

EXILE'S LETTERS

W. K. Rose

What is the use of talking, and there
is no end of talking,
There is no end of things in the heart.
— *Pound, after Rihaku*

READING LEWIS'S CANADIAN CORRESPONDENCE, one thinks — or is it only hindsight — what a plot for a Lewis novel! Of the hundreds of letters he wrote between November 1940, and August 1945, only a representative portion found room in *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*; many more survive in the Lewis Collection at Cornell and in private hands. Taken together and read in sequence, the whole group provides all the ingredients of a successful long fiction: extraordinary human interest, a main action nicely rounded in time and space, several suspenseful and revealing “sub-plots,” patches of humour and sentiment, and plenty of food for thought. This epistolary proto-novel seems to need only some focussing and an underlying idea.

For most readers some human interest will doubtless be present before they begin. We go to Lewis's Canadian correspondence because we are already captivated or repelled by or at any rate curious about the writer, that celebrated and wonderfully gifted bad boy of modern English art and letters. We have read his books, seen his pictures, perhaps become acquainted with his fascinating personality and career through his earlier letters, or the gossip of contemporaries. What will The Enemy make of Toronto, we ask, or Toronto of him?

The tale that unfolds is human comedy bleak, not to say black, beyond our expectation. Trapped in his “sanctimonious icebox,” Lewis flails about like a caged elephant. But the animal metaphor is misleading; it is an all-too-human, far from winning, yet admirably individual character that emerges from these pages. The writer is ridden by several concerns: the wish to be recognized as the notable

he was in England, the need to justify his earlier pro-Axis sympathies and his departure from Britain in 1939, the desire for some kind of companionship or ambience to replace his London life, the hope for a more stable existence in England after the war; above all, an almost hysterical pre-occupation with keeping his head above water.

These interests determine not only the contents of most of the letters but often the correspondents. For example, writing to a friend or acquaintance, Lewis will usually, *en passant*, touch him for a small loan or gift (all the same to him), but very many times he is clearly writing for the purpose of touching. Again, the particular concern and the face put upon it quite naturally depend on the particular correspondent. With English people — old friends like Naomi Mitchison and Sir Nicholas Waterhouse, influential acquaintances such as H. G. Wells and Henry Moore — Lewis is forever justifying his removal from England on economic grounds, explaining his flirtation with Hitler as pacifism, and announcing his new Rooseveltian liberalism and his eagerness to return to bomb-ridden London. The same people often hear as well of Canadian unfriendliness and parochialism and of their correspondent's decision to get into the establishment once he's back on home ground — "How about 'Keeper of the People's Pictures'? We've got a 'Keeper of the King's'. I think it absurd that because I didn't have a cotton-mill I can't 'Keep' something." To important Canadians, on the other hand, the expatriate expounds on the future of Canadian culture and on Anglo-Canadian relations. If the "melancholy monied methodist" is not perhaps sufficiently aware of his supplicant's eminence, Lewis does not hesitate to place himself in the most exalted company; he is also ready to abase himself before someone he considers his inferior in all but wealth.

This seesaw effect sets the tone of the Canadian letters. It, more I think than the financial desperation or the constant bellyaching, accounts for the uneasiness one feels reading the correspondence. It is hard to respect a man who's jumped his rent in London, refuses to pay up but insists that things left in the flat not be touched, *and* at the same time claims, to a prospective benefactor, that his living expenses in Canada are really *travel* expenses because he has to pay his London rent. To an English enquiry regarding his birth, the half-American Lewis insists on being a pure product of Albion, while he declares himself a fellow New Worldling to someone in power over here. The miraculous fact he seems never to leak is that he was actually, if fortuitously, born in Canada.

The shenanigans and self-seeking will not upset a reader familiar with the lives of other asocial artists. What disturbs here is, rather, one's sense of identification

with this beleaguered man: which of us, when the going was rough, has not cut his corner, put out his hand, told his saving lie? There is also the discomfort of having got too close to family secrets. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Finally, there is the irresistible fact of Lewis and his wife far from home, stuck in an unsympathetic locale, frightfully hard-up.

Lewis's unceasing efforts to keep the wolf from the door furnish the correspondence with its sub-plot. There is the story of his attempt to become a resident artist in an American university, and coming excruciatingly close to jobs at Olivet College and Reed. There is the story of the Ministry of Information commission, with a cast of notables including Sir Kenneth Clark, Henry Moore, and Malcolm MacDonald. This episode did, one way and another, put sizeable sums in Lewis's pocket. But like the others it ends ignominiously: the commissioned painting was never delivered. Then there is the Vancouver caper, about which more later. And there are, as always with this great comic artist, the funny bits. Lewis offering himself to Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art for \$40 a week steps right out of *Snooty Baronet*. With a picture in the Durban Municipal Art Gallery, he toys with the idea of prospecting for sitters in South Africa, then turns around and offers himself for a curatorship in South America!

THE LETTERS are instinct with both humour and sentiment, qualities that do much to create sympathy for their author. Exiled from a world capital, Lewis amuses his more urbane correspondents with jokes about the "this bush-metropolis of the Orange Lodges" in which he resides. His plight seen with the Lewisian detachment of *The Wild Body* becomes grotesquely comic: "in this place it is as if someone were sitting on your chest — having taken care to gag you first — and were croaking out Moody and Sankey from dawn to day-shut." The humourlessness of "these solemn yokels" is laughable. "'Well,' she said, 'they described you as Mr. W. L. the celebrated English *wit*. . . .' It took me some time to understand that she regarded the term *wit* as offensive and damaging." He is continually surprised at finding himself, whose spiritual home was the *rive gauche*, among such hicks. They don't mention the war. "The subject is not taboo. It just does not interest." So, when a tank "moved down the street and as it was abreast a group of people, myself among them . . . let fly at a range of fifteen feet with a quite sizeable little cannon it had hidden in its flank . . . no one took the slightest notice. That was what was so queer. I got the feeling that some-

thing unreal was happening: and it was the people who gave it me." He dubbed his days in Toronto, after the hotel in which the Lewises lived, his "Tudor period," and at the end of his exile summed up Canada in a letter to Allen Tate:

They have retained their censors office here so I am debarred from telling you what I think of this place: but if you turn to the Book of Genesis you will see that towards the end of the week God became awful tired. It was in the last few minutes (He was not feeling at all good) that He produced a country beginning with C. It might have been Canaan; or perhaps it was place over which a King reigns who is however only a commoner. A pretty tough one that!

A reader of Lewis's fiction, poetry, autobiographies, and letters quickly recognizes his ironic stance, his grinning Tyro's mask, as a natural product of his temperament. It is only in occasional letters and in the later novels that *The Enemy* gives vent to the warm-blooded, tender side of his nature. We come upon it in the Canadian letters in nostalgic evocations of palmier days in London. To his old friend Sturge Moore, he writes:

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.

The quality of tender intimacy in a few notes to his wife, in the Cornell collection, is particularly affecting. Away from her for a few days, he sends his regards to her beloved dog: "Tell him that if I hear he has misbehaved himself during my absence I shall put him in the *barph* and there administer a severe flogging: after which solitary confinement of course, and no bones for 24 hours." In 1944 Lewis reports the death of this "hirsute gremlin" in a letter to a friend. He feels, he says, in a way responsible for the pain inflicted by the loss of "this small creature, which stood for all that was benevolent in the universe." "Like the spirit of a simpler and saner time, this fragment confided his destiny to her, and went through all the black days beside us." Now his wife grieves, and he is "just another human being — by no means a well of primitive joie-de-vivre: so not much comfort!"

The letters from Canada are more personal than those of any other period of Lewis's life. They are also on the whole more discursive. *Hors de combat* for really the first time in his career, he has the leisure to comment at length on topics of interest; deprived of congenial companions, he needs the medium of correspondence for small-talk and rumination. Just as so often in his novels we jump from the purely personal or emotional passage to the philosophic discussion, so in these

letters are the cries of woe and pleas for help interspersed with lively commentary on public events, discussion of his own works, and speculation on the "post-war." Since Wyndham Lewis the Artist thinks always concretely, illustratively, his epistolary comment is apt to be as vivid as that in the essays and novels. On the subject of India's participation in the war, he says in 1942:

As to India defending *itself*: an Indian friend of mine informed me that his ancestors had not taken life for three thousand years. I asked him how he knew that. He replied at once: "I know it because if they had I should not belong to the Caste I do." — Not a promising subject for universal Hindu conscription!

In an unpublished letter to Malcolm MacDonald, Lewis opposes MacDonald's "theory that the bush will attract and absorb the red blooded people" with his own view "that the red-bloods will go pink and scorn the ancestral wilds."

In Timmins the other day a tailor was heavily fined for making a zoot-suit: and although it is true that the Finnish miners still kill each other in murderous affrays up there, the boredom that provokes this violence is being progressively liquidated, I understand, in the dazzling dance-halls of the bush cities. "Artic hysteria" is being sublimated in hot music. — I mean that I think that "the frontier" that is in [A. Y.] Jackson's blood is chronologic and not geographic, and it is far-off in the past, in a limbo of snowshoes and redskins. It will hardly come back via the air. . . .

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HE TIME HAS COME to stop playing games. The Lewis novel I have been coyly adumbrating did of course get written and eventually appear, in 1954, as *Self Condemned*. He had projected it early during his stay in Toronto and it must have been in the back, or on the side, of his mind when he wrote the letters I have been discussing. In an article, evidently unpublished, of 1941 or 1942, he says: "I could qualify to be the 'Dr. Anthony' of the Adjustee. There is nothing I do not know about these painful questions, and this accumulated wisdom I shall one day embody in a book, such as Maxim Gorki might have written — the author of 'Creatures who once were men'."

In avoiding mention of *Self Condemned* my aim has been to cause those who know the novel to make their own free associations between it and the letters, between the fiction and the facts. A study of the two in tandem does not, I think,

tell us anything new about the relationship between life and art or, specifically, about the relationship between Lewis's life and his art. Like most serious novelists, Lewis was essentially an autobiographical writer: the fantastic Bailiff's court in *The Childermass* is just as truly a theatre of its creator's mind as is the scene of "Lord Asmund's Lenten Party" (*The Apes of God*) a thinly disguised Renishaw. The fact that *Self Condemned* is probably the most closely autobiographical of the novels makes it only a more crucial example of an old pattern of transformation. Still, it is rare with any novelist and unparalleled in Lewis that so much first-hand raw material is available to the scholar. Having tried to suggest some of the intrinsic qualities of this raw material as well as its relevance to *Self Condemned*, I shall now focus directly on the novel in order to spell out some connections between it and the letters. My purpose is not to explain the novel via the *ur-novel* but rather to demonstrate more clearly the rewards of such a tandem consideration. The parallels are so extensive that only a rigorous sampling is possible here.

First, let us consider the underlying idea, absent in the letters but essential to the fiction. Lewis found it in the feelings that prompted all the self-justifying passages in the letters and the frequent complaints about not getting his due. His hero, Professor René Harding, is a martyr to his beliefs; his failure is a failure to compromise them. This intransigence brings about his exile in Canada and subsequent deterioration. Finally, he is too burned out to be able to face returning to England and the pariah's poverty.

"I do not need you to tell me ten times a day that it is not worth while to work here, to work in Momaco. *Of course* it is not. . . . But I also know that I will never again become a nameless piece of human wreckage. *But* my shoes shall be shone: my pocket-book shall be packed with newly-printed notes. . . ."

Here René might well be paraphrasing a passage from an unpublished letter of 1943 to Sir Nicholas Waterhouse:

But I have really come to a decision. *I will not* — categorically — any longer live from hand to mouth trying to do good paintings, trying to write good books. . . . I am tired of seeing people lounging about in comfortable bureaucratic jobs while I work my guts out about money.

Lewis always signed his letters to Sir Nicholas, "Professor."

Unlike René, Wyndham did return; he even attained a kind of official sinecure

in his small Civil List pension and regular reviewing for *The Listener*.¹ The point is that in Canada he felt deeply threatened by his political error of the 30's, and by having left England as the war was beginning. If René Harding's suffering and fate seem, like those of so many tragic heroes, in excess of the given cause (*i.e.*, his moral stand), do we not find in the letters the source of the feeling that nearly topples the novel but gives it such an impact?

Lewis's choice of the academic profession for his hero has lighter overtones, though the realities were grim enough. The signature to Sir Nicholas's letters may itself have inspired René's occupation, but certainly Lewis's long quest for a university position in Canada or the United States figured, as did his finally securing a place at Assumption College. Nor can we disregard the fact that the novel required that its hero be in some relation to the public so that his stand might reverberate. To make him an artist of any kind would have rendered next to impossible any authorial detachment on Lewis's part. And politicians were even less familiar to the writer than professors. Still, one cannot contemplate without some amusement this decision by Lewis, whose own formal education ended dismally at Rugby and whose academic contacts thereafter were tenuous. To a prospective academic employer, he wrote in 1943: "As to the nature of that work. It will I suppose consist of daily lectures, of an informal type. That is what teaching amounts to, isn't it?"

Lewis wisely avoids the academic scene as much as he can in *Self Condemned*. René has already left his post in England when the novel begins, and his appointment at Momaco never really materializes on-stage. Even so, the occasional glimpses of university life do not convince as the rest of the novel does: "It was an important dinner: the President of McGill and other academic notables were to be there." Compared with the high and true comedy of Malamud's *A New Life*, Lewis's academia reads like a parody of C. P. Snow.

René as professor rings most true during his recuperative stay at The College of the Sacred Heart, for here Lewis is clearly very close to his own experience. Readers of *The Letters* will know that he was invited by Father Murphy, Registrar of Assumption College, to lecture in the college's annual Christian Culture of his assignments was to deliver the second annual Heywood Broun Memorial Series, that he did so early in 1943, and then was invited to join the faculty. One Lectures in the fall of 1943. This series was, according to a brochure, "to be given by a world-famous authority in the realm of ideas who is working for 'a new Christendom'." The title of Lewis's lectures, the "Concept of Liberty From the 'Founding Fathers of the U.S.A. Till Now'" [*sic*], and his letters attest to the

seriousness of his preparation, as does *America and Cosmic Man*, published in 1948 as a result. Assumption is in Windsor, across the river from Detroit, whereas Sacred Heart is across the river from Buffalo, an earlier scene of Lewis's trials; but the identity is unmistakable from the beginning.

The letter within, in the crabbed peasant fist of Father Moody, was cordial in the extreme. The personality of the rubicund priest, who had visited him a year or so earlier, and offered him a course of lectures, if he had time to give them at Sacred Heart College, was visible in every awkward scratch of the pen and crude friendly word. (*Self Condemned*, p. 377)

Lewis's letters to Father Murphy and to others at the time of his affiliation with Assumption accord very well with the bright and lively picture we get in the novel. ("René's impression of these first days was that he was sinking down into the equivalent of a wonderful feather bed.") Here, after the horrors of Toronto, was a pleasant place to live and a most congenial, even indulgent, group of hosts. Lewis began his academic year with a summer course in the Philosophic Roots of Modern Art and Literature — "A distinct honour to have him," reads Father Murphy's bulletin. Although the agreement was that he should go on teaching till the following June, it is already apparent in letters of August, when Marshall McLuhan and Felix Giovanelli were working to lure him to St. Louis, that this professor felt free to come and go as he pleased. He did indeed depart at the end of January (1944), not returning till the following July! "I am distressed about my little class," Lewis wrote to Father Murphy that March. "But it can be explained . . . that I am *practicing*, instead of preaching, for a while, but will return to take up the story later." The long-suffering fathers not only had him back the following summer but commissioned a group of portraits. Their generosity evidently caused Lewis to have some qualms about earning money in St. Louis while still on Assumption's rolls. As René was on *paid* sick leave from Momaco, we are unnecessarily told, he returned the fees he received for his lectures at Sacred Heart.

The University of Momaco is itself, as this analogy suggests, part Assumption. The parallelism is most apparent in the turn in René's fortunes that is signaled by his appointment to Momaco in May of 1944. Just as the fire in the Blundell earlier the same year punctuates the Hardings' drift downward, so was the real fire in the real Tudor Hotel in February 1943 followed by Lewis's appointment to Assumption and its attendant joys.

But Momaco also means, in university as in everything else, *Toronto*. During his years in that city Lewis felt snubbed by its university. When, having achieved academic status at Assumption, he was invited by a professor to speak to a phil-

osophy club at the unfriendly institution, he wrote to a benefactor: "As I was in Toronto for nearly 3 years and the University studiously ignored my existence, I should answer him differently if he were not a friend of yours." Aware as he was of his lack of qualification — "Harvard is out of the question for me," he wrote to Theodore Spencer, ". . . if you know some old colleague or pupil who is now President of a Girls College (an inferior Vassar) or of some obscure Western or Southern university, write him and tell him about me." — and having been so frustrated in his quest for academic work, Lewis must have smiled a good deal over the professional success of his autobiographical hero. René tells Hester that "there is an excellent chance that I should be asked down to some large American University; Yale, Chicago, something like that." And the offer comes, thanks to the "unusual rapidity" with which "the existence of so distinguished a man upon the North American continent was recognized." To the knowing reader the irony of these opening words of the novel's last paragraph is as cutting as the scorn of the closing ones is explicable: "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."

A DIFFERENT SORT OF EXAMPLE of the curious ways of life and art lies in what I have called the Vancouver caper. For here is a subplot of sizeable dimensions in the letters that undoubtedly contributed to the atmosphere of lunacy and frustration in *Self Condemned* but that appears directly in the novel as only a passing instance of Affie's curiosity:

The 'crossing water' business at the present seance, and the insistence on the amount of water being inconsiderable, was easily traceable to a dozen or more letters which had recently come from someone in Vancouver, who urged René to come out there. He backed up this request with glittering promises, assuring René that the local University would immediately offer him a Chair. Where Victoria Island came in was that the correspondent invited them to stay with him at his 'properties', while arrangements were being made with the University authorities. This man's father was said to be on the Board of the University and a very influential man. This correspondent had poured registered letters in at the rate of two a week. . . .

Such are the entire fictional remains of probably the most extensive and certainly the most intensive exchange of letters of Lewis's Canadian years. It begins

towards the middle of 1942 with a proposal by David Kahma, a young British Columbian, that Lewis become the first star of an arts centre he hopes to establish in Vancouver, and it runs its dramatic course till the end of the year. Kahma, innocent and enthusiastic but well-steeped in Lewis's writings and with a flair for secrecy equal to his master's, appears out of the West like some *deus ex machina* or dream of Tantalus. His plans are grandiose, his funds seem limitless; there is a mysterious go-between named, as if eponymously, Miss West; there are off-the-scene "advisers" looming like the dark powers of *The Apes of God*.

Desperate as he was, Lewis could not dismiss the proposal out-of-hand. But his worldly sense told him to proceed cautiously. He seems not to have been much surprised when within a few weeks, the whole vast scheme had dwindled to an invitation from Kahma and his bride (née Miss West) to the Lewises to spend a few months as their guests in the modest house they were about to move into. It is some measure of Lewis's feeling of entrapment in Toronto that by the end of August he was ready to accept for the price of return rail fare for him and his wife. At this point the correspondence has crescendoed to daily missives and the reader in the Cornell collection finds himself caught up in the excitement. A cooling off period follows the non-appearance of the fare. Yet hardly a month later, Lewis is once more about to board the train. Then, as week follows chequeless week, the mirage slowly and finally disappears.

The story, a fine ironic mixture of comedy and pathos, makes a nice paradigm for *Self Condemned*. It also offers as a by-product a rather appealing fancy: if Lewis had gone to Vancouver he might well have run into England's other notable literary hostage to Canadian fortunes. The similarity between Malcolm Lowry's letter from Dollarton, B.C.,² and Lewis's epistles from Toronto is striking, and the temptation to compare them is very strong. But this would require a further chapter in the study of exiles' letters.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Lewis considered bringing René back to London, as a synopsis in the Cornell collection reveals. Hester was to commit suicide there instead of in Momaco, but René's spiritless condition would have been pretty much the same. The synopsis indicates a good deal of attention to the miserable post-war condition of London, as in *Rotting Hill* (1951). It may be that Lewis decided to sacrifice the nice symmetry of the alternative ending in order not to deal twice with this material.

² See *Selected Letters of Malcolm Lowry* (Philadelphia, 1965).