

JOURNEY OUT OF ANGUISH

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I
N THE FIRST WEEK of the second world war, going on thirty years now, Wyndham Lewis followed me, in ignorance, to Canada. We had met in the last summer of simulated peace, because I had sent him the manuscript of a novel which I had finished that I might do just that: send it to him. He had begun to read and ceased to write; the pages of *There Was A Tree* mounted beside his chair, an intidy pile, while *The Hitler Cult* remained a neat unfinished thesis on a successful paranoiac; a book by which he hoped to redeem his reputation after a disastrous and naïve error in judgement seven years before, when he had sided with a man whose merit was that he, too, was an Outsider. *The Hitler Cult* brought Lewis out on the side of his adopted country.

I had come from the land he had left about fifty-two years earlier. From time to time he had written to relations in Oakville, who were aware that Uncle Charlie's deserted son, young Percy, had become an artist in the Old Country. What I had brought from Canada was a native talent and a vision of a pulp and paper mill town as no different in essence from a state-run community or nation. Like most insights, it had blinded me to much of reality: one had a thesis, also; the characters were victims of it. The simpliste certitudes came easily, since outside them I knew so little. My English neighbour was a fascinating alien; English literature was left-wing ridden, and I had an endemic dislike of the cashing in on sensibility of many English writers — a Stephen Spender of their hoarded inner agonies.

It would have taken some dishonesty not to have become in those days a Lewis fan. I needed him. Tree, River, Mill: so I divided the novel. And to show, in the final part, the apparent nature of a mechanized environment, I mechanized the prose, glad of the Lewis exemplar.

So I sent off to him the typewritten corpse. He responded: in a flat I was visiting within five minutes walk of Notting Hill, the phone rang, a voice was in my ear, declaring that it belonged to Wyndham Lewis. If I had been less naïve, I would have refused to believe it: some catarrhal Indian colonel was putting

me on. Witness the directions to his studio, designed to instruct an idiot or some blind angel who had never visited the earth, and who must be taught to put one foot forward in that alien body and then, with agonized patience (you do follow me?), the next. Later, I would suspect it was a rôle he was forced to play, and that he would find in it an exacerbated humour which one could share at one's peril.

Next afternoon I was, beard and Daks suit and orange shirt, at the end of the long corridor, listening to a dog bark on the other side of the studio door. I heard the scuffle, the whimper, and the lock being released; I saw the broad-brimmed black hat, and under it the stranger who that day invented the myth that I disliked dogs.

Lewis survived the sight of me. We drank gin, flavoured with bitters, while Stephen Spender stared at us from blank eyes: this was the external world. Lewis showed me other paintings, including reproductions for a volume of drawings that never appeared. He told stories of Augustus John; he offered to write an Introduction for my novel; he assured me that with the autumn harvest war would come.

He had known another war. One fruit of it was *The War Baby*, which had appeared twenty years before in a magazine edited by the Sitwells. The story had been buried beneath much activity and a series of timed quarrels, including one with the Sitwells. Pressures of a Catholic upbringing moved where no one saw them. And for a period he had fled that moment of sanity that is *The War Baby*, "developing his intellect", as he said, and seeking conflict.

FROM THE ULTIMATE CONSEQUENCES he was saved, I believe, by a very pretty girl called Gladys Anne. For twenty years, when we first met, her loyalty and support had worn away at the fortress Lewis had constructed. In illness he had surrendered, a few years before, to acknowledgement of her faithfulness — not to the genius, but to a man who knew he could die.

Gladys Anne was Froanna Lewis, the name an anglicizing of the "Frau Anna" that she was called, on an inauspicious trip, by a German landlady. Margot Stamp in *The Revenge for Love* is not Froanna; neither is the Hester Harding of *Self Condemned*; but she was a window through which Lewis saw these characters, that they might impose upon him a humanity which Lewis recognized, without sneering, that they accepted.

Of women in general he was too critical, being repulsed perhaps by his own needs. Shortly after we met he decided to go to Canada. I sent to see him a girl I knew who belonged to the Family Compact that still rules Toronto. I liked her; she told Lewis the truth about me, which he could not accept; she provided introductions. If he had not been Wyndham Lewis, I would have fought back when he described her after her visit. Adulation is a flaw in character.

T. S. Eliot's was the face that launched the Lewises, eleven days after I had left, on their way to Canada: the portrait had been sold to a South African gallery. On the thirteenth of September they arrived at the King Edward Hotel in Toronto. They brought the dog; Lewis left behind his Hallowe'en hat. He suggested that I shave off my beard, as it made me conspicuous.

Froanna possessed still an extraordinary beauty. That first afternoon we all went to tea at the Muirhead's, where the décor was, I considered, modern, but which Lewis diagnosed more accurately as sterile — "like an operating theatre". That night in the main dining room we began our exile. Lewis tried to make their Atlantic crossing sound funny, but it was the account of a roundabout journey into frigid waters, that the enemy might be avoided. He would caricature unwanted encounters in the liner's bar and thus come to grips with — well, at least his own caricatures of them. It was a way, perhaps, of bringing under control an inexplicable world, in which one had learned to put forward one foot and then another. All that was hollow around him he dined on with a certain empathy. Because he understood his analysis, he believed he understood the thing analyzed — even when that thing was a person. Yet, since there was so much hollowness around him there was much he understood, and the analysis matched the unreality. The truths grasped seemed something innate in himself; it was there that value lay, a Cartesian essence; the rest was material, at best, for art.

Lewis needed opposition in order to function. Knowledge can wall one in against chasms of ignorance. In Toronto the target was to become a city and country he could not understand because he could not (O, Canada!) like it; the dross was his; the native product for ever out of reach.

If a plot was needed, so that he might oppose the enemy, one was immediately forthcoming: at a nickel a remaindered copy one of the downtown department stores attacked him with John Gawsworth's *Apes, Japes and Hitlerism*, a fawning book that presented Lewis's vices for admiration. Perhaps telling him of this made me in his eyes part of the plot to render him unacceptable in his homeland. Soon he left for Buffalo.

On the Canadian Thanksgiving weekend I visited the Lewises there. A portrait

of the chancellor of the local university was still unfinished, yet it was what he could do best: a gelid El Grecoesque elongation of the head, the bird-like hands placid against the held mortar-board, gave it a timeless dignity possibly greater than its subject. "I am trying to make it as academic as possible and still keep it a work of art," Lewis stated. The view through the window, to one side of the figure, he later changed.

In Buffalo he was hemmed in by despicable acquaintances. Hence his depression, in a place with no future for him. Back in Toronto, I arranged through T. W. L. MacDermot a meeting with the meat-packer millionaire, J. S. McLean.

Lewis arrived on St. Andrew's Day. Arriving in a taxi to the York Club, his account of an afternoon ordeal at Hart House was funnier than the version in *America, I Presume*, where he had time and the necessity to falsify it. At dinner that night were A. Y. Jackson, Charles Comfort, Carl Schaefer, Terry MacDermot and our host. Later we drove to the McLean estate. Finland had been invaded by Russia, and amid the alcoholic hilarity there was an air of gloom. Lewis left late, displaying his newly-acquired boxer's victory-shake of clasped hands above his head. Next day he returned to darkest Buffalo.

In April 1940 I accompanied my manuscript to New York. The Lewises were at the Hotel Stuyvesant, and as I knocked on their door my nose began to bleed. It was Dan Boleyn, the idiot protagonist of *The Apes of God*, not I who had nose bleeds — through pages monotonous with wasted blood. To Lewis it may have been one more expected and unpleasant blow. He sensed now that America was a land of inopportunity. So he told me that good books had no chance; he described me to someone on the phone as incredibly naïve; he assured me my future was a blank.

THAT FALL, the Lewises were forced back to Toronto. I had written one good story, lived off friends, been tossed out of the National Film Board, and begun a novel, *Puppet's Dream*, which Lewis refused to look at: reading one of my books had done him enough harm. On my birthday that December he endured his twenty-five-year-old fan, while the walls pressed in on our ultimate festivities.

It was the end. Lewis, painting at 22 Grenville Street, was too busy to see me in the new year. I worked less, lost direction, phoned periodically. At last in February I walked to the Tudor Hotel on Sherbourne Street. Froanna was on

her knees, cutting out the pattern of a new black dress. I could wait for Lewis: there was nothing else to do. I noted that Froanna had done a drawing of her work basket; she had been an art student when young. Eventually Lewis returned, complaining of the cold. Yet he was willing to walk back with me to Grenville Street (a couple of miles or more) that I might see his paintings: the offer was the first light in three months of winter darkness. I turned towards the studio as towards the Beatific Vision.

On the blustering street Lewis suddenly turned on me: I was to blame for all his troubles; behind his back I had spread stories about his life in England.

Eliot had forgiven at least as much. I, too, had been a prisoner of the knowing mind, and these false accusations were the beginning of a lengthy and unfinished purgation. Long since, when it no longer mattered, I have seen that the quarrel he was compelled to pick with me was a punishment he endured. Through it I began to know, as I left Lewis at the corner of Church and Bloor Streets, opposite a drug store then called Star, the need to find a way out of exile.

Looking back was no cure. Twice again I saw Lewis. He begged to buy my copy of *The Lion and the Fox*, for some academic acquaintance, but could not resist making me sign a receipt of payment, since I was a dishonest man. Oh well, it made me feel wronged, a useful and dangerous sensation. And yet, a year later, when he came into the office of B. K. Sandwell at *Saturday Night*, where I was then working, I could not hate him. Sandwell paid Lewis double the normal rates, because he felt sorry for him. When introduced, I said, "We have met before," and was silent. Lewis sat on the edge of a straight-backed chair while B. K. rolled a cigarette — a thing he only did when there were visitors; it always, for some reason, shortened their stay.

Ill at ease, "I call this my Tudor period," Lewis said, his hands clasped between spread knees, dark eyes defensive behind glasses, talking around the inevitable cigarette in his mouth. In his grey sports jacket, he was a man one might pass three times a day without noting it. The sense of loneliness came through. There was for me no triumph, which I had begun to realize was the self's petty masquerade to disguise defeat.

The article he had brought was on Morley Callaghan's collection of short stories, *Now That April's Here*. "Apart from the literary merits of the stories it contains," he wrote, "this book is beautifully replete with a message of human tolerance and love. Every one — or almost all — of these discreet miniature dramas ends softly and gently. At the end of some anguish there is peace: at the end of some bitter dispute there is reconciliation.

“All of these creatures are dimly aware that the parts they play — for all the sound and fury into which they may be led by the malice of nature, by the demands of the instinct for animal survival, or by our terrible heritage of original sin — the rôles which they are called upon to take are played according to some great law, within the bounds of rational order.”

It was a Lewis no one had seen before. Without the intense loneliness he might never have yielded to truths so foreign to his stance, nor was it likely he would have written these things where those who knew him could have read them.

Suffering is often approved of, for the artist, because it is believed that experience exists to be turned into art—an invitation to exploit one’s pain. That makes the true subject of any novel the writer’s sensibility. Few can master the act of writing because it is a gift given to the simple; one can no more think a story into being than one can think oneself into being. Lewis kept notebooks of his Toronto days, which ended after two and a half years in which he produced many good paintings, because he had a draughtsman’s hand and the white paper bade him speak. Back in England, his exile ended; he was home at last, and he acquired in his final decade an unaccustomed, if somewhat frigid, geniality. It had been for him, too, a long journey, in which at last the man Lewis was born into himself.

EVENTUALLY, TWO YEARS AFTER COMPLETION, *Self Condemned* was published. It was marred, perhaps, by self-laceration, but it was all he could do with that barren sojourn: put it down, an askew vision. Some have called it a *roman à clef*, yet one hardly recognizes the city (it was a composite, including a few inapposite details from my first novel), and if it was his intention to portray certain persons who claim to be in the book, he failed to sketch a true likeness.

No, it was a work of fiction, of which the central plot has been suppressed. If it had been written out of sheer vindictiveness, or as an act of self-therapy (a conviction the sterile have about art), I would have been there, for more than anyone else except Wyndham Lewis I was to blame for his coming to Toronto.

Perhaps it would have helped him if he had known, as I learned years later from one of his cousins, that his secretiveness and suspicions were family traits: he resembled most an uncle whom he had never met. He resembled, also, his father. Uprooted, he married the image of himself, through his talent, creating

a sealed-in false absolute; but he married, as well, a woman. In his blindness the mirror angel withered, and he learned to live, as well as he could, with himself and others. He helped the young; he did not desert Pound; he kept going till the end.

The best work was to come after *Self Condemned*, when he realized that sometimes he had tried to make an idol of his talent, and although he viewed his age without enchantment, he discovered before the end that he also was part of the human race, a man sometimes led by the malice of nature, enduring a terrible heritage, who played out his rôle finally within the bounds of rational order, moving after many bitter disputes towards some semblance of that peace replete with human tolerance and love, which to me at least is more important than literary merits. *The War Baby* shows that art and understanding cure no one; it shows, also, that Lewis was an honest artist when not blinded by his mind. In the decade since his death, Gladys Anne Lewis has not deserted his memory or his cause: that is a sign of a merit more than literary.