



GROTESQUE REALISM, SATIRE, CARNIVAL AND LAUGHTER IN *SNOOTY BARONET* BY WYNDHAM LEWIS

REALISMO GROTESCO, LA SÁTIRA, EL CARNAVAL Y LA RISA EN *SNOOTY BARONET* DE WYNDHAM LEWIS

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RESUMEN

Aunque la obra del escritor británico Percy Wyndham Lewis muestra una visión satírica de la realidad, cuyas raíces se sitúan en el humor carnavalesco típico de la Edad Media y esto hace que sus novelas tengan rasgos comunes a las de otros escritores Latinoamericanos como Borges o García Márquez, la repercusión que la obra de Lewis ha tenido en los países de habla hispana es prácticamente nula. Este artículo analiza una de sus obras menos conocidas, *Snooty Baronet* (1932), desde una perspectiva bajtiniana que muestra cómo los personajes que la pueblan se convierten en *alter egos* del autor, variaciones sin fin del yo/ojo, que nacen de las descripciones excesivamente detalladas y grotescas que el narrador hace de sus cuerpos y del mundo inconexo de carnaval, sátira y carcajadas que les rodea.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Realismo grotesco – Sátira – Carnaval – Bajtín – *Snooty Baronet* – Wyndham Lewis



ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that the works of the British writer Percy Wyndham Lewis display a satirical vision of reality, whose roots are to be found in the carnivalesque humour of the Middle Ages, as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin, and which calls attention to the common features Lewis's works share with such Latin American writers as Borges or García Márquez, Lewis's works have had a very limited impact in Spanish-speaking countries. This article analyses one of Lewis's least known novels, *Snooty Baronet* (1932), from a Bakhtinian point of view that shows the way in which Lewis's fiction is full of characters whose actions seem as absurd as their own existence and which are fictional alter egos of the author, endless variations of the I/eye, only made real by grotesquely detailed descriptions of themselves and of the disconnected world of carnival, satire, and laughter that surrounds them.

KEY WORDS

Grotesque realism – Satire – Carnival – Bakhtin – *Snooty Baronet* – Wyndham Lewis

ÍNDICE

1. Introduction
2. Wyndham Lewis's *Snooty Baronet*: grotesque realism, satire and laughter
3. Conclusion
4. Bibliographical references



1. Introduction

Percy Wyndham Lewis's creative life expands for some fifty incredibly productive years. The huge amount, complexity and versatility of his work as an editor, critic, philosopher, playwright, poet, novelist, and painter¹ contrasts, however, with the very limited impact that his works have had in Spanish-speaking countries² and very specially in Latin America. This is a really astounding fact if we bear in mind that, apart from their being contemporaries, Wyndham Lewis's fictional work shares with that of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges a humourously parodic vision of reality that has its roots in the world of carnival of the Middle Ages as theorised by Mikhail Bakhtin³.

It is not the purpose of this article to carry out a comparative analysis between Lewis and Borges, García Márquez or any other Latin American writer whose fictional works may have parody, the grotesque and carnival as integral and distinctive constitutive elements. Its aim is rather to apply some of the theoretical concepts developed by Bakhtin, such as performance and representation, the double, the emphasis on the grotesque body and the world of carnival, satire, and laughter, to the analysis of one

¹ As José Díaz-Cuesta explains in his article "Percy Wyndham Lewis: Writer, Painter, Artist" (1996), it is not always easy to separate the different aspects of such a complex figure as Wyndham Lewis, that it to say, to distinguish Lewis the writer from Lewis the painter.

² In his article "Wyndham Lewis and the Meanings of Spain" (2005-2008), Alan Munton explains that, although Lewis only visited Spain twice, the impact the socio-historical context of the Spanish Civil War had on his work was very significant. In spite of this and in spite of the fact that some of his best-known novels have a Spanish setting, translations of his work into Spanish are still nowadays difficult to find. In this respect, José Díaz-Cuesta's study of the Spanish translation of Lewis's memoir of the First World War, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (published in 1937), in an article entitled "Análisis transléxico del binomio Blasting and Bombardiering-Reventador y bombardero (Blasting and Bombardiering)" (1997) deserves special attention.

³ Bakhtin's theories are not only especially adequate for the analysis of the works of Wyndham Lewis and Jorge Luis Borges, though. In his article "Ironía, humorismo y carnavalización en *Cien Años de Soledad*" (2002), Eduardo E. Parrilla Sotomayor has carried out an original analysis of *Cien Años de Soledad* by Gabriel García Márquez from the point of view of the comic-satirical tradition and its relationship with the Bakhtinian concepts of grotesque realism and the carnivalesque.



of the least known novels written by Wyndham Lewis, *Snooty Baronet* (published in 1932) and, in doing so, sewing the desire for a deeper interest in Lewis's works⁴.

2. Wyndham Lewis's *Snooty Baronet*: grotesque realism, satire and laughter

If, as Jeffrey Meyers points out, "*Lewis is surely the most neglected and underrated major author of this century*" (Meyers, 1980, p. 1), *Snooty Baronet* is perhaps the most systematically overlooked and even dismissed of Lewis's novels. This is by no means a recent phenomenon since "*the relative obscurity in which Snooty Baronet abides fell upon it as early as its original publication*" in 1932 when "*both Boot's and Smith's lending libraries, uncomfortable with the novel's passages of sexual description, hit upon the singularly effective suppressive strategy of buying only 25 copies and keeping them off the public display shelves, thus restricting the novel's availability*" (Stanfield, 2001, pág. 241-242). Paradoxically, *Snooty Baronet* seems to have been "*the product of Lewis's periodic desire to write a popular novel that would ensure him a measure of financial security*" (Schenker, 1992, pág. 86). The novel's critical reception has not been much more favourable either. It has received accusations of being "*hard and mechanical*" (Meyers, 1980, pág. 227), "*a peppy and pointless novel*" (Kenner, 1954, pág. 109), even "*a relatively minor work*" (Edwards, 1996, p. 67). The parenthetical comment that D. G. Gibson makes of this work while discussing a much more fortunate Lewisian novel, *The Human Age*, may be said to be yet another example:

"It might be argued that [in The Human Age] Lewis was simply concerned with telling a vivid and fantastic tale, and one which would give full play to his imaginative genius. If so, it would be the first time in his life that he had no ulterior message for what the tale

⁴ These themes recur in most of Lewis's novels and in many of his philosophico-critical treatises.



provided a convenient vehicle. (The only possible exception to that which one can think of, perhaps, is Snooty Baronet —though there is much in that extravaganza which one can usefully ponder)" (Bridson, 1980, pág. 248).

As this last quotation shows, most of the references to *Snooty Baronet* in critical works on Wyndham Lewis are provided merely in passing and, although the last few decades have seen a renewed interest in Lewis's work, specific studies of this novel are still difficult to trace.

In spite of all this, or precisely because of this, in the pages that follow I will be carrying out an analysis of *Snooty Baronet* which will be informed by Bakhtin's theories of grotesque realism, carnival, satire and laughter and will focus on some of the elements which are traditional in Lewis's work, namely the depiction of the grotesque body, and the use of the double or the alter ego, the emphasis on performance, the pivotal function of the *I* that speaks and the *eye* that sees⁵ and, last but not least, laughter. Although these issues have generally a social aim for Lewis, it is my contention that *Snooty Baronet's* singularity lies rather in its being an exercise in self-consciousness, applied both to narrative fiction and to the subject⁶. In other words, apart from being a sociological case study, *Snooty Baronet* may also be approached as an existential novel⁷ which poses important questions on the

⁵ The words *I* and *eye* are homophones in English, a fact that allows for a suggestive play on words and meanings between the agent that speaks and the agent that sees, that is to say, the narrator and the focalizer.

⁶ It is precisely at this point that similarities between Lewis's novel and Borges's literary production may be found since

"Jorge Luis Borges, en algunos de sus cuentos, presenta una aniquilación de la noción de realidad objetiva y del Yo sustancial para proponer un estado de existencia alterno, el de la palabra. Este proceso lo realiza de modo humorístico. Parodia los cánones e ideas establecidas, degradándolos al punto de proponer su inexistencia, pero a la vez afirma el verbo como génesis de cualquier realidad posible" (Patiño, 2002).

⁷ Michael Nath suggests something similar in his 2003 article "Wyndham Lewis and Laughter" when he remarks that *"in an essay called 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' (1927) [...] Lewis offered the following definition: "*



nature of the self, of the subject, and enhances the destructive but simultaneously creative power of narrative and, hence, of the word, of language.

Mikhail Bakhtin showed a deep critical interest in the work of the French writer François Rabelais, to whose revaluation he greatly contributed in the early twentieth century. Bakhtin approaches Rabelais's work at length for the first time in "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel" (1937-1938), where he dedicates a first chapter to the analysis of the basic features of what he called the Rabelaisian chronotope and a second chapter to illustrate its origins in folklore and popular culture. Almost thirty years later, Bakhtin would complete what many have seen as one of his masterpieces, a book itself of Rabelaisian proportions, titled *Rabelais and His World* (1965), in which a whole chapter is dedicated to the discussion of "the grotesque image of the body". As Mary Russo explains,

"The central category around which Bakhtin organizes his reading of Rabelais as a carnivalesque text is 'grotesque realism', with particular emphasis on the grotesque body. The grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the Classical body which is monumental, static, closed and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the World" (Russo, 1994, p. 62-63)⁸.

The root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a thing behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons.' To do justice to this statement, one may need at least to consider the possibility that in Lewis, reflection upon the aesthetic may be explicitly existential and may tend to raise questions about the concept human" (Nath, 2003, p. 103).

⁸ Following this same line of argument do we find Juan Pablo Patiño's definition of grotesque realism, which is directly related to carnivalesque laughter:

"Uno de los principios fundamentales de este humor es el elemento material y corporal. Se acentúan así las imágenes del cuerpo, la bebida y la satisfacción de las necesidades naturales. Las partes bajas de la carne, como su carácter mundano e imperfecto, actúan como aniquiladores de todo lo elevado y



To the best of my knowledge, Alan Munton's 1982 article "Wyndham Lewis: The Transformations of Carnival" is the first and only project to use Bakhtin's theories of carnival and the grotesque body as a possible "*perspective upon Lewis's comic and theatrical materials*". Munton establishes a clear and well-defined distinction between what he perceives as Lewis's "*early comedy and the later satire*". "*Comedy*", he argues "*is abandoned by 1914, and satire is established as the dominant mode in the 1920s, reaching a climax with the publication of The Apes of God in 1930*". To the extent that it traces the relationship between comedy and satire in Lewis's fiction, Munton's article constitutes a splendid analysis of Lewis's collection of early stories, *The Wild Body* (1927), a book which shares of both the comical and satirical Lewisian moods because although the stories were originally written in between the years 1909 to 1911, they were rewritten to be published as a collection in 1927. Having set the limits of analysis upon the year 1930, it is only logical that Munton does not even mention *Snooty Baronet*, despite the fact that it is a novel which, as some critics have pointed out (Hugh Kenner, Bernard Lafourcade or David Trotter, among others), is closely connected to *The Wild Body* in both themes and narrative technique⁹.

establecido. Dichas formas son denominadas por Bajtín como 'realismo grotesco', el cual se opone a todo aislamiento y confinamiento en sí mismo para brindar una vía de intercambio con lo otro. Bajo la concepción 'clásica' el cuerpo es algo rigurosamente acabado y perfecto, de ahí los cánones de un ente aislado y solitario, separado de lo demás y cerrado en sí mismo. Para el humor carnavalesco el Ser es fundamentalmente incompleto y requiere la participación de lo popular para su subsistencia" (Patiño, 2002).

⁹ As early as in the 1950s Hugh Kenner discussed the connection between *The Wild Body* and *Snooty Baronet* in the following terms:

"evidently Lewis grasped, about the mid-thirties, that the Wild Body had lurched into a blind alley. The failure of Snooty —his most finely machined novel— is in a way the theme of Snooty; it is as though the narrator, having discovered outside the hatter's window the irrelevance of his mechanical contempt, lived out the second phase of his adventures and wrote them up to prove that even as a comic technique behaviorism could lead nowhere. (Since by hypothesis nothing whatever leads anywhere, he isn't abashed.) It is only the murkiness of The Wild Body's synthetic energy that concealed that fact from writer as from reader in 1927. The must brisker rattletrap of Snooty's technique carries the experiment launched five years before into the Persian desert in which this last novel of the automaton phase ends" (Kenner, 1954, p. 112-113). In the "Afterword" to *The Complete Wild Body*, Bernard Lafourcade bases the manifest



Unlike the majority of modernist writers of his time who attempted to reproduce the contents and structure of consciousness since, for them, it represented the only accessible reality, Lewis proclaims himself for the external approach to the human being, for "the wisdom of the eye", which focuses on external appearances and actions rather than on the psychology of the individual. The depiction of the body, of body language and of the functions of the body become central in all of his novels. *Snooty Baronet* is no exception in this respect. The novel is a parade of grotesque characters whose bodies are metaphorically dismembered. Their extremely visual, almost pictorial, portraits are the site from which comicity and laughter arise¹⁰. The story begins by calling the reader's attention to an extreme close-up of a man who turns out to be the narrator and, perhaps, main character in the novel, Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, the Baronet of the title page. These are his words:

"Not a bad face, flat and white, broad and weighty: in the daylight, the worse for much wear — stained, a grim surface, rained upon and stared at by the sun at its haughtiest, yet pallid still: with a cropped blondish moustache of dirty lemon, of toothbrush texture: the left eye somewhat closed up — this was a sullen eye. The right eye was more open and looked bright; it sat undisturbed under its rolled-up wide-awake rounded lid. The right side of the face has held out best! — The nose upon the face indicated strength of character if anything — the mouth, which did not slit it or crumple it, but burst out of it

connection between *Snooty Baronet* and *The Wild Body* firstly on their respective narrators' bent for manipulating the real and, secondly, on their names since Kell-Imrie was "first named Carr-Orr, which suggests that this novel was initially conceived as a sort of sequel to *The Wild Body*" (Lafourcade, 1982, p. 405). Two years later, also in the "Afterword" to his edition of *Snooty Baronet*, Lafourcade insists on the idea that "with *Snooty Baronet* Lewis is actually materializing the project put forward in *The Wild Body*" (Lafourcade, 1984, p. 258). More contemporary critics like David Trotter (2001: 351) also affirm that "*Snooty Baronet is in some respects a variant on *The Wild Body*, Lewis's previous extensive use of the first-person narrative in fiction*" (Trotter, 2001, pág. 351).

¹⁰ But bodies are exposed, dismembered, caricaturized and, as Rowland Smith points out, "*Lewis's ability to portray the mannerisms of people he knew was part of his satiric art*" (Smith, 1980).



(like an escaped plush lining of rich pink), that spelled sensitiveness if anything, of an inferior order. The brows and temples were up in a fawn-saffron "Derby". The "Derby" was the ordinary transatlantic "Derby" — the sort men are careful religiously to remove when they enter the public hall of an hotel, particularly west of Nantucket, to show that they are educated. (There may be ladies there!)" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 15).

Starting with the face, Kell-Imrie's self-portrait becomes progressively more detailed and focuses respectively on his moustache, his left eye, his right eye, his nose, his mouth, his brows and his temples. This extreme close-up has a defamiliarizing effect which is further enhanced by the fact that he systematically compares each part of his face to an object —a dirty lemon, a toothbrush, plush lining and a hat—, thus narrativizing in his fiction the theoretical approach to the human being which has reported him accusations of anti-humanism and which he advanced in "The Meaning of the Wild Body" when he stated that

"the root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a thing behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all things, or physical bodies, behaving as persons. It is only when you come to deny that they are 'persons,' or that there is any 'mind' or 'person' there at all, that the world of appearance is accepted as quite natural, and not at all ridiculous. Then, with a denial of the 'person,' life becomes immediately both 'real' and very serious" (Lewis, 1982, pág. 158).

This denial of the person in favour of the thing is also emphasized by the fact that the narrator presents himself in the third person, thus introducing a further distance between the thing described and the person describing it. If this were not enough,



Kell-Imrie proves to be literally composed of things himself, at least partially, because as a result of the wounds inflicted on him in the war (he refers to himself as "*a grand blessé*", that is to say a severely wounded soldier), he has a "*silver plate*" in his head and also a mechanical leg which gives out "*ominous creaks*" especially when he forgets to oil it, for as he ironically acknowledges, "*like watches and clocks these things require lubrication*" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 48).

The other two main characters in the story, Mrs. Valerie Ritter, Kell-Imrie's sexual allure, and Captain Humphrey Cooper Carter¹¹, his literary agent, are also caricaturized and presented as grotesquely wild bodies. Already their long names are significant in so far as they furnish their persons with a certain pomposity and grandeur they would like to possess but which in fact contrasts with their appearance, expressions and actions. In the course of the narrative they are actually called simply Val and Humph, respectively. These two characters are also depicted as puppets devoid of a mind, automata performing their allotted roles, dummies whose actions are usually nothing but mere responses to external stimuli. Kell-Imrie enjoys being snooty to them, an attitude which acquires a greater magnitude when he performs his role of narrator and describes them physically. What follows is an extract from Kell-Imrie's caricature of Humph when he first presents his literary agent to the reader:

"Humph's head is an outsize article altogether — he is a lad that must give the hatter some mad moments, first and last. But that is nothing, what is important is that Humph is absolutely like a big carnival doll — all costard and trunk, no legs to speak of. With a portentous wooden head-piece, varnished a ruddy military pink-and-tan (Brigade of Guards), the fellow trots in. Standing to attention, he stares out blankly at you: to command or to receive orders. He has

¹¹ Names are very significant; all of the characters have very pompous names but in fact they are most frequently called Snooty, Val and Humph.



been given a pair of brown eyes, why I don't know. His brow is one of those meaningless expanses of tanned wood, it slopes back a little, brownly flushed (he flushes tan)" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 59).

When the time comes to describe Val, Kell-Imrie adopts a feigned boredom which actually hides an immense pleasure, the product of his bent for satire¹². These are his words:

"My God I had forgotten. I suppose I have to describe her for you. That is a bore. I had forgotten about it. There is really nothing much to describe, however. Her eyes are too close together, her forehead too narrow, which makes her best in profile. But in profile there's her chin. That's a little too 'double' — she's always talking about it. Her hair is thin, and it is fairish. Her face has a swarthy massaged flush. (If you look too close, it is full of pits: under the make-up it is a field of gaping pores — her nose is worst in this respect: some day it will disintegrate, for all practical purposes.) She screws up her eyes and giggles nearly all the time. Then she will quickly stop, as if offended suddenly, straighten her face out, sniff very slightly, and pull her upper lip down like a latch over the under one, and look over her left shoulder hard at the floor for a while, prim-lipped and frowning. But her figure is good. It is really a good one, if you don't mind an extra pound of flesh, in the right place" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 28).

In his article "*Snooty Baronet*: Satire and Censorship", Rowland Smith offers sufficient evidence to prove that Lewis had some of his acquaintances in mind as "living models" for almost everyone of his characters, the narrator included, a fact

¹² Especially hurtful because all the characters in *Snooty Baronet* have a flesh and blood model upon which they are based as Rowland Smith had pointed out (Smith, 1980).



which contributed to the problematic circumstances of the novel's publication, as mentioned before. As he explains,

"Lewis's ability to portray the mannerisms of people he knew was part of his satiric art. Much of his satire has the effect of a literary cartoon, exaggerating the most pronounced characteristics of his subjects and vividly identifying them with the trait that has been disproportionately emphasized. This is a feature of his exterior technique. By presenting his characters from the outside, visually, rather than from the inside, through their thoughts, Lewis accentuates their external characteristics and fixes them in the reader's mind as internally empty, thoughtless, mechanical marionettes who are all teeth (like his Tyros) or all chin (like Humph in Snooty Baronet) or all flushed face and flashing eyes (like Val in the same book). Because the portraits were recognizable the joke was all the funnier for those in the know and the humiliation all the more bitter for those pilloried" (Smith, 1980, pág. 181-182).

Distortion, exaggeration, excess are fundamental attributes of grotesque realism. Lewis uses these techniques in *Snooty Baronet* in order to de-humanize its characters and to make them suitable inhabitants of the carnivalesque world he has devised for them. Sex is part of that world. Bakhtin's theories on the work of Rabelais situate the latter's focus on the body alongside a number of images of the material bodily principle, *"that is, images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life"* (Bakhtin, 1968, pág. 18). *Snooty Baronet* does not pay excessive attention to eating and drinking. Sex, however, has a central position in the novel. Sexual scenes are not very frequent, yet they are explicit enough. In line with the narrator's particular approach to the body, the sexual life of characters is also presented as a grotesque activity (perhaps the most significant example being the description of Val's removal of Kell-Imrie's mechanical leg immediately before



their practising sex, an action which does away with any trace of romanticism and/or passion that these encounters might be thought to suggest). Having sex with Val is for Kell-Imrie merely the natural response to a stimulus. Yet it is an activity which partakes of the dual nature of the carnivalesque, because it simultaneously produces pleasure and pain — "*My head always gives me trouble at the moment of the climax under the silver plate*", says the narrator (Lewis, 1984, pág. 50)— , satisfaction and disgust. Kell-Imrie is particularly explicit in this respect:

"I go to see her in her maisonnette. Always I go with reluctance, as if I were going to have out a very cushy tooth, soft and easy, but still a pang. And then that dentist's manner! To continue the simile. What a repulsive technique! Old Val's revolts me.

She is nothing if not shoppy, the old harlot. (But picture to yourself a dentist who giggled all the time while he was yanking your tooth out!) — Still I go for more! I go regularly. I go with irritation. I go with a subtle confusion. I even go with shame, but I go regularly: sniggering (I catch the trick) I succumb: and old Val whisks my leg off quicker than any woman I know. (I only know two as a matter of fact, with whom my relations are such as to provoke or suggest that act of drastic amputation in the natural course of things, at a certain point in the interview — where it recommends itself as being if not necessary at least more practical)" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 23).

The de-humanization of characters that takes place in *Snooty Baronet* does not necessarily have to be, however, a reflection of Lewis's denial of the self. Quite on the contrary, as Michael Nath suggests, what some critics have considered to be a symptom of his antihumanism, may eventually be read as a sign of "*open-mindedness rather than of dogmatism*". Nath suggests that the limits of this apparent form of antihumanism should be reconsidered "*in terms of its potential for raising existential questions*" (Nath, 2003, pág. 104-105). In this respect, it may be



argued that the climactic moment of the novel is Kell-Imrie's encounter with the automaton in a hatter's show-window. Significantly enough, the narration of this encounter occurs in chapter VI, the very middle of the novel. The visual confrontation with the double and the theatricality of daily life are the two basic ideas which lurk behind the figure of the automaton in the hatter's show-window. Anne Quéma explains that

"The automaton acquires an allegorical meaning and constitutes an archetype for the characters of the novel who are all governed by actions of the mechanical Wild Body. While metamorphosis fosters a sense of transition and succession, the double creates a sense of crisis and dual confrontation" (Quéma, 1999, pág. 48).

Characters in *Snooty Baronet* are born performers. They spend the whole of the novel playing their respective roles. Even before providing a detailed portrayal of Val's body, the narrator describes her voice and insists on her ability to adopt the required personality depending on the context and/or moment:

"In her careful business-like voice as she snatched the receiver down, it was all there and more. You dreaded to think how long she had sat there. And then she possessed such a terribly finished telephone-personality. Her telephone-voice was that of the stage impersonation of telephoning, with a dummy-telephone. And then oh, the shattering gaiety of the mayfairish highlife drama, as arranged for the suburbs (once a day, a matinée, perhaps, and once, or perhaps two, a night). Such impeccable technique, for what of late had become such a lonely little part!" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 24).

Val is undoubtedly an actress but so is the narrator. His own words are suggestive enough: *"She stepped back and I raised my artificial foot and entered the hall as she*



retreated. As it were sadly, as it were wistfully, she beat her slow retreat. She was being shy and silent, she was being girlish. I for my part was being Samuel Butler!" (Lewis, 1984, p. 27). Kell-Imrie's placing himself side by side with Val in this shared game of pretensions accounts for the fact that he is perfectly conscious of its existence. What is more, he takes pleasure from it:

"There is scarcely anything I enjoy so much as imagining myself for a short while other people. I do not mind if they are quite unimportant. But for preference I take up a man with a name, that is only natural. According to the classical canons of acting I suppose I should be rather second-rate. For there are only a few parts that suit me. No one knows better than myself that for that profession at least I have too much personality. This does not prevent me from acting however" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 24).

The adoption of multiple personalities, multiple selves, by the narrator is indicated by the use of different names. In the first chapter of the novel, significantly the one in which Kell-Imrie presents himself to the reader, he is an anonymous "I" who tells us his profession and punningly mentions the name "*William Wyndham*" (Lewis, 1984, p. 16). This, added to the fact that he is a "*'fiction' writer*" (Lewis, 1984, p. 16), appears to be a self-reflexive wink on the reader that presents this anonymous narrator as an alter ego of the author himself, Wyndham Lewis. Paul Scott Stanfield mentions the overt connection which the narrator establishes between himself and the author in the following terms:

"A digression on an eighteenth-century politician and an ironic suggestion for improving bullfights inscribe the author's name both in the text and in the character Kell-Imrie. 'And if I had to pick out of our annals a figure to explain myself by,' Kell Imrie abruptly declares at one point, 'I could think of no better one than that of the famous



disciple of Burke, namely William Windham' (100). Many pages later, attending a bullfight, he notes, 'I should prefer a Lewis-gun to these lances and swords. The former gives better the measure of the genius of man —The Lewis-gun. (Of man the individual —I mean Lewis of course)'" (Stanfield, 2001, pág. 172).

Rowland Smith provides more arguments to sustain the connection between author and narrator when he affirms that "*it is surprising how many of Lewis's interests and experiences are reflected in Snooty Baronet*" (Smith, 1980, p. 182). The whole of his article gives examples of these shared experiences.

The novel itself offers a further example of the similarities that exist between Lewis's life and the narrator's fictional adventures in the form of the newspaper cutting that Val shows him in one of his visits to her in Chelsea. What follows is an extract from that cutting:

"Sir Michael Kell-Imrie, seventeenth baronet, known to his friends as 'Snooty', is at present in Japan, where he is studying the psychology of the Samurai caste, we hear. This should yield interesting results. 'Snooty' is a bit of a philosopher, and already has published more than a book. Temperamentally something of a swashbuckler himself, of the red-blood school, he should find much in common with the warlike traditions of the Samurai. It may be recalled that in 1920 or thereabouts Sir Michael, or Mr Kell-Imrie, as he then was, got into hot water, the fieriness of his highland nature getting the better of him as he noticed a woman beating her husband outside a public-house. [...] Having regard to his distinguished war record (Sir Michael Kell-Imrie was five times wounded and has an artificial leg) he was warned by the magistrate, and fined ten pounds and costs" (Lewis, 1984, pág. 44-45).



Apart from providing the real name of the narrator for the first time, the cutting is also of special significance in so far as it is a catalogue of the names, and consequently personalities, that he displays in the novel. Logically, perhaps, since this is a public account, the only names which are missing are the two more intimate ones which are used by the women with whom he has an affair; Val calls him Snoots, whereas Lily calls him Mike.

This blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction is further enhanced by the fact that the narrator of *Snooty Baronet*, who "*in early drafts of the novel [...] was named Carr-Orr*" and the narrator of *The Wild Body*, Kerr-Orr, share more than similar names and become both of them alter egos of the author himself¹³.

Anne Quéma explains that "*the role of the double in Lewis is to chop up the sequence of self-representations, to spatialize the temporal phalanstery of selves*" (Quéma, 1999, p. 47). Many clues in *Snooty Baronet* invite the reader to conceive of Humph as Snooty's double. Both have fought in the war —they were even old war companions (Lewis, 1984, p. 60); both share the same grotesque body and Snooty himself points to that possibility when he establishes a connection between his chin and Humph's:

*"When I look at Humph's chin I am reminded of a strong-box. The chap is all chin. I hate this face more that I hate my own, which is saying a good deal. I disliked it from the start, a long time ago. [...]
As for chins, I confess I am in no position to talk. I have enough and to spare myself of that. My life-long I have suffered on account of it. My teeth are so substantial, that is the fact, that the chin to go with them has to be of a solid make"* (Lewis, 1984, pág. 59).

¹³ Paul Scott Stanfield deals extensively with this issue (Stanfield, 2001, pág. 243).



3. Conclusion

Leaving aside its doubtless aim at social satire, what makes *Snooty Baronet* utterly contemporary¹⁴ and, ultimately the reason why it has been selected as the object of analysis in this article, is that it is an exercise in self-consciousness that can be applied both to fiction writing and also, and perhaps more interestingly, to the subject. Grotesque realism, satire, and laughter are traditional features of Lewis's aesthetic-philosophical works and are most of the times aimed at social satire. These elements are used as a form of satire on the self. *Snooty Baronet* also abounds in social criticism but its main interest may be read as a telling example of Lewis's use of the grotesque body, the double, theatricality and performance not only as a means to self-satire but also in an attempt to call attention to the creative process of narrative creation.

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¹⁴ For a detailed analysis of the influence Lewis might have had on contemporary writers and the extent to which his narrative techniques have anticipated postmodernism, see Asensio Aróstegui (2007).



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