
FORBIDDEN BOOKS

By C. J. FOX

The collection you'll be seeing today had its beginnings 55 years ago as an indulgence in what increasingly felt like secret or illicit or forbidden books. The excitement of hunting down and reading such outlaw works enveloped me soon after, in the spring of 1954, a fellow university student named Anthony Bailey (a future author in his own right) bestowed on me a grim-looking, just-published tome that bore the blunt title *Self Condemned*. It was a novel about a radical-minded British history professor self-exiled to a chilly Canadian city fictionally called Momaco.

Physically, the volume appeared to have been roughly produced – indeed I learned later that the author had complained to the publishers about the quality of the typography crammed on to its 400-odd pages of coarse paper. But I quickly realized that I would have the work no other way. That crude container for the tragi-satiric take on the 20th-Century reality presented by the writer, Wyndham Lewis, happened to suit the starkness of its contents, however much considerations of economy rather than ideological purpose may in fact have motivated the designers at the London publishing firm of Methuen. The novel, fronted by the artist Michael Ayrton's spectral dust-jacket, had the feel of something then being surreptitiously trafficked along the underground literary networks of the USSR, desperation heresy primitively packaged. Didn't Lewis say in his 1950s tract *The Writer and the Absolute*, "It is dangerous to live, but to write is much more so"?

All very dramatic – as were the contents, but equally the external circumstances, of other Lewis books (and pictures, for that matter) which I was pursuing early in my informal career as a collector of the renegade author of *Self Condemned*. Hunting and mostly finding these strange, diverse and elusive works brought me into the shadow of the London Blitz in the case of

one novel, *The Vulgar Streak*. It proved to be exasperatingly scarce because initial stocks were "destroyed by enemy action" one night in 1941. I finally found this creation of Lewis the self-styled ideological, "Enemy" while combing through a stock of second-hand English books in that former enemy capital, Rome. On other long-fruitless Lewis pursuits, I discovered that the travel book *Filibusters in Barbary* and the social inquest *Doom of Youth* had both quickly vanished from British bookshops back in 1932 following cries of libel. That same year, a Lewis novel called *Snooty Baronet* was held up by reason of obscenity complaints. And, like it, his super-charged fictional masterpiece *The Revenge for Love* (1937) became bogged down in pre-publication morality disputes separate from subsequent protests – bordering on boycott - about the politics, or presumed politics, of this and other works by the purported "lonely old volcano of the Right."

One short story by Lewis became a collector's Holy Grail after being honoured with seizure by U.S. Customs while his gargantuan satire *The Apes of God* had to be published in all its potentially libelous (and eventually remaindered) bulk by Lewis himself on its first outing. Fifteen years later, his celebration of the USA, *America and Cosmic Man*, was delayed many months by wrangling between the author and the buoyant book's one-off publisher. Its tardy appearance came in 1948, further marred by a format even more dismal than that of *Self Condemned* six years later. And whatever happened to *Anglosaxony*, I asked as I dejectedly sought that Toronto-published and possibly-pulped Lewisian contribution to pro-Allied wartime pamphleteering, dated 1941. It was two decades before I finally acquired *Anglosaxony* – GRATIS, from book dealer extraordinaire, Hugh Anson-Cartwright. Bibliophilic ecstasy! – But a key text too.

Lewis's pictures had similarly offbeat circumstantial tales to tell, compounding their inherent and unique fascination. My still-extant 1911 Lewis self-portrait, for instance, was a sort of miracle baby, having lain on the floor beneath a bomb-damaged studio skylight in London, presumably exposed to the natural and Nazi elements for much of the artist's six-year, Second War absence from Britain. And the sight of what became my 1938 drawing of his wife among slews of other long-unsold WL pictures at London's Leicester Galleries in 1964 was like spotting a particularly forlorn and deserving beauty while-strolling through a crowded emporium for pedigreed pets (if that's not an inelegant comparison!). Moreover, my drawing by Lewis from his 1931 Morocco jaunt, acquired by a penurious Dutch teacher in the late 1930s after the artist named the price as £5 payable on installments, seemingly spent World War II at large in Nazi-held Holland like its fugitive purchaser.

But content rather than provenance must always be the prime consideration. Thus, feeding voraciously off *The Art of Being Ruled* back in the Fifties after finding it at Parker's, Oxford, I felt I was being let in on a kind of confidential X-ray of the hidden workings of social power in the West – complete with the role of the media, for example, in a vast mechanism of indirect control based on oblique manipulation of the mass mind rather than on blatant physical violence or terror as under Fascism or Bolshevism. (Lewis's book came out in 1926, long before the "mass media" became a fashionable subject for study and McLuhanesque punditry.) I had the sensation in the Fifties that, since no commentators I then knew of seemed to mention *The Art of Being Ruled*, I was being treated to sinister, almost diabolical "insider information." Indeed, to paraphrase the anti-hero of Lewis's last published novel, *The Red Priest*, I felt I was

being taken close enough to the Black Throne to get some straight news from the other side of Nowhere! I deemed myself privileged, being allowed to avail of this short cut to the quintessential lowdown on how Power (capital "P") functions. But getting too near the Black Throne brought disaster to the main protagonists of both *Self Condemned* and Lewis's climactic metaphysical fantasy, *The Human Age*, just as a drawing added to my collection by his widow, with a high-riding manikin-horseman crashing from his mount, seemed to convey the deathly consequences of hubris.

So it was for me with Lewis for a good 15 years after his passing in 1957. I relished, among other things, the sense of being given privileged access to exposure of the world as "a vacuum informed by power" and fictional demonstrations of the peril accruing from the Satanic arrogance that often accompanies worldly omniscience. I was also ushered into awareness of the raucous studio politics of art and literature by this private mentor of mine, himself a boisterous participant in the cultural battles royal. Then interest in his work began to take hold all around me. In the later Sixties, he was "paperbacked" for virtually the first time (*Time and Western Man* had been revived with soft covers in the U.S. the year of his death, a lonely breakthrough for him). By 1965, Penguins had joined a sudden spate of Lewis paperbacks being spearheaded by Calder of London. Even the mass-market Signet in the States rallied to the cause with a solid anthology. There soon followed more reprints and anthologies and Walter Michel's pioneer omnibus on Lewis's visual art and, in addition, a Lewis society with a newsletter and conferences and a Memorial Trust. Then came California's Black Sparrow Press with the first of its two dozen spanking new editions of the books, plus a comprehensive bibliography and, meanwhile, several significant exhibitions in

Britain and – amazingly! – in *Canada* of the pictures, 17 years before UVic's intervention.

In the new century, there have already been four shows in England, culminating in last year's National Portrait Gallery exhibition, which drew 40,000 viewers. The Black Sparrow book flow ended a few years ago with the firm's disbandment but its Lewis back list was taken over elsewhere. There have been more specially-introduced reprints from Penguin, while a pair of additional paperback publishers (including OUP with *Tarr*) are entering the field to news of a forthcoming international Vorticist show and of a retrospective of Lewis as both painter and writer. Academic books about him have come in an ongoing flow since the oracular Frederic Jameson in 1979, notably Paul Edward's richly illustrated Yale blockbuster on the overall output in 2000 which coincided with a second biography. And in continental Europe, exhibitions, translations, und so weiter...

All in all, it hasn't been so bad for a swaggering, insolent Enemy figure, claimed by some to be a forgotten name in Modernist studies. But for me the spectacle of growing interest down the decades has threatened to moderate my Lewisian zeal somewhat. My attitude had always been, "No man so reviled or averted could be *all*-bad"! These days, everyone seems to be in on the "secret texts" I coveted so much, with their "news from nowhere." Would Lewis, I wondered in panic, be somehow absorbed into the "Mainstream" and granted even a measure of respectable membership of the "canon"? The romance of consorting with a deep-dyed outsider has dimmed a little amid the gathering attention and I've found myself rather resenting this takeover of my solitary feast. Perhaps this was one reason why, as a collector, I partly moved over to accumulating the works of other striking loners - from Aldington, Ford and Edmund Wilson to

Jeffers and C.H. Sisson, from the Germans Jünger and Benn to the abrasive re-writer of English 18th-Century history, the Galicia-born Zionist Lewis Namier.

But was I simply bored with Wyndham Lewis? Never. This endlessly fertile hyper-individual, who proved himself an "isolated, foreign intelligence, like a messenger from another universe" (as he wrote of Rousseau), remains the core of the so-called Fox Collection.

I hope that the whole assemblage will allow future students at the University of Victoria and from elsewhere to read and view themselves awake in a world full of intellectual pacifiers.