'THIS ODD GAME CALLED WAR': THE ETHICS OF GAME PLAYING IN THE WAR WRITING OF H. G. WELLS, G. K. CHESTERTON, AND WYNDHAM LEWIS

MICHAEL SHALLCROSS

Although H. G. Wells and G. K. Chesterton almost invariably found themselves on opposing sides in matters of public dispute, both men attested to a private friendship that transcended ideological conflict. In correspondence with Chesterton's wife, Frances, Wells remarked upon a request for the pair to debate together, 'nothing would delight me more than a controversy with G. K. C., whom indeed I adore,' before explaining that the apparently adversarial nature of their relationship was somewhat phantasmal: 'we are really quite in agreement. It's a mere difference in fundamental theory which doesn't really matter a rap – except for after dinner purposes'.[1] Perhaps the principal matter on which the two found themselves in agreement was that of the ethical importance, not to mention the sheer pleasure, of engaging in children's games as an adult. In 'Friendship and Foolery', a chapter from Chesterton's *Autobiography* (1936), he writes that although he shared marginally more ideological common ground with his other great public antagonist, George Bernard Shaw, ultimately 'Wells was more of my sort than Shaw', because he possessed a 'vigorous and unaffected readiness for a lark'.[2] This article examines the implications of this readiness for a lark in the context of the First World War, with the aim of highlighting the difficult ethical questions that this cataclysmic event raised for public men who recommended the cultivation of a childlike adult persona. Beginning with a discussion of the ideological positions taken up by Wells and Chesterton in relation to game-playing and the War, I go on to examine the ways in which these stances were later challenged by the artist, novelist and critic, Wyndham Lewis, in his post-war satire, *The Childermass* (1928), a novel that drew praise from Wells, despite featuring Chesterton in a thinly disguised, malign central role.

LITTLE WARS AND GREAT WAR

[1] Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1945), 323.
[2] G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), 222.

When Wells first invited his new friend, Chesterton, to stay with him at Easton Glebe, the pair immediately became embroiled in a prodigious bout of game playing.[3] On this first visit they invented the mysterious game of Gype, for which they constructed elaborate rules and customs, while neglecting to create the game itself. They then went on to build a toy theatre together, producing a satirical dramatisation of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission, in which the Commissioners dismembered Dickens's Mr Bumble the Beadle, before placing him in a huge cauldron and stewing him. Later in the same visit, the pair were joined by Chesterton's younger brother, Cecil, at which point the three men retired to the carpet to play a war game of Wells's recent invention, involving toy soldiers. This was, presumably, a version of the floor game that Wells first conceived over a long lunch with another of his playful literary friends, Jerome K. Jerome, the rules of which were published in 1913 under the title *Little Wars: A Game for Boys*.

While the pleasure that Chesterton and Wells derived from such activities can be understood, on one level, simply as a non-utilitarian expression of high spirits, both men also sought to formulate an ethics and psychology of game-playing in their writing. This was a common concern amongst the pre-war intelligentsia, stemming in large part from the ongoing influence of Herbert Spencer, whose Social Darwinist precepts exercised a tenacious grip on the turn-of-the-century cultural imagination. In *The Principles of Psychology: Volume 2* (1872), Spencer contends that no 'matter what the game, the satisfaction is in achieving victory – in getting the better of the antagonist. This love of conquest, so dominant in all creatures because it is the correlative of success in the struggle for existence, gets gratification from a victory at chess in the absence of ruder victories.'[4] While Spencer's ostensible intent was to laud the civilizing process that leads to the sublimation of such violent impulses, the influence of his conflation of game-playing and physical combat upon later social theory was rather more ambiguous. Its ingraining within the popular consciousness is perhaps most clearly discernible in the propagation of the truism that the battle of Waterloo had been won on the playing-fields of Eton.[5] This conceit went on to inform the famous refrain – '"Play up! play up! and play the game!"' – of

[3] Although it does not seem possible to date this first visit precisely, it must have occurred after May 1912, when the Wells family moved to Easton Glebe, and is likely to have predated the outbreak of war in July 1914. The account given here is taken from Maisie Ward's *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 321.

[4] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology: Volume 2* (New York: D. Appleton, 1920), 708.

[5] Matthew Arnold refers, somewhat sceptically, to the saying in his essay, 'An Eton Boy' (1881): 'The aged Barbarian will […] mumble to us his story how the battle of Waterloo was won in the playing-fields of Eton. Alas! disasters have been prepared in those playing-fields as well as victories; disasters due to inadequate mental training - to want of application, knowledge, intelligence, lucidity.' Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism: Third Series* (Boston: The Ball, 1910), 255.

Henry Newbolt's war poem, 'Vitaï Lampada' (1892), in which the protagonist's memories of dutiful service on the public-school cricket-ground inspire him to bravery on the battlefield.[6]

Both Chesterton and Wells were uneasy about such rhetoric. Chesterton was particularly repelled by the sanguinary applications of play encouraged by Spencer's speculations, and expended much intellectual energy in challenging the latter's account of the agonistic foundation of game-playing. In one of his earliest articles for *The Speaker*, Chesterton sets out to distinguish children's games from the adult variety: 'Games as ordinarily understood [by the adult] do not constitute play, they constitute sport. In a game, as the adult understands a game, the essential is competition, and the aim victory,' whereas 'children's play is, a festival, a strictly ceremonial rejoicing'.[7] By investing the preadolescent game with the capacity to transfigure the competitive urge, Chesterton ascribes a utopian, somewhat prelapsarian dimension to this stage of play, implying that it might offer a pacific corrective to the adult combatant: 'One of the most universal and popular forms of play amongst children is that represented by "Here we go round the mulberry-bush," which consists of nothing but running round in a ring. It consists of the circle, the very type of equality and communism.'[8]

With the publication of *Little Wars*, Wells sought to infuse his vision of play with a similar pedagogic message. Although the majority of the text is given over to an entertaining account of the fun to be had in playing the game, he also appended a more serious final chapter, 'Ending with a Sort of Challenge', in which he argues that the game conveys a positive ethical message, since it not only offers a vicarious substitute for the combative urge, but also pragmatically demonstrates the folly of war to the player. Thus, Wells combines an adherence to the precepts of Spencerian psychology with a Chestertonian desire to destabilise them:

> [*Little Wars*] is a homeopathic remedy for the imaginative strategist. Here is the premeditation, the thrill, the strain of accumulating victory or disaster—and no smashed nor sanguinary bodies, no shattered fine buildings nor devastated country sides, no petty cruelties. … I have never yet met in little battle any military gentleman … who did not presently get into difficulties and confusions among even the elementary rules of the Battle. You have only to play at Little Wars three or four times to realise just what a blundering thing Great War must be. … That, I think, is the

[6] Henry Newbolt, *Collected Poems: 1897-1907* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1918), 131.
[7] G. K. Chesterton, 'Some Urgent Reforms: Playgrounds for Adults II', *The Speaker*, 30 Nov 1901. BL MS Add.73381 ff.77.
[8] Ibid, ff.77.

most pacific realisation conceivable, and Little War brings you to it as nothing else but Great War can do.[9]

Wells's belief that Great War might be equally effective in bringing about this realisation was put to the most urgent possible test in the following year, with the outbreak of the conflict that quickly became known as 'The Great War'. Wells promptly composed a lengthy treatise on the subject, bearing the now-famous epigrammatic moniker, *The War That Will End War* (1914), in which he argued that 'world pacification' must be the ultimate purpose of the conflagration: 'this is now a war for peace.'[10] Here Wells echoes the rhetoric of *Little Wars* by arguing that the extremity of the carnage will ultimately function as a permanent cautionary example of the futility of war, though the torturous logic of this pacific defence of war leaves Wells in the position of implying that the most dramatic possible bloodbath is necessary in the short term, to serve the longer-term good. Consequently, despite his anti-war rhetoric, in order to defend his thesis Wells was compelled to oppose those pacifists who denounced the war outright, with the result that many considered him to have undergone an extraordinary overnight conversion to jingoism. Wells's biographer, Vincent Brome, goes further, arguing that once the conflict began in earnest, it 'carried Wells away on a wave of excitement'. Much as families of the period would gather around the dining table to play freshly patented board games such as 'Bombarding the Zepps' and 'From The Ranks To Field Marshal', Wells was lured into the drama of the tactical to and fro, evincing, in Brome's view, an 'almost schoolboy impetuosity' in translating his enthusiasm for prophecy to the largest possible canvas.[11]

The note of dissonance between Wells's professed pacifism and projected militarism is illustrated by a quirk in the first edition of *The War that Will End War*, which ends with a paratextual advert for *Little Wars* that directly contradicts the rhetoric of Wells's afterword. The advertiser explains that *Little Wars* functions as an indispensable handbook for the successful prosecution of real war, rather than a deterrent against such action: 'every essential to good generalship in actual warfare is [required] before a victory can be won. So much is this the case that the game has been taken up in earnest by a number of prominent military men.'[12] In the copy consulted for this article (held in the University of York's J. B. Morrell Library), this blurb has inspired one reader to angrily scrawl 'flag-waving Teutonic Kiplingism' at the top of the page. While this is not a characterisation that Wells would have readily recognised, the kernel of ambivalence in Wells's temperament is hinted at in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The New Machiavelli* (1911), in which the narrator

[9] H. G. Wells, *Little Wars: A Game for Boys* (London: J.M. Dent, 1931), 103-6.
[10] H. G. Wells, *The War that Will End War* (London: Frank & Cecil Palmer), 11.
[11] Vincent Brome, *H. G. Wells* (Kelly Bray: Stratus, 2001), 140.
[12] Wells, *The War*, un-paginated end matter.

recalls that while he 'disliked Herbert Spencer all my life,' Kipling's 'wild shouts of boyish enthusiasm for effective force' had exerted a powerful influence upon his youthful development.[13]

Despite Wells's assertion that *Little Wars* was designed to dissuade the would-be militarist from action, the utilitarian claims of the advertiser are supported by evidence that war games found favour amongst the political top brass of the era. The guest book at the military stronghold, Reigate Priory, records that Winston Churchill played a military strategy game named '*L'Attaque*', during a visit shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, and of course, as the century wore on, the meetings of senior strategists were increasingly conducted around maps filled with miniaturised military units.[14] Nonetheless, with the advent of the First World War, the discrepancy between what Wells termed, in *Little Wars*, 'the exact science of our war game', and the profoundly inexact science of Great War quickly became evident on the ground.[15] As Wells noted in another of his volumes of war writing, *What is Coming? A Forecast of Things after the War* (1916), 'the game played according to the very latest rules of 1914' seemed to be based upon appallingly randomised slaughter.[16] A year later, in *War and the Future* (1917), Wells admits that every prediction that he has made so far has run aground on an inadequate factoring in of contingent human folly. Nonetheless, he immediately goes on to offer further speculations upon the relative likelihood of transforming 'the present endlessly hopeless game into a new and different and manageable game', a hope encouraged by evidence that 'the Western allies are playing a winning game upon the western front'.[17] Though Wells was proved correct in the latter assessment, it is striking that even at this late stage in the bloody conflict he consistently turns to the language of play when setting out his

[13] H G. Wells, *The New* Machiavelli, ed. Simon J. James (London: Penguin, 2005), 93; 105. In a further indication of Wells's ambivalence, the narrator goes on to note that his antipathy towards Spencer was softened when he read the latter's autobiography, and finally found that he 'loved him' (93).

[14] For details of Churchill's time at Reigate, see 'Churchill's Secret Reigate' *Reigate History*, 2010 <http://www.reigatehistory.co.uk/churchill.htm> [accessed 30 March 2015].

[15] Wells, *Little Wars*, 69.

[16] H. G. Wells, *What is Coming? A Forecast of Things after the War* (London: Cassell, 1916), 32. This shift is illustrated in rather unsettling microcosm by the fate of the raw materials of *Little Wars*. Mathilde Meyer, the governess of Wells's sons, recalled that after one skirmish 'hopelessly damaged soldiers were melted down in an iron spoon on the schoolroom floor, and others had a new head fixed on by means of a match and liquid lead.' Mathilde Meyer, *H. G. Wells and His Family* (Edinburgh: International Publishing, 1955), 27.

[17] H. G. Wells, *War and the Future: Italy, France and Britain at War* (London: Cassell, 1917), 273, 269.

predictions – indeed, he refers to the war and its consequences as a game on twelve separate occasions in the book.[18]

Wells's staunch contemporaneous defence of the war was shared by Chesterton, as was his propensity to discuss the conflict in terms of game-playing. Chesterton's polemical tract, *The Barbarism of Berlin* (1914), presents his first extended analysis of this new incidence of 'the game called war'. The text begins with a tabulation of Germany's preliminary infractions against Belgium and France, before wondering rhetorically, how 'long is anybody expected to go on with that sort of game?' Later, Chesterton corroborates the Wellsian advertiser's assessment of the enthusiasm of military strategists for war games, while doubting the enemy's aptitude for such activities: 'It is said that the Prussian officers play at a game called *Kriegspiel*, or the War Game. But in truth they could not play at any game; for the essence of every game is that the rules are the same on both sides.'[19]

While it might be assumed that Wells's defence of military action would be less nationalistic in tone than that of Chesterton, their polemics reveal a surprising ideological affinity on this point, again deriving from a shared distrust of the influence of Spencerian social theory upon political systems.[20] In his second treatise on the war, the ironically titled propaganda piece, *The Crimes of England* (1915), Chesterton deprecates 'Prussia, plodding, policing, as materialist as mud', before arguing that 'It matters little whether we call' the political philosophy at hand, 'with the German Socialists, "the Materialist Theory of History"; or, with Bismarck, "blood and iron." It can be put most fairly thus: that all *important* events of history are biological, like a change of pasture or the communism of a pack of wolves.'[21] Wells's assessment of the evils of 'Prussianism' in *The War that Will End War* is barely differentiable from Chesterton's position:

> We have to destroy an evil system of government and the mental and material corruption that has got hold of the German imagination and taken hold of German life. We have to smash the Prussian Imperialism […which] has preached a propaganda of ruthless force and political

[18] *War and the Future*, 31; 51; 134; 135; 140; 149; 170; 261; 269; 273.
[19] G. K. Chesterton, *The Barbarism of Berlin* (London: Cassell, 1914), 93, 11, 45.
[20] It is also notable that Chesterton and Wells were both members of the War Propaganda Bureau. An edition of *The Barbarism of Berlin* was published by the Bureau, and it seems likely that the tenor of all of the war polemics discussed above was moulded by both men's understanding of their duties in relation to the WPB. For more details, see 'War Propaganda Bureau', *Spartacus Educational*, September 1997 (updated January 2015) <http://spartacus-educational.com/FWWwpb.htm> [accessed 30 March 2015].
[21] G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1915), 75, 99.

> materialism to the whole uneasy world. "Blood and iron," she boasted, was the cement of her unity.[22]

However, Wells departed from Chesterton in the utopian addendum that he affixed to these reflections. When Chesterton came to mount a retrospective defence of the war in his autobiography, he particularly defined his position as a sober antidote to Wellsian utopianism, arguing that the concept of a war to end war possesses no intrinsic ethical merit, as it might just as easily be used to justify a war of aggression as one of defence. Consequently, Chesterton was 'far from certain that a War to End War would have been just'. Conversely, his continuing retention of a pro-war position was based upon his belief that the 'only defensible war is a war of defence', and that the purpose of the Great War had been 'the great defence of civilization. … We never promised to put a final end to all war. … We only said that we were bound to endure something very bad because the alternative was something worse.'[23]

WYNDHAM LEWIS AND *THE CHILDERMASS*

One might imagine that Chesterton's cautious, measured position would have been rather more acceptable to those who had fought and suffered in the conflict than Wells's somewhat shrill, overheated pipe-dreams. Consequently, it is rather surprising to find that in one of the most powerful fictional responses to the First World War – Wyndham Lewis's dark post-war fantasia, *The Childermass* – it is Chesterton who comes under tacit attack, while the evidence of Lewis's correspondence demonstrates that he looked upon Wells in a rather more favourable light. Unlike Wells and Chesterton, Lewis fought in the war, serving as a bombardier on the battlefields of Ypres and Passchendaele. Consequently he possessed hard-won experience of a conflict that he later defined in terms of perverse play – in 'this odd game called war … a dum-dum bullet is a foul, but a gas-bomb is O.K.' – in which he saw himself as a playing piece manipulated across the landscape by the unseen hand of an incompetent game-player: 'I moved hither and thither over this sea of mud and have since been told that it was a fool who was moving me.'[24]

The Childermass concerns the posthumous journey of two fallen soldiers, Satterthwaite and Pullman, through the 'city of the dead' to an appointment with a sinister figure named the Bailiff, who holds the salvation or damnation of his deceased petitioners in his power.[25] Lewis's city of the dead operates as a fantastical rendering of the battlefields of the war, with Pullman compelled to maintain constant vigilance over a hostile terrain in which individuals and objects discorporate at a moment's notice, and inexplicable shifts in the

[22] Wells, *The War*, 8-9.
[23] Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 248, 247.
[24] Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: John Calder, 1982), 151; 152.
[25] Wyndham Lewis, *The Childermass* (London: John Calder, 1965), 38.

landscape cause continual disorientation. Pullman embodies the stoic, responsible serviceman, the 'staunch attendant' (19) of Satterthwaite, who represents, in turn, the capitulation of the adult to a state of infantilism. Satterthwaite is consistently rendered in childlike terms, clinging needily to Pullman 'with a shell-shock waggle' (19) to his walk, while prattling to himself, in cockney, '"What a *gime*! What a *gime*!"' (58). The narrator explains that Satterthwaite is 'the victim of the devils of Humour, of war pestilence and famine […] his mouth and nostrils full of the Death-gas again, shell-shocked into automaton. '"What a *gime*!" he whimpers' (59).

As Michael Hallam has recently noted, Naomi Mitchison considered Lewis's development of his 'enemy' persona after the war to be 'a constructive pose, a satirical mode meant to enable genuine social reflection and change. Lewis, the enemy of infantilism, wanted all society to grow up.'[26] In this light, Lewis's depiction of Satterthwaite might be understood as a critique of the principled pre-war juvenility of Chesterton and Wells. Discussing Chesterton shortly before the war began, Lewis situated him as the progenitor of an infantilised public discourse. Perhaps with one eye on Chesterton's laudation of prepubescent game-playing, Lewis imagines him writing his articles from 'his nursery rocking-horse', before deriding his social thinking as the 'drivelling of an imbecile … one long mechanical dribble of empty inversions and wearisome similes from the nursery'.[27] If Lewis's pre-war rendering of Chesterton seems somewhat harsh, his post-war polemics make these jibes appear positively amiable. In *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) and *Time and Western Man* (1927), both composed concurrently with *The Childermass*, Lewis refers to Chesterton, variously, as 'a ferocious and foaming dogmatic toby jug,' and as a nightmarishly carnivalesque figure whose 'cartoon-like John Bull physique' is topped off with 'a sanguine grin fiercely painted on'. In summary, Chesterton presents 'a sinister figure such as you would find, perhaps—exploiting its fatness, its shrewdness, its animal violence, its blustering patriotism all at once – in the centre of some nightmare Bank Holiday fair'.[28]

This rhetoric builds up to a near-hysterical conception of Chesterton as a physically threatening presence; it also reads as an uncannily accurate gloss on the character of the Bailiff in *The Childermass*, a correspondence that has

[26] Michael Hallam, 'In the "Enemy" Camp: Wyndham Lewis, Naomi Mitchison and Rebecca West', in *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*, ed. Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker & Nathan Waddell (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 74.

[27] Wyndham Lewis, 'Futurism and the Flesh' (1914), in *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914-1956*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 35.

[28] Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), 387; and Wyndham Lewis, *An Anthology of His Prose*, ed. E. W. F. Tomlin (London: Methuen, 1969), 157.

surprisingly evaded Lewis scholars to date.[29] Chesterton's putative location at the centre of 'some nightmare Bank Holiday fair' is called to mind by the assertion of the critic, Robert Chapman, that the Bailiff is 'a burlesque of Peter at the gates of Heaven' who 'performs in a booth resembling a Punch and Judy theatre'.[30] In the text, this image is elaborated upon in lurid detail: the Bailiff resembles 'Uncle Punch amongst his jolly children … all grinning vulpine teeth, puckered eyes' and 'rubicund cheeks' (151), with a 'great red bud of [a] head to adumbrate the bludgeon-skull of the Britannic Bulldog, all of a portly piece ... with Mr Bull's bluff eye' (189). The Bailiff has succeeded in turning his acolytes into 'pseudo-infant-minions' (159), who listen rapt as he expounds his anti-intellectual dogmas 'floridly fiercely and irresponsibly' – recall Chesterton's 'sanguine grin *fiercely* painted on' (309; my emphasis).

Notwithstanding Lewis's long-held antipathy toward Chesterton's advocacy of a childlike disposition, it remains initially confusing that he should have developed such a visceral apprehension of Chesterton in his writing of the 1920s, since the latter's support of the war, though resolute, was far from gratuitously bellicose in comparison to many of his journalistic contemporaries. Chesterton was no shallow jingoist; rather, he possessed an acute sensitivity to the suffering of his nation – it seems no coincidence that he experienced a complete mental and physical breakdown shortly after the war broke out. As Chesterton later recalled, his last action before his collapse was to 'go to Oxford and speak to a huge packed mass of undergraduates in defence of the English Declaration of War. That night is a nightmare to me; and I remember nothing except that I spoke on the right side.'[31]

So why should Lewis have come to regard Chesterton not merely as a naïve bungler in world affairs, but as a thoroughly malign influence upon the nation's psyche, goading it to war while posing as a childlike innocent? One possible explanation is the little-known fact that in 1917 Chesterton lent his name to a campaign to conscript the artist, Jacob Epstein, following the latter's successful application to be exempted from the call-up on the grounds that he was an '"irreplaceable artist"'.[32] Epstein's exemption was subsequently

---

[29] To my knowledge, the only critical work to remark upon this possible correspondence is William Blissett's article, 'Chesterton and English Literary Modernism'. Blissett notes, as an aside, that '[t]he exuberant, larger-than-life, grotesque figure of the Bailiff […] reminds me of the pseudo-jolly, somehow menacing figure of Chesterton as caricatured by the Men of 1914 early in their careers'. *The Chesterton Review*, 34 (2008), 113-44 (129).

[30] Robert T. Chapman, *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires* (London: Vision, 1973), 169.

[31] Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 248-9.

[32] This incident is related by Martyn Downer in *The Sultan of Zanzibar: The Bizarre World and Spectacular Hoaxes of Horace de Vere Cole* (London: Black Spring Press, 2010), 191. Downer reports that the campaign was conducted in the pages of the *Evening Standard* in June 1917, beginning with an interview in which Sir Philip Burne-Jones expressed dissatisfaction with the exemption. The sculptor, Francis Derwent Wood, registered his agreement with Burne-Jones in an open letter, and Wood was then 'forcefully backed up' by

overturned, and although he never saw action (having suffered a nervous breakdown while still in England), his modernist peers were outraged by this intervention.[33] In *The Childermass*, the Bailiff authorises executions in a spirit of blithe joviality, and it seems plausible that Chesterton's apparent capacity to sway the powerful may have contributed to the Bailiff's rendering as an irresponsible arbiter of salvation and damnation, whose patronage of his 'jolly children' recalls Lewis's claim that Chesterton thrilled at the idea of 'a jolly old war (with all the usual accompaniments of poison gas and bombs)'.[34] In the text, one of the Bailiff's pseudonyms is revealed to be 'Herod', while the novel's title is a reference to the Feast of the Holy Innocents.[35] Accordingly, this imagery would seem to situate Chesterton as a modern-day Herod, demanding the massacre of all the young males of a generation.

It is certainly difficult to defend Chesterton's actions in the Epstein case. In mitigation, one might note that his beloved brother, Cecil, with whom he and Wells had played *Little Wars* at Easton, was now at the front, and was dead the following year. Moreover, in view of Chesterton's democratic convictions, he would have deplored the notion that certain individuals should be exempted from service purely on the grounds of exceptional artistic talent. Lewis makes a comparable point in his autobiography, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), in a bitterly ironical account of the manoeuvrings of his more well-connected literary contemporaries:

> The 'Bloomsburies' were all doing war-work of 'national importance', down in some downy English county, under the wings of powerful pacifist friends; pruning trees, planting gooseberry bushes, and haymaking, doubtless in large sunbonnets. One at least of them, I will not name him, was disgustingly robust. All were of military age. All would have looked well in uniform.[36]

However, the key difference is that Lewis was on the front line in 1917 and Chesterton was not; the latter was intervening in the fate of a flesh-and-blood man from the safety of his bureau, in a manner that might be compared to the abstracted war-game player, manipulating his toy soldiers, and Lewis could not forgive the fact.[37]

Chesterton. Due to an embargo in force at the British Newspaper Library during the composition of this article I have not been able to consult and quote from the original newspaper correspondence.

[33] Downer, 192.

[34] Lewis, *Anthology*, 158.

[35] Lewis, *Childermass*, 72.

[36] Lewis, *Blasting*, 184.

[37] Chesterton later addressed this view of the conflict in an article on 'Satirizing the Great War' (*Illustrated London News*, 17 May 1924). Discussing Otway McCannell's satirical

THE SLEEPER AWAKES

Following the publication of *The Childermass*, Lewis received a letter from Wells, offering slightly baffled plaudits: 'You have a mind alien to mine. But I find myself more & more deeply impressed by your vivid imagination, your power of evocation & your profound queer humour. … I salute you with gratitude and admiration.'[38] Lewis replied with equivalent praise, albeit couched in an implied recent modification of his view of Wells: 'for two or three years [… I have] come more and more to respect what you do', in particular 'I refer to articles I have from time to time read, dealing with the questions of war and Peace, which, partly because I was a soldier maybe and have especially reflected on that question, struck me very much. That is why I sent you a copy of *Childermass*, and I am overjoyed to hear that it met with your approval.'[39]

Lewis's conversion to an appreciation of Wells coincided with the latter's renouncement of his initial defence of the conflict. In a recent essay on Lewis's satirical treatment of war rhetoric, Nathan Waddell argues that 'from the First World War onwards [Lewis used] satire as a means of resisting the "war-to-end-wars" rhetoric that irked him.'[40] Lewis was ahead of the game in this respect – David Lodge has noted that by the mid-twenties, Wells's quixotic notion had become 'the ironic catch-phrase of a whole generation's disillusionment,' much as Siegfried Sassoon bitterly satirised the glibness of Newbolt's game-playing metaphor in his war poem, 'A Subaltern' (1917).[41] In *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham* (1930), Wells alludes, with grim self-recrimination, to his belated adjustment of perspective on the subject, when he has the narrator remark that after the war the military bartering between nation-states went on 'just as though there had never been that stupid talk about "a war to end war"'.[42]

---

illustration, 'The Devil's Chessboard', Chesterton explains that the picture consists of 'a number of repulsive people playing chess with human pawns, while behind them there is a horrible vision of slaughter'. Chesterton concedes that '[i]f there are luxurious and cynical people who launch wars wantonly for their own amusement, like chess-players' the image might be considered just, but goes on to contend that this is a misrepresentation of the nature of the Great War. G. K. Chesterton, *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton, Vol.33:* The Illustrated London News*, 1923-1925* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 329.

[38] H. G. Wells, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 4 vols, ed. David C. Smith (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), vol. 3, 270.

[39] Wyndham Lewis, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. W. K. Rose (Norfolk: New Directions, 1963), 180.

[40] Nathan Waddell, 'Providing Ridicule: Wyndham Lewis and Satire in the "Postwar-to-end-war World"', in *Utopianism, Modernism, and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Alice Reeve-Tucker & Nathan Waddell (London: Palgrave, 2013), 56-73 (59). Waddell also notes that 'invasion literatures of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods had in fact engaged in detail with the idea of a "war to end wars" in advance of 1914' (60).

[41] Lodge, 60.

[42] H G. Wells, *The Autocracy of Mr. Parham: His Remarkable Adventures in this Changing World* (London: Heinemann, 1930), 9. Waddell also quotes this source in his essay on Lewis, cited above.

If Chesterton wasbrought to the edge of his physical and mental endurance in 1914 by the weight of events, the same was true of Wells. At the conclusion of *The War that Will End War*, he reports his recent sense of mental strain in terms that strikingly mirror those of Chesterton in the *Autobiography*: 'There have been moments in the last three weeks when life has been a waking nightmare.'[43] The liminal imagery of the waking nightmare emphasises a sense of transition between states, from the dreamlike play-world of *Little Wars* to the nightmarish reality of Great War. In *Experiment in Autobiography* (1934), Wells specifically explains his change of outlook in terms of a transition from childhood to maturity: 'Up to 1914, I found a lively interest in playing a war game, with toy soldiers and guns … I like to think I grew up out of that stage somewhere between 1916 and 1920 and began to think about war as a responsible adult should.'[44] In this respect, Wells's recantation must have presented pleasing evidence to Lewis of an ideological convert to his cherished cause of persuading society to grow up. In *The Childermass*, he refers with implicit approval to Wells's earlier novel, *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), on two separate occasions – perhaps he considered the title an apt metaphor of the ethical awakening of its author.[45]

Conversely, Chesterton's refusal to countenance a comparable *volte-face* no doubt exacerbated Lewis's antipathy. Chesterton impatiently ascribed Wells's change of heart to disappointment over the failure of his unrealistic pipe dreams: 'Those who now think too little of the Allied Cause are those who once thought too much of it. Those who are disappointed with the great defence of civilisation are those who expected too much of it. A rather unstable genius like Mr. H. G. Wells is typical of the whole contradiction.'[46] Nonetheless, despite Chesterton's intractability over the ethical merits of the conflict itself, the measured, melancholy reflections on the war found in his autobiography demonstrate that he did come to share some of Wells's unease over the ethics of his pre-war game playing. There is more than a touch of survivor's guilt in the literary quotation that Chesterton selects to summarise his view of the aftermath of the war:

> As the Ancient Mariner remarked, in a moment of melancholy comparison:
> The many men so beautiful
> And they all dead did lie;

[43] *The War*, 99.
[44] H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography: Discoveries and Conclusions of a Very Ordinary Brain (Since 1866),* 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Gollancz, 1934), 102.
[45] Lewis, *Childermass*, 91; 98. The novel was rewritten and republished as *The Sleeper Awakes* in 1910, but Lewis's references are to the earlier title.
[46] Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 246-7.

And a thousand thousand slimy things
Lived on; and so did I.[47]

This reflection is triggered in the text by the recollection of a further example of game playing amongst the great and good on the eve of war. In June 1914, Chesterton became involved in a whimsical film project masterminded by J. M. Barrie, which again centred upon adults playacting at combat. As the film historian, Luke McKernan, has recorded, Barrie's hijinks began when he 'organised a "Cinema Supper" at the Savoy Hotel', including 'such luminaries as the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith [and] Edward Elgar'. Barrie 'hired a team of cameramen to film everyone arriving and then seated at their tables, and arranged the players so that Bernard Shaw was made to deliver a speech haranguing Chesterton and other guests', after which those whom Shaw had 'insulted then all got up, bearing swords … and chased him off stage.'[48]

In the *Autobiography* Chesterton picks up the tale, recounting that the following day Barrie invited the previous night's pranksters to an Essex wasteland, where they were handed 'Wild West equipment' (232) and made to take part in the filming of a farcical Western. As Chesterton goes on to explain, the two days' events were all part of the same grand plan – Barrie had 'some symbolical notion of our vanishing from real life and being captured or caught up into the film world of romance; being engaged through all the rest of the play in struggling to fight our way back to reality' (234). While McKernon records this incident merely as a whimsical interlude, illustrative of the playful innocence of those pre-war days, Chesterton's account progresses to a rather more critical note, which discovers a self-lacerating moral in Barrie's meta-cinematic conceit: there 'had really been a sort of unearthly unreality in all the levity of those last hours; like something high and shrill that might crack; and it did crack. … If the Cowboys were indeed struggling to find the road back to Reality they found it all right' (234-5).

If Chesterton's references to the players 'vanishing from real life' and being 'caught up into the film world of romance' resonate with my account of the dangers of the literary commentator approaching war as a game of spectatorship and speculation at one remove, Chesterton's emphasis upon himself and his fellow performers as 'the Cowboys' seems particularly pointed. Colloquially, a cowboy is an untrustworthy, irresponsible or reckless figure; according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, 'a dishonest or careless person in business, especially an unqualified one'.[49] In the case of the early-twentieth-century

[47] *Autobiography*, 258.
[48] 'Pen and Pictures no. 3 – J.M. Barrie', *The Bioscope*, May 2008 <http://thebioscope.net/2008/05/30/pen-and-pictures-no-3-jm-barrie/> [accessed 30 March 2015].
[49] *Oxford Dictionary of English*, ed. Angus Stevenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 403.

public man, this imputation might be extended to pose the question of whether literary figures, disposed as they are to seclude themselves within a childlike realm of fantasy and play, can really be considered adequately qualified to arbitrate on such matters as global conflict – an expectation that had grown to a perhaps unprecedented extent in the early years of the century. As Wells acknowledges at the beginning of *What is Coming?*, 'prophecy may vary between being an intellectual amusement and a serious occupation.'[50] The progress of Wells and Chesterton illustrates that for the literary public man this vacillation between game and gravity, romance and reality, must remain ever-shifting and unsettlingly permeable.

SANGUINE SPECULATIONS

While Lewis's confidence in his capacity to arbitrate on the ethical rectitude of his forebears might seem to suggest an austere temperament at work, his public career was characterised by a comparable flexing of the boundaries of probity and play. Notwithstanding his objection to all forms of immaturity, Lewis's pre-war persona had been composed of just as conspicuous a merger of combat and juvenility as those of Wells and Chesterton, as his gleefully offensive baiting of old-guard figures such as Chesterton begins to illustrate. If Wells and Chesterton were playing at being prepubescent boys on the public stage, Lewis set out his literary stall as a juvenile delinquent, recklessly breaching the rules of literary decorum at every turn. His recollection of a public spat with Filippo Marinetti in June 1914 – the same month in which Barrie corralled Chesterton and his fellow cowboys into action – offers a case in point. Lewis's rendering of the incident is suffused with a mock-militaristic spirit of play:

> Marinetti brought off a Futurist *Putsch* about this time. … I counter-putsched. I assembled in Greek Street a determined band of anti-futurists. … After a hearty meal we shuffled bellicosely round to the Doré Gallery. Marinetti had entrenched himself upon a high platform, and he put down a tremendous barrage in French as we entered. Gaudier went into action at once. … He was sniping at him without intermission. … The Italian intruder was worsted.[51]

In writing of these pre-war artistic skirmishes in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, Lewis takes a leaf from the memoirs of Wells and Chesterton, figuring the war as a personal liminal moment, auguring a progress from harmless play-fighting to harsh reality: 'life was one big bloodless brawl, prior to the Great Bloodletting' (35). Elsewhere in the memoir, he describes his view

[50]Wells, *What is Coming*, 1.
[51] Lewis, *Blasting*, 33.

of the war as that of a 'group of people crossing a bridge. The bridge is red, the people are red, the sky is red. … And the principal figure among those crossing the bridge – that is me – does not know that he is *crossing* anything, from one world into another.'[52] Like Wells, Lewis saw this passage between worlds not only as a schismatic moment of mass cultural disillusion, but also as the catalyst for the construction of a more sober personal bearing. Lewis's post-war conversion to intellectual maturity was also accompanied by a particularly insistent sideline in Wellsian political speculation, a self-assigned brief that ultimately did enormous damage to his posthumous reputation. By the early 1930s, he was advocating appeasement of the Nazis, in a series of bowdlerised accounts which confidently assured his readers that any concern over Hitler's possible expansionist aims could 'be entirely dismissed from the most apprehensive mind'.[53]

In a letter written to Wells from New York in July 1942, Lewis explained that his response to the rise of fascism had been coloured by an overwhelming fear that if another conflict arose, 'our tribe' would be 'fearfully battered' like 'last time,' an anxiety that led him to attempt to 'discourage and obstruct' conflict at all costs.[54] Lewis's explanation came in response to a letter from Wells, sent in December 1941, offering praise of Lewis's most recent novel, *The Vulgar Streak* (1941), while regretting the novel's apparent failure to fully realise its theme of the ruthlessness of the human will. Wells articulates the moral at hand in language that conveys more than a dash of disillusioned Spencerism: 'the ruling passion in a human being is to feel that it is real and alive … this is sought by the exercise of power over other human beings (or, over matter)'.[55] Here we see Wells's views once more converging with those of Lewis, who had first rejected the 'war that will end war' thesis in the 'war' issue of his journal, *Blast* (1915), in an article on 'The European War and Great Communities' which predicted that Wells's hopes for the conflict would founder because 'murder and destruction is man's fundamental occupation'.[56]

In this light, Lewis's epistolary response to Wells's reflections on the 'exercise of power' seems rather surprising. In an allusion to his correspondent's interpretation of the previous war as a species of meta-conflict, Lewis speculates that 'like the last, this war is about war. But it has a much better chance of ending war than the Wilson and Lloyd George set-up had. Or am I too

---

[52] Lewis, *Blasting,* 2.
[53] Lewis quoted in Jeffrey Meyers, *The Enemy: A Biography of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Routledge, 1980), 188-89.
[54] Lewis, *Letters*, 334.
[55] Wells, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 312.
[56] Wyndham Lewis, 'The European War and Great Communities', *Blast 2* (1915), 13; 16. *The Modernist Journals Project* <http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1144595337105481&view=mjp_object> [accessed 30 March 2015]

sanguine?'[57] Thus, in a curiously circular role-reversal, Lewis displays a belated conversion to Wellsian utopianism in direct response to Wells's expression of a rather Lewisian pessimism. Nonetheless, his final self-checking prevarication – 'Or am I too sanguine?' – provides a sting in the tail. While the query initially appears merely to signify uncertainty over his flirtation with Wellsian utopianism, Lewis was well aware that the term 'sanguine' carries a dual meaning: both optimistic and bloodthirsty. Recall, once more, Chesterton's 'sanguine grin fiercely painted on'. Coming in response to Wells's gloomily monitory assessment of human nature, Lewis's final clause takes on a more sharply self-critical tenor: as with his earlier condemnatory assessment of Chesterton, for the detached spectator of the game of war, the mask of sanguinity may conceal more sanguinary impulses.

For Wells, the urge to exercise power over matter died hard. Despite his autobiographical protestation that he had put away childish things following the War, the subsequent account of Colin Middleton Murry suggests otherwise. Writing of a childhood visit to the Wells family home in the 1930s, Murry recalled his host rushing 'round frantically winding up clockwork trains, constructing bridges and fortifications, firing pencils out of toy cannons. It was all highly hysterical – quite unlike any grown-up behaviour I had ever known.' Similarly, despite Chesterton's ethical unease over the Barrie episode, his memoir attests to an undiminished fondness for children's games. Writing of the child's propensity to 'deliberately [deprive] this world of half its paving-stones, in order to exult in a challenge that he has offered to himself', Chesterton notes that in his childhood 'I played that kind of game with myself all over the mats and boards and carpets of the house; and, at the risk of being detained during His Majesty's pleasure, I will admit that I often play it still.'[58] The pedagogic position implied here remains the same as that which he had set forth at the outset of his career. Rather than conducting a liminal leap from childhood to adulthood in the manner advocated by Lewis and Wells, for Chesterton the safer ethical manoeuvre remains to retreat to the non-combative precepts of preadolescent play. The road to reality is finally exchanged for the path back to the nursery room door, if only because in there nobody gets hurt.

[57] Lewis, *Letters*, 333-34.
[58] Colin Middleton Murry, *One Hand Clapping* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975), 28-9, 108. I am grateful to Trevor Timpson for drawing my attention to this source.