unfettered freedom,” Stephen embraces Satan’s almost Stirnerian motto, “Non serviam” (246, 117). Pursuing these individualistic ambitions, he successively “frees” himself from the constraining “nets” of family and religion. And in the novel’s concluding pages, as Stephen prepares to begin a last liberating flight from the constraints of fatherland, he explains his distrust of the Irish nationalist cause to his patriotic friend, Davin, in terms consistent with the Egoist critique of national training: “When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight . . . nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets” (203). Stephen believes that exile will finally allow him to fulfill his personal and artistic destiny. Reflecting its protagonist’s optimistic spirit, Portrait concludes with an ending that is a beginning, in which time opens
outward onto a vital future, full of hope and the promise of individual and creative potential:

26 April: Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

27 April: Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead. (252–53)

As has been noted often, Joyce treats these final words with skepticism, encouraging readers to question Stephen’s ability to realize his ideals. But because Portrait appeared in the pages of the Egoist, Stephen’s theory of artistic liberation and the novel that portrays his personal journey were given the Individualist movement’s official sanction and publicly affiliated with their doctrine. By imitating and assailing Joyce’s treatment of the bildungsroman, therefore, Lewis could strike at the heart of Egoist ideology.

Lewis repeatedly associated himself with the ideals of his Individualist compatriots in the first issue of the Vorticist periodical BLAST (July 1914). As he proclaimed in BLAST’s opening manifesto, the journal would appeal “to the individual” and “make individuals” by presenting “an art of individuals” (7–8). Lewis then proceeded, in a fashion more dramatic but no less iconoclastic than Marsden’s, to “blast” a slew of hallowed English ideals and institutions that, in his view, obstructed individual vitality and creativity. He patriotically exhorted his contemporaries to overthrow the conventionalizing influence of England’s class system, education establishment, and provincial cultural heritage in order to revitalize English art and society, and thereby create a nation of hard-boiled and independent individuals (11–20).

During the first year of the Great War, however, a battery of new facts assailed Lewis’s hopes for Vorticism and his faith in artistic and political Individualism. By the summer of 1915, as the second number of BLAST appeared, his Vorticist ideals were under siege. He confronted the decline of the avant-garde scene as artists and intellectuals went to the front, and in some cases, Gaudier-Brzeska’s for instance, died there. He observed the art public and press increasingly turning away from the activities of artists toward the more pressing concerns of wartime life. He witnessed the spread of a popular and simplifying nationalism quite different from the individualistic nation-
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alism championed in the first issue of *BLAST*. Before the War, Lewis had exhorted the English to become self-determined “individuals.” But in the first months of the conflict, Britain’s government, literary establishment, and popular press began promoting a nationalist fervor among the populace that discouraged independent action and encouraged unified support for the war effort against the Triple Alliance (Hynes *War* 78–87). Confronted with these wartime facts, Lewis began to question not only the potential of the English to overcome their stultifying national training and cultural traditions, but even the validity of Vorticism’s individualistic ideals.

In that tumultuous and disillusioning year of war, in fact, Lewis’s attitudes regarding Individualism shifted radically. He became a stern and clever critic of the movement. Returning to the unfinished novel he had begun seven years earlier, he revised and expanded it to reflect his philosophical realignment. Because the Egoists had sanctioned the genre of the novel as an appropriate literary form to articulate and celebrate their ideals, it became for Lewis an irresistible instrument with which to attack Individualism. And since the form had traditionally been used to render the inner lives of characters inhabiting dense social environments, he could use his novel to assail at once Individualist approaches to psychology, social interaction, politics, and aesthetics.

By the time Lewis completed *Tarr* in November, 1915, he had made it a comprehensive fictional critique of the Individualist world view, a keen satire of the Individualist bildungsroman as epitomized in the *Egoist* by Joyce’s *Portrait*. To the Individualist view that persons are autonomous beings capable of independent action and personal liberation, Lewis opposed a picture of persons as overdetermined beings incapable of controlling the maelstrom of competing forces that constitute human identity. To the Individualist narrative of persons transcending the restrictions of personal history and national training to become creative and independent individuals, he opposed a narrative of persons struggling unsuccessfully to stabilize their disorderly lives in an equally chaotic social world. To the Individualist vision of the modern novel as an optimistic bildungsroman that represents the continuously developing subjectivity of a single protagonist, he opposed a disjunctive formal hybrid which yokes together two contrary novel sub-genres—the education story of psychological development and the *Sturm und Drang* novel of psychological disintegration—and thereby assailed the formal conventions of narrative and psychological continuity that had dominated the genre since the early eighteenth century.

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Lewis initiated his fictive assault by continuing the Individualist bildungsroman beyond its open-ended conclusion to show his protagonist failing to fulfill the Egoists’ ideal of personal and artistic liberation. He thereby challenged the concept of the autonomous ego at the heart of Individualist doctrine. Tarr begins where Portrait ends; its “Overture” is an epilogue to the Individualist novel. Whereas Portrait concludes with Stephen Dedalus poised to begin a new life on the Continent as an autonomous artist, Tarr takes up the story of its intellectually precocious young artist-protagonist, Frederick Tarr, after he has been living on the Continent for some time. The “Overture” puts Tarr in an exemplary Individualist predicament: he is embroiled in a stifling romantic relationship with an overly dependent young German woman, the “bourgeois-bohemian” art student Bertha Lunken. According to Individualist doctrine, in order to achieve personal and artistic freedom, the young artist must eliminate all restrictive attachments. Yet despite Tarr’s rhetoric of artistic independence and his proclaimed antagonism to the conventions of bourgeois life, he fails to conform to that doctrine. Lewis exposes his protagonist as an insecure and conflicted young man, unsure of his desires, attracted to the allure of bourgeois-bohemianism, incapable of separating himself from Bertha.

On a Paris street, Tarr unexpectedly encounters Alan Hobson, a Cambridge-educated bohemian compatriot. During their discussion Tarr repeatedly positions himself as an Individualist artist, immune to the appeals of conventional bourgeois life, while Hobson successively assaults those claims, attempting to expose Tarr as a self-aggrandizing hypocrite. Tarr responds so angrily to Hobson’s accusations and so many of his explanations sound defensive that by the end of the conversation he seems more a person playing at Individualism than a true Individualist. At first he assumes a posture of imperious superiority. He blasts Hobson’s bohemian accoutrements: his shabby tweeds, German acquaintances, and long hair. “Why so much hair?” Tarr prods. “I don’t wear my hair long. If you had as many reasons for wearing it long as I have, we’d see it flowing round your ankles” (23). Hobson counters this pose of detached superiority by introducing evidence of Tarr’s own bohemian entanglements:

“Tut! Do you still see Fräulein Lunken—is it?—as much as ever?”

“Oh, you know her? = Yes, I forgot that. = Yes, I still see her.”

“It seems to me you know more Germans than I do. = But you’re ashamed of it. You do everything you can to hide it. . . . I met
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a Fräulein Brandenbourgh the other day, a German, who claimed to know you. I am always meeting Germans who know you. She also referred to you as the ‘official fiancé of Fräulein Lunken.’ = Are you an ‘official fiancé? And if so, what is that, may I ask?”

Tarr was taken aback, it was evident.

Hobson laughed stridently. (24)

Hobson’s exposure of the engagement provokes from Tarr a rapid-fire series of theories intended to explain his “association” with Bertha while reaffirming his status as an independent artist. Despite his best efforts, however, Tarr’s defensive theorizing exposes a model of personal identity far more encumbered than the Individualists’ autonomous ego. His first account echoes the Egoist conception that artists are especially individualistic beings, more resistant to constraints than others. “I am an artist,” he asserts, expressing the conviction that persons can define their own identities. He next distinguishes artists as vital and self-creating beings, immune even to the physical claims of sexuality: “With most people, not describable as artists, all the finer part of their vitality goes into sex. . . . The artist is he in whom this emotionality normally absorbed by sex is so strong that it claims a newer and more exclusive field of deployment. = Its first creation is the Artist himself, a new sort of person; the creative man” (29). But this account threatens Tarr’s proclaimed identity as a “creative man” by contradicting the fact that he is “associated sexually” with Bertha (29). How can this sexually engaged young man be an artist, if artists’ vitality expresses itself in art rather than sex? To resolve that inconsistency, Tarr proposes a more complex theory of artists’ sexuality that inversely correlates visual style with sexual behavior. Artists “whose work is very sensuous or human,” he explains, have a “more discriminating . . . sex instinct,” while those whose work is “ascetic rather than sensuous” are less discriminating sexually. Under this account Tarr cites the “invariable severity” of his painting to justify his “coarse . . . foolish, slovenly taste . . . in women” (30). This rationale fails to alleviate his worries about artistic integrity, however. Within moments of proposing a theory to reinforce his status as “a creative man,” Tarr acknowledges the “secret” that his identity is in fact incoherent:

“You have understood the nature of my secret? = Half of myself I have to hide. I am bitterly ashamed of a slovenly, common portion of my life that has been isolated and repudiated by the energies I am so proud of. ‘I am ashamed of the number of Germans I know,’ as you put it. = I have in that role to cower and slink away even from an old fruit-tin like you.” (31)
Tarr’s description of his identity as split, a divided entity in which one “portion” struggles to “hide,” “isolate . . . and repudiate” another, contradicts the Individualist conception of the autonomous ego as an integral and coherent entity that must resist not internal selves but external constraints.

In a subsequent discussion with his friend Butcher, Tarr embraces an exemplary Individualist strategy to reaffirm his autonomy and salvage his battered persona as “creative man”: he resolves to “dis-engage” himself from Bertha. But Butcher’s cautionary response to the plan raises questions as to whether Tarr will realize it. Butcher recognizes that the disorderly facts of human life tend to confound such simplifying strategies:

Butcher filled his pipe, then he began laughing. He laughed theatrically until Tarr stopped him.

“What are you laughing at?” . . .

“I was laughing at you. You repent of your thoughtlessness and all that. Your next step is to put it right. I was laughing at the way you go about it. You now proceed kindly but firmly to break off your engagement and discard the girl. That is very neat.”

“Do you think so? Well, perhaps it is a trifle overtidy.” (43)

The specter of complexity that Butcher raises comes to haunt Tarr when he attempts to execute his “overtidy” scheme. His tumultuous meeting with Bertha Lunken demolishes his disengagement plans, plunging him into a chaos of human intimacy.

Positioned as the climactic scene of the “Overture,” Tarr’s encounter with Bertha sabotages the Individualist ideal of self-liberation. Were Tarr an Individualist bildungsroman, this final scene between lovers would have come at or near the end of the narrative and climaxed with the protagonist’s successful separation from the unwanted woman, a symbolic assumption of emotional, sexual, and artistic independence. Another celebrated bildungsroman of the avant-guerre, Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers (1913), defines the pattern. In the novel’s final pages, Lawrence’s artist-hero, Paul Morel, successfully terminates his dependent relationship with the intense, devoted Miriam despite her love for him and his lingering desires for her. Though Morel recognizes that by leaving Miriam “he was defrauding her life,” he also knows that staying would “stifl[e] the inner . . . man,” even “deny . . . his own life.” Refusing “to give life to her by denying his own,” Morel separates from Miriam, thereby realizing the Individualist ideal of personal liberation (418). Tarr fails to follow Morel’s example. He
repeatedly attempts to terminate the stifling relationship with Bertha, but his efforts are subverted by his own internal confusion and her perplexing responses. Lewis counters Lawrence’s picture of a dependent young woman who obediently submits to the superior will of an independent young man with a bleak emotional stalemate in which neither woman nor man can triumph over interdependency:

They progressed from stage to stage of this weary farce. Confusion increased. It resembled a combat between two wrestlers of mathematically equal strength. Neither could win. One or other of them was usually wallowing warily or lifelessly on his stomach, the other tugging at him or examining and prodding his carcase. (60)

In Tarr’s debate with Hobson, Lewis assails the Individualist ego from within by exposing the self as a fractured entity; in Tarr’s exchange with Bertha, he attacks that ego from without by rendering human intimacy an infectious contagion that can penetrate and distort the self: “Everybody . . . all personality, was catching. We are all sicknesses for each other. Such contact as he had with Bertha was particularly risky” (72).

Thwarted by uncooperative inner selves and contaminating others, the would-be Individualist cannot establish independence. Indeed, Tarr’s divided, porous, and shifting subjectivity radically limits his ability to take any definitive action. Lewis thereby dismisses the Individualist model of the advancing ego. Like Joyce and Lawrence, he portrays human subjectivity as dynamic, but renders the form of that dynamism as a repetitive, tortuous vortex of conflicting forces that spins violently and gets nowhere. The meeting between Bertha and Tarr can only conclude inconclusively. He leaves Bertha’s flat without leaving her, still attracted to the bourgeois-bohemian conventions he reviles, hounded by doubts and recriminations, “something follow[ing] him like a restless dog” (74).

With the start of Tarr’s second section, “Doomed, Evidently—the Frac,” Lewis initiates his attack on the form of the Individualist novel. He assails the model of the modern novel as a bildungsroman that records the developing subjectivity of a single protagonist by displacing his narrative of a would-be Individualist with a narrative type alien and antagonistic to the education story: a pessimistic German Romantic tale of *Sturm und Drang*. Once called a novel of zerrissenheit or disintegration, this sub-genre typically records the trials of a sensitive young artist, full of storm and stress, who is slowly torn apart by the conflicting claims of the social world he inhabits and his tumultuous inner life. The
artist-protagonist’s disintegration is provoked by his inability either to
win the ideal woman with whom he is romantically obsessed, as in
Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, or to reconcile his dream of
creating a transcendental art with the philistine realities of bourgeois
life and taste, as in the works of E. T. A. Hoffmann, especially those
focused on the eccentric musician-composer Johannes Kreisler—the
*Kreisleriana* and *Murr*.8 Accordingly, Lewis’s tale of *zerrissenheit* features
a disintegrating German artist who shares the surname of Hoffmann’s
romantic composer and the suicidal fate of Goethe’s romantic lover: the
expatriate Otto Kreisler, whose unrequited obsession with Anastasya
Vasek ultimately drives him to take his own life.9 Indeed, Hoffmann’s
influence pervades Lewis’s narrative of disintegration; Otto Kreisler’s
story shares with the tales of Johannes Kreisler a number of themes and
formal strategies: the chaos of mental life, the mechanization of human
behavior in passion, and the theatricality of conflict.10

By yoking together these two opposing models of the modern
novel, Lewis not only expressed on a formal level his aggressive
antagonism to the idealistic orthodoxies of the Individualist bildungsro-
man, but questioned the broader novelistic conventions of narrative and
psychological continuity that underlay the bildungsroman and the tale
of *zerrissenheit*. In Lewis’s view, both narratives simplify and stabilize
human identity and interaction. Though the two sub-genres represent
the self in opposing trajectories of action—one rendering the ego in
ascent, the other the ego in decline—both assume an integral and
dynamic self. In contrast, *Tarr* renders identity unstable and disjunctive
through an unstable and disjunctive narrative.

Lewis uses Otto Kreisler to extend his critique of Individualism,
intertwining his analysis of individual psychology and social interaction.
In the argument with Hobson, *Tarr* describes his identity as split
between two opposing selves, one artistic, the other sexual. During the
struggle with Bertha, *Tarr*’s identity is further fractured as intimacy
with his lover subdivides his split ego between self-involvement and
dependence on another. But with the arrival of Kreisler, personal
identity and social life sink into a maelstrom of transitory and
disjunctive “selves” colliding within individual minds and upon the
social stage of bourgeois-bohemian Paris.

“Doomed, Evidently—the Frac” plunges the reader into Kreisler’s
tumultuous life. The failed artist wants desperately to get his evening
clothes from hock. He needs the “frac” to attend a dance where he hopes
to encounter a woman he has recently met and for whom he has
developed a romantic obsession, the Russian-German beauty Anastasya

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Vasek. Kreisler imagines himself and Anastasya as the two principles in a tale of zerrissenheit: he the oversensitive artist overwhelmed by hopeless love, she the ideal and unattainable woman. Yet his efforts to see Anastasya again and fulfill the role of romantic lover are foiled by his internal compulsions and unexpected external events. First, he has no money to recover the frac. Having abused the generosity of his wealthy friend Volker and hocked nearly all his possessions, Kreisler must await a check from his father in Germany. This helpless waiting fills him with anger. He resents his father not simply because of this financial dependence, but because his father has recently married Kreisler's own former fiancée. The check does not come in time, leading an increasingly incensed Kreisler to attempt other means of acquiring funds. He tries to hock a suitcase, but can't get enough money for it. He runs into an English acquaintance and contemplates asking him for the money. They converse, but Kreisler assumes that his request will be rejected and drops the idea, filled with unfounded anger for the oblivious Englishman.

Just as the German reaches a state of raging distraction, overwhelmed by feelings of persecution and resentment, he unexpectedly encounters Anastasya. She is accompanied by the suave Russian-Polish art-dealer Soltyk, who has superseded Kreisler as the principal recipient of Volker's money. This fact, for Kreisler, is a last straw. Though he has spoken with Anastasya only very briefly once before and knows nothing about her relations with Soltyk, he not only jumps to the conclusion that she and the Russian-Pole are romantically involved, but takes the encounter as ocular proof that Anastasya—a woman he barely knows—has betrayed his affections. Outraged and humiliated, Kreisler modifies his plans. Still intent on attending the dance, he now determines to subject Anastasya and Soltyk to some sort of retribution. In this hostile mood, the inability to get his frock out of hock becomes an advantage. His inappropriate appearance will only intensify the "indignity" he intends for Anastasya and Soltyk (133). Kreisler rubs against a newly painted wall on his way to the dance in order to enhance the effect of his oncoming "misconduct" (125).

The Bonnington Club dance is the textual event where Lewis brings his critique of Individualism to its fullest and most comic articulation: the scene intertwinen his assault on Individualist notions of personal identity, social interaction, and anarchist politics. During the dance the belligerent Kreisler spreads disorder, venting his unjustified anger at Anastasya and Soltyk on almost everyone at the dance. He gratuitously abuses a number of dance partners: "Several young women
... he lured to the conservatory. = They all came out with scarlet faces” (151). Twice he goes so far as to make himself and his partner into a “disturbing meteor” (148), propelling them violently into groups of unsuspecting guests. These abuses and collisions transform the well-planned social event, in which multinational bourgeois-bohemians are meant to interact in an orderly and respectful fashion according to codes of cosmopolitan etiquette, into a comic and turbulent chaos. Metaphorically, the “maelstrom” that the colliding Kreisler “produce[s] and conduct[s]” (154) clashes with the Egoists’ anarcho-libertarian political ideals. In Lewis’s dissident view anarchy is not, as the Egoists contended, a utopian form of social order that maximizes individual liberty, but the defining condition of human identity, a state of turbulent and destructive disorder. Because persons can therefore produce only psychological bedlam and social commotion, according to Lewis, the anarchist goal of a stateless society filled with independent egoists is nothing but an illusion.

By displacing the Individualists’ ideal of political anarchism with this picture of psychological anarchism, Lewis also displaces the Individualist concept of the authentic self with that of the theatrical self. In Individualist fiction, the protagonist’s ultimate task is to discover his true identity, to achieve authenticity. But in Tarr, because identity is a transitory concatenation of contradictory desires and compulsions, the task of personality becomes an ongoing but ultimately futile series of efforts to find such an authentic self. Unable to locate that self within, persons strive to adopt an identity they wish were authentic in hopes that by performing that pseudo-self it might somehow become real. So Tarr, who is not authentically an Individualist artist, attempts unsuccessfully to act as if he is, and Kreisler, who is not authentically a self-sacrificing Romantic hero, nevertheless strives to fulfill that role.

These hopeless efforts to adopt an authentic identity turn social life itself into a theater of anarchy, a chaotic spectacle of missteps and misperformances. So as Lewis’s characters try to play “roles” appropriate to the social “scenes” they encounter, internal and external disturbances always render their roles obsolete, insuring that all their performances eventually flop. Sometimes a disturbance comes from outside: other people, involved in their own private dramas, may subvert a character’s performance. As Kreisler searches the dance floor to punish the treacherous Soltyk,

He caught sight of Anastasya dancing with (he supposed) some Englishman.
He stopped, paralyzed by her appearance. = This reality intercepted the course of his imaginary life (of which his pursuit of Soltyk was a portion). He stood like somebody surprised in a questionable act. (153)

Such embarrassing disturbances can also originate within: a person’s determination to maintain a chosen role may be overwhelmed by the multitude of conflicting bodily and emotional drives that infest identity. On discovering Anastasya in the arms of yet another man, Kreisler is overwhelmed by a fury so potent that it literally takes control of him:

He had not reckoned on being met by her before his present errand was finished. = The next moment he was furious at this interference; at her having the power to draw him up. . . . Hell and Heavens! he was not going to stop there looking at her. . . . He took her partner roughly by the arm, pushing him against her, hustling him, fixing him with his eye. . . . His blood was flooding him. . . . He was . . . as surprised at his action . . . as she was. (153; emphasis added)

Because persons cannot control their own desires or the actions of others, social activity becomes as collisionary as Kreisler’s fanatic dances. Every scene, every interpretation, every play of action invariably goes horribly wrong.

Thus while Kreisler arrives at the dance intending to inflict “some indignity or other” on Anastasya and Soltyk, he fails to do so. Despite all his aggressive and abusive behavior, he manages to vent his contorted feelings on everyone except the pair he means to abuse. Soltyk pays no attention and Anastasya finds Kreisler’s antics curious and finally comic:

She would have liked him to stop. He had done something strange and was suddenly going away. That was unsatisfactory. = They looked at each other blankly. He showed no sign of stopping: she just stared. = Suddenly it was comic. She burst out laughing. (153)

An evening he had hoped would end in “a climax, of blows, words, definite things” (159), concludes instead with a typical Lewisian anti-climax that leaves Kreisler the sole victim of his own humiliating shenanigans. Echoing Tarr’s slinking departure from Bertha’s flat in the “Overture,” Kreisler too beats a hasty retreat: “The turmoil of the evening remained his, the solid part of it, unshared by anybody else. . . . All he wanted now was to get away from the English Club as soon as possible” (159).

In Tarr’s closing paragraphs Lewis brings his satiric project to its
culmination in a vision of dehumanization and temporal compression that mocks the open-ended conclusion of the Individualist bildungsroman. Stephen Dedalus emerges at the end of Portrait believing himself a creative and independent individual on the threshold of a promising new life. Joyce’s novel concludes with the story of its protagonist’s future still to be told, this narrative suspension enacting formally Stephen’s optimistic hopes for the life to come. Lewis counters that sort of open-ended finish with a pinched conclusion that squeezes years of Tarr’s future into six abrupt sentences:

Tarr and Anastasya did not marry. = They had no children.
Tarr, however, had three children by a lady of the name of Rose Fawcett, who consoled him eventually for the splendors of his ‘perfect woman.’ = But yet beyond the dim though solid figure of Rose Fawcett, another rises. This one represents the swing back of the pendulum once more to the swagger side. The cheerless and stodgy absurdity of Rose Fawcett required the painted, fine and inquiring face of Prism Dirkes. (320)

This contracted finale not only describes Tarr’s future as one of degradation and dependence, but contorts the novel’s characters into anonymous and attenuated figures in a mechanical process of sexual abuse and narrative repetition. As Lewis’s would-be Individualist becomes a mindless instrument of his own schizophrenic sexual desires, caught swinging between dehumanizing “relationships,” Bertha and Anastasya are reduced to sexual objects, nothing more than clever names in a bleak scheme of sexual abuse, destined for replacement by an endlessly alternating series of “bourgeois-bohemians” like Rose Fawcett and “swagger-sexes” like Prism Dirkes. Lewis’s characters end up fictional grotesques trapped in a disjunctive and distorting narrative that has demolished Individualism and its myths of psychological, social, and temporal continuity and progress.

In Tarr, Lewis treats literary form and conceptions of nationality homologously. As he conjoins two contradictory models of the modern novel in order to challenge the underlying assumptions of both, he brings together in a corrosive clash the contradictory conceptions of national identity that were competing for authority on the eve of the Great War. His hybrid novel discredits Individualist and determinist views of nationality’s influence in personal identity, exposing both as inadequate to explain the facts of human life. Lewis uses Tarr to discredit the Individualist account that self-realized persons can escape nationality; he uses Kreisler and Bertha to discredit the determinist
account that persons are defined by nationality. So Tarr fails to overcome “Englishness” while Kreisler and Bertha fail to conform to “Germanness.” They succumb, in their own ways, to Lewis’s maelstrom of individual identity, that dynamic and distorting “condition” in which the vagaries of individual psychology, social intercourse, and national training merge, transforming persons into human grotesques.

During his debate with Hobson, Tarr plays the Individualist part by assailing the conventionality of English national character. But his attack masks an envy for Hobson that springs from a fascination with the bourgeois-bohemian life he supposedly reviles. Animated in part by an Individualist contempt for what he calls “the whole of English training” (42), Tarr lambastes Hobson for submitting to England’s standardizing systems of education and class in terms that clearly echo Marsden:

“You have bought for eight hundred pounds at an aristocratic Educational establishment a complete mental outfit, a programme of manners. For four years you trained with other recruits. You are now a perfectly disciplined social unit, with a profound esprit de corps.” (34)

Yet Tarr’s personal history as a young man who lacks Hobson’s financial support and educational pedigree (he resembles the young Lewis in this), complicates his efforts to avoid the influence of English training. He has the ambivalences of the outsider. He resents Hobson’s bourgeois accoutrements because he lacks them, but at the same time he remains enthralled by those institutionally inculcated national traits because he has not been fully trained as an “Englishman.”

Tarr’s attraction to Bertha exposes these ambivalences. Attempting to explain his involvement with her to Butcher, he articulates the dilemma. He is embroiled with the German bourgeoisie, he tells his friend, because she displays at once the exoticism of a foreigner and the banality of the Englishwoman:

That bourgeois, spoiled, ridiculous element was the trap. I was innocently depraved enough to find it irresistible. It had the charm of a vulgar wall paper, a gimcrack ornament. A cosy banality set in the midst of a rough life. Youthful exoticism has done it, the something different to oneself. (39)

For Stephen Dedalus defining personal liberation is a comparatively uncomplicated task; it consists in rejecting the oppressive sources of Irish training, namely family, religion, and fatherland. For Tarr, whose national training is incomplete, however, the desire to “fly by those nets” is always tainted by attraction for them. His individualistic efforts
at self-liberation, including the aim of transcending nationality, are always thwarted by a desire for the “cosy banality” of bourgeois life, epitomized above all for him by England and Englishness.

Disgusted by his own attraction for all persons and things English and bourgeois, Tarr is drawn to the exotic Anastasya. She becomes the locus of his desire to escape Englishness precisely because she is not English. Her “racial” differences are for him a source of erotic attraction:

He felt immensely pleased with himself as he walked down the Boulevard Clichy with this perfect article rolling and sweeping beside him. No bourgeoisie this time! = He could be proud of this anywhere! Absolute perfection! Highest quality obtainable.―The face that launched a thousand ships.” A thousand ships crowded in her gait. There was nothing high-falutin’ about her, Burne-Jonesesque, Grail-lady or Irish-romantic. Perfect meat, perfect sense, accent of Minnesota, music of the Steppes! And all that was included under the one inadequate but pleasantly familiar heading, German. He became more and more impressed with what was German about her. (297)

The humor of this analysis derives from the disjunction between Tarr’s increasing impression of Anastasya’s “Germanness” and the fact, which even he glimpses, that none of her enthralling characteristics appear even remotely to result from her birth in Berlin (213). By subsuming all that she represents for him—an alternative to the bloodless, pre-Raphaelite image of the ideal English woman—under the inadequate rubric “German,” Tarr confirms that he desires Anastasya not because she is German but because she is not English. He hopes that through intimacy with this cosmopolitan woman (“No bourgeoisie this time!”), he will achieve finally the elusive goal of individual liberation.

Not surprisingly, then, Lewis’s would-be individualist at times perceives Anastasya as a person who has transcended national training. On first meeting her at a German salon, he assumes her nationality, asking “from what part of Germany she came.” Anastasya’s response not only catalogues the competing ways in which nationality was being popularly defined before the Great War, but concludes by rejecting those explanations and identifying herself as the ultimate source of her “national” identity: “My parents are Russian. = I was born in Berlin and brought up in America.” She initially offers the theory that nationality is determined by parental lineage, but complicates that explanation immediately, suggesting two other possible nationalities, the first based on birthplace, the second on place of habitation. Is
nationality the result of blood, birth, or culture? Is Anastasya a Russian, a German, an American, or some cosmopolitan hybrid of the three? Tarr is predictably confused. But with an individualist sense of self-determination, he asks her to define her own nationality: "Do you regard yourself as a Russian = or a German?" (213). From an Individualist point of view, Lewis's double hyphen here becomes an equals sign that opposes the differentiating "or" by equating "Russian" and "German." For Individualists, different nationalities are equal to the extent that they result from national training and can therefore be overcome by persons of sufficient intellect and will.

But of course, Tarr never realizes his dream of individual liberation through intimacy with Anastasya. Their relationship does not facilitate his transcendence of emotional dependence, sexual obsession, or nationality; it culminates by exposing him as a mindless sex machine, swinging schizophrenically between relationships with swagger sex and bourgeois-bohemian women. That Tarr's sexual life has this contradictory structure confirms his ultimate failure as an Individualist. The ambivalences exposed during his initial debate with Hobson define Tarr's sexual life at the novel's conclusion. On one hand, he wants to become an independent artist and so despises everyone and everything English and bourgeois-bohemian; on the other, he is compulsively attracted to bourgeois-bohemia because he lacks the proper educational, class, and financial pedigree. Thus he alternately desires women like Anastasya, who have nothing English or bourgeois about them, and women like Bertha, who display the "cheerless and stodgy absurdity" so common to his compatriots. It is no coincidence that Anastasya is succeeded in Tarr's personal history by Rose Fawcett, a bourgeois woman with a very English-sounding name.

While Lewis uses Tarr to discredit the Individualist account of nationality, he uses Kreisler and Bertha to attack the determinist view that nationality fundamentally defines identity. Much of the reductive and propagandistic English literature critical of Germany and Prussian militarism popular during the avant-guerre depended on the determinist account (Hynes Edwardian 34–53). But Lewis assails that account first by showing that conventional national types, which offer especially desirable "roles" through which to constitute a stable identity, are often, like the humans who construct them, incoherent and divisive. Kreisler's efforts to fix his identity by playing the role of the ideal German fail in part because a single monolithic conception of German national character did not in fact exist. Two contradictory models of Germanness had been competing in the English imagination for
historical authority since the wars of unification: Germans as sensitive romantics; Germans as patriotic militants. As we have seen, the first conception was older and based on the Romantic cultural tradition, in which writers like Hoffmann portrayed Germans as sentimental idealists, full of storm and stress, being slowly torn apart by the conflicts between their minds and environments. The authoritarian conception of Germanness, on the other hand, was less literary or cultural in origin than ideological and institutional: it was based on Bismarck’s code of “blood and iron” and the ideals of the educational establishment that Germany’s Prussian rulers consolidated after unification. Under that account Germans were a “race” of disciplined, obedient soldiers, committed to making Germany the world’s greatest military and imperial power, and thereby securing for their fatherland, in Kaiser Wilhelm’s famous words, “a place in the sun.”

Even Tarr’s anti-German readers have been tempted, we have seen, to stabilize Lewis’s complex Germans by reading them as national stereotypes. But Kreisler and Bertha staunchly resist such efforts at containment: their traits and behaviors are reducible neither to the passive and self-destructive sentimentality of the Romantic model of German character nor to the aggressive militarism of the Prussian model. While Kreisler and Bertha occasionally strive to conform to those stereotypes, displaying certain conventional “national” characteristics, their lives are far less stable, far more complex than either stereotype permits. They suffer their respective fates not because of their nationality, as a reading of Tarr as an anti-German tract requires, but because they are individuals whose particular personal histories, psychological compulsions, and social experiences lead them to try to fix the flux of identity on the ground of national training, an effort that in Lewis’s anarchical world is doomed to failure.

Kreisler has a psychological complexity that foils any account of him as an allegorical manifestation of either German romanticism or Prussian militarism. Tarr locates the origin of Kreisler’s brutality more in personal history than in nationality. His troubled relationship with his father accounts not only for his acts of spiteful aggression but for other character traits that do not fit the stereotype: his peculiar obsession with money, his special antagonism toward Soltyk, and his compulsive attraction for Anastasya. As Paul O’Keeffe has argued, Kreisler’s behavior springs from the conflicted emotions he feels toward the father who has usurped his fiancée and withholds needed money and toward the former fiancée who has married his father. O’Keeffe
explains that this “Oedipal nightmare” drives Kreisler to channel his compulsive feelings of hatred, envy, and desire toward surrogate fathers and surrogate fiancées. His emotions regarding his father are displaced onto his wealthy compatriot, Volker, for withholding money and onto Soltyk for usurping Anastasya, while those regarding his ex-fiancée are displaced onto Soltyk for usurping the role as recipient of Volker’s money and onto Anastasya for “preferring” Soltyk. (Tarr “Afterword” 377).

Lewis renders Kreisler as so confused and compulsive to show that while humans may attempt to fix the chaotic flux of identity by conforming to national stereotypes, they will always finally perplex and explode those conventionalizing forms. In the frantic struggle to secure their identities, persons will try to surrender their agency to any role that promises a sense of substantiality. Though a dizzying array of candidate roles present themselves, the stereotypes of nationality exert a particular allure owing to their institutional construction, cultural authority, and popular appeal. But when Lewis’s characters attempt to conform to national stereotypes, they find themselves enmeshed in the terrible process of deformation that his conception of identity entails: their efforts to conform are thwarted by their unique psychological compulsions, transforming them into national caricatures, grotesque distortions of national types. Thus despite his best efforts to fulfill a monolithic national ideal, Lewis’s unstable German appears by turns a militaristic Prussian officer devoted to a heartless honor cult, a hopeless Goethian suicide self-destructively obsessed with an unattainable woman, and a Freudian case study, tormented by an Oedipal nightmare that leads him compulsively to envy and despise men, to worship and abuse women.

Kreisler’s efforts to stabilize himself through the conventions of German nationality, whether the passive Romantic or the active Prussian model, are repeatedly thwarted by the action of his “very complicated and turbulent existence” (251). So during his frantic ratiocinations on the pending duel with Soltyk, he invokes his German training and pedigree, “reviv[ing] the title of Freiherr that, it was rumoured in his family, his ancestors had borne” (263), to justify his jealous and destructive rage against the Russian-Pole. But as “Freiherr” Kreisler plays the role of honorable Prussian nobleman, his compulsive hatred for Soltyk twists his desire to act with honor into a chaotic practice of senseless brutality. His pursuit of Soltyk does not climax in the exemplary chivalric duel, with two men meeting at an appointed time, choosing their weapons, marching twenty paces in opposite
directions, and firing. Instead, the “duel” degenerates into a farcical parody of its chivalric model, contorted by Kreisler’s fickle mind. Once the German finds himself at the appointed time and place, facing his adversary, he loses interest: “I am willing to forego the duel at once on one condition. If Herr Soltyk will give me a kiss, I will forego the duel!” (272). This bizarre offer, which both insults Soltyk’s “manhood” and exposes the conflicted nature of Kreisler’s feelings for his opponent, provokes the Pole to fury. He lunges at Kreisler. They scuffle briefly, but are soon separated. Soltyk and his friends begin to withdraw. Kreisler, his mind changing again, decides to stop them and resume the duel. He levels a gun at Soltyk, ordering him to take up a weapon. Soltyk’s second, Saretzky, rejects the offer. As Kreisler bends to pick up a gun and give it to his opponent, Saretzky aimed a blow at his head. It caught him just in front of the ear, on the right cheek bone. He staggered sideways, tripped and fell. The moment he felt the blow he pulled the trigger of the Browning, which still pointed towards his principal adversary. Soltyk threw his arms up, Kreisler was struggling toward his feet. He fell face forwards on top of him. (275)

This “climax” would be wildly funny if it were not so grotesque: the “honorable” Prussian nobleman struggles in the dirt with the dead body of an innocent man he had steamrolled into a meaningless “duel” and shot by mistake.

This bleak dynamic, whereby circumstance, psychology, and national training converge, disfiguring personality and behavior, achieves its most disturbing manifestation in Kreisler’s rape of Bertha. The rape marks the culmination of the trajectory begun on their walk to the Bonnington Club dance. During that fateful trip Bertha, inspired by the atmosphere of the dark Parisian night, had embraced the role of a self-sacrificing German romantic:

Her strange companion’s dreamy roughness, this romantic enigma of the evening, suddenly captured her fancy. . . . She took his hand. = Rapid, soft and humble she struck the deep German chord, vibrating rudimentarily in the midst of his cynicism.

“You are suffering! I know you are suffering. I wish I could do something for you. = Can not I?” (141)

The text identifies Bertha’s embrace of sentimentality as a submission to national training by identifying her act with “the deep German chord.” This sentimental young woman who aims to sacrifice herself in order to save her “suffering” companion does not end up the heroic martyr for
love that the Romantic stereotype dictates, however. Even though she distrusts Kreisler, Bertha pursues the sacrificial role by agreeing to pose for him. But in Kreisler’s flat the illusion is shattered: unprovoked, he savagely assaults her. And by a similarly twisted logic Kreisler is driven to rape Bertha, a woman he has no real feelings for, by his schizophrenic desire to love and destroy an entirely different woman. As Kreisler seizes her, Bertha glimpses the distorting dynamics of human agency in Tarr: “Her tardy words, furious struggling and all her contradictory emotions disappeared in the whirlpool towards which they had, with a strange deliberateness and yet aimlessness, been steering” (193–94). Bertha and Kreisler are not stereotypical Germans. Caught between personal compulsions and national conventions, between individualist activity and determinist passivity, they become human grotesques, farcical caricatures of the national types of the self-sacrificing romantic and the disciplined militarist. No “racial critique,” then, Tarr trounces its moment’s accounts of nationality as the comforting fictions of a race of beings too chaotic to realize their desperate dreams of stability.

Ever since the appearance of Hugh Kenner’s groundbreaking 1954 study of Lewis’s works, an increasing number of critics, most notably Jameson, Levenson, and Peter Bürger, have argued for the significance of Tarr and for Lewis’s crucial role in the history of British modernism. Despite such efforts, however, the novel, though generally viewed as one of Lewis’s best, has still, as Bürger states, “not been admitted to the canon of modernist literature by writers concerned with the subject” (127). Lewis’s achievement in Tarr has been underestimated in part because critics have not historicized the work adequately, failing to acknowledge the novel’s active engagement with specific debates among leaders of the English avant-garde concerning issues of personal identity, political action, literary aesthetics, and national character.

Retrieving Tarr’s assault on the English Individualist movement has allowed us to recognize Lewis as an antagonist within the Egoist circle, a kind of Kreisler figure disturbing their ideological consensus, willing to pursue his critical vision despite their contrary views. He responded more quickly and profoundly to the Great War, discovering in the period’s turbulent events truths about persons, society, and politics that undermined the Individualist world view. As Marsden and her comrades strove to preserve the prerogatives of the free and autonomous individual, to defend an anarcho-libertarian politics, and to articulate an Individualist aesthetics, Lewis offered in Tarr a
pessimistic alternative to their vision, insisting on the chaos and complexity of personal identity, social life, and modern literature. Engaged in this iconoclastic assault on Individualist doctrine, *Tarr* was a powerfully oppositional work, *en avant* even of the avant-garde. In this, our account revises the prevailing critical consensus that Lewis became the “enemy” of literary modernism only in the late 1920s.¹⁴ As we have seen, he began attacking the opinions and literary practice of his modernist contemporaries before the end of the Great War, before the orthodoxies of modernism had even solidified.

And by recovering in particular Lewis’s literary attack on the Individualist bildungsroman, as epitomized in the *Egoist* by Joyce’s *Portrait*, we have been able to better assess *Tarr’s* formal achievement. This disjunctive, hybrid novel should be seen as a major modern text not only because it questions the conventions of narrative and psychological continuity that had prevailed in novels since the early eighteenth century, but also because it was among the earliest Anglo-American literary works to apply to literature the formal techniques of fragmentation and assemblage that visual artists had been deploying for nearly a decade before the Great War. Years before Joyce, Eliot, and Pound wrote their major works, Lewis, by combining two different narrative forms in a single novel, had created a text characterized, as Bürger puts it, by “radical discontinuities” of the sort that would eventually distinguish the canonical works of literary modernism (127–28).¹⁵

Lewis’s achievement in *Tarr* has also been misunderstood because analysts have failed to accompany him to the conclusion of his critical journey. That failure has usually taken two forms. Most often, critics—including such insightful readers as Jameson and Bürger—have taken the novel’s English protagonist not as Lewis portrayed him but as Tarr wants to be read, namely as a successful Individualist artist.¹⁶ By exempting Tarr from Lewis’s corrosive attack, however, such readers have been able to interpret the novel as a more straightforward and positive work than the text itself indicates. As we have seen, no character escapes the consequences of *Tarr’s* anti-individualist vision.¹⁷ Other analysts, like West and Wagner, have restricted the scope of Lewis’s critical assault to characters of only one nationality, interpreting the novel as a racial critique of Germans. Their readings neglect the ways in which *Tarr’s* German characters fail to conform to national stereotypes, ignore the novel’s criticisms of its English characters, and therefore misconstrue Lewis’s complex analysis of nationality’s role in personal identity.

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Readings of *Tarr* as a racial critique portray Lewis at best as a jingoistic advocate of anti-German stereotypes and at worst as an unreflective dupe of “racial” determinism. Our reading of the novel shows him to have been neither: in context, Lewis’s literary treatment of nationality was as independent and iconoclastic as his attack on Individualism. *Tarr* assailed both the Individualist and determinist analyses that defined the range of orthodox views of nationality during the *avant-guerre*. At its most successful, in fact, Lewis’s literary investigation of national character anticipated much later “deconstructions” of the category of nationality and its reductive stereotypes by uncovering their implication in established regimes of power, by exposing their inadequacy to account for and determine human activity, and by explaining their persistent appeal.

Indeed, as we have seen, *Tarr* diagnosed the allure of national determinism and English Individualism. People embrace and attempt to conform to such totaling accounts of human identity and activity, according to Lewis, because they promise coherence and order. But since human life is irreducibly chaotic, implacably antagonistic to all such efforts of explanation and containment, those accounts are doomed to failure. That Lewis in *Tarr* so resolutely disputed the nineteenth-century groundwork of Individualism, the emerging aesthetic and political consensus of British modernism, and the *avant-guerre*’s orthodox analyses of nationality, ought once and for all to establish *Tarr* as a major modern novel and Lewis as a major modern author.

NOTES

1 Paul O’Keeffe’s “Afterword” (to the 1990 reprint of *Tarr* (361–85) provides a comprehensive account of the novel’s complex composition and publication history.

2 Reed Way Dasenbrock correctly recognizes these competing conceptions of nationality in *Tarr*. I disagree, however, with Dasenbrock’s view that those competing conceptions result from *Tarr*’s palimpsestic composition and its attendant status as a work “at war with itself.” In my view, as will become evident, Lewis intentionally played these competing accounts of nationality against each other in order to discredit both. O’Keeffe’s “Afterword” to the 1990 reprint of *Tarr* makes the strongest case that Lewis’s novel is not a unified work but an incoherent literary palimpsest.

3 Levenson was the first critic to recover the influence of Stirner among English modernists before the war. In *Genealogy* he argues that the popularity of Stirnerian Egoism should be seen as another manifestation of the “ideology of subjectivity” that he traces “from Arnold, Mill and Pater to Hulme and Ford”
(63–68). In contrast, Robert von Hallberg emphasizes Stirner’s political influence on the Egoists and on Imagism, arguing that Marsden and Pound were drawn to Stirner because they concurred not only with his individualist ethics but with his libertarian, anti-liberal, and anti-statist politics, a politics that they believed found a literary correlate in Imagist aesthetics. See also Bruce Clark 129–43.

4 Marsden’s New Freewoman, originally a dissenting feminist journal, was renamed the Egoist at the start of 1914 to reflect the increasingly Stirnerian concerns of its editor and contributors.

5 In 1914, its first year of publication, the Egoist printed poetry by the Imagist poets F. S. Flint, Richard Aldington, H. D., John Gould Fletcher, Amy Lowell, and John Rodker; reviewed and reproduced photographs of art works by the Vorticist sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska; and included favorable articles on the Vorticist painters Lewis and Edward Wadsworth.

6 Compare the ending of another individualistic bildungsroman of the avant-guerre, Lawrence’s Sons and Lovers. In the novel’s last moments, Lawrence’s artist-hero, Paul Morel, overcomes his dependent attachment to his deceased mother and determinedly embraces his future:

She was the only thing that held him up. . . . He wanted her to touch him, have him alongside with her.

But no, he would not give in. Turning sharply, he walked towards the city’s gold phosphorescence. His fists were shut, his mouth set fast. He would not take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her. He walked quickly towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly. (420)

7 Von Hallberg convincingly argues that Imagism was another literary form in which individualist ideals were being articulated.

8 The Kreisleriana are a sequence of short works focused on the fictional musician-composer, first published in small German literary and music journals between 1810 and 1814 and collected in Hoffmann’s two-volume Fantasiestücke in Callots Manier (1814–1815); most of these tales have not yet been translated into English. The first two volumes of Hoffmann’s great unfinished novel, Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Makulaturblättern, were published in 1820 and 1821, respectively; the first volume was never completed. This novel is available in English as The Life and Opinions of Kater Murr, with the fragmentary biography of Kapellmeister Johannes Kreisler on random sheets of scrap paper, in Hoffman Selected Writings, Vol. 2.

9 Lewis, alluding to The Sorrows of Young Werther in BLAST 2, argues that “Goethe, with a book, set free the weltenschmerzen of the suicidal Teuton. The razors flashed all over the Teuton world. The pistol smoke went up from every village” (70).

10 Robert Currie (117–18) establishes the crucial influence of Hoffmann’s Murr on Lewis’s Tarr. My understanding of the relations between Hoffmann and Lewis has also benefited from the comments of Loren Kruger.

11 Toby Avard Foshay provides an interesting analysis of Lewis’s complex satiric stance in Tarr and concurs that the “ending of Tarr . . . is clearly satirical, with Tarr pretending to an attainment and a liberation which he very clearly has not achieved” (64).
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12 See also Hynes War 52–56, 67–78.
13 My account of these competing conceptions of German character is informed by Modris Eksteins 55–94.
14 Most recently, Bürger has defended this conventional chronology of Lewis's turn against modernism. In his attempt to account for Tarr's persistent exclusion from the canon, Bürger explains that "Lewis's later leanings towards fascism have probably been less decisive in this connection (for as we know similar attitudes have not prevented the canonization of Pound's work) than the fact that with his essay collection Time and Western Man [1927] he appeared on the scene as an engaged, not to say enraged, critic of literary modernism" (127). Levenson is the only other analyst I have found who opposes this prevailing view.
15 Obviously I reject O'Keeffe's claim that Lewis achieved the "fragmentation of meaning that occurs in such key Modernist texts as The Waste Land and The Cantos . . . by default . . . as a result of the novel's compositional timespan" (382).
16 Jameson calls Tarr "the first and last fully positive figure in Lewis's work" (98), while Bürger explains that Lewis's novel, "in so far as [it] is concerned with Tarr . . . narrates the production of the artist himself," a project he believes Tarr eventually "accomplishes" (128–29).
17 Only Levenson has recognized the breadth of Lewis's critical attack (in Modernism).

WORKS CITED

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