

THE WILD LAND

A Celebration of Globalism

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WHEN WYNDHAM LEWIS came to North America in 1939, he brought a set of intellectual premises that could readily accommodate the shock of a “war transient’s” life in the New World. They also served Lewis well when he came to forge the experience into art and into an appropriately spectacular vision of the future world society.

By 1939 an advocate of globalism, he also numbered among his numerous books *The Wild Body* and *Filibusters in Barbary*. The first, published in 1927, included short stories set in the countrysides, primitive yet hotel-ridden, of Brittany and Spain. *Filibusters in Barbary*, a travel book which first appeared in 1932, described a 1931 trip through the mushroom towns and the fierce backlands of Morocco. The British edition of *Filibusters* was withdrawn from the market because of threats of libel suits, an instance of the economic and other misfortunes that haunted Lewis in the 1930’s. It was thus as a man conscious of his environment through experience and observation, as well as in terms of his global concepts, that he entered upon his life in the New World.

“In the nine months preceding the outbreak of war our debts were steadily piling up,” wrote Lewis to his friend Naomi Mitchison on July 8, 1942. “. . . It was under these circumstances that I collected what I could, and made a bee line for New York.”¹ By November 1940, the United States visitors’ permits originally issued to Lewis and his wife had expired, and they made their way to Toronto. There, “in an apartment hotel — 14 bucks a week”, they stayed until the middle of 1943. By July of that year Lewis was teaching in Windsor, Ontario, and for the rest of the time until his return to Britain in 1945, that city and St. Louis, Missouri, were his main places of residence.

The upheavals of wartime had dumped into the Toronto hotel a vast variety of human fauna, many of them peculiar to Canada. To the author of *The Wild Body* and *Filibusters* hotels had already the appeal of microcosms, and the Toronto establishment was soon the object of fascinated scrutiny to his satirical eye. Its convulsive affairs, and those of the community beyond it, were recorded with professional gusto in his notebooks, which are now part of the extensive collection of Lewis manuscript material at Cornell University. In a recent account of the collection, W. K. Rose has described these notebooks as "full of newspaper clippings and notations of language, popular culture and plain factual detail." There are, among other observations, written notes and drawings of the hotel furnace room, and "hundreds of snatches of conversation are quoted, often with explanatory notes. . . . He records radio commercials . . . and popular songs."²

In scrutinizing the community beyond the hotel's precincts, Lewis focussed on the ostensibly more refined section of society. Seen through his eyes, in terms of salon and academy, that society appeared little more than a grotesque aping of its Mayfair original. Once more, this time as author of *The Apes of God*, he felt that he was recording familiar phenomena. Together, the wild New World hotel, and the absurdly derivative high society beyond its bounds provided the material out of which Lewis built a setting for the "black sacrifice" of his novel, *Self Condemned*.

His ancestry, as well as his literary orientation, braced Lewis for his lengthy stay in the New World. Born in 1882 on the family yacht off Amherst, Nova Scotia, Lewis had for father a lively and literate veteran of the American Civil War, and though, after childhood, he seems to have seen little of Charles E. Lewis, he evidently acquired from him some of his sense of literary style, as well as a great deal of knowledge about what he called "the hubbub of battles." The Lewis family, abounding in lawyers and merchants, had spread from its main base, upstate New York, into Canada, to which its ties were strengthened by marriage. Lewis's paternal grandmother, Romain by name, was French-Canadian. A Romain uncle maintained a business in Montreal. A Toronto building, erected in 1852 by great-uncle Charles Romain, "gives me a certain sentimental footing," wrote Lewis from that city in 1940.³

His French-Canadian connections retained a considerable interest for Lewis. On arriving at Quebec City from Britain in 1939, one of his first acts was to search eagerly through the telephone directory for signs of the Romains. Later, when in Toronto, he went to other parts of Ontario in search of clues to the establishment which the Lewises had formerly maintained in that province.

At the same time, he remained highly conscious of his American connections. "It should also be remembered that at 6 . . . I frisked and frolicked with other little American boys on the New England coast — *not* with little Britons on the English coast," Lewis wrote a young American admirer, Felix Giovanelli, in 1948. "The American beginnings are irrelevant, except that I could not help imbibing from my very American father much Stimmung, a certain sentiment, and a lot about the Civil War. And my mother was more American than Irish, and her memories are mine. I have masses of my uncle's letters, who was an American coal magnate. It adds up to nothing very solid, but must be reckoned in."⁴

It seems safe to "reckon in" Lewis's New World roots when seeking to explain his fascination with the historical destiny and the sometimes wild ways of North American society. By March 1943, he was writing of piling up "notes about the ideologic foundations of the U.S.A."⁵ These were the makings of *America and Cosmic Man* (1948) and its argument that America was the cradle of a radically new kind of universalism. The notebooks, dealing with the savage side of North American life, which provided raw material for the backdrop to *Self Condemned*, had been in the making since 1941. Thus, even during the war, Lewis was eagerly taking cognizance of those characteristics of life on the American continent which most impressed him, the cosmic and the crude. Eventually he was to suggest a link between them.

CANADA, TO HIS MIND, was in a cruder stage of development than the nation to the south. In an outline for a never-executed novel, called tentatively *Hill 100*, he wrote in 1942: "If it is true . . . that 'America is a country that has passed from Tartary to decadence without having known civilization,' then it is true of Canada that it is *not even decadent* yet."

The outline for *Hill 100*, now in the Cornell collection, also mentions a historical incident to which Lewis attached considerable symbolical importance and which further illustrates his concern with the savage side of the North American character. The same incident is recounted in *America and Cosmic Man*, where Lewis writes of how La Salle, descending the Mississippi, left several men behind to build a boat. "When he came back, he found the boat only half finished and his compatriots had vanished. Upon the timbers [were] scrawled these words: 'Nous sommes tous sauvages'."⁶ Lewis quotes a young Harvard instructor who warned him "that all foreigners should bear in mind that message."

"This is much too romantic," Lewis says of the instructor's interpretation. "The savagery melted away before the impact of British civilization. But the invaders could not melt so great a wilderness without themselves losing to it much of their personality. Not the human 'savageness', however, of the romantic imagination, but the alien waste of nature, is still there underneath: the 'wild land', as they formerly called it, very imperfectly covered up."⁷

Elsewhere, Lewis praised Canadian painters like A. Y. Jackson for their stark portrayals of Canada's "wild land". But as practicing novelist he evidently assumed the persistence in wartime Toronto as well of an abundant human wildness. This is reflected in the brutal atmosphere of the Hotel Blundell in *Self Condemned* and in the crude bush-Mayfair that is upper-class Momaco. One is reminded of his earlier remarks in *Men Without Art* (1934). "A breathless business hustle," he wrote, left no room for the development of a European type of urbanity in the cities of the New World. "Undeniably, the 'American scene' is of the utmost barrenness, physically and socially. It is planted in the midst of a relative wilderness, beneath a surprisingly hard and penetrating light. . . . The actual physical landscape has something of a Swiss frigidity and emptiness."⁸

The man who wrote *The Apes of God* could speedily take the satirical measure of a Canadian upper-class salon, and enjoy himself hugely in the process. But his imagination revelled also in the more patently savage offerings of the Wild Land. Lewis's early pictorial work had been preoccupied with the ritualized contortions of primitive creatures, which he described as "big obsessed sun-drunk insects." The same general breed of "great comic effigies" turn up at Brotcotnaz, Bestre and other characters in *The Wild Body*, swarming all over "the barbaric environment", as Lewis termed Brittany years later. With these characters, disporting themselves in microcosmic hotels, and with such comic apparitions as the hotelkeeping Signor Borzo, bounding and howling across the Klondikean wilderness of Morocco, the hotel creatures of *Self Condemned* form a direct line. Lewis's imagination feasted on the wilderness of Canada with a relish born of a longstanding occupational taste for such material.

Yet that imagination responded with equal enthusiasm to the fact that the trans-Atlantic Wild Land was "a human laboratory for the manufacture of a Cosmic Man." This new human type, Lewis wrote, took the form of "a perfectly eclectic, non-national, internationally-minded creature . . . with no more geographical or cultural roots with a chameleon."⁹ Here again Lewis was on familiar ground. As visual artist and writer, he had often abandoned the here-and-now for themes cast in a world-shrinking, timeless dimension. His early drawings fea-

ture titanic figures which use the earthly scene as a bleak backdrop or platform for their cosmic contortions. In an early, non-satirical picture, called *Sunset Among The Michelangelos* (Victoria and Albert Museum), we are confronted with four naked human beings, muscular forms looking as if they had been sculpted roughly from granite. They straddle a massive rock formation against a sky of blazing red. They could be the first, or the last, men. Each seems the pictorial rendering of the “Norse giant” Lewis speaks of in his novel, *The Red Priest* (1956), a creature who sullenly contemplates a sphere alien to him, civilization.

The furtive quartet in *Sunset*, seemingly caught by surprise in their wild element at the edge of the world, appear to regard the earth in the manner of passengers forced to endure a rudely accoutred space ship. The same intelligence which articulated this primeval man-earth relationship in the picture was able, forty years later in *Self Condemned*, to visualize man “riding an immense ball.” This ball was “dashing around in a cold, black emptiness” and “was warmed by a much larger, extremely hot ball.”¹⁰

The settings for such metaphysical fantasies as *The Enemy of the Stars* and *The Childermass* have the same elemental quality as those of the early pictures. The sense of place is abstracted away. The place is, simply, “somewhere in the cosmos”. In *The Enemy of the Stars*, a play first published in 1914, the scene of the central character’s “execution” is framed by earth, sky and posterity. There is almost a contemptuous disregard for the niceties of locale dear to the parochial hearts of most earthmen.

Lewis’s sensibility, then, seemed profoundly attuned to the idea of earth as something other than a conglomeration of cosy locales institutionalized into nation-states. To this deep-rooted globalism he also gave — comparatively early in his career — explicit ideological expression. In *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) he suggests that already the world is one community, made so by the new techniques of government and communication. In a 1929 essay, “A World Art and Tradition”, he wrote that “the Earth has become *one* place, instead of a romantic tribal patchwork of places.” The experimental art of the time constituted “a primitive form of a world-art” which he feared could “stop altogether long before the political omnibus, lumbering furibundly forward, catches it up.” And he adds: “What has fact on its side is still this strange synthesis of cultures and times which we named Vorticism in England and which is the first projection of a world-art. . . .”¹¹

Among the pictures Lewis produced in the 1930’s and 1940’s — in Britain and Canada — were semi-abstracts and fantasies of themes ranging from creation to

war. These sometimes featured forms that can be described only as interplanetary. Yet for the first eight years of the 1930's, Lewis the political commentator appeared to be forsaking globalism, or at least reacting against what was then its chief institutional manifestation, the League of Nations. By 1939, however, he had reverted to his original position, that nationalism was obsolete, that a world state was the logical next step for an increasingly homogenous humanity. "The machine age has made nonsense of nationalism," he wrote in a collection of essays published several months before his departure for North America.¹²

What he saw and felt around him on this last and longest of his trans-Atlantic visits — others had been made in the 1920's and 1930's — confirmed him in these views and provoked enthusiastic announcements of an "earth culture, or the eclectic culture of the transition" (the title he gave an article he wrote for a British publication, *The Pavilion*). America's destiny was "not to be just another 'grande nation': but to be the great big promiscuous grave into which tumble, and there disintegrate, all that was formerly race, class or nationhood."¹³ Canada was "an integral part . . . of the North American culture." But most countries, added Lewis, were merely regional units rather than self-sufficient cultural entities. Canada's natural splendours impressed him greatly. However, he warned in an unpublished wartime essay (now in the Cornell collection) not until the "smug, drab and snooty" character of central Canadian communities had been altered would the nation obtain what it most needed — a strengthening of its "natural stock" through immigration.

Self Condemned was written largely in the early 1950's, in spite of the author's blindness and other physical ills. Specific notes from the Canadian years were called for by Lewis during composition, were read to him, and were inserted into the story as he dictated it. While some of the fictionalized Canadian characters and circumstances are identifiable with still-surviving features of the real-life scene, the book in its totality cannot be readily construed as a commentary on Canadian life as such.

The work's prime significance lies in the sepulchral destiny of its hero, René Harding. We are left with little doubt that the fate of this man, who had "stood up to the Gods", would have been every bit as horrific if he had chosen to stay in Britain rather than plunge into a Canadian exile. The book's remarks about Canadian life are certainly not likely to endear the author to frantic celebrants of Confederation's Centennial. Yet Lewis himself says in *Self Condemned*: "Any criticism of Canadians, meaning English-Canadians, is in general irrelevant. . . . If you criticise them you criticise the average population of Belfast, of Bradford

and Leeds, and of Glasgow. If you deplore the materialism and the humble cultural level, you are merely criticising anglo-saxon civilization.”¹⁴

Nevertheless, without the stimulus to his satirical powers of wartime in the Wild Land, Lewis might not have retained the zest required for a creative effort so great as that which, in the face of appalling physical difficulties, he put into *Self Condemned*. He is said to have regarded the North American years, in retrospect at least, as a rousing experience. His published letters, as well as remarks made to London visitors during the post-war years, suggest a strong desire to return to the New World and experience again what he called “the electric intoxication of the air breathed by prisoners set free.”¹⁵

Through this image of prisoners set free, Lewis was to suggest a link between the North American’s grandiose destiny as Cosmic Man and the often crude nature of that new man’s social life. The savagery, in fact, was a celebration of the freedom inherent in the historical status of this novel type. Incarcerated in the Old World, the European was a creature beset by restraints. “The animal which is house-trained, chained up, domesticated in Europe, on emigration to the New World celebrates its freedom,” Lewis wrote to a young Canadian in 1949.¹⁶

The same letter cited examples of these celebrations — the wife-beatings, the drunkenness and the brawls making up the wild life of his fellow-guests at the Canadian hotels where he stayed, and recounted with few fictional trimmings in the hotel scenes of *Self Condemned*. In listing these frontier-like eruptions he was not indicting them. On the contrary, he urged their exploitation by Canadian writers. “Every hotel we were in,” wrote Lewis in bemused recollection of his Canadian adventure, “. . . rocked all night with hysterical whoopee at least once a week. . . . In the States, things were much quieter.”

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, ed. W. K. Rose, London, 1963, pp. 327-30.

² *Wyndham Lewis at Cornell*, Cornell University Press, 1961.

³ *Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, p. 283.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 463-64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *America and Cosmic Man*, London, 1948, p. 152.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, London, 1934, pp. 150-51.

⁹ *America and Cosmic Man*, p. 182.

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- ¹⁰ Wyndham Lewis, *Self Condemned*, Gateway paperback edition, Chicago, 1965, p. 211.
- ¹¹ *Drawing and Design*, 5, No. 32, pp. 30 and 56.
- ¹² *Wyndham Lewis the Artist*, London, 1939, p. 16.
- ¹³ *America and Cosmic Man*, p. 155.
- ¹⁴ *Self Condemned*, pp. 155-56.
- ¹⁵ *America and Cosmic Man*, p. 169.
- ¹⁶ *Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, pp. 511-12.