

MOMACO REVISITED

WYNDHAM LEWIS had a double claim to glory. Among the seminal writers in English of the period between the two Great Wars, he appeared as fourth to the great trio of Pound, Eliot and Joyce; Eliot in fact described him as "the greatest prose writer of my generation." As the founder of Vorticism and a fine painter in his own right, he was also one of the leaders of British avant garde painting during the same era. Yet for much of his life Lewis lived under an obstinate eclipse, struggling in poverty, officially unrecognized, and never granted the critical acclaim which he and his admirers regarded as his due. The works of Lewis's friends and contemporaries have been widely published and widely read; Eliot and Joyce are among the standbys of freshman English reading in every North American university, and anything Pound ever wrote seems now to be standard equipment for the undergraduate poet. But I have never yet seen a single passage of Wyndham Lewis's writings in a college anthology or reading list, while, until the last year or two, Lewis's books have been mostly out of print and hard to find. True, there has recently been a minor flurry of interest in Lewis, but it still hardly balances the generation of neglect.

In that generation of neglect Canada plays a special role. Lewis's associations with Canada weave a curiously persistent thread through his life. He was born in Canadian waters, when his father's yacht was berthed offshore at Amherst, Nova Scotia. During the First World War he became, partly on the strength of this tenuous link, a Canadian war artist. And then, at the beginning of World War II, he found himself trapped in Toronto; the English currency regulations did not allow him to obtain from London the money he needed to pay his passage home, and his Canadian earnings never gave him a sufficient surplus for

the fare. Between Canada and St. Louis, Missouri, he hovered till the war ended and he could return to Notting Hill and his last great fight, against blindness.

Lewis reached Canada after a disillusioning period in New York, where he found himself ignored and unable to make even a tiny living from either writing or painting. By contrast, his first days in Canada were unexpectedly encouraging. Though he found Toronto "a mournful Scottish version of America", he did some CBC talks, picked up a small contract from the Ryerson Press, and sold a few drawings. In retrospect it seems a wretched harvest for a man of Lewis's quality and standing, but great artists have often survived by such meagre pickings, and Lewis at the time was able to believe that at last he was on the upgrade. "After the winter of my discontent in the long and chilly shades of that statue of liberty, I feel as if I had come up out of a coalmine or a dungeon into the fresh air again."

Within a year he was disillusioned. "Things have come to an awful mess here," he wrote. "If I don't do something to break out of the net, I shall end my days in a Toronto flophouse." His income had fallen sharply after the novelty of his presence wore off, and often he and his wife were on the edge of starvation, living from hand to mouth in a cheap and raffish residential hotel, the original of the Hotel Blundell of *Self Condemned*. The University of Toronto almost ignored him, and most of the writers who lived in Toronto during the war years seem to have been unaware of his presence. The only literary names mentioned in his letter from the Toronto period are those of Lorne Pierce, who befriended him, and Douglas Le Pan; A. Y. Jackson was almost alone among Canadian painters in trying to make Lewis feel welcome in the country of his birth. Finally, in 1943, a tiny Catholic college, Assumption at Kingston, gave him a modestly paid but welcome teaching post; there Marshall McLuhan and Felix Giovanelli sought him out and got him lecturing and painting assignments at St. Louis.

On the whole, Canadian hospitality had been shamefully scanty. Lewis interpreted his situation as the result of Anglophobia and of the resentment of mediocrities in high academic positions towards their intellectual betters. One of the aims of this special issue of *Canadian Literature* is to give, through contributions by people who knew Lewis or have studied his works closely, and through hitherto unpublished writings by Lewis himself while in Canada, some idea of what actually happened to him here. We have no intention of claiming Lewis as more than peripherally Canadian; it seems, however, that there is a place in *Canadian Literature* for the discussion of an episode in Canada which is of great interest in the larger context of Anglo-Saxon literary history.

I suspect the neglect Lewis experienced in Canada, though we must accept the shame, was a particular aspect of his general fate. He was not one of those writers whose bestselling fame, in the age before our own, assured them a welcome anywhere. His works were, in fact, unpopular among those who read popular successes, and impenetrable to those who were disinclined to make reading an instrument of thought. There was little superficially attractive in either his novels or his critical writings, nothing in the general sense poetic, scanty space for the softer feelings to cling. Lewis was, of course, among the great satirical novelists of his period. *The Apes of God*, *The Revenge for Love*, mock with superb savagery the literary and political shames and pretences of the 1930's in England, and they have a universal insight into the bogus that carries them beyond their own age. What helped to make these books so inaccessible to the general reading public was the elusiveness of any emotion except anger; Lewis tore away the masks from the people he satirized and revealed to us hollow men, without either true thoughts or true feelings. On his own face, however, he kept the mask in place. His favourite mask was that of the Enemy; it was the title of one of the magazines he edited, but it was also a guise which he himself liked to assume — the enemy of the fake and the insincere. It is true that Lewis attacked the hollow men, the men of sham feeling, because he himself respected true feeling and grieved to find it so rare. It is also true that the masks he himself wore were there to protect his own over-sensitive feelings. But this was not very evident to the average reader, and Lewis, who lacked the facile talent to please as well as the inclination to exploit the emotions, remained a writer for the few, a writer's writer.

Another complexity which further removed Lewis from the average reader was the apparent ambiguity with which he viewed his creations. As human beings they were hollow; as creations of art, might they not be complete? Lewis in fact always saw in art the breaking down of life, its reconstruction in a static and crystalline form. The essence of Vorticism was the concept of the still, unmoving centre. This was why Lewis attacked Bergsonian and other similar philosophies of time; this is why, in *Tarr*, the hero explains to his mistress that "deadness . . . is the first condition of art," and goes on to say: "The lines and masses of the statue are its soul. No restless, quick, flame-like ego is imagined for the *inside* of it. . . . This is another condition of art: *to have no inside*, nothing you cannot see. Instead, then, of being something impelled like an independent machine by a little egoistic fire inside, it lives soullessly and deadly by its frontal lines and masses."

THIS BRINGS US to *Self Condemned*, which is and is not a Canadian novel — indeed, is and is not a novel. It is on one level autobiographical, drawing much from Lewis's experiences in Canada, seen with a highly subjective eye. It paints a portrait of Canada, but the portrait is rather like those coldly hieratic images he painted of his literary contemporaries. Most of the Canadians who read *Self Condemned* find the portrait unrecognizable, "a bad likeness".

Undoubtedly it is the multiplicity and mutability of its aspects that makes *Self Condemned* uncongenial to so many readers. Viewed from the naturalistic standpoint, it seems a strange mixture of heavy and rather amateur social documentation, authorial comment, and likely catastrophes heightened to melodrama. But what has to be borne in mind, even on this level, is that it is an exile's novel, and the reality of exiles is always subjective — in this case the obsessive, distorted life of ex-Professor Harding and his wife Hester in the hotel suite where wartime restrictions on travel and Canadian hostility conspire to maroon them in the mythical city of Momaco.

This is one aspect of *Self Condemned* which perhaps only exiles, or those who have been able to place themselves into convincing imaginary exile, can completely understand. When I first read *Self Condemned* ten years ago I had recently emerged from a situation very similar to that of Lewis in wartime Toronto. Like him, originally a Canadian by fact of birth and little else, I had returned to Canada, lived through three years of poverty, uncongenial work and slow literary recognition, and had just won a measure of liberation when *Self Condemned* appeared. My mood was still largely that of the exile, and I easily became immersed in this subjective world of another exile. Today, though my memories still enable me to understand this aspect of Lewis's book, I see it more distantly, and am aware of the distortions of actuality; I have, in other words, ceased to be an exile, and I know that, though some of Lewis's insights about Canada are startlingly correct, others are equally startlingly wide of the mark.

Such a change of attitude towards the superficial content of *Self Condemned* perhaps makes it more easy to see clearly its other aspects in which, like mirror writing, Lewis's view of art and life is symbolized. The bleak tragedy of Harding and his wife, the steady attrition of their personalities in the hotel room that, through their poverty and lack of friends, becomes their microcosmic world, seems to have a real and solid power, until one remembers what a deceptive compassion on the author's part has masked, that Harding — though he shares his

creator's view of history, his hatred of the state, his anger at the time philosophers — is really another Lewisian hollow man and so a projection of the Vorticist viewpoint that art becomes real only in the moment of suspended life. It is on this level that the novel moves into shape. The Canadian scene, its *faits divers* observed and preserved as meticulously as butterflies dead and pinned on cork, takes its place in the grand mosaic. The best known, most spectacular passage of the book is also its key. The hotel burns to a shell in the middle of the harsh Canadian winter and is afterwards unrecognizable under the stupendous castle of ice that has been constructed by the hoses of the firemen.

What René and Hester gazed into was nothing to do with what had been the Hotel Blundell. It was now an enormous cave, full of mighty icicles as much as thirty feet long, and as thick as a tree, suspended from the skeleton of a roof. Below, one looked down into an icy labyrinth; here and there vistas leading the eye on to other caverns: and tunnels ending in mirrors, it seemed. . . . It was a cave in which no polar bear could inhabit, in which the Great Auk could not lay its egg, and into which no ex-guest could enter with his ice-pick, to search for diamonds which, in his breathless exit, he had had to leave behind. It was a sinister, upside-down forest of ice, rooted in air; a piece of sub-polar absurdity which would stand there till the first thaws.

As the hotel becomes transformed, so in their negative apotheoses do both Harding and Hester. Despairing of ever leaving Canada, Hester throws herself under a lorry, and René is called to inspect her body. He finds himself

. . . looking down on a much-soiled collection of objects. They were arranged in the most paradoxical way. Like a *graffito* the essentials were picked out. He recognized the low-bottomed silhouette of a female figure, the clothes shapeless and black with blood. Slightly to one side there was a pair of legs in horrible detachment, like a pair of legs for a doll upon a factory table, before they have been stuck on to the body. At the top, was the long forward-straining, as it were yearning neck. Topmost was the blood-stained 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 peering on in the darkness.

Repeatedly the image of Hester as *graffito* returns to René; in other words, she has undergone the same dislocation as life must suffer for the work of art to come into being; in René's mind she has become the equivalent of a work of art. As for René himself, it is reserved for him, when all within is clearly dead, to approximate, in the last clause of the novel (which by now has revealed itself as a determined anti-novel), the condition of the ice-hotel:

EDITORIAL

. . . and the Faculty had no idea that it was a glacial shell of a man who had come to live among them, mainly because they were themselves unfilled with anything more than a little academic stuffing.

But the glacial shell, with no content, accords precisely with the definition of the work of art in *Tarr*. René and Hester, and the world they belong to, symbolized by the Hotel, have all been received into the timeless and static world of art, the still centre of the Vortex, the dominion of the Enemy.