

ing the spoor of guilt and anxiety back into a distant and idealized childhood, the world of Beatrix Potter.”

Some of the arguments in Mr. Smyer's book are actually rather interesting, but he continually prejudices his case with his own excessive cleverness—in the bomb-shattered house in *Coming Up for Air*, the lower rooms of which have sustained the most damage, “the wreckage below indicates that the unconscious mind, the soul, is already stricken”; and the “memory holes” at the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-four* hint “at the connection between the mother and destruction. Not only is *mem* an Indian corruption of ‘ma’am’ (which the Anglo-Indian Orwell would have known) but also it is linked to a cluster of childhood terms for mother (‘mum,’ ‘mummy,’ and so on). In addition, *memory* is phonetically connected to *mammary*.” If one does not share the disposition to see everything as a species of Freudian riddle, this sort of thing is difficult to take very seriously.

Nicholas Guild

## FREDRIC JAMESON

*Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*  
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979. Pp. 190.

The first thing to be said about Fredric Jameson's new book, *Fables of Aggression*, is that in two ways its title is misleading. First, Jameson's focus is on putting contemporary poststructuralism to use in practical criticism, with the novels of Wyndham Lewis as his field of operation. Lewis is not completely forgotten, but neither is he the center of our undivided attention. Second, Jameson backs away very quickly from the implications of his subtitle “the Modernist as Fascist.” In the Prologue he admits that his title was provocative and says that Lewis was not really a Fascist but a “protofascist.” In turn I must admit to being provoked, not because I think that the connections between Modernism and Fas-

cism are trivial or should be ignored, but because this important topic demands serious and responsible treatment, not the application of attention grabbing labels which the author himself admits cannot stick. To call Lewis a protofascist is to associate him indelibly with the entire complex of Fascism while excusing oneself from the task of seriously discussing the connection. Jameson distinguishes between two kinds of ideological analysis, the old crude Marxist labeling and the new more sophisticated concept of ideology advanced by Althusser. Jameson claims to use the latest model from Paris, which by and large he does, but only after this initial labeling.

Jameson's program of formal and ideological analysis is at the center of his study. I find it difficult to summarize; Jameson himself speaks of his “methodological eclecticism.” But briefly he is bringing together Marxist, Freudian, and structuralist methods of analysis, using formalist methods to advance ideological analysis, reinscribing the language and narrative of the text in its context in history and ideology. In the notes Jameson occasionally cites his forthcoming book, *The Political Unconscious*, and those interested in his theory might find it more profitable to consult that when it appears.

What I object to in this is his jargon ridden and almost unreadable prose. Let me quote one example: “Reification exasperates the relationship of desire to its objects to the point where the dialectic of representation discussed above knows a qualitative leap, and the first-order transcendent space of the death wish is driven into reflexivity, generating those historically new formal structures and second-degree textual solutions which are the various modernisms” (p. 171). The ponderous nature of this prose stems from the dominance of a closed set of nouns. Jameson's argument could be improved immensely by the incorporation of some of the process Marxists talk about so much in the form of a few active verbs.

But I admire the ambitious scope of his theoretical interests, the intelligence with which he harmonizes diverse theories, and most importantly his willingness to test his theories. Here is a theory-oriented critic applying his theories to literature, a rare event worth some attention. For this reason readers who are neither Marxist nor interested in Lewis should find *Fables of Aggression* of interest, though without a

grounding in Marxism it may be heavy going and without one in Lewis it may be difficult to assess the utility of Jameson's ideas.

Jameson's grasp on Lewis, it must be said, is not as strong as his theoretical grasp. His study concentrates on the five major novels, *Tarr*, *The Apes of God*, *The Revenge for Love*, *Self Condemned*, and *The Human Age*. This in itself is commendable. Lewis wrote over forty books. Four studies attempting to survey that material have already been written and future work on Lewis should proceed with Jameson's selectivity. But he doesn't present his argument as a selective one about Lewis's major works but as a general one about Lewis; this is hard to accept given his occasional lack of attention to detail and his failure to discuss parts of Lewis's *oeuvre* which support or weaken his argument.

Lewis cannot be responding as Jameson claims (on page 41) to Harry Levin's *James Joyce in Men Without Art* as it was published seven years before Levin's book, though he does discuss it in his later *Rude Assignment*. Jameson quotes Lewis's phrase "burying Euclid deep in the living flesh" from an essay by Hugh Kenner, not from Kenner's source, Lewis's essay "Super-Nature Versus Super-Real," reprinted in the widely available, *Wyndham Lewis On Art*. He discusses *Tarr* in terms of the European situation when it was first written, but quotes only from the second version published in 1928. He makes an ingenious suggestion that the "sobriety" of Lewis's late style is due to his blindness; this is much less persuasive, however, if one has read *The Vulgar Streak* or *Rotting Hill*, written before his blindness but stylistically close to his last works. Lewis's early play, *The Enemy of the Stars*, a form of science fiction and philosophical if not exactly theological, has an obvious bearing on what Jameson calls Lewis's later "theological science fiction," but it is never mentioned by Jameson. Finally, Jameson attempts throughout to make sense of Lewis's dual activity as a writer and painter by characterizing something as Cubist, Expressionist, or Futurist. However Jameson intends us to take these references, Lewis was not any of these things, but a Vorticist, a word Jameson uses only once. Jameson's obvious and correct feeling that he ought to incorporate painting into his discussion has not led him to figure out how.

These are all minor points, perhaps, which do not affect the substance of his argument. But they do indicate that Jameson's "Lewis" should not be taken as Lewis: there are limits to his discussion obvious to any reader of Lewis. But within those limits he has original, fascinating, and compelling things to say. His analysis of Lewis's style in Chapter 1 is brilliant and shows his practical criticism at its best. I am less persuaded by his discussion in Chapter 2 of how agonistic situations and what he calls the pseudo-couple recontain the "centrifugal" force of Lewis's style, but at least he sees Lewis's plots as more than threads to string ideas on. Chapter 3 is the best, a discussion of epic and cliché, and though I am innately suspicious of the "semiotic rectangles" he develops for *Tarr* and *The Human Age* in the next chapters, I would grant them a certain heuristic force.

These first three chapters contain some excellent formal analysis: any reader of Lewis will profit from them, and they demonstrate the applicability of their formal systems to practical criticism. But in the last three chapters this formal analysis is subordinated to ideology in a way which for me undermines Jameson's critical enterprise. In the last analysis Lewis is a straw man for Jameson who again and again follows and uses Lewis's cultural critiques up to a point, only to dismiss him for, to be blunt, not agreeing with Jameson. The problem with Lewis is that he never became "genuinely dialectical" (p. 126); we are told of Lewis's "conceptual paradoxes" (p. 126), "conceptual dilemma" (p. 134), and how "the work unravels itself" (p. 175). Contradiction and paradox become the key words in the final chapters as Lewis is dismantled in an argument absolutely sure of its own premises which, however, arrives ironically at a position closely resembling the object of its critique.

Jameson's peroration takes off from his discussion of Lewis's portrayal of "the baleful influence of the political intellectual" in *The Revenge for Love*. Describing Lewis's portrait of Percy Hardcaster as an unwitting self-portrait, he turns on Lewis and attacks the pro-Fascist intellectuals of the 20's and 30's and postwar American liberals (what they have to do with Lewis is left unclear) who in their innocence are blindly imprisoned in words. But Jameson is drawing a self-portrait in turn (am I doing this too in some infinite hermeneutic regress?). I have no desire to condemn Jameson for I see that in doing so I would

be condemning myself, but his condemnatory conclusion disturbs me for to have written it Jameson must not see himself as a political intellectual caught up in words, or see that he too represents an ideology which has in its turn entered "the field of force of the real social world." Here, too, we find a "terrible innocence," at the heart of a book which seems so sophisticated.

Reed Way Dasenbrock

## CAROL SHIELDS

### *Happenstance*

Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson,  
1980. Pp. 216. \$14.95

If you think of recent fiction as serial items in the chronicles of neurosis and despair among the fouled up lifestyles of the middle classes, then Carol Shields latest work comes as a minority report on a seemingly foreign country. It recounts the experiences of Jack Bowman, an academic historian living in the Elm Park suburb of Chicago, during the week his wife Brenda is away with her quilts at a craft show in Philadelphia. A variety of crises, major and minor, fill out Jack's week; his closest friend Bernie Koltz splits up with his wife and comes to stay with him; his father, a devotee of self-improvement books, following the precepts of *Living Adventurously*, tries Turkish coffee and makes phone calls at odd hours; his neighbour, Larry Carpenter, tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide; his son Rob decides not to eat for a week; a huge snowstorm hits the city; his secretary indicates that she has conducted exciting sexual acts with him in her fantasies. Jack accommodates this mosaic of events without feeling obliged to indulge in the main event of so much modern fiction—the dark night of the soul. The ingredients for it are there threaded through the book, vague intimations of his loss of faith, rambling speculations on the nature of history, fears that a rival scholar has jumped the gun by publishing a monograph in precisely the area on which he has, halfheartedly, spent years of research. But in the varying pressures of his week, though doubts filter through his head and his habit of mind is characterized

by wry self-mockery, he has no melodramatic propensity to make a meal of disaster. He is sustained by minor pleasures, fleeting insights and a basic sense that his relationships are secure and will endure. So this is a book about what used to be called the silent majority, about coping or muddling through with some sense of dignity intact. In all of her work Shields has indicated that the small ceremonies of life that sustain a texture of decency are worth observing and maintaining. Legions of American writers have documented the superficialities of habit, the vulnerability of our lives to crisis, presenting characters who plunge into lonely alienation and yield themselves up to maudlin whining about the meaninglessness of it all. Shields gives us several characters whose lives are coming unraveled yet she places her emphasis on the way they find strengths within themselves and the way others come to their aid in knitting back together the fabric of relatively stable, ongoing existence. Jack Bowman sees himself as a little colorless but he can regard his own failures and those of his friends as being within an acceptable, normal range. He has not burdened himself with all kinds of expectations that he cannot fulfill, and so he is not completely mired in navel gazing. He is not the best father, son, husband or friend in the world, but he is good enough to accept the responsibility of helping those who come to him in trouble. Shields has no interest in grandiose, heroic gestures, rather she is concerned to demonstrate that adulthood requires flexibility, a certain stoical persistence, and a realization that wisdom is a cumulative process not a destination to be plunged towards at others' expense.

The structure of the novel weaves about in time recalling fragments of childhood, early courtship, the development of friendships, the evolving relationship to parents. Many of these passages seem to be over-elaborate, pointless meanderings, until we realize how they help to create our sense of ease with the solid and unspectacular central figure. Jack's parents appear to be dull in the ordinariness of their routines until we sense the generosity of their undemanding love. Shields fortunately ensures that her characters never seem to be smugly complacent for she endows each of them with a touch of altruism and a practicality that avoids self-congratulation. The clarity of her prose style, the flexibility of tone, the aptness of her descriptive passages bring us into a close and sympathetic engagement with her characters. Quilt making is an