

8. Author's Note to *Youth*, p. vii.
9. *Conrad's Short Fiction*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
10. *The Secret Agent*, p. 311: *Fathers and Children*, translated by Constance Garnett, London: Heinemann, 1906, p. 89.
11. *Conrad's Western World*, p. 3.
12. *The Secret Agent*, p. xiii.

WYNDHAM LEWIS AND THE SANCTIMONIOUS ICE-BOX

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Wyndham Lewis in Canada. Edited by George Woodcock. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Publications Centre, 1971. Pp. vii, 110. \$4.00.

Wyndham Lewis in Canada is a fascinating volume. It consists of a series of essays previously published in *Canadian Literature*; most, but not all, in No. 35, the issue devoted to Lewis's Canadian experiences. The introduction by Julian Symons was written specially for this collection. There are critical essays, personal recollections, a memoir by Lewis's wife on their sojourn in "The Hotel" (the model for the Hotel Blundell in *Self Condemned*), and three pieces by Lewis himself. These are: "Hill 100: Outline for an Unwritten Novel", "On Canada", and "Nature's Place in Canadian Culture". The contributors include Hugh Kenner, George Woodcock, W. K. Rose, and C. J. Fox. The volume is attractively designed, pleasingly printed, and completely absorbing.

In its one hundred and ten pages, the editor has assembled a range of writing which not only gives a satisfying sense of "covering" Lewis's stay in Canada from late 1940 to 1945, but also shows consistent good taste and intelligence. The essays "fill in" various aspects of an unhappy period in Lewis's life. At the same time, the critical perceptions of the essayists are particularly sharp and poised. As is so often the case with occasional criticism, the short comments embodied in some of

these commissioned pieces have a penetration which is conspicuously lacking in the few longer and more scholarly exercises in Lewisian commentary. Hugh Kenner's article, for example, on "The Last European" is more accessible, warmer, more humane than his book on Lewis—which is, nevertheless, the best book there is. In "The Last European" he relates *Self Condemned* to a pattern in Lewis's writing, and thereby focuses the critical attitude developed in his introduction to the 1965 Gateway edition—another example of Kenner's occasional writing—which remains the best criticism there is on that novel.

The reminiscences (such as "Wyndham Lewis at Windsor" by Father J. Stanley Murphy, and Anne Wyndham Lewis's "The Hotel") have a real biographical value. But the central concern in the collection is to discuss Lewis's published reactions to Canada. Inevitably discussion of these reactions leads to discussion of his "Canadian" novel, *Self Condemned*.

George Woodcock in this article, "Momaco Revisited", states that *Self Condemned* "is and is not a Canadian novel". Yet, whatever meaning one attributes to the "Canadian" element in the novel, *Wyndham Lewis in Canada* does enlarge one's sense of the all-pervading otherness of Lewis's Canadian experiences. And that otherness, surely, roots *Self Condemned* as firmly in Canada as do its moments of social comment and observation, which annoy many Canadians because they are often technically inaccurate, and appear needlessly hostile. The emptiness of exile; the blankness of the urban Canadian scene to one who has lost that identity which preserved him from the mindless urban void in his native land—these are overwhelming realities to the newly arrived intellectual exile. And they are as indigenous to Canada as more easily recognizable local themes.

In *Self Condemned*, Lewis is forthright in his criticism of the bush city in which the protagonist finds himself. Yet he continually strives to be fair. René and Ester Harding hate their new environment. But in creating their anguish, Lewis is seldom narrowly anti-Canadian: "Any criticism of Canadians, meaning English-Canadians, is in general irrelevant. An anglo-saxon community living under such isolated conditions, in so uninviting a climate, could hardly be otherwise than they are. They are just average inhabitants of Belfast, of Leeds and Bradford, of Glasgow, poured into a smaller community. . . . If you criticize them you criticize 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 criticizing anglo-saxon civilization."¹

Lewis is not always as fair-minded as this. But the Hardings' scorn for the citizens of Momaco is usually presented as an inextricable part of their tomb-like isolation. It is one of the facts of the novel that Hester's obsessive anti-Canadianism poisons her. And the "nice talks" she has with Alice Price's father (which consist of "vitriolic analysis of everything Canadian") take place explicitly on the fringes of insanity and breakdown. It is René who has to remind Hester that it was not

the Canadians, but the English, who first penetrated the Canadian wilderness and cheapened it. The neurotic delight Hester takes in sneering at the locals is as convincing a depiction of an aspect of Canadian life as is her tearful refusal to believe Mrs. McKenzie's reports of a changed, mean, narrow-minded wartime England.

Both George Woodcock and Hugh Kenner comment on the truthfulness of the exile world in the book. Woodcock writes, "it is an exile's novel, and the reality of exiles is always subjective. . . . 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".² In his introduction to the Gateway *Self Condemned*, Hugh Kenner overlooks the subjective validity of the horrors in Lewis's "sanctimonious ice-box". There he comments: "to assault the reader with something corresponding to the miseries of some nether pit, he exaggerated small facts virtually beyond recognition. Icicles in Momaco grow six feet long and as thick as a man's arm. . . . For this is expressionist fiction, relieving the author's memory and gratifying his taste for fantasy, at the same time as it delineates René Hardings hell" (p. xii). In "The Last European", however, Kenner is prepared to credit the picture with more than mere expressionist fantasy in the delineating of a private hell. Private hells are often close to reality: "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" (p. 18).

The articles written by Lewis in Canada show his persistent attempt to come to terms with the climate, culture, and manners of his new world. The weather was clearly as oppressive to the author as he was later to make it appear to the Hardings. The sense that the wilderness is at his doorstep informs both "Nature's Place in Canadian Culture" and "Hill 100: Outline for an Unwritten Novel". In the former he praises A. Y. Jackson (who, almost alone of Toronto artists, befriended Lewis) for his sense of locale, and his ability to make the wilderness the subject of his art: "His vision is as austere as his subject-matter which is precisely the hard, puritanic land in which he always has lived: with no frills, with all its dismal solitary grandeur and bleak beauty: its bad side deliberately selected rather than its chilly relentings" (p. 52). The attitude revealed is bleak, but it has generosity, which, if not warm, is nevertheless vital. His praise of Jackson's "regionalism" leads to a typically penetrating comment. The following passage epitomises Lewis's ability to make sense of the cultural contrasts which underlie any concept of the colonial or the provincial:

The term "regionalism" is employed too narrowly: that is why it has acquired a slightly contemptuous connotation. However, Shakespeare was a regionalist; and what an extraordinary regionalist Cervantes was! There is only one kind of cultural universalism, and that is encountered, preeminently, in Dante.

The music of Offenbach or that of Chopin could not have originated in London or New York. A native of Vancouver might well pastiche Toulouse Lautrec: but Lautrec, and for that matter Picasso, is a regionalist, of the region called Paris. I have said all that is necessary about Canada as a "region". Jackson and Thompson have only administered some bold scratches to the surface of what others will break into some day no doubt. [pp. 58-9]

The conflicting claims of bitterness and fair-mindedness often give this kind of perception to Lewis's comments on Canada. When bitterness prevails, as in the following passage from *Self Condemned*, the sneers are empty: "Furber took his surroundings very seriously. He was as solemn a Momaconian as anyone: going to all the hundreds of committee meetings which gave to every microscopic local intellectual a sensation of importance every day of the week. To articles in Momaco, or Ottawa or Toronto papers, or in reviews such as *Midweek* (of Momaco) or *Saturday Night* (of Toronto) he attached as great importance as if they had appeared in the *New York Times*, in *The New Statesman* or *La Nouvelle Revue Francaise*" (p. 257). Even to those who are prepared to concede *a priori* brilliance to the *New Statesman* and the *New York Times*, the petulance of Lewis's disdain must be disconcerting. The two passages make a perfect contrast, and show the instinctive emotional barriers which Lewis, by and large, manages to overcome in his attempts to digest what is alien in his Canadian experiences.

In "Hill 100: Outline for an Unwritten Novel" we get little more than a glimpse of a sketch. But what we do see is almost naked prejudice of a kind that is mainly smoothed away in the published works. The plan of the proposed book, so Lewis tells us, is to show the two colonial powers, the French and the Anglo-saxon in the early, primitive colonizing stage. A depiction of the differences between them (the French are not only Catholic, but also all intermarried with Indians) is to lead to a description of "the present day world of the gold mining town" which will be shown to be "very little less primitive". The savage, "ill-cooked", undeveloped nature of life in Toronto will then be the centre of attention.

Only the outline exists. But it is a very indulgent outline, and shows a superficiality which only occasionally intrudes into *Self Condemned*. Strangely enough, the moments of superficiality in the novel are often connected with positive statements about Canada. In that context they seem to be merely perfunctory gestures of impartiality, such as the passing comments on what a fine city Montreal is; what an excellent library there is in the Parliament Building in Ottawa; and how Ottawa is the "finest capital city of the new world". There is even a sentimental glibness to the square-jawed uprightness of the off-duty Mountie who (not quite humming "Rosemarie") decks the lout assaulting René in the Beverage Room. In contrast, the hostility of that Beverage Room to the supercilious and loud talk of the Hardings is suggested with an almost disinfected detachment.

Self Condemned is very much a book of its period. The Canadian cultural scene to which Lewis reacts is specifically that of the forties, and his particular

observations are as much period pieces as are the radio programmes to which the Hardings are addicted. One wonders what comment Lewis would have on a journal such as *Canadian Literature*, or on a publication such as *Wyndham Lewis in Canada* with its list of contributors even as dazzling as those gracing the pages of *The New Statesman*. But just as René Harding is convinced of the second rate quality of Momaco's intellectual life, so too he is convinced that his past life has been blown up in the European war. In this way *Self Condemned* is again a haunting historical document. "Rotter" Parkinson's life as a lone intellectual is doomed after 1939, "the last year, or as good as, in which such a life as this one was to be lived. Parkinson was the last of a species. . . . Such a literary workshop belonged to the ages of individualism" (p. 76). René's conviction that his future lies in the New World is only partly conditioned by his proud refusal to return to the English academic world from which he has resigned. Just as pervasive is his conviction that his old life can no longer exist after the holocaust.

The very blandness of the New World offers a solidity which contrasts with the horrors and iniquities of Europe. And it is the civilisation of Europe which is the subject of René's professional, historical disgust. As he points out to his wife, they may be ossifying in their Momaco room, but they are not starving in a Polish ghetto, nor dying under a hail of bombs. Canada is not neutral, as is Auden's New York in September 1939. But René Harding's view of Europe exploding on the other side of the Atlantic is as resonant of the mood of the age as is Auden's better known period piece.

Much of the political comment in *Self Condemned* echoes Lewis's other writing. A hard-bitten view of human lusts for power; scorn for the bumbling that led to the war; discussions of the negative effects of Marxist revolution having ousted liberal reform; even hopes for a new humanity and mildness in an international post-war world—all these ideas are to be found elsewhere in the Lewis political canon of the time. But even if their role in the novel is occasionally arbitrary, their polemical presence adds to its rarefied yet authentic historical flavour.

The least gripping aspect of the book is probably its central theme. René's gradual dehydration, although carefully worked out, has that theoretic quality which mars most of Lewis's novels. A suspicion of emptiness hangs about the depiction of René's fateful tendency to turn away from "human beings as they are". And that suspicion is reinforced by Lewis's uncertain grasp on the nature of academic life. René's resignation of his professorship has to be taken as a complete repudiation of his past. So too his decision to accept a chair in Momaco—and with it material comfort—has to be seen as part of his "being mechanized upon a lower level—in everything expediency counted more with him" (p. 356). Yet there is in fact very little reason why—intellectually—this should be so, or why *academically* he should end up in the cemetery of the shells.³

His personal nemesis, on the other hand, has the chilly inevitability of

The Revenge for Love. René ignores the implicit warning of his friend Rotter: "but in life nothing is taken to its ultimate conclusion, life is a half-way house, a place of obligatory compromise; and, in dealing in logical conclusions, a man steps out of life" (p. 96). And he ends up as a glacial shell of a man. The pathos of his end is all the more marked because of the searing experience in "The Room" where his human vulnerability cannot be ignored. There his ghastly isolation links him inseparably with the all too human wife to whom he can condescend both before and after his most intense ostracization.

Here *Self Condemned* has a shattering impact. The puppet-like grotesqueries of Part One in which René detaches himself from his English acquaintances are amusing in typically Lewisian fashion. But the strangely intimate horror of the Hardings' life in their Canadian hotel room, the almost embarrassing pain with which René comes to terms with his wife's despair and suicide—these are unique Lewisian features.

Critics have commented on the superb sense of slow motion which is created around the Hardings' life in their hotel room. As they survive from dreary Sunday to dreary Sunday, their existence becomes submerged in an "inhuman void": "So they conversed, these two inmates of this lethal chamber. Its depths were dark. Looked into from without—by a contemplative bird established upon the maple bough about a foot from the middle window—the Hardings would have seemed (as they moved about their circumscribed tasks, or rested sluggishly upon the bottom as it were) provided with an aquatic medium, lit where it grew dark by milky bulbs" (p. 174). But just as vivid as this evocation of a submarine existence, is the sense of dependence, the desperate intimacy of the two protagonists. Their limited pleasures are most intense because they are shared. And whether they are blotting out the day with nightly radio programmes, or hoarding tea, the bond between them is always implied. Geoffrey Wagner sees⁴ only a "characteristically sharp-eyed persona" trying to rid himself of romance and the "silliness involved in the reproduction of the species" when the couple are described leaving their bed each morning, "like two flies dragging themselves out of a treacly plate" (p. 197). Yet their enforced sensual closeness in "The Room" is as moving a part of their marooned world as any other:

They must vegetate, violent and morose—sometimes blissfully drunken, sometimes with no money for drink—within these four walls in this identical daily scene—from breakfast until the time came to tear down the Murphy bed, to pant and sweat in the night temperatures kicked up by the radiators—until the war's-end or the world's end was it? Until they had died or had become different people and the world that they had left had changed its identity too, or died as they had died. [p. 171]

Once he enjoys success in Canada, René can reassert his old London wish to keep a distance from his seductive wife. Yet it is the reality of their physical

bond which makes the agony of her suicide so real. The closing of *The Revenge for Love* has a similar intensity. But the blank otherness of Canada gives a pathos all its own to Lewis's depiction of an exile's nightmare.

NOTES

1. Wyndham Lewis, *Self Condemned*, Gateway Edition (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1965), pp. 195-96.
2. George Woodcock, "Momaco Revisited", *Wyndham Lewis in Canada*, p. 10.
3. This point is made rather harshly by William Pritchard in his commentary on the novel. (William H. Pritchard, *Wyndham Lewis* (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 154.) Peter Dale, writing in the special Wyndham Lewis issue of *Agenda*, argues even more harshly that René is not made to appear original, perceptive, or a "historian worthy of consideration". He finds "the portrayal of the marriage of René and Hester" to be the "enduring element in the book". But one's reaction to his views is conditioned by a suspicion that he is not particularly careful in dealing with the facts of the novel. He tells us that René "resigns his post as lecturer" in England (although a passage discussing "the resignation of his professorship in 1939" is actually quoted in the essay), and, amidst must plot-summary, recounts that Hester "commits suicide apparently on the tram-lines". ("*Self Condemned*", *Agenda*, 7-8 (Autumn-Winter, 1969-70), 31-36.)
4. Geoffrey Wagner, *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 265.