

WYNDHAM LEWIS AT WINDSOR

J. Stanley Murphy, C.S.B.

IN THE LATE SUMMER of 1942, while I was visiting St. Michael's College, Toronto, I walked over to Sherbourne Street, rang the bell at the Tudor Hotel, and asked for Wyndham Lewis. I was greeted with a quiet reserve, which receded at once when Lewis heard me say that Cecil J. Eustace, author and educational director for the publishers, J. M. Dent & Sons, had suggested that I should invite him to participate in the Christian Culture series of lectures and presentations which I had founded in 1934 and which were centred mainly on Assumption College, Windsor.¹ C. J. Eustace, who had met Wyndham Lewis in Dents' office in connection with the possibility of his somehow receiving royalties due on his books from Britain, had told me that he would be a most valuable lecturer. He had also inadvertently given me an insight into Lewis's whimsicality, which was liable to leave the listener puzzled for a moment. Knowing that Eustace, a convert to Catholicism, was an enthusiastic student and admirer of Jacques Maritain, Lewis asked: "What kind of a Catholic are you? Do you follow the Popes and the Councils, or do you follow Maritain?"

On my first encounter with Wyndham Lewis, our conversation was necessarily brief and serious. He asked if the works of Maritain and Etienne Gilson were prominent in our philosophy course, and obviously he felt they should be. He mentioned some of his Catholic friends in England, and said: "I am afraid that my mother was a 'bad' Catholic." He was most interested in the Christian Century Series and in Assumption College. Before I left, he agreed to come to Windsor the following January 2nd and give a lecture on Art. I suggested that I would

try to get him a lecture at Marygrove College, Detroit, on the occasion of his Christian Century series lecture, and promised to write him as soon as I returned to Windsor.

I did so, and it was on the 12th September, 1942, that he answered me from the Tudor Hotel:

Dear Father Murphy,

Except that I have been very much driven for the last week or so, I am afraid I have no valid excuse for having been so long in answering and I apologize very much. But I *can* say that I have had to hunt high and low for the enclosed photograph, which is the best I can find. It is a Press photograph taken in '39. Will it be all right?

Please take care of it. If you give it to a photographer, insist that he look after it and return it to you! As soon as you need it no longer, please register it back to me. — Apologies, again, for what must seem extra fussiness. But I require the whole of this photograph for subsequent use in a book.

As to the subject of the lecture, I was reading in *La Nouvelle Relève* the other day (a Fr. Canadian review) a defense on the part of the editor for his respectful treatment of André Gide. It occurred to me that a very interesting address could be written upon the *relation of art to religion*. I think that the vicar of the church in which Bach's music was first played would be apt to look a little askance at one of his parishioners who expressed himself in terms bordering on veneration for this terrific music — which is a mate of the frescos on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at Rome, by Michael Angelo. The "Air for G. Strings" is like the hurrying Jehovah and the unawakened Adam, reaching out his hand for that *touch* which will bring him to life. Now I think that there is a great deal to be said upon this subject: and if that strikes you as a line of discourse which will interest your audience, shall I begin pondering that? *The Relation of Art to Religion* it could be called, or *Religion and the Artist*.

Finally, I must now write to St. Mary's Grove, and for them I should choose some other subject. It is agreed, is it not, that you give me a fee of one hundred dollars? I don't know quite what to say about that to St. Mary's Grove, but suppose I had better just ask what they would give me.

With my kindest regards, and greatly looking forward to seeing you again.

Yours sincerely,

Wyndham Lewis.

Though he managed to misplace the record of the January 1943 date for his lecture, he wrote in sufficient time to re-confirm it, and I recall meeting him at the N.Y.C. railroad station in Windsor. Soon he was made comfortable in the

best suite at Assumption College, and dined in the old refectory with the faculty; the students sat at tables beyond the arches which symbolically separated them, but not their voices, which at times became somewhat tumultuous. Just before Lewis was driven to the Vanity Theatre in Windsor's main street for his lecture, he complained of a cinder that had lodged in his eye and was exceedingly concerned. However, it took only a few minutes for Sister St. Desmond, the infirmarian, to remove the impediment, to Lewis's great joy.

His lecture, "Religion and the Artist", was given to the usual Canadian-American audience which attended the Christian Culture series, and dealt to a great extent with Rouault as the Painter of Original Sin. He read from a typed and hand-corrected manuscript, once pausing to remark: "I cannot seem to make out what I have written here: seems like islands of light and dark." He told me that he had ceased to try extemporizing in lectures some years before; had found that it made him too nervous. He mentioned one occasion when several speakers were present and that "amiable buffoon, G.B.S." so successfully played to the audience that, without a written text, it threw one off.

THOUGH ASSUMPTION COLLEGE then had less than 7% of the student-population that flourishes on the university campus today, it was the decision of the President, Very Reverend V. J. Guinan, C.S.B., and of us who were his advisers to invite Wyndham Lewis as a Special Author-Artist to lecture for a year; the Christian Culture series offered to subsidize a portion of the expenses. Lewis's enthusiasm in accepting the project is evident in the two letters to me which appear in W. K. Rose's collection, *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*. He wrote of "being enormously obliged . . . for bringing to so happy and expeditious conclusion this plan . . . cannot imagine for myself more congenial surroundings . . . really very great thanks, and I am looking forward in every way to coming among you again, to teach alongside of you and your colleagues."²

Shortly afterwards an unforeseen accident increased the blight which hung over this period of Lewis's life in Toronto. On the 4th March, 1943, he wrote to me:

My dear Father Murphy,

Thank you for your letter — as soon as the influenza bugs have been driven off and my brain is a little clearer, I will write again. This is just a note to say that 2 weeks ago last Monday the Tudor Hotel burnt down. As it was 30 below

zero at the time, my wife got a very bad chill. We went to a neighbouring hotel. I nursed her and got the infection myself. We are back in the rear part of the Tudor now (it is quasi-impossible to find an apart. in Toronto at present). Both feel momentarily pretty rotten. By next week the weather will have grown more clement, probably, and I shall be myself again. As I said, this is just a note to acknowledge your letter. More shortly.

Yours sincerely,

Wyndham Lewis.

In May 1943, Wyndham Lewis made a special one-day trip to Windsor at my suggestion "to play a part in home-finding", an almost insuperable task in those war years. We were not entirely successful. However, when the Lewises came in mid-June, before Summer School, they stayed a short time in a local hotel, and then sub-let for the summer — from a soldier Lewis met on the street — a pleasant place in the Royal Apartments, on Ellis Street, near Oullette. To John Burgess at this time he described Windsor as "a very agreeable little city, and quite charmingly arranged . . . Oullette is a handsome street, with the Detroit skyscrapers at the end of it."³

In late June Summer School began and lasted for six weeks. Out of interest and respect, I attended all of Wyndham Lewis's classes. The content of his course — Philosophy of Literature — involved the philosophic principles embodied in various works of fiction, from Tolstoy's *War and Peace* to novels by Steinbeck and Hemingway. Most of the class were teachers, many of them nuns, though George Haddad, the Canadian concert pianist, and an Irish Oblate Father were among others who attended this five-hours-a-week course. I can still hear Lewis's resonant voice so often echoing Hemingway's title, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, though always — I am sure unconsciously — he said "For Whom the Bells Toll." A phrase he sometimes used, and illustrated effectively from the works being discussed was: "A Conscience for Reality." After his first class or so, as we walked across the campus, he confided that teaching nuns was a new experience to him. He found them agreeable and likeable, but wondered how much background in contemporary fiction many of them would have. In a letter to John Burgess of the 17th July, he comments at some length on his course, "My priestly colleagues are pleasant fellows," he adds. "How good the religious disciplines are for people."⁴ On the 17th August, again to John Burgess, he writes: "The priests are very pleasant and do not mind my not being a catholic. They accept me as a well-wisher: they respect the principles of others . . . they have treated me with great kindness, as also the nuns."⁵

I have observed that sometimes Lewis would toss out a whimsical remark, perhaps intended to puzzle the listener on matters that he had not entirely settled in his own mind. On campus there was a well-known author, Father H. A. Reinhold, who had early been expelled from Germany by the Nazis and later hounded by them from Switzerland. His course in Liturgy drew many comments, foreshadowing much that has happened since Vatican II. Listening to two nuns discussing the course and emphasizing certain changes advocated by Father Reinhold, Lewis remarked: "What is Father Reinhold trying to do — throw us all back into the Greek Church?"

Lewis brought not only a vast background of experience but also fresh studies into his classes. He was a presence whom no intelligent person could ignore. He had great respect for the moral virtues, but an equal respect for the intellectual virtues. As delicately as a surgeon, he would separate the spurious in treating a book like *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. He knew Spain, and he tried to keep his own "conscience for reality" pure.

During July 1943, Marshall McLuhan and Felix Giovanelli came to Windsor from St. Louis University to see Wyndham Lewis. Their meeting was a memorable evening. The young professors were keenly intelligent admirers of their host's genius. Lewis was very happy. He discussed his courses, the projected Heywood Broun Memorial Lectures that fall, and a plethora of other items. Marshall McLuhan had long been acquainted with Lewis's painting and writing, and later, in 1944, he contributed a penetratingly brilliant essay, simply entitled "Lewis", to the issue of *St. Louis University Studies* entitled "Key Thinkers and Modern Thought."⁶ I recall one incident of that evening. Lewis, in the middle of a long explanation, left the room for a moment to Giovanelli, McLuhan and myself. When he returned, he hesitated to recapture the train of thought. We were all interested. Dr. Giovanelli beckoned, respectfully: "Please continue your paragraph!"

Later in 1943 Lewis was fortunate enough to discover a first-floor apartment, with a large western exposure window, along the Detroit River; it was next to a park, had a good view of the Ambassador Bridge and Detroit, and was about fifteen minutes' walk from Assumption.

Early that fall Bishop (then Monsignor) Fulton J. Sheen opened the Christian Culture series in Detroit. At his room at the Sheraton Cadillac, Lewis did a black pencil sketch of him. In the long conversation that followed, Monsignor Sheen told Lewis that he would be proud if he could see how well-marked his own copy of *Time and Western Man* was, that in his classes he frequently quoted

from the book, and that Lewis was the first writer he had encountered who pinpointed the extravagances of the Time-Philosophy. They got on well. Later, Lewis said to me: "He is bright and able."

The Heywood Broun Memorial lectures, twelve in number, were another outgrowth of the Christian Culture series, and in 1943 they were delivered by Wyndham Lewis under the general title: "Concept of Liberty from the Founding Fathers of the U.S.A. until Now." They provided the basis for his book, *America and Cosmic Man*.

One evening Waldemar Gurian, the distinguished European author of *Bolshevism, Theory and Practice* (1931), then a Professor of Political Science and founder of the *Review of Politics* at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, stopped overnight in Windsor on his way to London, Ontario. Miss Pauline Bondy, then at Windsor and now head of the Department of French at Vanier C.I., held a small gathering in his honour at her home near the college. Dr. Gurian, the Hon. Paul Martin and I were there; Lewis came later. Gurian, short, all intellect and unconsciously abrupt, shook hands with Lewis, and — without premeditated malice I am sure — reminisced: "I first heard of Wyndham Lewis as I talked with Carl Schmidt, author of *The Necessity of Politics*, in a Berlin cafe in the late twenties. Schmidt said: 'Democracy is dying, according to Wyndham Lewis'." Lewis remained carefully silent during the evening, taking no chances of further misinterpretation.

That Lewis feared misinterpretation (what intelligent person does not have some concern for the effects of war psychosis!) was evident. He was disturbed when his corner meat-market owner confided to him that Father Murphy had over the years brought some rather suspect people to Windsor, such as Prince Hubertus Zu Loewenstein, the anti-Nazi German exile who had been pro-Loyalist during the Spanish Civil War. There was also loose gossip about Lewis himself in his apartment house by people who had never read a line of his writings, never seen his or any other paintings, and had never before encountered a great artist or author.

Later that fall Jacques Maritain, second recipient of the Annual Christian Culture Award Gold Medal of Assumption College, revisited us to give a special lecture entitled "Moral Philosophy". Lewis was intrigued by it, and wished that many others could have heard it. During the afternoon before the lecture he did a pencil sketch of Maritain and was photographed with him; the photograph appears in Lewis's *Rude Assignment* (1950).

About the same time, Lewis asked me to pose for a colour pastel. I greatly

enjoyed the walks along the river to his apartment and the conversation during the various sittings. He often mentioned the difficulty of painting people who knew nothing of art and expected a photograph. To see him work was a joy, and I paid him the tribute of total confidence, never asking to see the result while the sessions were in progress. In 1956 this pastel was shown in the "Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism" exhibition at the Tate Gallery, and it was also reproduced at that time in the *Illustrated London News*.

Very early in 1944 I recall meeting Lewis in the street near the Prince Edward Hotel and learning that their Christmas had been anything but placid; their dog had been dangerously ill. A few days later, Lewis told me that the dog had died. The significance of the loss deepened many years later when I read this passage from a letter to Felix Giovanelli:

... The death of our hirsute gremlin had left an ugly gap . . . People never forgive you for possessing more of anything than themselves — more reputation is a sore offence; and if you put yourself in their power they can make you tolerably uncomfortable. By coming to Canada — in the middle of a world-war — I did that. And my wife has had to pay as well as myself. So this small creature, which stood for all that was benevolent in the universe, sweetened the bitter medicine for her.⁷

During the fall of 1943 and the following winter Lewis repeated his course in the Philosophy of Literature to students in the regular seminars, and originally intended to continue until the end of the spring. However, thanks to McLuhan and Giovanelli, opportunities for lecturing and painting developed at St. Louis, and when he left us in February 1944, I took over his small class and continued until the end of the term.

FROM MY MANY CONVERSATIONS with Lewis, I recall, among other opinions, the following:

He regretted that his friend Ezra Pound, such a splendid poet and critic, should have been so wild on political and racial matters. He predicted that eventually Ezra would receive "the fool's pardon" for his having broadcast for the "Boss", Mussolini. Lewis said that he could never be a Communist. He felt that, without ever taking a vow of poverty, he had chosen to remain poor rather than, out of attachment to wealth, producing lies to please. Lewis said he never forgot the impression that one Hindu made on him when he came to congratulate him for writing *Pale Face*. The Hindu said: "As far as I know, no one in my family or

ancestry has ever destroyed any kind of life." Lewis objected to the naïve classification of Morley Callaghan as the "Canadian Hemingway", and praised Callaghan for the fresh originality of his collection of stories, *Now That April's Here*. He liked Bruce Hutchison's *The Unknown Country*, and quoted from it in defending the Canadian painter, A. Y. Jackson. He was amused when occasional letters came to him, intended for D. B. Wyndham Lewis, biographer and originator of a famous newspaper column under the pseudonym "Beachcomber." He felt that D. B. was finally persuaded to insert his full name by his publisher in order to embarrass Wyndham Lewis. Sometimes a fan of D. B. would write to Wyndham Lewis, after reading one of the latter's books, and say in effect: "You are not your own dear self."

I recall spending one evening with the Lewises, all in good spirits, when Mrs. Lewis mentioned that one of her relatives had become a Catholic and had moved from England, and that she herself had almost become a Catholic. "You should not have said it that way," Lewis remarked, with a benevolent twinkle, "It's like saying that you almost caught the train."

On another occasion, at one of his Heywood Broun lectures, there was a great deal of coughing, certainly involuntary. Partly for dramatic relief, but also half-seriously, Lewis said: "I am afraid the room will soon fill with germs, and we shall all go down." My recollection is that after that the coughing got under control.

Not long after his departure from Windsor, on the 2nd May, 1944, Lewis wrote me from the Coronada Hotel in St. Louis:

Dear Father Murphy,

Constantly since my arrival here I have been on the point of writing you, but realising I had nothing definite to tell you, I refrained. Now I am able to announce *this* at least: I have secured an oil-portrait, as well as several well-paid drawings. After a brief struggle on arrival I succumbed to McL. and went to the Plaza. The expense was terrific. However, I may have to thank its dismal splendours for some of my success. What happens next I do not know. I am bound to you and have already overstayed my 'leave'. On the other hand, we shall I hope be able to shuffle things round in such a way that I can prolong my stay here and do this work (and almost certainly other work will materialize in the near future): then later, somewhat more in funds than when I departed, return to Windsor and catch up on my indebtedness for February. Some time next week it will be necessary to return to Windsor for 24 hours and we can straighten it out then. It will be much easier to explain things when I turn up. I am distressed about my little class (I got in a bit of one of my lectures at Assumption in my

lecture at Chicago, and it was very effective. The Chicago lectures developed just before I left.) But it can be explained to the class that I am *practicing* instead of *preaching*, for a while, but will return to take up the story later. These things here have to be *snatched at* or they will evaporate. The iron has to be smitten while it is hot (which is the problem; but we can solve it between us.)

Give my love to all my cassocked colleagues: I must pick up that pamphlet on the C.C.F. when I am there. I know that Father LeBel, Father Lee, and Father Garvey, will be glad to hear of my success down here . . . With the most cordial greetings,

Yours,

Wyndham Lewis.

P.S. Re. Hutchins. *Of course* I should be delighted to go to so important a centre as Chicago. As you realise, I cannot myself write to Hutchins. But if you undertook to do so, you would certainly have my permission. The University of Chicago might consider having me there on these terms. To have a practicing artist — someone working, all the time, on the spot — is more useful (and more in consonance with contemporary ideas of education) than a mere routine instruction. I could put aside 2 hours every day in my studio to receive visits of students (or some such period). Once a week I would give a formal lecture on the principles of art and visual understanding. This lecture would have to be prepared and would take a day perhaps. Nevertheless I should have a good deal of time for private work. (You are naturally at liberty to quote this passage if you like.) W.L.

I quoted the passage but was unable to get Lewis into Chicago or any other universities. The idea was twenty years in advance for most places.

It was necessary for Lewis to return to Canada once a month to renew his Visitor's Visa to the U.S.A. Around mid-March he returned for a day, bringing with him an important letter from Marshall McLuhan, and some of McLuhan's writings, which he highly endorsed; this was to lead to McLuhan's joining the faculty of Assumption College for over two years. "Lewis," McLuhan used to say, "is a one-man Gallup Poll." On the same occasion Lewis encountered the Irish poet, Padraic Colum, in the corridor near my office. They had met before in Europe, and they chatted briefly. A few days later, on the 23rd March, Lewis wrote to me from St. Louis.

My dear Father Murphy,

Many tasks have intervened since I got back here, to delay me writing to thank you for your extremely attractive proposal the other day, upon such generous terms: namely to translate the *lecturing* assignment temporarily suspended, into a *painting* assignment . . . I went away with a renewed realization of how benevolent the will was that had opened these possibilities for me of fruitful work and kindly

contacts. For I do wish to say how greatly I have appreciated, too, the friendly co-operation of our colleagues. . . . McL. is delighted to have received your invitation. . . . Remember me to all and sundry: I am sorry my visit was so hurried and that I was unable to have a talk with Fathers Garvey and Le Bel, as well as Father Lee. What a nice chap Padraic Colum is — he gave me a sad account of poor Joyce's last days though Heaven be thanked his wife is safe & provided for in Switzerland.

Yours most cordially,

Wyndham Lewis.

Returning from St. Louis on July 18, 1944, Lewis gave a three-weeks' course on "The A.B.C. of the Visual Arts". I attended most of these classes; so did Marshall McLuhan. On one occasion when a thorny misunderstanding between Lewis and a lay-professor developed, McLuhan reached over to me and whispered: "They're both on the same side." Weeks later, the lay-professor said to me: "I am sorry that I did not understand him at the time; he was perfectly right." After this Summer School course, Lewis worked for five weeks on a series of portraits of former Presidents of Assumption College. He had written earlier from St. Louis: "You will not have to give me the bum's rush in the autumn. I shall be off *somewhere* by then. We will regard this as a breathing space, and meanwhile you will have got a little gallery of pictures." From Windsor, on the 28th August, 1944, Lewis wrote to me in Corunna on the St. Clair River, where I was vacationing:

Thank you for your letter. We were sorry not to see you on the 25th, but at the end of the week we shall meet up, by which time all the pictures but one will be completed.

Meanwhile we have another thing to annoy us very much: having lost all our mail during our absence, we have now lost all our goods to a Laundry (the "Puritan" — name of evil association). . . . Well, until Saturday. Do not bathe in this weather. It seems the fall has hit us.

In the early fall Lewis gave up his Windsor apartment and the college car drove him and Mrs. Lewis to the train in Detroit, bound for St. Louis. Later he returned to Windsor and lived in a downtown hotel for several months, eventually going briefly to Ottawa, then to Montreal, to catch the first passenger ship to leave Canada for England after VJ day. Before leaving Windsor, he did a large painting of Nell Martin, the wife of the Hon. Paul Martin.

He always said that one day he would write about Canada, especially about the Toronto of his experience, but that he would be kind to those at Assumption.

Chapters XXXII and XXXIII of his novel *Self Condemned* drew to an extent on the Assumption College of the war years, with similarities and even greater dissimilarities that need not be itemized here. A letter he wrote to Roy Campbell, on whom he built a character in another novel, gives an insight into his manipulation of material in a novel: “. . . the necessity of altering and dislocating . . . the forcible fusion with the drama . . . and do not consider what my *behaviourist* puppet hints at is a reflect on anything that could cross my mind [regarding Campbell].”⁸

The Wyndham Lewis I knew: an appreciative and loyal friend: “a friend of man”, as he once called Roy Campbell. I relished his humour, admired his brilliance, respected his integrity, and will always remember his gentleness. Seven years ago, after the eminent British philosopher, Father M. D. D’Arcy, S.J., lectured here, he wrote to thank us and to say: “I was happy to have visited a spot that was kind to my dear friends, Wyndham Lewis and Roy Campbell.”

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Affiliated then to the University of Western Ontario, 120 miles away in London, Ontario, Assumption College was later to receive its own university charter, eventually becoming known as Assumption University of Windsor, and now as Assumption University, merged in the new University of Windsor.
- ² *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. W. K. Rose, London, 1963, pp. 348-50 and 352-53.
- ³ *Ibid.*, pp. 357-58.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 357.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 364.
- ⁶ *St. Louis University Studies*, Vol. II, 1948.
- ⁷ *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, pp. 375-76.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205.