# ‘A serious place’: Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr*, and the Café

*Kreisler was in a sense a recluse … But cafés were the luminous caverns where he could be said, most generally, to dwell … (Wyndham Lewis, Tarr)*[*1*](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

In his 1935 book, *Provence: From Minstrels to the Machine*, Ford Madox Ford records an exchange with his companion, Janice Biala, the artist whom he had commissioned to provide illustrations to accompany the work. After seeing a particular vista in London, Biala makes an appeal: ‘Let’s go quickly to a café so that I may get down my impressions while they are new … ’ Ford’s reply that there are ‘no *cafés* in London’ astonishes her: ‘But if London does not provide *cafés* for her artists how can she expect to have any art? … Or any letters? Or any civilisation? Or any anything?’[2](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Biala’s shock response calls our attention to the contemporary significance of the café: its material importance to the artist as a place to work, as well as to its symbolic value as a generative cultural and artistic milieu. Scores of artists and writers sat for hours in cafés, ate and drank in cafés, talked and argued in cafés, they thought, wrote, and smoked in cafés; in short, the café was the backdrop for many of their lives. And, for a few, the café also served as the backdrop for some of their finest works of art.

In our continued efforts to map the spatial, geographical, and now global contours of literary modernism, the quotidian space of café has not gone entirely unnoticed.[3](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) But there remains much more to be discovered about how this important space affected the life and work of modernist writers. Wyndham Lewis is a writer for whom space was a consistent fascination: whether that be private, public, civic, national, pictorial, or indeed, textual. Over the years critics have discussed Lewis’s preoccupation with space. Fredric Jameson, for instance, finds that ‘Lewis was in some deep Bachelardian fashion haunted his whole life long by rooms and houses, by dwelling space as such.’[4](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Scott Klein also observes an obsession with rooms, declaring that ‘spaces – primarily rooms – have been central to Lewis’s fictions’.[5](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

However, such critical attention has tended to focus primarily upon private rooms and private dwelling spaces, often overlooking other spaces that feature in his work. Such a preoccupation with private interiors perhaps demonstrates a critical desire to locate spatial analogues that reconcile Lewis’s overt eschewal of psychological subjectivity – his famed ‘external method’ – with the accepted practice of reading literary modernism in ways that privilege the interiorised narrative. Whatever the reason, to read Lewis in this way may lead us to miss what he was trying to achieve with his use of spaces like the café.

The following discussion takes Lewis’s first published novel, *Tarr* (1918), and focuses on his imaginative conception of the café and the way it ultimately shapes his writing. What we find is that Lewis’s understanding of the café is informed by a particular historical legacy of the space as an expansive and civilised social forum for arguing, debating, philosophising, and declaiming on a range of ‘serious’ subjects; and that, further, this conception of the café provides Lewis with a useful setting in which he can incorporate and attempt to aesthetically naturalise his own authorial intrusions and rhetorical pronouncements. In this particular sense, I argue that we can ultimately understand the café as a version of the novel’s own form.

**A serious place**

The café’s role in the genesis of culture and creative practice is a theme to which Ford returns to again and again in *Provence*: ‘a café’, he says, ‘is a serious place where serious people discussing serious subjects mould civilisations’ (p. 58). Though Lewis would have no doubt disagreed with Ford on most matters, he would have probably agreed with this definition of the café. In his autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Lewis introduces his fictional proxy, ‘Cantleman’, visiting a number of cafés during the War marches in London of July 1914.[6](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Giving us the ‘lowdown on the editor of *Blast*’ as someone who could never identify with the ‘collective sensation’ of the crowd (*BB*, p. 84), Cantleman is conducting ‘crowd-experiments’ (*BB*, p. 80) in an ironic attempt to understand the ‘thrilling masses’ that converged upon Trafalgar Square (*BB*, p. 78). In an account that echoes Biala’s conception of the café as a kind of sanctuary where the artist can attain artistic focus away from the hubbub of the city, Cantleman also finds the café to be a lucid retreat away from the confusion of the vague and directionless ‘jelly-fish’ crowds (*BB*, p. 80). During his initial foray he observes the mob’s character to be that of ‘sluggish electricity’, it was ‘aimlessly flowing’ and ‘had no meaning’ – he can barely comprehend it. But after withdrawing into a ‘Neapolitan café’ he is able to satisfactorily compose his observations to paper (*BB*, p. 80). For the purposes of his autobiography, Lewis wants us to understand that these fragments from 1914 are contemporaneous and candid, not simply hazy recollections reconstructed and reworked in 1936–1937. He writes:

Remember that I wrote that in 1914. It was written *on the spot*. It was almost as contemporary as the notes jotted down by Cantleman in his cafés, into which he went aside, out of the crowd, to report *sensations*, as soon as he got one. (*BB*, p. 84 [emphasis in original])

There is clearly something about the café that Lewis associates with immediacy, integrity, and artistic creation.

As one might expect, Lewis’s account of the Neapolitan café contradicts Ford’s indignant declaration that there were no cafés in London. Another popular establishment in the city was the Vienna Café, near the British Museum, where in 1910 Lewis first met Ezra Pound. In Canto LXXX, Pound celebrates the meeting place, laments its closing, and records that it was through Laurence Binyon that he made Lewis’s acquaintance:

And also near the museum they served it mit schlag

In those days (pre 1914)

The loss of that café

Meant the end of a B. M. era

(British Museum era)

Mr Lewis had been to Spain

Mr Binyon’s young prodigies

Pronounced the word: Penthesilea

There were mysterious figures

That emerged from recondite recesses

And ate at the WIENER CAFÉ[7](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

The Vienna Café closed in 1914, which Lewis supposes was because it was staffed and owned by ‘German[s] or Austrians, “alien enemies”’ (*BB*, p. 280). Of his affection for the place, he wrote to Pound: ‘I think by the way of Blessing the Vienna Café’ (*LWL*, p. 66),[8](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full). referring, of course, to possible inclusion in his now infamous ‘Blesses’ in *Blast*.[9](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Twenty years after it closed, the café still held some importance for Lewis; meditating on its significance, he wrote:

I have always thought that if instead of the really malefic ‘Bloomsburies,’ who with their ambitious and jealous cabal have had such a destructive influence upon the intellectual life of England, something more like the Vienna Café habitués of those days could have been the ones to push themselves into power, that a less sordid atmosphere would have prevailed. The writing and painting world of London might have been less like the afternoon tea-party of a perverse spinster. (*BB*, p. 273)

Lewis’s understanding of the Vienna Café here chimes with Ford’s definition of the café as a material and metaphorical font of civilisation. And he suggests that the Café was so important for artistic creation that its demise had a grave impact on London’s art and letters of the subsequent period: caffeine, perhaps, having a more positively stimulating effect than the tea served in the drawing rooms of Bloomsbury?[10](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Before meeting Pound in 1910, Lewis spent many of his formative years on the continent. He stayed for short periods in Holland, Munich, and Madrid; he spent summers in Brittany, travelled in Spain, and returned now and then to London. But from 1902 to 1909 he was mostly in Paris, drawing, painting, and frequenting the famous cafés. Here, Lewis learned much about these ‘luminous caverns’ and the society that frequented them. In *Rude Assignment*, he recalls the cosmopolitanism of the city and how the café terraces ‘swarmed with people from every corner of the earth’ including ‘an immense student population, [who could] sit all day long (and often did) for the cost of one cup of coffee without being interfered with and observe the crowds, or be entertained by his neighbours’ (p. 121).[11](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

By the time of Lewis’s artistic apprenticeship, the Parisian café had long-served as Parnassus for culture’s prime movers. Artists, writers, and thinkers associated with the cafés of Paris had played a significant part in strengthening the fame of the city as cultural metropolis and ‘Capital of the Nineteenth Century’.[12](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) George Moore provides a compelling description of what drew young artists like Lewis to the city. On his arrival in Paris, Moore recalls in *Vale* (1914):

I felt that my business was the discovery of a café where I could pass the evening –nothing to me seemed more essential than that. [ … ]

In the Middle Ages young men went searching for the Grail; to-day the café is the quest of a young man in search of artistic education.[13](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Moore became good friends with the Impressionist painter Édouard Manet who would later paint his portrait in the Nouvelle Athènes café in Montmartre.[14](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) In his *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886), a book that introduced his English contemporaries to his version of *fin de siècle* bohemianism, Moore included a panegyric to the importance of the Nouvelle Athènes in his creative life:

I did not go to either Oxford or Cambridge, but I went to the ‘Nouvelle Athènes’. What is the ‘Nouvelle Athènes’? He who would know anything of my life must know something of the academy of the fine arts. Not the official stupidity you read of in the daily papers, but the real French academy, the *café*.[15](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Moore goes on to insist that ‘though unacknowledged, though unknown, the influence of the “Nouvelle Athènes” is inveterate in the artistic thought of the nineteenth century’.[16](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Today, of course, the role of the café in French artistic and intellectual life is proverbial but Moore’s memoir can be understood alongside works like Henry Murger’s *La Vie de Bohème* (which Lewis references in the opening of *Tarr*) as one of the formative antecedents of the captivating mythology of Parisian café culture.

At the start of the twentieth century, these cafés remained the chosen places for artists and thinkers to meet and discuss new ideas. They had always attracted their share of tourists and poseurs, but with developments in transport and media, as well as a favourable exchange rate, the influx was now on a much more significant scale.[17](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) The practice of moving to Paris in order to sit in cafés like the artists of yore had become a clichéd rite of passage. Lewis called this period Paris’s ‘late sunset’ (*RA*, p. 121). The poet Leon-Paul Fargue mocked the scene:

Every obscure poet or painter who wants to be successful […] has to do a little military service in those […] pavement academies that teach Bohéme lifestyle, contempt for the bourgeois, sense of humour and heavy drinking.[18](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

The café terraces (‘pavement academies’) of Paris filled with those affecting the attitude of the bohemian artist. Costumed in the livery of the destitute, exchange-rate tourists played out their lives through scripted romantic visions of the café-dwelling artist. In 1908, Max Beerbohm observed that Paris was now a cheap theatrical parody of its former glories: ‘[a]ll reality seems to have gone out of it, leaving only a hard artificial glare for the bedazzlement of tourists’. It was ‘less like a city than a stage set’.[19](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) With its pulse seemingly diminished, one chronicler pronounced the death of Parisian bohemia in 1913, concluding that it existed now only as ‘the palest ghost of a legend, formless and indistinct’.[20](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) In the districts of Montmartre, the Latin Quarter, and Montparnasse, superficiality reigned; it seemed to some that being seen was far more important than any genuine engagement with the spirited intellectual praxis of café culture.

Though relishing his experience at the time, Lewis would later condemn this café-centric superficiality as extremely damaging to culture and civilisation.[21](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) In his view, these sham-artists trivialised and devalued the work of ‘real artists’ and their contribution to society, and he was keen to expose them. In an essay published shortly after *Tarr* called ‘What Art Now?’ (1919), Lewis distinguishes the fickle fashion-following pseudo from the true artist:

The brainless little loafer who has got into art school because he was too lazy to go anywhere else hears of this or that development in art. He hears that So-and-So (capital S) “is painting all black.” He rushes to the nearest café with the news […] The particular attitude of mind and of speech […] is confined to the unproductive café-haunting microbe, many of whose attitudes and imbecilities are attributed to artists […] He is just the public’s idea of an artist.[22](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Such banality and inauthenticity was a particular concern for Lewis and became a familiar railing point in much of his work. In his 1930 novel, *Apes of God*, through Pierpoint he provides a similar estimate of this state of affairs:

The traditional “Bohemia” has changed radically since the War. The reason is this. Everyone able to afford to do so has become a “bohemian”. This is the term still employed by the more naïf of the transformed majority. But of course traditionally that person was called a “bohemian” who could not afford to be anything else. The tramp, or the cynic by choice, upon a vast scale, constitutes a novel type.[23](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

It is the culture of ‘bohemianism’ and the bourgeois dilution of the café that (amongst other targets) Lewis satirizes in *Tarr*. ‘Bourgeois-bohemian’ is the term he deploys to lampoon the inhabitants of a faux-bohemia where the rich and well-to-do masquerade as starving artists. Much of Lewis’s critique of this clichéd Bohemia, at least in the first two chapters, stems itself from an idealised conception of the café that not only corresponds with Ford’s notion of the café as a ‘serious place’ but also draws on the café’s long history as a space devoted to the art of communication, civil assembly, and argument. Ultimately, for Lewis, the café is an arena where social interaction could and should ferment social action.

There are two models upon which Lewis’s conception is based, and though culturally different they are related by their essential social and political functions. The first is an enduring image of the café that traces back to the coffeehouse of seventeenth-century England: that merry meeting place of political debate and democratic expression. The second is the Russian tavern, which, in addition to being a locus of sociability, served as a forum for revolutionary political exchange.[24](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Following discussion of these two institutions and their relation to Lewis’s conception of the café, we discuss the influence they have upon the shape and form of Lewis’s novel, *Tarr*.

**The coffeehouse legacy**

Since its first appearance on the streets and boulevards of Europe’s cities, the coffeehouse has been associated with pioneering social, political, and cultural developments.[25](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) The sociologist Jürgen Habermas was the first to explicitly connect the English coffeehouse with the creation of a discernible public sphere. He argues that the coffeehouse, along with a few other nascent seventeenth-century spatial phenomena (the salon and *tischgesellschaften*[table societies], for instance), was the essential prerequisite for the emergence of a public sphere characterised by an open and progressive socio-political debate.[26](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Crucial to this cultural upheaval was unregulated conversation. The coffeehouse presented what Habermas called an ‘ideal-speech situation’.[27](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) It was a place where citizens could momentarily escape their role as subjects and gain autonomy in their engagement with rational debates on diverse matters, ranging from literature to high politics. Historian Thomas Babington Macaulay described the coffeehouses of Restoration England as ‘The chief organs through which the public opinion of the metropolis vented itself’.[28](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Following Macaulay and Habermas, later historians have paid particular attention to the coffeehouse as a forum for the emergence of a popular political consciousness. Steven Pincus and Brian Cowan, for example, engage with the micro-politics of coffeehouse society, explaining how it forged the way for a more inclusive and secular political culture.[29](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) While Margaret Jacob goes as far as to extol the coffeehouse’s legacy as ‘one of the preconditions for the emergence of modern democratic society in the West’.[30](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

The English coffeehouse model spread throughout Europe and became an important institution in the development of an international culture of enlightenment.[31](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) And while there are distinctions to be made between the different types of institution across Europe (due to varying state, legal, cultural, and economic contexts), the essential (and idealised) concept of the coffeehouse remained the same from country to country and endured for more than 200 years.[32](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Cowan, for instance, suggests that ‘the English coffeehouse ideal was imitated and adapted to local contexts as it made its way across space and time’.[33](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) In effect, the English coffeehouse, the French café, and the Germanic *Kaffeehaus* all share a common genealogy. The ‘family resemblance’ is such that, Cowan says, ‘they can be understood as individual parts of a broader, transnational and global history of the discovery and rapid diffusion of coffee and the revolution in sociability that this brought about’.[34](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Since their inception, and in their various continental guises, cafés and coffeehouses have provided an essential social function and sustained a particular type of intellectually and politically engaged clientele. One way this can be appreciated is through the sentiments these institutions received from contented habitués, which remained remarkably similar in theme and content throughout the ages, particularly with reference to classical antiquity and the ancient symposium. There is a ‘curious continuity’ that Cowan notes between ‘the ways in which the earliest English coffeehouses were described by their champions and the idealised descriptions of the modernist café or coffeehouse in continental Europe’.[35](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Such continuity is also revealed in Lewis’s attitude towards the café.

Despite the satirical scorn that colours his evocation of Paris and its inhabitants in *Tarr*, Lewis describes the city as his ‘university’,[36](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) giving both a sense of its formative importance and bringing to mind the familiar epithet of seventeenth-century coffeehouses as ‘Penny Universities’.[37](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) In *Rude Assignment* Lewis remembers his ‘education’ in the city as a heavenly period of idle curiosity and enthusiastic debate. Describing it as ‘*la nouvelle Athènes*’ (and perhaps invoking George Moore’s café of the same name), he re-imagines the capital as the classical city: cradle of civilisation and centre for the arts, learning, and philosophy. Paris, he says, ‘was the great humanist creation of the French […] the perfect place to live in […] expansive and civilised’, its ‘multitude of café-terraces’ – embodiment of the renowned symposia of Athens’ Lyceum – was ‘divinely disputatious’ (*RA*, p. 121). Lewis’s perception of the café here is strikingly similar to the poet Émile Goudeau’s 1888 description of French cafe life where:

It is necessary to descend into the crowd, to intermingle with the passers-by, to live, like the Greeks and Latins, in the *agora* and the forum. Under the rainy skies of Paris, the *agora* and forum is the café…The cafés are the places of reunion, where, between two games of cards or dominoes, there take place long dissertations – sometimes confused, hélas! – on politics, military strategy, the law and medicine. What is more, these establishments have replaced the Academy, in whose famous gardens, philosophers walked back and forth, declaiming their inductions and deductions.[38](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

And both Lewis’s and Goudeau’s descriptions evoke the contemporary feeling seventeenth-century coffeehouse habitués held for their esteemed institution. The poet and satirist Samuel Butler, for instance, employed the same classical analogy and proclaimed the coffeehouse ‘a kind of Athenian school’, and wondered whether coffee was the drink ‘Lycurgus himself used when he compos’d his laws’.[39](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) In 1679, Thomas Shadwell similarly described the intellectual and politically conscious coffeehouse habitués: ‘[e]ach coffee-house is fill’d with subtle folk, who wisely talk and politickly smoke’.[40](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) We might imagine Lewis here as W. H. Auden’s ‘lonely old volcano of the Right’[41](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) ‘smoking’ ‘politckly’ away in his own café in Paris.

For more than two centuries, then, coffeehouses and cafés across Europe held an enduring role. They played host to a mix of social groups, and witnessed the formulation of a range of radical ideas and social and political movements. They were essential focal points for the democratic opposition to autocratic monarchy in Restoration England, and were just as important to anti-establishment movements in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. Standing atop a table in the Café de Foy in Paris in 1789, for example, the revolutionary journalist and politician Camille Desmoulins exhorted the people to take up arms and storm the Bastille. And it was in the Café Durand at the end of the nineteenth century that Émile Zola penned ‘J’accuse’, his great indictment of the French government’s handling of the Dreyfus affair. ‘J’accuse’ was published in *L’Aurore*, a paper that was read at every café table in Paris.[42](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

The coffeehouse’s long history as a revolutionary, literary, social, philosophical, and political forum, its sense of excitement and urgency, was what Lewis wanted his ideal café to be rather than the banal site for the staging of clichéd bohemianism that it had become. It is a model that in its essence is related to another ‘revolutionary’ drinking establishment that despite having a different cultural history conjures similar idealised notions.

**‘A serious world’: the Russian tavern**

Lewis’s wistful recollection of Paris in *Rude Assignment* is also closely and importantly tied to the literature he read as a student in these cafés. As part of an instalment for a radio series called ‘Crisis’, recorded for the BBC, Lewis was asked to present a talk detailing the decisive literary influence on his life as a writer (the formative ‘crisis’ to which the programme’s title refers).[43](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) After some thought he identified not one book, as provisionally directed, but ‘a solid mass of books’ that he says ‘revolutionised [his] technique of approach to experience’; a ‘great volume of creation produced in the nineteenth century by a group of men over a space of fifty or sixty years [of which] there is no parallel since the Renaissance’, namely: ‘the creative literature of Russia’ (*RA*, pp. 156–7). He then added a spatial dimension, claiming that while reading these Russian books as a student in Paris he ‘lived for some time wholly in that Russian world’, elaborating that:

my “crisis” – if we wish to attain that over-forcible expression – was even more than a collection of books: it was a world […] I was not suddenly stopped by a wall of books. Rather I passed imperceptibly into a warmer, richer, atmosphere. (*RA*, p. 157)

The effect was such that he claims he ‘was for some years spiritually a Russian’ and after returning to London, though the ‘muscovite spell had lost much of its primitive strength’, he says: ‘it was partly, still as a *Russian* that I wrote my first novel “Tarr”’ (*RA*, p. 161 [emphasis in original]).

This aspect of the Russian influence upon Lewis’s writing of *Tarr* is well known and the Dostoyevskian parallels have been variously documented, but what has received little or no attention is the primacy Lewis accords to a particular social space within this influential Russian World.[44](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Trying adequately to determine exactly what it was about this imaginative realm that struck him so, Lewis deduces that ‘the impact of such books was due to much more than their vitality’, and suggests that Ivan Karamazov from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) ‘supplies the correct answer’. He then quotes a passage from the novel in which the brother expatiates on the young men who sit ‘drinking and talking in the corners of Russian taverns’:

They’ve never met before, and when they go out of here they won’t see each other again for the next forty years. But what do they talk about for the moment that they’re here? Nothing but universal problems: Is there a God? Does the Immortal soul exist? Those who don’t believe in God discuss socialism and anarchism, and the reorganisation of mankind on a new pattern; which are the same questions, only tackled from the other way up. (*RA*, p. 159)[45](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Such topics of conversation seemed to the impressionable Lewis of a substance far more weighty and consequential than ‘the Dogs’, football, or women (*RA*, p. 159), which are subjects Lewis would have probably encountered in the English pub. Gareth Stedman Jones, for instance, argues that in turn-of-the-century London, working-class institutions like the pub were somewhat insular and defensive; part of a ‘culture of consolation’ where conversations were more likely to be about sports and entertainment than politics.[46](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Thus, responding to Karamazov’s vignette, Lewis concludes:

That was what ‘Russian boys’ had their minds filled with apparently, and what these books showed them ardently discussing in taverns as they drank, as if the fate of the universe hung upon their words. […] Here was a more serious world altogether, thought I. (*RA*, p. 159)

It is not just the seriousness of the subjects under discussion that is of significance here; the social space of the tavern is clearly fundamental to Lewis’s conception of this world, because what the tavern enables and, indeed, what Karamazov describes is the momentary formation of an engaged, coherent, and conscious public sphere. The tavern in this formulation is a kind of cultural analeptic. Like the stimulating parley characteristic of the English coffeehouse and European café, the Russian tavern here is a space of expansive debate, philosophy, and vitality; socially inclusive, and culturally egalitarian, it is a place where atomised individuals and a convoluted, fragmentary body politic coalesce to revivify (however fleetingly) a disintegrating social nexus. Or, in Fordian terms, the Russian tavern is ‘a serious place where serious people discussing serious subjects mould civilisations’.[47](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Built on the consumption of vodka rather than coffee, the Russian tavern fulfilled many of the same social functions as similar establishments in the West but according to Laura L. Phillips cultural differences mark it as a much more explicitly masculine space with a tendency towards political and physical violence.[48](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Masculine identity and codes of conduct found fuller expression in the tavern. Phillips suggests that ‘The absence of a female presence in Russian taverns … allowed men an unfettered opportunity to exhibit masculine behaviours, an opportunity that found its most prominent expression in drinking, cursing, and fighting’.[49](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Despite state concerns about public drinking, antagonisms and violent outbursts tended to revolve not around excessive alcohol consumption but differing political ideologies, labour movements, trade unions, and factory committees.[50](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) The tavern was a crucial forum for political discussion and organisation; they were places to meet, to pass on illegal literature, and conduct conspiratorial conversations.[51](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) The tavern’s overtly political function therefore made them the focus of intense political rivalry between working-class groups, who, as Phillips says, ‘literally invaded and destroyed each other’s meeting places’.[52](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Scenes of masculine posturing often colour *Tarr*’s café scenes, as well as the title character’s misogynistic outlook, but it is the political and ideological zeal (to the point of violence) associated with the Russian tavern that most inspired Lewis. Though perhaps not to the extent of destroying another fellow’s café, there is sense in which all café encounters in the novel are tinged by violence and aggression. Scott W. Klein, for instance, argues that ‘All of the relations between characters in *Tarr* are duels of one kind or another’.[53](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Lewis’s imaginative transposition of the Russian tavern to the cafés of Paris, then, formed a compelling vision of cultural engagement and renewal. Indeed, it is clear from his Vorticist experiments onward that he urged an interventionist art intellectually committed to (in Karamazov’s words) ‘the reorganisation of mankind on a new pattern’. So fundamental is this relationship to Lewis’s early imaginings of Paris life that he concludes: ‘Paris for me is partly the creation of these books. I now realise that if I had not had Tchekov [*sic*] in my pocket I should not have enjoyed my *Dubonnet* at the [Café] ‘Lilas’ so much’ (*RA*, p. 159).

In *Tarr*, it is the eponymous Englishman who holds such beliefs about the café as a serious place. For Frederick Tarr, the café is a place for conversation, but not just any old vapid chitchat: it must be of a weight and significance as described by Karamazov. Tarr is continually dismayed, however, that the intellectual calibre of his café encounters does not meet the Karamazovean standard. So while the novel opens promisingly in a café with Tarr holding forth on the Dostoyevskian ‘universal problem’ of Art versus Life, it is soon apparent that this will be nothing like the serious discussion he hoped for. Put simply, the cafés of *Tarr*’s Paris are the places where Lewis’s idealistic notions confront the disillusioning and irritating realities of modern life; and it is this friction that energises many of the novel’s café scenes. Subsequently, we find that the shape and form of Tarr’s various interactions are partly attributable to the distinctive characteristics of the café.

**The spatial form of the café**

Following Lewis’s introduction to bourgeois-bohemian Paris, the narrative proper of *Tarr* begins with Alan Hobson and Frederick Tarr meeting awkwardly on the Boulevard du Paradis and going to the Café Berne for a drink. Once inside, Lewis continues his critique of ersatz bohemia. As the beneficiary of an expensive Cambridge education, Hobson is generally castigated for living an indolent and inauthentic bohemian lifestyle. In Hobson’s dress Tarr observes the ‘Art-touch’ (*T*, p. 22): his shabby Harris tweeds and large floppy ‘wideawake’ hat sitting atop lengths of untroubled tresses betray an advantaged upbringing. He is a bourgeois-bohemian, the antithesis of artistic integrity – affecting the bohemian appearance of the artist while experiencing none of the privation and exercising none of the labour. Tarr finds Hobson’s ‘pseudo-neediness’ to be ‘sentimental indulgence’ and believes that ‘=Every man should be forced to dress up to his income’ (*T*, p. 33). Tarr then launches into an acerbic lecture on Art and Sex.

In his brief assessment of this opening café scene in *Bohemia in London*(2007), Peter Brooker states that ‘the contretemps between the two men takes place in a Paris café but might just as well have been in Fitzroy Square or Percy Street where Lewis sat writing, throwing punchy insults’.[54](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Once we understand the significance of the café space, however, we find that it is not incidental but instrumental to the nature and circumstance of the encounter. Taken literally, Brooker’s statement asserts that such an intellectual confrontation could have taken place either in a private residence or in the street outside.[55](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) But it is perhaps not so controversial to argue instead that one’s behaviour can be, and very often is, dictated by one’s immediate environment; whether one is at home, on the street, or in someone else’s lodgings, conduct is adjusted accordingly. One might consider, for example, the distinct contrast between Tarr’s loquacity in this opening café scene and his reserve in private at Bertha’s salon later that day. Bewitched by her room’s strangeness he sits without ‘saying anything’, examining it as ‘you do a doctor’s waiting room’, observing perforce ‘a certain formality’ from which ‘more inaction followed’ (*T*, pp. 54–5).

Key to the form of café conversation in this encounter is the café’s status as a liminal space. Occupying a position on both sides of the public/private sphere, the café transcends but critically does not dissolve the border between the two states. An account of Parisian café life by former expatriate resident Florence Gilliam, *France: A Tribute by an American Woman* (1945), illuminates very well some of the characteristic social effects of this liminality:

Every gradation of social life, every type of dress, every shade of poverty and riches, every occupation and every interest can mingle there without embarrassment, condescension, obligation, or implication. Some go to meet friends, to encounter new and stimulating acquaintances; others to be alone in the crowd. I know of no look in the world – unless it be the sightless gaze turned to one another by riders in the subway – that is so impersonal as the one on the face of a person in a café, not in immediate contact with the other occupants. The man who writes a letter there, composes verses, reads his paper, or just studies his drink in lone contemplation, attracts no attention whatsoever. On the other hand, if he chooses to engage some stranger in conversation about politics or art or the weather, he may easily enter upon an exchange of views that would be quite out of place on the street, and yet is as devoid of personal connotations as if it took place while waiting for a bus.[56](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

It is this commingling of spheres that facilitates such casual free exchange and prepares the ground for ideas to flourish. Gilliam’s account of the Parisian café also reveals that it was above all a place for exuberant badinage:

Mostly the cafés are for talk; and this is talk for talk’s sake, in its richest form. It is dominated by no obligation to listen to the monologue of a host or hostess, or hearken to the dicta of any lion of the occasion […] Much of the talk is intensely serious, and no subject is beyond its range.[57](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

In his historical account of the café, *The World of the Paris Café* (1996), W. Scott Haine describes three values upon which such sociability depended:

The first was selectivity – that is, the freedom of participants in café sociability to converse with whomever they wished. The second value was autonomy – the right not to be interrupted by third parties once you had begun to talk with a particular person or group. The third involved the idea of tolerance – that is, the concept that no one in the café should take offence at the minor irritations and insults that accompanied socializing in a small space amid a dense urban agglomeration.[58](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Such an ethos is essential to the character of café conversation in *Tarr*, sustaining and explaining some of the novel’s curious adversarial exchanges that oscillate ominously between awkward propriety and severe pique, as in a later scene with Tarr and Kreisler at the Café d l’Aigle where Tarr has sought out his rival for Bertha’s affections. Here, in somewhat of a theatrical play, mocking grins and ‘alarming diabolical smile[s]’ (*T*, p. 222) volley back and forth across the café table:

You can get out of your head any idea that I have turned up to interfere with your proceedings […]. Affairs lie entirely between Fräulein Lunken and yourself.

Kreisler met this assurance truculently.

You could not interfere with my proceedings. I do what I want to in this life!

How splendid. *Wunderbar!* I admire you!

Your admiration is not asked for!

It leaps up involuntarily! Prosit! But I did not mean, Herr Kreisler, that my desire to interfere, had such a desire existed, would have been tolerated. Oh, no! I meant that no such desire existing, we had no cause for quarrel. Prosit! (*T*, p. 222)

We are all too well aware, of course, just as Kreisler is, that ‘interfere’ is exactly what Tarr intends to do. Despite Kreisler’s stating candidly his desire ‘to be left *alone*’, Tarr merely orders another drink and sits back undeterred (*T*, p. 222 [emphasis in original]). The tenuousness of the habitués’ unspoken right to public privacy is exposed and easily infringed, but it is this knife-edge that maintains the tension in the above. As a public and (generally) social space available to anyone with money enough to purchase a coffee – and although he pushes his luck – there is no official rule prohibiting Tarr’s conduct, which is why Kreisler’s private question: ‘[w]hy was this Englishman sitting there and talking to him?’ (*T*, p. 222) remains exactly that: private and unanswered. The restrained indignation and sarcasm disguised as politeness here demonstrates the café’s ability to sustain disagreeable encounters.

Such an exchange is quite unsustainable, for example, in a private residence. Recalling Tarr’s visit to Kreisler’s room on the following night, there is no such civil restraint: ‘Why have you come *here*?’ is the abrupt response to Tarr’s imposition succeeded immediately by the order to vacate, ‘Quick! Out!’ (*T*, pp. 238–9 [emphasis in original]). Unlike the café, the domestic interior shows no such ambiguity; it is Kreisler’s ‘territory’ (*T*, p. 247), a fact of which Tarr is well aware: ‘[t]he room, somehow […] seems on its owner’s side, and to be vomiting forth the intruder’ (*T*, p. 240). Recognizing his disadvantage, Tarr sets forth the logic of contested space:

Should he insist, forcibly and successfully to remain, it can only be for a limited time. He will have to go sooner or later, and make his exit, unless he establish himself there and make it home, henceforth; a change of lodging most people are not, on the spur of the moment, prepared to decide on. (*T*, p. 240)

Tarr’s comical speculation indicates an understanding that such overt territoriality is justifiable only when linked to official proprietorial status. He says, ‘[t]he civilised man’s instinct of ownership makes it impossible for any but the most indelicate to resist a feeling of hesitation before the idea of resistance in another man’s shell!’ (*T*, p. 240).

In contrast, Kreisler’s aggressive response would be unacceptable within the space of the café. Confirmation of this comes the following evening when Kreisler is undone enacting a similar performance of territorial violence against Louis Soltyk that proves to be both unsuccessful and counterproductive. This time unleashed in service of his trespassed ‘honour’ rather than his room, in an act reminiscent of assertions of masculinity in Russian taverns, Kreisler forsakes café etiquette with a smack to each of Soltyk’s cheeks and subsequently finds himself ejected from the Café Souchet by the policing garçons ‘like a drunken workman’ (*T*, p. 251). We might also remind ourselves that this is the second branding Kreisler has occasioned upon Soltyk’s cheeks. The first incident occurred on the street outside the Café Berne a few days earlier. Without policing waiters, it quickly turned violent and ended with Kreisler snapping Soltyk’s cane and flinging the splintered pieces in his face. The street’s openness and lack of close supervision ensured that no civil discussion could be maintained (*T*, p. 255).

So, to return to Brooker’s claim. While we can certainly re-imagine the opening café scene playing out as a disputatious encounter between Wyndham Lewis and Roger Fry rather than Frederick Tarr and Alan Hobson, it is highly improbable that such an encounter could be sustained on Fitzroy Square or in Lewis’s private apartment at Number 4 Percy Street. The character of the opening confrontation in *Tarr* is shaped and sustained by the café’s liminal status that positions it on both sides of the public/private sphere.

**Café conversation**

Fredric Jameson has described Tarr and Hobson’s meeting at the café as staging ‘revulsion with the social’. Declaring that it portrays a ‘symptomatic hesitation and reluctance in the face of the most insignificant human contacts’, he says, ‘the more heightened moments of scandal or violence prove to be nothing but the convulsive effort to free one’s self from one’s interlocutor, or […] to obliterate him in an explosion of rage and black bile’.[59](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Maintaining our focus on the café, however, we find that this is a misreading of the motivating force behind Tarr’s contumelies. For when we pay attention to the status of café conversation in this meeting, it becomes apparent that the revulsion is not with ‘the social’ qua ‘the social’, but rather with the state of café sociality and social culture as represented by Hobson as bourgeois-bohemian café loafer. With this emphasis, what we find is that Tarr, no less than Lewis himself, is undoubtedly a strong believer in the power and efficacy of social interaction and public debate, particularly in the space of the café. At the start of chapter 2, for instance, we are told that ‘[a] great many of Frederick Tarr’s resolutions came from his conversation. It was a tribunal to which he brought his hesitations’ (*T*, p. 36). With ‘tribunal’ elevating discussion to the level of a court of justice, we are also told that ‘[c]ivilised men have for conversation something of the superstitious feeling that ignorant men have for the written or the printed word’ (*T*, p. 36). It is therefore Hobson’s indifference and ignorant refusal to show any respect for the art of café parley that leaves Tarr ‘unsatisfied’ and, significantly, ‘with much more to say’ (*T*, p. 36). Incidentally, the only overt display of violence in this scene is directed towards Hobson’s hat, which is knocked from his head into the road, and perhaps represents not only Tarr’s willingness, in the words of T. E. Hulme, ‘to fight about’ ideas but also the collision of a polite English coffeehouse sensibility with the violent tendency of the Russian tavern.[60](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Further evidence of Tarr’s dislike for empty, idle chat occurs later in the novel when after moving to Montmartre, he finds himself in a café on the Place Clichy in the company of another disagreeable bourgeois-bohemian. An Englishman affecting the manner of an artist with a ‘wide awake’ hat that was ‘larger than Hobson’s’ annoys Tarr by ‘pretending to be alarmed every time he was addressed’ (*T*, p. 205). Unable to find any affinity with the man: ‘Tarr gazed at the conclusive figure in front of him, words failing. Words failed, too, for maintaining conversation with it. He soon got up, and left, his first apéritif at Montmartre unsatisfactory’ (*T*, p. 206). This is exemplary of what Tarr sees as the deadening effect of bourgeois convention and bohemian masquerade. He says as much to Hobson earlier on when he criticises the conventional lives these so-called bohemians live:

It’s the same with the café fools I have for friends – there’s a Greek fool, a German fool, a Russian fool: –an English fool! = There are no ‘friends’ in this life any more than there are ‘fiancées.’ So it doesn’t matter. You drift on side by side with this live stock – friends, fiancées, colleagues and what not (*T*, p. 32).

With the sham artist cutting such an ersatz figure, Tarr finds it impossible to have any kind of serious and meaningful interaction. Like Hobson, pilloried as the ‘poor froth blown off the decadent nineties’, this English ‘Café-fool’ libels the artist with his affected and outmoded appearance. Costumed in ‘the wardrobe-leavings of a vulgar bohemianism’, he belies a truer nature by relinquishing any individuality or autonomy in his misguided dedication to romantic clichés of what it is to be an artist (*T*, p. 34).

Tarr’s revulsion, then, if we are to use the word, is with the ‘unserious’. For, it is clear that he is not a character revolted by or determined to free himself from social encounters when, after the disappointing meeting with Hobson, he runs into Guy Butcher and asks whether he has ‘time for a drink’ (*T*, p. 37). His nature is in fact the opposite; as someone with an enthusiasm for debate, Tarr is eager to immerse himself in ‘the social’ and to engage in a more edifying interchange. And, indeed, following this conversation with Butcher at the Café l’Univers on the character of English Humour, his conversational needs are slaked; instead of rushing from the café toward further confrontation, Tarr is now possessed by a ‘sensation of peculiar freedom and leisure’ (*T*, p. 4).

**Café as theatre**

Conscious of the public setting of the café, one notes a certain amount of theatricality in these exchanges. There is a performative dimension evident in Lewis’s café conversations where speakers are seen to launch into lengthy and dramatic orations that would be just as appropriate for the stage, and are received with equal histrionic relish. In fact, the propinquity of café and theatre has an established history. It was Richard Sennett who first drew our attention to the literal proximity of café and theatre in eighteenth-century Paris and London, describing how both institutions shared a cultural regime of speech and gesture. For example, the terms ‘making a point’ and being ‘settled’ derive from this era. In the café, one would suddenly stand when one had a ‘point’ to make, and would be subsequently ‘settled’ by the raucous noisemaking of the patrons when the speaker became tiresome.[61](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Such exuberance was still prevalent nearly two hundred years later, as Gilliam attests:

In cafés, celebrities may collect groups around them, though in most cases it is not because they are celebrities, but because their talk is the best in the place. Wits may stroll from table to table, dropping gems; but the great portion of wit grows out of the talk that is flying around, and cannot be isolated from its setting.[62](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

The image of ‘strolling wits’ marks the Paris café as a site for intellectual showmanship. When Tarr launches into his lecture on Art and Sex, he achieves a similar feat: an ironic description of his oratorical flight is given from Hobson’s point of view. Gifting him aerodyne wit, Hobson presents Tarr as a café celebrity of sorts, reminiscent of Gilliam’s account:

As Tarr’s temperament spread its wings, whirling him menacingly and mockingly above Hobson’s head, […] [he] did not think it necessary to reply. = He was not winged himself. = He watched Tarr looping the loop above him. He was a droll bird! He wondered, as he watched him, if he was a *sound* bird, or homme-oiseau? People believed in him. His exhibition flights attracted attention. What sort of prizes could he expect to win by his professional talents? Would this notable arriviste be satisfied? (*T*, p. 27 [emphasis in original])

For more examples of such theatrics, we might also consider Hobson’s convulsing and crowing ‘thrice’ like a ‘rooster’, before finally letting himself go ‘in whoops and caws, as though Tarr had been pressing him to perform’ (*T*, p. 28). Or the theatricality of his response to one of Tarr’s criticisms: ‘“I? My Voice –? But that’s absurd! = If my speech –” Hobson was up in arms about his voice in mock vehement surprise’ (*T*, p. 29). And, finally, Tarr’s immediate reaction to the histrionic display is to adopt a role to counter Hobson’s ‘Pierrotesque and French variety’: ‘[He] needed a grimacing, tumultuous mask for the face he had to cover. = The clown was the only role that was ample enough’ (*T*, p. 29).

A notorious self-publicist himself, Lewis, like Tarr, was not shy when it came to public displays of wit. In his biography of Lewis, Paul O’Keefe reports just such a display at the Café du Dôme where Euphemia Lamb sat:

listening while Lewis expounded, perhaps, on the books he was currently reading, and noting the effect of inadequate hygiene on his complexion, she remarked to her companion that he was so bloody clever it was coming out of his face in spots.[63](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

**Novel as café**

The unique character of the café space as a place for public performance and talk may in fact be crucial for Lewis's decision to choose the café as the place where through the mouth of Tarr he could deliver his own philosophical pronouncements. For, *Tarr* is arguably a didactic novel and it is in the café scenes where this feature becomes most apparent. Tarr’s role as café wit and satiric malcontent steals the show. Casting Hobson as both ‘crowd’ and ‘cultivated audience’ (*T*, p. 29), he ensures that he is the lone spectacle. Imposing on the conversation subjects that are of immediate interest to him, in some instances he even goes so far as to strike Hobson from the discussion entirely, answering for him: ‘You reply, “what is all the fuss about?”’ (*T*, p. 33). Andrzej Gasiorek has identified Lewis’s style here as ‘a declamatory mode of address that replaces dialogue with the monologism of the self-obsessed mind’.[64](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) It is also a mode of address decidedly apropos both to the café setting and to Lewis’s artistic and rhetorical intentions.

*Tarr*’s didactic impetus accrued its share of criticism early on. Before publication, the novel was faulted particularly for the flatness of Tarr’s characterization. Upon reading the manuscript, Harriet Shaw Weaver commented: ‘[t]he characters appear to me mechanical automatons, wound up in order to spout forth opinions’ (*LWL*, p. 76). Lewis responded with an acknowledgement of sorts:

The criticism you made I made myself to a friend of mine about those first chapters. I make Tarr too much my mouthpiece in his analysis of Humour etc. = Only what you say does not apply to the fourth chapter, of Part I, in which there are, I think, no opinions, only an analysis of character and action.

[…]

You must really consider the first three chapters as a sort of preface. But I will admit that Tarr has just a trifle too many of my ideas to be wholly himself, as I conceived him. (*LWL*, p. 76)65

The chapters that gave rise to Weaver’s objections are, significantly, the ones with the café settings, for it is in these spaces that Tarr and his opinions dominate.

In what can now be read as another Lewisian connection to the Augustan coffeehouse, Paul Edwards has described Lewis’s narrative technique in *Tarr* as the subversion of ‘those processes by which fiction has sought to communicate the real [by] returning instead to some of the roots of the novel in essayistic discourse’. And he highlights the resemblance between the narrative rhetoric of *Tarr* and that of eighteenth-century writers (and coffeehouse habitués) like Samuel Johnson and Fanny Burney.[66](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Further confirmation of Lewis’s essayistic style comes from O’Keefe who has suggested that the bases for Tarr’s lectures on Art and Sex in Chapter 1 and on Humour in Chapter 2 were essays produced by Lewis in 1911, which, he says, would explain the ‘rather blatantly authorial tone of Tarr’s conversations’.[67](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full)

Might the café be fundamental to his decision to include these essays? Or, rather, as the place where it was usual to hear grand declamations on a range of subjects, might Lewis’s use of the café setting be motivated by an aesthetic attempt to integrate and naturalise his own philosophical thoughts as represented in these essays? Tyrus Miller has argued that Lewis’s early authorial intrusions in *Tarr* soon become intentional and integral to his future projects.[68](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) Despite his concession to Weaver, rather than purging his work of personal opinion, Lewis would in his later work in fact accentuate what Miller calls the ‘infection of character and author, and of action and ideology’.[69](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/2wi8bJg9RYdHq53vf3Jy/full) The shift in Lewis’s attitude can be traced in his telling response to Sturge Moore, whose criticisms, like Weaver’s, focused on the early café scenes: ‘[a]ll I can suppose’, Lewis says, ‘is that I am really Tarr’s hero’ (*LWL*, p. 100).

Though the literary experiment was apparently unsuccessful per the aesthetic requirements set out by Moore and Weaver, Lewis’s use of the café should be understood partly as a desire to meet such contemporary critical expectations as well as an inventive way to incorporate his own rhetorical pronouncements in what is perhaps the most appropriate setting. The café is, in a sense, a version of the novel’s own form. As *Tarr*’s hero Lewis walks the floors of the cafés in the novel like the coffeehouse habitués of the seventeenth century, holding forth on a range of ‘serious’ subjects declaiming and explaining in an attempt to ‘mould civilisation’ and bring about revolutionary cultural change in a manner akin to those ‘Russian boys’ in Russian novels.

Reading the early scenes of *Tarr* in this way demonstrates that the café holds a significant place in Lewis’s development as a writer. It had served its novelistic purpose in his early attempts to adhere to accepted modes of novelistic discourse, which soon gave way to an unabashed polemical style comparable in spirit to the coffeehouse rhetoric of old – a style that would develop into one of the most audacious and compelling literary voices of the twentieth century.

**Notes**

1. Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr: The 1918 Version*, ed. Paul O’Keefe (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 2001), p. 77, hereafter referred to as *T*.

2. Ford Madox Ford, *Provence: From Minstrels to the Machine*, ed. John Coyle (Manchester: Carcanet, 2009), p. 24 [emphasis in original].

3. See: Shachar Pinsker, ‘The Urban Literary Café and the Geography of Hebrew and Yiddish Modernism in Europe’, in Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 433–58; also Scott McCracken’s work on the space of the teashop: ‘Voyages by Teashop: An Urban Geography of Modernism’, in Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (eds.), *Geographies of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 86–98.

4. Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 42.

5. Scott W. Klein, *The Fictions of James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis: Monsters of Nature and Design* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 118.

6. *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1967), pp. 63–84, hereafter referred to as *BB*. The ‘Crowd-master’ appears in *BB* in slightly altered form; the original was published in *Blast 2*, 1915.

7. Ezra Pound, ‘LXXX’, in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* [Fourth Collected Edition] (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), pp. 506–7.

8. Wyndham Lewis, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis 1882–1957*, ed. W.K. Rose (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 66, hereafter referred to as *LWL*.

9. But it seems that the war mitigated even the most rebellious of temperaments; Lewis perhaps thought it imprudent to bless anything vaguely pertaining to ‘alien enemies’ at that time. For whatever reason, the Vienna Café was not included in the list of ‘Blesses’.

10. Pound’s line in Canto LXXX about the Vienna Café serving it ‘mit schlag’ refers to the coffee being served ‘with whipped [cream]’ but ‘mit schlag’ also connotes the more suggestive: ‘with impact’. Despite his apparent disapproval of Bloomsbury tea-parties, Lewis was fond of London’s ABC Teashops, which were blessed in *Blast*.

11. Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment,* ed. Toby Foshay (Santa Barbara, Black Sparrow Press, 1984), p. 121, hereafter referred to as *RA*.

12. Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris – Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ [1935], in Peter Demetz (ed.), *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*(New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 146–62.

13. George Moore, *Vale* (New York: D. Appleton, 1914), p. 140.

14. Édouard Manet, *George Moore (1852–1933) at the Café (1878–9)*. Oil on Canvas. 65.4cm x 81.3cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

15. George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man* [1886] (London: Heinemann, 1926), p. 85.

16. Ibid. p. 86.

17. In 1913 a tourist from the US could get 5.1840 Francs for every dollar. At the end of the war in 1919 this increased to 7.3090 Francs, and a year later in 1920 the figure doubled: for every dollar a tourist could get 14.2050 Francs. Source: [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com/" \t "_blank) [Date accessed: 6 August 2014].

18. Leon-Paul Fargue, *Le piéton de Paris, 1939* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 140–41, quoted in Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey (eds.), *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 69.

19. Max Beerbohm, ‘At the Empire’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science, and Art*, 106, no. 2766 (31st October 1908), pp. 538–39 (p. 538).

20. Orlo Williams, *Vie de Bohéme: A patch of Romantic Paris* (London: Martin Secker, 1913), p. 5.

21. As Alan Starr reminds us, from around 1901 Lewis adopted a lifestyle loosely based on the bohemian figure of Augustus John. See ‘*Tarr* and Wyndham Lewis’, *ELH*, 49, no. 1 (Spring, 1982), pp. 179–89 (p. 179).

22. Wyndham Lewis, ‘What Art Now?’ [1919], in Paul Edwards (ed.), *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914–1956*(Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), p. 48.

23. Wyndham Lewis, *Apes of God* [1930] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 127.

24. Laura L. Phillips, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), see, for instance, ‘Functions of the Tavern’, pp. 72–95.

25. See Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2004).

26. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

27. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 88.

28. Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England: From the Accession of James the Second*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1849), p. 361.

29. See Brian Cowan, ‘The Rise of the Coffeehouse Reconsidered’, *The Historical Journal*, 47, no.1 (2004), pp. 21–46; and Steve Pincus, ‘“Coffee Politicians Does Create”: Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture’, *The Journal of Modern History*, no. 67 (December 1995), pp. 807–34.

30. Margaret C. Jacob, ‘The Mental Landscape of the Public Sphere: A European Perspective’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, no. 28 (1994), pp. 95–113 (p. 96).

31. See, for instance, James van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

32. Brian Cowan acknowledges that while ‘it seems likely that the original English coffeehouse ideal was imitated and adapted to local contexts’ there is another history to be written, ‘much more difficult to research’, concerning ‘the ways in which each local or national context created its own distinctive coffeehouse tradition’. See Brian Cowan, ‘Café or Coffeehouse? Transnational Histories of Coffee and Sociability’, in Susanne Schmid and Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp (eds.), *Drink in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014), pp. 35–46 (p. 43).

33. Ibid. p. 43.

34. Ibid. p. 37.

35. Ibid. p. 41.

36. Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 15.

37. Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee-Houses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

38. Émile Goudeau, *Dix Ans de Bohème* [1888], eds. M. Golfier and J.-D. Wagneur (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2000) cited in Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 124–5.

39. Charles W. Davis (ed.), *Samuel Butler: Characters* (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve, 1970), p. 257.

40. Thomas Shadwell, ‘The Woman-Captain,’ [1679], in Montague Summers (ed.), *The Complete Works of Thomas Shadwell*, 5 Vols. (London: Fortune Press, 1927), Vol. 4, pp. 15–16.

41. W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice, *Letters From Iceland* (London: Faber, 1937), p. 247.

42. Noël Riley-Fitch, *Literary Cafés of Paris* (Washington and Philadelphia: Starrhill Press, 1989), p. 14.

43. Taped on 13th March 1947 and broadcast on 16 March 1947. Much of what he presented was later used verbatim in chapter XXVII of *RA*, pp. 156–59, and I therefore quote from here where applicable.

44. See, for instance, Hugh Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (London: Methuen, 1954), p. 27, on the novel’s ‘Russian’ complexities; or Timothy Materer, *Wyndham Lewis the Novelist* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), p. 54, for the opinion that early reviewers’ references to Dostoyevsky ‘were prompted by the character of Kreisler’; Paul O’Keefe rounds off his ‘Afterword’ to *Tarr: The 1918 Version* with an exploration of the Dostoyevskian parallels, pp. 379–82; while more recently Scott Klein has argued that *Tarr* ‘takes the psychically charged worlds of Dostoyevsky and Goethe as its models’ to the extent that it ‘may be thought of as perhaps the finest “Russian” or “German” novel in the English tradition’. See Scott W. Klein, *Tarr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. xvii–xviii.

45. Lewis quotes from Constance Garnett’s translation.

46. Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 220, 236–7.

47. Ford, cited above.

48. Phillips, pp. 72–95.

49. Ibid. p. 78.

50. Ibid. p. 79.

51. Ibid. p. 80.

52. Ibid. p. 81.

53. Scott W. Klein, *Tarr* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xiv.

54. Peter Brooker, *Bohemia in London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 15.

55. Number 4 Percy Street was Lewis’s home between 1913 and 1915, see *BB*, p. 85.

56. Florence Gilliam, *France: A Tribute by an American Woman* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1945), pp. 42–3.

57. Ibid. p. 44.

58. W. Scott Haine, *The World of the Paris Café: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789–1914* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. 150–1.

59. Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 37–8.

60. ‘The best way of gliding into a proper definition of my terms would be to start with a set of people prepared to fight about it – for in them you will have no vagueness.’ T.E. Hulme, ‘Romanticism and Classicism’, in Herbert Read (ed.), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) pp. 111–40 (p. 114).

61. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 73–87 (p. 83).

62. Gilliam, p. 44.

63. Paul O’Keefe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p. 80.

64. Andrzej Gasiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Devon: Northcote House, 2004), p. 30.

65. Letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver dated March 1916. *LWL*, p. 76.

66. Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 40.

67. Paul O’Keefe, ‘Afterword’ in *T*, p. 364.

68. Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 111.

69. Ibid. p. 111.