THE LAST EUROPEAN

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"I am the last American living the tragedy
of Europe." EZRA POUND, 1960

I WAS A FRESHMAN at the University of Toronto, watching black squirrels scamper beneath its elms, and settling into 73 St. George Street for my first extended stay away from home, when Wyndham Lewis was completing his first year's stock-taking of Toronto as a city of exile ("... Things have come to an awful pass here: if I don't do something to break out of the net, I shall end my days in a Toronto flophouse." ...); I was listening to C. N. Cochrane's lectures on historiography and G. S. Brett's on the continuous life of the mind and Malcolm Wallace's on Shakespearean compassion while the author of *Time and Western Man* and *The Lion and the Fox* was enduring the social chill and the central heating in a room "twenty-five feet by twelve" at the Hotel Tudor a half-hour's stroll away; at the same distance from one another we completed I my sophomore year in Toronto and he his third ("We are freezing out here slowly, in this icebox of a country. This hotel burned down six weeks ago, all but the annexe. I am living in the ruins"); but by the time the junior Eng. Lang. & Lit. curriculum had commenced to revolve past my fitful attention Roman satirists, English Augustans and French Cartesians, the author of *The Apes of God* had moved to Windsor, two hundred and twenty miles west-south-west.

The point of this synchronicity is that it has no point. I never heard the name of Lewis mentioned, and can only identify in retrospect, as a remote little space-time convolution, the two years I lived not a mile from a Titan.

There was no conspiracy to keep us undergraduates from finding out he existed. Though Toronto's, like all faculties, contained men scrupulous in their sensitivity

to the present (I know for a fact that one of them read *Partisan Review*) it seems clear that they didn't know about him either. They scanned print more promiscuously than we did, and his name would have surfaced from time to time before their ken atop, say, contributions to *Saturday Night*, but merely as a name: four blank syllables, attached to remarks about — oh, Canadian painting, a subject never deemed vital (our mentors were word men).

WHEN HE CROSSED the Atlantic he left behind what he lived on: his reputation, such as it was. Such as it was, it had gotten him portrait commissions, though never as many as fell to Augustus John. Chiefly he lived on advances for books, also obtained by pledging his reputation. Some were books he cared about, some he would not have elected to write but for necessity. Either kind drew on meditations nearly habitual with him, concerned with fame, illusion, groundless belief, and the manipulatability of these. It is no wonder he wrote so much about politics.

Painting can be a fantastically lucrative vocation, though it never was for Lewis; and if a painter have Lewis's gifts, and Lewis's lack of income, he is likely to give thought to what it is that people who buy pictures, when they do buy them, think they are paying for, reflections apt to reinforce any nascent interest his intellect may take in voids and vacua. For what can Pablo Picasso possibly be doing that is worth a gangster's ransom to anybody? The answer is, being Picasso: being the man whose name some utterly mysterious nexus joins to a public idea, an idea his skill, his luck, his dealers engendered. He is not being paid as a workman for a day's work when he overpaints a canvas; nor for the usefulness of his product in decorating a wall, which a reproduction would do quite as well. Nor, since the picture is a unique exemplum sold to one buyer once in one transaction, does some crude determination of the number of people he interests determine his remuneration, as it does a writer's. Nor, except for some such pivotal picture as a major artist will not achieve more than five or six times before he dies, is some unique concentration of human insight coming into the purchaser's keeping. No, whoever owns a Picasso owns (at great cost) just that — a Picasso: an example of his work, very like a hundred other examples, work to each example of which, by agreement, great value is affixed. The agreement will possibly one day collapse, as in the case of Millais, and the market deflate. Meanwhile the living painter, needing to eat, will hope for such an accretion of public

imponderables as will set on new examples of his work the price commanded by a reputation.

Will hope; will strive? Possibly. And if he is gifted, like Lewis, with word-skills also, he will set them to work too, in part to make himself still better known. Rossetti, an indifferent painter, did this, and Whistler, an excellent one, both profitably. And in the mind of the British picture-connoisseur (though Lewis publicly derided that species, or doubted its existence) Wyndham Lewis has a public existence, compounded, like all public existences, of rumour and noise and gallery talk and press cuttings (a delimited void, in fact, laced with tracer bullets): a less potent existence than John's or Picasso's or Klee's, but sufficient to foster the indispensable feeling that "a Lewis" on one's wall might be something more than *x* square inches of pigment: might be, in fact, a whiff of heady "reality," worth an outlay. That was partly what the books were *for*, in greater or less degree according to the book. It was also (hence their lasting interest) what they tended to be *about*: the nature of public identity, the identity of a person, a movement, an idea. All these, Lewis thought, were corrupted once they went into action, entoiled themselves with the contingent, and brought in groceries. But men of the intellect need groceries.

And in North America — in New York at first, and for three long years in Toronto — none of that fructive nothingness was at his disposal. He was simply a man who could paint pictures, if you liked the kind of pictures he painted, and could also write, with forceful and it seemed barbarous word-joinery, deploying moreover when he wrote ideas not reassuringly continuous with the other ideas that were going round in those years. So at about the age of sixty he was brought up against the full implications of a world where nobody knew who he was. "Wyndham Lewis" had ceased to exist.

The urgent problem was to stay alive: to make and cultivate contacts, to secure commissions, to solicit publishers' advances: in short to improvise "Wyndham Lewis" again, in a cold land at war. He expended disheartening efforts to little effect. Devoid of an identity, he was reduced to a nervous system. It is no wonder that everything Torontonian got on his nerves: the heat, the cold, the plumbing, the ventilation, the liquor regulations, the intellectuals.

He began his North American experience by finishing a novel — *The Vulgar Streak* — about a man who discards his identity and makes a new one, supported by a new trade, that of counterfeiter. He finished with that

experience by recreating it from a decade's distance, back in London, in a novel — *Self Condemned* — about a man who discards his identity (that of British professor) and exists in Momaco, Canada, as an exacerbated nervous system merely, until after some years he claims a new identity (that of American professor) and is free to carry on "insect-like activity" in a "Cemetery of Shells." His Canadian years, his years as a nervous system, expose him to shock and psychic reduction and tragedy. Canada, projected from the author's experience there, is the book's synecdoche for limbo, a frigid province remote from a forgotten sun.

This novel about Canada — Canada as experienced by a stranded Martian — derives its insidious power from the recognition it elicits that we all to some extent share that condition. This recognition emanates from chilling crystals embedded in the intimate texture of the prose. When you are nobody, nowhere, arrived out of nowhere, unknown, then anything at all that touches your attention does so with uncanny aggressiveness. A squirrel for instance is neither an entrancing fellow-creature, as for a child, nor a frisking detail in the continuum of things, as for the urbanite, nor a reveller on the largest mown lawns he has ever seen, as for the Varsity freshman, nor even a professional problem, as for the rodent control operator. No, it is something suddenly perceived staring "with one large popeye through the window, his head, like a neolithic axe-head, pressed against the glass, standing on his hind legs": an alarming apparition that does not recur.

These moments of hallucinatory encounter we have all experienced when we are most wholly cut off from all we normally are: in our dreams. *Self Condemned* is like an immense bad dream — the psychedelic fan would say a bad trip — implacable, engulfing, unnervingly paced, voices and blurs and acts of madness and over and over those moments of eerily heightened awareness, so randomly related to what is there to be aware of: the vertigo of a man without an identity on which he can rely. A distinguished critic not long after its publication assured the readers of an American journal that Toronto was not in fact like that at all. He wryly suggested that they consider the testimony of one who merely lived there. Quite: no place is like that if you live there.

But who, Lewis would ask (had asked repeatedly since 1910) — who really lives anywhere? No one does who lives, as Lewis did, in his mind, accumulating sharp acts of elaborated perception. The mind can always demand an order of sense to which the real is unequal. Lewis exploited this situation, one might say, all his life: it gave him reasons to be active: "Most of my books," he wrote in 1940, "are merely a protest against Anglo-Saxon civilization, which puts so many obstacles in the way of the artist." He had been some time discovering these ob-

stacles. "I started life as what is called a 'revolutionary' . . . : a man of the *tabula rasa*. I thought everything could be wiped out in a day, and rebuilt nearer to the heart's desire. I designed an entirely new London for instance." You can make these rapid changes in your mind, as fast as you can whisk your thoughts about. Outside your mind you cannot. It was not merely Anglo-Saxon civilization that was recalcitrant, not merely the sluggish inhabitants of London, glancing comfortably at the Albert Memorial. It was reality, the created actual: that against which the hand bumps, or the head.

He thought not, however; he tended to suppose every named thing, every encountered distraction, as provisional as the painter's reputation. So his fictions specialize in dismissals of reality: in voids where people like the Communists of *The Revenge for Love* are designing wholly new Londons (a capitalist hung from each lamp-post) or painting wholly new Van Goghs (since his tricks, authenticated by bought experts, will sell); or where Vincent Penhale in *The Vulgar Streak* is making for himself a new self, supported by new money, which though skilfully made in the basement is every bit as "real" as the output of the Royal Mint. And the texture of his novels, right from *Tarr* onward, was made up of details like that hallucinatory squirrel, fixed on the page with arbitrary irrelevance.

This was a habit of mind appropriate to painting, where one may elaborate a passage which the eye may choose to pause on or not, or which may lie in wait to gratify the ripe seeker after local felicities. In prose, which exacts sequential attention, it frequently ministered to clutter, a vice of style. The painter of a squirrel, his mind stocked with shapes, may well elaborate its skull's resemblance to a neolithic axe-head. The describer of a squirrel impedes attention by such a remark; it takes us away from the squirrel. The describer however of a squirrel presented by a state of semi-dream, a squirrel not part of nature's continuum but thrust against the consciousness of a man deprived of any scale of familiarity, can by invoking the axe-head and the pop-eye touch on the nearly primitive terrors of such an apparition.

And this was Lewis's feat in *Self Condemned*, to discover the use of his mannerisms: to manage with their aid that the provincial banal should menace like an apparition, and that a man should plausibly be driven mad by it. He had often patrolled the borders of madness before. His previous novels had repeatedly plunged into vertigo: the duel in *Tarr*, for instance, or the killing of the civil guard in *The Revenge for Love*. Their notation for vertigo is a sudden slowing-down of time, in which particulars follow one another at molasses speed and

with stroboscopic vividness. People are tricked into such abysses by misfortune, or by a presumptuous disregard for the rules of the communal game. The books are controlled by a theory about the communal: that it is a game, beset with savage penalties, and a rather silly game because it is controlled by silly people. The losers, like Victor Stamp in *The Revenge for Love*, have not mastered the game, as Lewis never quite mastered the painting game (he could paint, but that was only part of the game, and not the most important part).

Self Condemned, however, is not about a game. It is about the meaning of identity, amid the great convulsions that render meaningless millions of lives. And it does not contain an episode of vertigo; it is from end to end a prolonged vertigo, a slow-motion picture of very little happening, appraising the power of that very little by its very slowness to destroy René Harding implacably. When near the end he is shown his wife on a morgue slab he sees her much as the squirrel was seen: "Top-most was the bloodstained head of Hester, lying on its side. The poor hair was full of mud, which flattened it upon the skull. Her eye protruded: it was strange it should still have the strength to go on peering on in the darkness." This is a moment of appalling, disorienting shock; the nauseous intensity of its random detail (a corpse as still life) is evidently right. But in being continuous with the texture of so much else in the book it clarifies the nature of the book's less lurid passages: they document the continuous disorientation of the political prisoner, the man displaced, the survivor (there have been millions) of a community elsewhere in space or mislaid in time: a nightmare state of being no-one nowhere. Everyone alive today knows something about this. The break-up of Europe, the subsequent great privations and migrations, transposed whole peoples into a sort of life-long Momaco.

MOMACO, THE SLOW-MOTION CITY, was made out of Lewis's experience of Toronto, as later Third City in *The Human Age* was made out of his experience of post-war London. Both are places of exile constructed by the imagination out of inhabited places, as though the imagination were insisting that exile, since the war, has entered into the very stuff of human experience. And this is what we are explicitly told early in *Self Condemned*, when during the last pre-war summer René visits his friend Parkinson:

> Both of them knew that this was the last year of an epoch, and that such men as themselves could never exist on earth again.... They knew that as far as that quiet, unmolested elect life was concerned, they were both condemned to death:

> that the chronological future was, in fact, *a future life*, about which they both felt very dubious. They might survive as phantasms in a future England: or they might learn to live in some other way.

This points forward to *The Human Age*, a book about life experienced as a future life. If it also points forward to Momaco, that is because such a future, one no European can inhabit, already exists on the western side of the waters. Canadians are apt to find the Momaco details implausible — icicles for instance six feet long and as thick as a man's arm — as though the country were somehow being misrepresented. But Lewis was recreating the paranoia of exile; and one does see such icicles sometimes, even in Toronto.

John Ruskin, obsessed with the deterioration of all things, lamented once that the very Alps grew shabby, their snow-caps exiguous, their flanks grey and bare. This remark was seized on as evidence of his madness, until research disclosed that it was perfectly true. There had been a long cycle of scanty precipitation. Ruskin's emotional obsessions had not deformed his vision of the Alps, but had shown him the Alps as Lewis saw the squirrel, abstracted from habitual schemes of reference which tell men year after year that Alps are splendid or that squirrels are jaunty. A climatologist makes a similar abstraction, and notices among the Alps the same phenomena Ruskin did. But the climatologist's observations do not disturb us; Ruskin's do. We do not trust a man whose passions arm his vision. Yet we heed a man whose method replaces vision, even when he brings the same news the obsessed man does. We say the obsessed man's facts must be wrong; we say this to exorcise his obsession, which we fear is insidious.

A cold "as impossible to keep out as radium," cold that "walked through your heart, it dissolved your kidney, it flashed down your marrow and made an icicle of your coccyx"; a morning light that "seems to bang you in the face, as it glares in at the window"; a newspaper clipping about a boy's eyeball pierced by a splinter of ice; tears caught by the wind "as they came over the rim of the eyeball" and dashed against the wayfarer's shoulder: these observations, individually accurate, limn a felt hostility: the winter not indifferently *there* but actively malevolent. It was his sense of being menaced that shaped Lewis's perception, that shapes René's. And Lewis felt menaced — by the seasons as by everything else — because he *was* menaced; he was menaced by annihilation. By a mere change of state, by translation in wartime across a body of water, Wyndham Lewis, painter, satirist, pamphleteer, Enemy, had been reduced to virtual non-existence.

There would seem to have been no better demonstration of his life-long thesis that the human world, identity itself, is precarious, provisional: image that un-

sleeping intellect, that acetylene will, still blazing but rendered irrelevant, disregarded by professional custodians of the life of the mind, leafing their lecture-notes among the elms and the squirrels a mile away! So little does it take — a mere switching-off of attention — to annihilate worlds. But something of more moment was going forward than one ignored painter's privations. His troubles were an historical paradigm. Midway through his first summer in Toronto he wrote to T. Sturge Moore:

> How calm those days were before the epoch of wars and social revolution, when you used to sit on one side of your work-table and I on the other, and we would talk — with trees and creepers of the placid Hampstead domesticity beyond the windows, and you used to grunt with a philosophic despondence I greatly enjoyed. It was the last days of the Victorian world of artificial peacefulness — of the R.S.P.C.A. and London Bobbies, of "slumming" and Buzzards cakes. As at that time I had never heard of anything else, it seemed to my young mind in the order of nature. You — I suppose — knew it was all like the stunt of an illusionist. You taught me many things. But you never taught me *that*. I first discovered about it in 1914 — with growing surprise and disgust.

This rhymes with the doomed communion of René and Parkinson on the eve of a second war. The full import of the discovery Lewis recalls making in 1914 did not come home to him until 1941. For years he had seen the destruction of old illusions as opportunity for a new illusionist ("I designed an entirely new London for instance").

Between 1914 and 1945 millions of Europeans made such a discovery. The New World has never had to make it. The New World has tended to suppose that the order of nature does dominate its arrangements, that its opening arms of welcome symbolize (however scorched the earth elsewhere) access to all that man's heart can desire: mountains and fir-trees, water and wheat and sunlight. Do men need men? Do they need cities? The New World inclines to think not. Her sage is Thoreau. She feels that her cities are her problem areas; that some economic process, no doubt related to the concentrations of capital, makes them exist and metabolize thought and wealth; but that they turn cancerous.

But Europe is a place of cities, and the reliance of a Wyndham Lewis on his city is so complex that a city on a lower plane of organization than London's deprived him virtually of existence. He was not like the millions whose gratitude has confirmed the New World in its hypotheses, who deprived by war and famine of everything took life and hope from the gift of elements in an elemental continent. It was not for elements that he expressed so strident a hunger but for

community: for all that can cross neither frontiers nor oceans: the established web of relationships, indescribably fragile, that made his life as painter and writer possible. Even his enmities were such relationships.

Despite many acts of particular kindness such a life was impossible to him in New York and equally impossible in Toronto, for he had left behind what it is to be a European, and so stepped out of himself. He stepped into the kind of nightmare for which he had been all his life perfecting the notation: phenomena become apparitions, charged with random detail. Back in England (and blind) he applied that notation to the Canadian experience: *Self Condemned.* Then he generalized the case and reapplied it; he repeated the fictive experiment of cutting a man loose from Europe, but this time set him, as René Harding had not been set, in alliance with the centres of power. The centres of power were successively the Bailiff and Sammael, and the book was *The Human Age.* It showed that power was not the nutriment René's soul perished for lack of. It also opened up theological issues Lewis was still expecting to confront in 1956. In 1957 he died.

René Harding in Momaco, Pullman in Third City and Dis, are beings abstracted from accustomed spaces and times and so from identity. A people increasingly indifferent to accustomed spaces and times, increasingly migrant, increasingly disrooted, is both growing away from the experience of those books and unwittingly reliving that experience. Little symptomatic adjustments occur: the arts, for instance, turn anonymous, as we learn that the TV commercial, not the play with a known author or the painting validated by some master's signature, is the imaginative focus of our culture. The bicycle chain swings in a suburban street. An eye is gouged out. Crowds walk past death indifferently.

It was partly in such a world, familiar to us, that Lewis (prompted by his demon) lived all his life, but partly in an older Europe. When he came to Canada, the last European, he came to a future which gratified his demon but in which he was miserable. In provisional Canada, a Canadian city with its minimal communal bonds, its bleak continuities and nearly unnoticed convolutions of police-court violence, prefigured a human future into which Canada has passed with a minimum of post-war fuss. One thing we can learn from Wyndham Lewis's misery is the nature of the quiet transmutation the very assumptions of civilization have undergone, which today makes the cultural Arctic he barely survived seem normal and habitable everywhere.