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In Search of the Low-Down Americano: H. H. Lewis, William Carlos Williams, and the Politics of Literary Reception, 1930–1950

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*A poem can be made of anything. This is a portrait of a disreputable
farm hand made out of the stuff of his environment.*

—William Carlos Williams, *Kora in Hell* (1920)

IN his quest to define America through poetry, to unearth the roots that give meaning to the land and its people, in a language “modified by *our* environment; the American environment” (Int 59). William Carlos Williams found an obscure and oddly gifted companion, whose quest intersected with his own at critical crossings in both poets’ lives. An inquiry into these crossings helps illuminate the climate of literary reception and the conditions of literary production that affected the recognition of both. “Of all the American modernists,” Charles Tomlinson writes, “Williams was the most tardy in receiving recognition. His writing lifetime was dominated by the literary criteria of T. S. Eliot and the New Criticism, in neither of whose terminology was there a place for the kind of thing Williams was concerned with doing” (Williams, *Selected Poems* xvi). On a lower register, and for reasons that had as much to do with Lewis’s erratic temperament as the politics of literary reception, the same might be said of H. H. Lewis. The studies of Paul L. Mariani, in his seminal biography of Williams, *Cary Nelson in Repression and Recovery*, and Jack Salzman, in *Years of Protest*, citing the friendship and contested interventions between Williams and Lewis, began the essential spadework, but a more thorough investigation of the particularities and consequences of the Williams-Lewis connection is needed. In the following study, drawing from correspondence, contemporary

reviews, and biographical data, I argue that the circumstances in which their friendship evolved and its outcome for both Williams and Lewis will help us to obtain a clearer grasp of the particular intersections of politics, literature, and contemporary history at a time when writers took to the road in their search for America, and poetry was held—by some—to be an effective weapon in the struggle for social justice.¹

We know a great deal about Williams from several distinguished biographies and his work is readily available in New Directions editions and anthologies. To most readers, however, Lewis will appear as a complete unknown; brief excerpts from his work and references to his life are found scattered in radical anthologies and studies (Mariani, North, Hicks, Salzman, Wald, Nelson, Wixson, Dellinger, Conroy). I begin, then, with a summary of Lewis's poetic apprenticeship and early publication before addressing my main topic, the Williams-Lewis connection and its relation to the conditions affecting literary reception in the 1930s and 40s.

One-time firebrand of the cultural left, Harold H. Lewis spent most of the early and final years of his life in complete obscurity. Forgotten by all but a few old literary friends from the 1930s, viewed as a strange, incomprehensible eccentric by his neighbors, Lewis lived his last years in a one-room converted corncrib in Missouri's bootheel where I first interviewed him some twenty years ago. A tall, erect, imposing man in his eighties, with bushy white hair, Lewis looked like an Old Testament prophet, a Jeremiah in an unjust world, or an impassioned John Brown, as viewed in John Steuart Curry's famous painting. No one in Cape Girardeau, except for his sister, Catherine, and Alan Nourie, a librarian from Southeastern Missouri State University, it appeared, had ever heard of H. H. Lewis or knew his story—or even cared. Lewis had buried himself in his tar-papered shack, consumed by some terrible personal affliction. Scarred from perceived injuries, he lived an ascetic, lonely existence, locked in the past, his creative energies tragically wasted.²

For a relatively brief period in the 1930s Lewis enjoyed acclaim and notoriety. Malcolm Cowley in *The New Republic* in 1932 hailed him as “the red-starred laureate, the Joe Hill of the Communist Movement” (*TNR* 70 [13 April 1932]: 252.) Less charitably an editor of *Partisan Review*, in a testy exchange with Lewis, called him “a necrophilic son of a cretin.”³ Heralded as a rising star of proletarian literature by V. F. Calverton and editors of the Soviet publication, *International Literature*, Lewis seemed destined to stir up controversy. To editors and writers like H. L. Mencken, Jack Conroy, and William Carlos Williams, Lewis represented a fresh and vigorous voice in the search for the “low-down Americano,” Mencken's

expressive term for what is uniquely American in the language we speak.⁴ They were not alone in finding worth in the gumbo poet's work. Both little and main-line magazines published Lewis's prose and poetry in the 1930s, including Mencken's *The American Mercury*, Conroy's *The Anvil*, *The New Republic*, and numerous others. In 1937, Lewis's poetry won the prestigious Harriet Monroe Literary Prize. His poem, "Farmhands' Refrain," first published in *Poetry*, was anthologized in the 1952 edition of Oscar Williams's *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* but dropped from subsequent editions.⁵

Occasionally American literature produces poets who, lacking formal education and access to the sites of literary production, rise out of the people, achieving, if only briefly, recognition. Born on a Missouri farm near Cape Girardeau, raised on hard field labor, parented by a distant father, and schooled by a tyrannical schoolmaster, Lewis was by any standard an exceptional individual in his determination to become the poet of the underdog, the sharecropper, the dispossessed in their timeless conflict with power and authority. "I distinctly remember my first day in school," Lewis wrote in "School Days in the Gumbo," appearing in the *American Mercury* (January 1931). "That unspared rod, that hickory, a freshly cut one, reposing ominously on two nails driven into the plaster wall above the master's desk. The evil history of its predecessors had already taught us beginners what to expect of this one. We eyed the scepter of authority till the tension grew unbearable, till a sudden whipping would have been a relief" (50). Plowing the sticky bottomland soil of his parents' farm on a searing July day, Lewis stopped his team of mules in midfield. Raising his fist to the sky, he cursed a cruel God conspiring to thwart his thirst for learning and expression. Leaving home at age nineteen, Lewis rode freights to New Orleans and Los Angeles to find work. Frustrations and obstacles dogged him throughout his long life.

How, to begin the inquiry, did an obscure gumbo farmer with no "connections" or literary patrons become a published poet, gain for a brief time the attention of the literary establishment, enlist the support of William Carlos Williams, and stir up literary altercations involving at various times Williams, Malcolm Cowley of *The New Republic*, the *Partisan Review* editors, the *Saturday Review of Literature's* columnist, William Rose Benét, and Communist Party cultural doyens?

Rejecting capitalism, devoted to the *idea* of the Soviet Experiment, Lewis was nonetheless firmly rooted in American soil. A descendant of Kentucky pioneers, he was a born-again populist when populist dissent in Missouri's bootheel had ceased to be an expression of agrarian revolt against monopoly power and an unjust tax system.⁶ The Soviet Experiment (of which he had no personal experi-

ence) embodied Lewis's longing for the imagined community of "Utterly." Poets and planners before him had envisioned similar utopias—Fruitlands, Brook Farm, Llano Colony, the Cooperative Commonwealth—but Lewis's never achieved material form. "Course that blindly forward wends," Lewis wrote,

While another Hope impends,
Through the worst to be;
Trending as a river trends,
Even with the backward bends,
Toward the sea;
Till the profit-system ends,—
That's the road to Utterly. (*Road* 11)

Many before him, including theologians, visionaries, and socialists, had of course expressed a similar hope. Lewis pinned his hope on a workers' democracy, a just order that erases class distinctions and economic disparities. It was a time when revolutionary talk and labor activism swayed young writers like Lewis to the left. Lewis's radical views were nurtured by physical toil; there is honesty in the emotions and convictions that farm work evokes. Communism offered Lewis an alternate vision of the oppressive reality he experienced. Communist literature, however, led him at times to extravagant sloganeering, causing many critics to overlook his innovative talent for language and verse forms.

It is worth recounting Lewis's strange odyssey leading to publication and recognition, for it illuminates literary politics—the conditions of reception and praxis of literary production in the period between the two world wars—connecting oddly with William Carlos Williams's own reception, complicated, one might argue, by his independent spirit. A review of Lewis's short-lived but significant role in the history of midwestern literary radicalism raises interesting questions having to do with access to the circuits of communication, patronage, publication, critical evaluation, and literary politics in the 1930s and 40s. In a curious way, Lewis's story figures into William Carlos Williams's quest to create an *American* poetry liberated from European influences, recreating in the American imagination "everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was" (I xvi).

Like many other young midwesterners, Lewis made his way into poetry through the little magazine circuits of the 1920s and 30s. Exposed to the free verse versus "rhythmic" verse debate through *Pegasus*, a little magazine edited by Noah Whitaker in Springfield, Ohio, Lewis began to develop his own poetic forms that

stretched and bent traditional meters to suit his purpose. Whittaker met Lewis in New Orleans in 1926, where Lewis, penniless again, had gone after leaving a postal clerk job in St. Louis. Eager to foster an incipient workers' culture, Jack Conroy, an assembler in Toledo's Willys-Overland auto factory (1928), urged Lewis to submit to little magazines like *Pegasus*. As editor, writer, and critic, Conroy was to play an important role in Lewis's short-lived rise as a poet, remaining in contact during Lewis's years of contumacy and paranoia.

Young, impressionable, and short of money, Lewis hitchhiked to Los Angeles in 1924, where in mission and flophouses he encountered the down-and-out shipwrecks of humanity who had slipped down the skidway to die of hunger and disease. In "Down the Skidway," published in *The Anvil* (May 1933), Lewis records his slide into humiliating poverty:

Away down there, darkly hunkered over a serving of beans in a slummy restaurant, I jerked up to a raving rumpus back in the kitchen. "You god-damn poky, triflin', clock-watchin' deadbeat you, ye won't WORK! Hyer's what ye've 'earned' sence mornin'. Now git!" The cook was firing the pearl diver. "GIT, I said, you rotten-lazy dingbat, you fly-blowed— Well, by God, that's good riddance. Charley, see if they's another bastard out thar fer the job. En if they ain't, stick yer damn sign up at the winder." I immediately lunged for the job, procured it, flung on the diving suit of a greasy apron and dived desperately—for one dollar per ten hours, meals included. (Should that be called butting bottom in America? No. For some dishwashers in hard times work all day for their meals only.) Weakened by the long hunger, I all but drowned in the sudsy sea before the first day ended. I was afraid of coming up too frequently for air, was feeling those eyes upon me. . . .

That "stove-devil," heat-blanching and heat-crazed, gaunt and flagrantly dirty, up against it for twelve hours daily, received \$60 per month. The waiters got \$1.25 per day.

The restaurant belonged to a chain of such for dime-gripping bums and low-paid working-stiffs. Came gringos and greasers for coffee and stew, hash, beans—a large bowl of brown beans for a dime. Came Negroes, humblest of all. Came "mouthmen" and "wolves," proletarian beasts of the ghastliest ilk. From the poverty of America, in this bottomless hell, came these contorted and condemned souls. (9)

It was a signal rite of passage in the shaping of Lewis's political consciousness. Working-class people in Los Angeles experienced the hardships of economic hard times long before the Crash of 1929. Lewis joined informal meetings led by the anarchist Marcus Graham, who was assembling *An Anthology of Revolutionary Poetry* in the wake of the Sacco-Vanzetti trials. Its publication in 1929 heralded the appearance of young literary rebels whose work began to appear in the little magazines of the left. A Canadian by birth who had left his country in protest of compulsory conscription, Graham left a deep imprint on the Missouri farm-hand. Ascetic, slender of build, with fierce eyes, Graham was a fiery visionary who viewed poetry as a revolutionary weapon in the struggle for a free society.⁷ Graham's anarchist evenings, together with Lewis's stay among the "bottom dogs" of Los Angeles, ignited his poetic imagination and steered him leftward. What mattered to Lewis was to fire up people's concern for the outcast and fuel their indignation at an economic system that would permit such cruelty to the poor.

Lewis's contributions to *New Masses* attracted editor Mike Gold's attention. Gold had issued a call in 1928 for a new generation of worker-poets and activists. "You certainly have the goods," Gold wrote Lewis in 1929, "—vigor, slanguage, experience et al. We'll take a chance with the postal authorities and publish your poems."⁸ Some ten contributions by Lewis appeared in the early *New Masses* between 1928 and 1931. The rough-hewn, vigorous, irreverent style that would become his trademark is evident in "What the Hell Difference Does it Make to a Hungry Man," appearing in *Red Renaissance*, his first published collection of poems, in 1930:

"There aint no God, there aint no God,
There aint no God at all,
There aint, there aint, there aint, there aint,
In spite of Peter and Paul.
Goddammit, I just know, I KNOW!
I've got the books that prove it so."
You hear the atheistic slant
Sputter and rant and bawl.

"There is a God, there is a God,
The Christian God of course,
There is—gee whizz!—there is, THERE IS!"
(Water; he 's getting hoarse.)
"And where's the proof? Why, proofs abound;

One book, then all the world around!,"
 You hear the reverend scream and fizz
 From truth's veritable source.

"There aint, there is, there aint, there is,
 Aint-is, aint-is, a God"
 Those two! Tsk, tsk, the vulgar bout,
 Each a dogmatic clod.
 With such as them I can't agree:
 There may . . . and yet . . . there may not be.
 You hear the gent of poiseiful doubt
 Blow his Olympian wad. (19)

By 1929 Lewis had begun to gain recognition through the left press, and was listed as a contributing editor of *New Masses* the same year he received a short biographical sketch with photo in the November issue (22). At least one rebel poet, referring to the Soviet Union's best-known worker-poet, saw Lewis as the Demian Bedny of America. "Bedny, of course, was a party member for years," Henry George Weiss wrote Lewis in 1932, "and even went to Siberia once or twice; you have the opportunity of becoming the American Bedny without actually joining the party, merely by accepting its political line and writing more regularly for the communist press. But it is important that you get the *Daily Worker* more often. . . ."⁹

Weiss's advice came after the fact; Lewis already had begun looking in the direction of the Red Star for guidance. Communism in the early 1930s offered disillusioned workers like Lewis, stranded by the Depression, a belief to hold on to, a program of social change, a promise of heaven on earth, or at least a better hand than most Los Angeles flophouse occupants and Missouri gumbo farmhands had been dealt. It was a kind of religion to Lewis, having, as he believed, been abandoned by God. He saw no contradiction between his faith in the Soviet workers' republic and his deep, nativist loyalty to America. Growing up poor, seeing hungry, homeless people on city streets suffering police brutality, Lewis sought through poetry to overthrow the hated enemy Capitalism. The wealthy were insulated from conditions of the poor; it was hopeless to persuade them. Lewis's devotion to social justice, however, had the power to stir workers who heard his poems read in factories. Lewis had a way with language that spoke to the unlettered and unread. He reworked language in new ways, making poems workers could understand and respond to *as poetry*. The great folk poets—Robert Burns,

the Russian peasant poet Klinev, the Silesian weavers in their 1844 revolt, the Wobbly poet Joe Hill, the Yoruban poets—had accomplished the same. Lewis lived in an era when public oration and debate were staples of rural communities. Poetry, too, was intended to be spoken; Lewis had come of age when Socialist speakers like Kate Richards O'Hare traveled the Midwest and Vachel Lindsay performed "Why I Voted the Socialist Ticket" and "The Eagle That is Forgotten."¹⁰ Similarly, Lewis explored the oral dimensions of poetic language in poems like "Tractors Eat Kerosene," referring to the fact that impoverished sharecroppers eat dirt for lack of enough food.

T-bones!
 T-bones!
 Lawd, cain't you heah me cry?
 Must ah weah out mah knee-bones
 A-prayin' fuh T-bones?
 Git plumb outta breath,
 Git strangled to death
 On de T-bones in de sky?

Even no fatback,
 Lawd, braing dat back—
 Slick fuh makin' greens go down!

Cotton-pick machine
 Lives on Kerosene:
 Human go'na have to chaw groun'!

An early advocate of Lewis's work was editor Jack Conroy, who printed his poems in *The Rebel Poet* (1931–32), furnished the introduction to his first collection *Red Renaissance*, and contributed a short essay on Lewis's work to *Fantasy* for the fall 1933 issue. Reviewing his third collection, *The Road to Utterly* (1934), Conroy wrote: "Lewis restores poetry to some of its ancient uses, for the wandering troubadour sang not to literary critics, not to collectors of first and limited editions, but to the common folk, to the great unwashed and underfed. It is among the disinherited and dispossessed that Lewis seeks his audience."¹¹ Lewis's first big break came when Conroy recommended Lewis to H. L. Mencken. Mencken, author of *The American Language*, sought fresh colloquial language drawn from lived experience, the kind that distinguished Conroy's own writing and other

American Mercury contributors like George Milburn and H. L. Davis. Politically conservative, Mencken had little good to say about proletarian writing but admired Lewis's use of vernacular speech rhythms and comic mimicry. The appearance of "School Days in the Gumbo" in the January 1931 issue signaled a breakthrough in the mainstream press. Lewis's literary ascendancy elicited strong reactions among some critics who scorned what Conroy in praise called "crude vigor."¹² William Rose Benét, in the *Saturday Review of Literature* (8 [4 June 1932]: 775), expressing shock, firmly dismissed Lewis's work: "His verse," Benét wrote, "is really very bad, and my concern here is with the writing of verse as an art."¹³ He advised Lewis to read Edmund Wilson in *The New Republic* on proletarian writing. It's unlikely that Lewis accepted Benét's advice; yet Wilson would soon be recommending Lewis for a Guggenheim grant.

While Conroy praised Lewis as an original talent to members of the John Reed Club in St. Louis, Philip Rahv and William (Phelps) Phillips, editors of *Partisan Review*, then a publication of the New York City John Reed Club, dismissed him as "leftist," a renegade from the (Stalinist) Party line. An angry exchange of letters between Lewis and the editors ensued. Lewis felt vindicated, however, by Isidor Schneider's favorable review of his booklet of poems, *Road to Utterly*. Lewis is "spontaneous," Schneider wrote, "his range is common experience and he has an unusual talent for literary invective" (*PR* 2 [April-May 1935]:43). Suspending publication with the October-November 1935 issue, subsequently merging with Conroy's *The Anvil*, *Partisan Review* carried no further mention of Lewis's work. Lewis's idiosyncratic verse and stinging rebukes had become a liability to many in the Communist Party's cultural establishment. A "bohemian" by their standards, Lewis could not be counted on despite his declarations of faith to the workers' cause. Others like Malcolm Cowley of *The New Republic*, however, recognized Lewis's raw talent, in need of direction and a toning down to meet publishers' standards.

To midwestern radicals like Lewis and Conroy, critics and writers like *Partisan Review*'s editors Rahv and Phillips led a self-interested clique cozying up with Communist Party cultural commissars, ignoring their Western literary comrades. Perhaps the chief reasons for the growing divide separating the two regions had to do with cultural and historical differences, together with the relative isolation of both. Scattered widely across a broad hinterland "west of the Hudson" the midwesterners had little stake in the ideological debates and party proclamations of Union Square radicals. Few were more isolated than H. H. Lewis, indentured, as he lamented, to the mules pulling the plow in the fields of his Cape Girardeau farm. Lewis made the divide a personal issue. With few exceptions—William Car-

los Williams being the preeminent one—critics, editors, and publishers on the Eastern seaboard, Lewis said, formed a “Kaffee Klatsch Klan,” an impenetrable combine that shut him out and that he was determined to expose.

Factionalism splitting the left threatened to pull Lewis into fruitless conflict, in which poetic creativity would be wasted in tirades. In the fierce emotional tensions of the 1930s, it took little to start a bitter row—and Lewis rarely retreated from a good fight. As Lewis dug in, a way out from a needless impasse appeared quite unexpectedly.

In September 1934, William Carlos Williams wrote Fred Miller, an impecunious tool designer in Brooklyn, who edited a little magazine entitled *Blast* (September 1933–November 1934): “You’ve got a find in Lewis. He’s got that something extra, in addition to the usual valued qualities in a writer, which flips up the interest in a new way. It’s a question of wit and energy. I read his stuff breathlessly which, although it isn’t the final test of excellence is nevertheless the first one. Maybe he’s too good, if you know what I mean, he may be accused of making something decorative out of suffering. But that sets up the difficulty all over again. Is there *any* way of telling the bitter truth. If you create interest by good writing pleasure must enter for the reader. While if it is bad writing, nothing comes across but a pathetic disgust. What’s the answer? Stop writing at all? The things don’t mix. I say, gimme Lewis, he knows writing is to be read and to be found interesting because it is well done, of good material. At bottom he’s got the stuff—just like a baseball pitcher that has the stuff. Go ahead and explain it.”¹⁴ During this time (1934–35) Williams was himself writing “the bitter truth” about the poor and the dispossessed. A number of his short stories with proletarian subjects appeared in *Blast*, including “The Girl with a Pimply Face” and “Jean Beicke,” drawn from observation of and encounters with working-class people in Passaic, New Jersey, where he practiced medicine. Ignoring the proletarian precepts championed by Mike Gold in *New Masses*, these stories nonetheless deliver the message that a ruthless capitalist economy heartlessly discards ordinary working people like devalued shares of stock.¹⁵

Warm to the aims of the Communist Party regarding social justice for the poor, Williams nonetheless distrusted the party’s covert functioning and dogmatic pronouncements. Communist Party orthodoxy was inimical to his temperament and to his effort to remain objective as a poet and observer of life. Party authority and discipline, quite apart from the worth of the cause, were, he said, dictatorial and unworthy of a democracy. Moreover, Communism as a political philosophy, he decided, was incompatible with American beliefs; it would never find acceptance in any large-scale way.

As early as 1931, in an open letter to Ford Madox Ford, Williams had deliberated upon the need for an American art in a time of economic turmoil. A constituent of such an art, he said, would be a people cultivated enough “to express themselves fully, in all colors and shapes of their living moods” (qtd. in Mariani 330). Included were factory workers and immigrants Williams knew as patients in his medical practice. Mencken’s *The American Language* validated a growing interest among young writers in American idioms and locutions. In a letter to Gorham Munson, Williams expressed his admiration for Mencken “because of his views of our new language” (qtd. in Mariani 343). Indeed, Williams had long been interested in what was uniquely American about his native language; this interest drew him to Lewis.

His exchange of letters with Mencken in 1934 help explain Williams’s attraction to Lewis’s verse. When Mencken asked for his thoughts on poetry and the American language, Williams sent a three-page note entitled “Note: The American Language and the New Poetry” (Mariani 364). Language, Williams wrote, plays a central role in the development of poetry, in speech rhythms, sense, and most of all in capturing the living language of locale. New forms must evolve, involving a language of place with measure and form in careful relationship. It was ironic that Williams’s and Lewis’s similar concern with the language of place and circumstance converged in Mencken, whose article—appearing the same year in the *Saturday Review of Literature*—pilloried proletarian literature.

Williams’s interest in working-class issues was in spirit humanitarian, yet poems such as “Yachts,” from a 1935 collection entitled *An Early Martyr*, bear political implications, alluding metaphorically to the ruthlessness of capitalist practices. Williams was, however, insistent on standards for poetry that freed it from political taint. “All we’ll get by a Communist issue,” he wrote Nathanael West in 1932, when considering a topic for a special issue of *Contact*, “is a reputation for radicalism and not for good writing—which is our real aim. But later we can appear with an air of: there’s good writing among the Communists too; they’re not just propagandist crazy” (SL 125). He wished “to state,” he wrote Kay Boyle several months later, “that poetry . . . is related to poetry and not to socialism, communism or anything else that tries to swallow it . . .” (SL 131).

Not intimations of revolutionary class struggle, then, but the bold freshness of Lewis’s writing attracted Williams’s interest, despite its frequent idiosyncratic oddness, as in “Shakeup at Santa Barbara”:

How mighty is Nature, how null the boast of man.
Lecture it off, God’s likeness, if you can!

The seismic mirth that jarred the Japanese,
 Knocked over Buddhas, bounced Nirvanic ease,—
 That bowel-laughter rudely bursts again
 To jangle Nordics, jumble lice and men.
 Nature had seen the Babbit kraal arise
 On class-subjection, lucre, blood and lies.
 Behold, she saw it thus: quaint Mr. Blank,
 A weary pauper, lean against a *bank*.
 Isn't that enough to loose the frightful mirth?
 O man, brain-burdened ninny,—what on earth!
 (*Rebel Poet* 3 [March 1931]: 5)

To Williams and others intrigued by Lewis's bold originality this was language that might invigorate poetry and appeal to people who could not afford to purchase books from trade publishers. Looking beyond instances of colloquial vulgarity and the occasional awkward formal qualities of Lewis's poems, Williams discovered an expressiveness that echoed his own quest for a new American language in poetry. He linked Lewis to the early American colonists in their struggle for just treatment by the English colonizers. Despite infelicities and outmoded forms, Lewis's poems revealed a seriousness of conviction registered in the idioms of speech and brash neologisms. The very broken, tortured quality of Lewis's poetic forms was instructive. Lewis sets an example for poets, Williams ventured, indeed for himself, aware that the cultural gatekeepers, both left and right, were likely to receive Lewis coldly. Lewis's work represented a new poetry for the times evident in the vigorous rhythms and language of speech, poems of impassioned belief, located in place and experience (see Mariani 376–9).

Lewis seized on Williams's support like a lifeline. In the summer of 1935, on a trip east to New York with his sister and brother-in-law, Lewis visited Williams at his home. Lewis's sister recalled the visit: "In the New York area he was the guest of the William Carlos Williamses—[he] proudly brought Dr. Williams to the hotel to meet his kin."¹⁶ Lewis admired the "Doctor," sensing a kinship with the Pater-son poet, who defied conventions when the occasion called for it. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, Lewis wrote: "I saw Williams in his home, and he admits that in praising my work he contradicted a lifetime of poetic practice and poetic criticism, he waved his hand to indicate that he was expressing a revolution in his own attitude toward the past. So it is no wonder that the Kaffee Klatsch Klan [Lewis's epithet for the New York leftist cultural establishment whose chief organ was the *Partisan Review*] was outraged at his 'betrayal' of the 'intellectuals.' Too

damn bad that he had manifested his interest in Marxism by praising the Marxian effusions of a farmhand rather than those of some Eliotophile decadent recommended by the Klan.”¹⁷

While Conroy and other midwesterners cautioned him to go slow, Lewis bounded ahead, sure that Williams’s endorsement would not only bring him recognition but expose the makers of literary reputation as scoundrels. Williams sent a review of Lewis’s booklet collections to *The New Republic*. Editor Malcolm Cowley returned the review, explaining: “I wish we could publish this outspoken comment.” Lewis, reading a copy of Cowley’s note, bristled at the rejection, writing: “I have you in a well-bulwarked jam about this and I know it hurts, Comrade Recent, expatriate from Paris, middleclass snob, Sacred Cow-ley of Rappism [referring to the defunct Soviet Revolutionary Association of Proletarian Writers], you are hereby rendered into hamburger. I have already heard some bellows, forthright and suppressed, from your kind in your city [New York], and now one more can join the chorus.”¹⁸ Earlier the *TNR* editors had rejected one of Lewis’s poems, commenting: “You’ll agree that this stuff is hardly adapted to our magazine.” Lewis failed to offend Cowley, however, who later recommended Lewis for a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Williams reviewed four of Lewis’s poetry collections for the January 1936 issue of *Poetry* magazine, writing that Lewis “has the one great strength without which there can be no art at all—belief, a belief in his own songs, in their absolute value, the power of their words to penetrate to the very bones of his listeners.” Williams’s essay on Lewis was to appear in the new publication, *Partisan Review and Anvil*, joined by a shotgun marriage of two little magazines, but the editors declined after seeing Williams’s review in *Poetry*, explaining that the essay duplicated material in the review.¹⁹ His response to a questionnaire, arguing that Marxism and American democracy were a poor mix, irritated the *Partisan Review and Anvil* editors. “My opinion,” Williams wrote, “is that our revolutionary literature is merely tolerated by most Americans, that it is definitely in conflict with our deep seated ideals.”²⁰ Williams’s response prompted letters to the editor under the subtitle “Sanctions Against Williams.” Williams continued to rankle the *Partisan Review* and *Anvil* editors (Conroy had been dropped as editor). The cultural left entertained new prerogatives; it appeared that Rahv and Phillips, former Stalinists who now embraced Trotskyist views, were to be among the cultural brokers.

The essay, now called “an American Poet,” went to the little magazine *Dynamo*, which ceased publication without publishing the essay. To Lewis this was evidence, he wrote Meridel Le Sueur, *Midwest’s* editor, that “the lethal existence of the Williams essay” was too explosive for the leftist cultural doyens.

While his fifth collection of poems, "Midfield Sediments," was in preparation for publication, Lewis asked Williams to include his essay as an introduction to the volume.²¹ Williams declined, probably because *New Masses* was considering it for publication. Like its subject, Williams's essay had begun to run afoul of editors and generate controversy. *New Masses* at first rejected Williams's "An American Poet," forwarding it in the summer of 1937 to Meridel Le Sueur, editor of *Midwest*, a short-lived literary magazine published in Minneapolis.²² She would be, Lewis wrote, "a very brave woman to publish it. Even more like downright daredevilry. Thunderation!—American proletarian literary sheets are not supposed to promote proletarian literature!"²³ More setbacks occurred: *Midwest* went under (little magazines had brief lives in the 1930s) before it could publish the essay.²⁴ It showed up next on the desk of the *Partisan Review* editors, igniting a brief firestorm within the cultural left, which neither *New Masses* nor *Partisan Review* was willing to extinguish.

Partisan Review had now appeared in new format and with a new editorial staff, having untied the knot with *The Anvil*. In the re-born *PR*, editors Rahv and Phillips renounced their earlier association with the "revolutionary working class," declining any further "defense of the Soviet Union" in favor of editorial independence. Openly hostile now to Stalinist elements in the party the *PR* editors welcomed modernist currents in literature and art based upon their artistic value, not their engagement in the revolutionary movement. The turnaround signaled a feud with former colleagues on the left, erupting into a bitter conflict with *New Masses*.

The *Partisan Review* editors invited Williams to submit a poem, probably hoping to patch up relations following the earlier rejection of his Lewis essay. Williams complied. When his poem was rejected, Williams sent another, also rejected. Williams responded in a postcard: "Your patience will make the flowers bloom." The *PR* editors interpreted this as indication that Williams intended to submit another poem. But the November 16, 1937, issue of *New Masses* noted that Williams had scratched *PR* as a venue for his work. To learn of this in the pages of their bitter rival was particularly galling to the *PR* editors. In the note the *NM* editors wrote: "Incidentally, some of our readers may have seen an advance notice of the Trotskyist *Partisan Review* announcing the anti-Soviet, anti-Communist contents of the first issue. William Carlos Williams is listed as a contributor, but he writes to *The New Masses* that 'the *Partisan Review* has no contribution of mine, nor will I send any'" (qtd. in Conroy, "Plowboy Poet" 205). (Williams did in fact contribute again to *Partisan Review*, in its spring 1939 issue.) A week later, Williams's Lewis essay finally appeared in print, kicked back from *Midwest* to *New Masses*, where it appeared in the November 1937 issue.²⁵

Upset with Williams's choice and the manner in which it was made known, *PR* editor Dwight Macdonald sought an explanation. Williams replied that he had no stake in the feud between *New Masses* and *PR*; his only interest, he said, was to see the Lewis essay in print.²⁶ Soon after, *Partisan Review* printed an exchange of letters with Williams, titled "The Temptation of Dr. Williams" (January 1938). The *PR* editors assumed a defensive, sarcastic posture towards Williams, yet opened the door for reconciliation: "When the real situation becomes clear . . . we hope he will send us some more poems." Lewis, the gumbo poet, had disappeared from their sights along with Conroy and other worker-writers, who attempted to create a non-elitist literature separate from the dominant discourse of commodity culture.²⁷

In an injured tone the *PR* editors counterattacked *New Masses*, claiming that the party had enlisted the aid of Dr. Williams in launching a vicious assault on their magazine. Citing an earlier exchange of letters with Williams, the editors complained that *New Masses* was using Williams in their effort to "stifle independent left-wing expression."²⁸ Williams shrugged off the matter, commenting in a letter to a friend that the *PR* editors were, in effect, posturing. After all, he added, *PR* had called for sanctions against Williams a year earlier. It was an absurd charge, he said, to claim that he was taking sides *politically*. But to remain neutral from politics was not an option. Williams found himself embroiled in a battle between rival periodicals: one continued to embrace party positions; the other turned away from the Communist Party's cultural movement, positioning itself as an independent voice of the left and a growing presence of cultural power and status within the literary establishment.

Soon *The New Republic* was pulled into the feud between *PR* and *NM* that Lewis (and Williams in a roundabout way) had brought into the open. *TNR*'s Malcolm Cowley joined in the altercation, voicing dissatisfaction with *PR* in an article published October 19, 1938. Cowley expressed regret that the reborn *PR* had strayed from its new course of political independence, engaging in factional quarrels directed toward former allies on the left. The piece elicited a response from *PR*'s editors with Cowley's rejoinder in the same issue calling for a truce favoring literary rather than political aims.²⁹

Midwestern radicals like Nelson Algren and Meridel Le Sueur were still smarting over the loss of *The Anvil* in the Communist Party-engineered coup.³⁰ The party had dropped its promotion of working-class writers soon after the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in August 1935, announcing the Popular Front, one of whose aims was to enlist mainstream writers in the struggle against fascism. Almost all of the little magazines of the left had disappeared by 1938, Malcolm Cowley complained in his *TNR* article (October 19, 1938), point-

ing out to the *Partisan Review* that “Not a single literary magazine is now being published by the Communist Party or its fellow travelers” (qtd. in Salzman and Wallenstein 298). By the early 1940s the *Partisan Review* had transformed itself “into an organ of modernist high culture at the expense of other literary schools, most notably realism and naturalism” (Wald, *New York Intellectuals* 221). Worker-writers like Lewis and Conroy were viewed as liabilities by a new formation of cultural and intellectual elites located in the universities and on editorial boards of magazines like the *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and *Hudson Review*. As an epitaph of sort, Philip Rahv’s essay entitled “Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy,” published in 1939, dismissed the achievements of 1930s literary radicals whose efforts to introduce working-class experience and characters into fiction were, Rahv claimed, expressions of Communist orthodoxy. The intelligentsia, he argued in another article, were better suited than the proletariat to be the revolutionary class.³¹

Determined to escape the nets of literary statusmakers, Lewis nonetheless wished to expose them. Such was the idea for a proposal he planned should he win a Guggenheim Fellowship. Edmund Wilson and others, however, steered him away from the proposed topic. Recommending him were Wilson, Stephen Vincent Benét, and Jack Conroy (both Benét and Conroy had won Guggenheim awards). Lewis promised Wilson that he would not use the award to “take revenge upon the Kaffee Klatsch Klan.” “I’ll drop that idea as a project,” he wrote, “and state only the other idea: To reflect the verse, the attitudes, and problems of the farmers of Southern and Southwestern United States.”³² Similarly, Conroy dissuaded Lewis away from using the Guggenheim project to attack literary cliques, advising him to stick to creative work as evidence for the award.³³

Despite his failure on a first try to win the award, Lewis seemed poised in the summer of 1938 for the literary breakthrough he had so long anticipated. Five of his poems appeared in the June issue of *Poetry* magazine. In the same year *Poetry* magazine awarded Lewis its prestigious Harriet Monroe Lyric Prize. In its “Notes on Contributors” the editors recalled Williams’s remark about Lewis’s belief in the power of his own words.³⁴ Lewis wrote Wilson explaining the failed Guggenheim attempt. “Only 3 poets won this yr, all professors of English, one even [a] member Kaffee Klatsch Klan. . . .” Moreover, Lewis exclaimed, his appearance in *Poetry* proved the “Intellectuals betrayed. But Williams crows over it: I’m his protégé as well as Stalin’s.”³⁵ Malcolm Cowley agreed to recommend Lewis in his second try for the Guggenheim, based on the publication of Lewis’s “Sharecropper Songs” in the July 27, 1938, issue of *The New Republic*.³⁶ Among them was “Sho’ Nuff?,” an angry critique of racism in which the poem’s sardonic tone serves to undercut the staged mimicry of black speech.

When pious cullid folkses
 Git put away in de groun'
 Dey all go White to Heaben,
 Dey all go White to Heaben
 (Sho' nuff?)—
 White, Jesus-White to Heaben,
 No angel black er brown!

When Kluxers hang a Negra
 Who neba did no crimes,
 Dey all go Black to Hades,
 Dey all go Black to Hades
 (Sho' Nuff)—
 Black, Negra-Black to Hades
 To hang a hund'ed times! (331)

Lewis asked Wilson in September for his support. Wilson would make a good sponsor, Lewis said, given that he is a critic of Communism and the Soviet Union. "Socialism may be far in the future for America, however," Lewis said in his letter to Wilson, "and in the meantime I am an American poet horsing for a fellowship, writing another person with a rural address (how the unstratified brotherly feeling glows!), trying to put that personal touch in some manner."³⁷

A third sponsor was former *TNR* editor Robert Morss Lovett, whose review of a recent biography of Keats struck a resonant note with Lewis. "You mention how Keats disgusted the aristocrats of his time, simply because he was a proletarian," Lewis wrote Lovett, "despite his implied acceptance of their social ideology, whereas they could have more or less respect for the gentile if rebellious Byron and for the wealthy anarchist Shelley. . . . Similarly, I think, my verse is opposed by the Lockharts of the contemporary left literary movement, though (and partly because) it has been so roundly praised in [the] Soviet Union. I am really a clod-hopper, not of the elite radicalized intelligentsia, and the challenge of my example exerts an unendurable strain upon the principles of these hypocrites."³⁸

He had expected to fail the first try, Lewis wrote Wilson when the winners were named the following year. But the second rejection astonished him, he said, given the project's clear relevance to the sharecroppers' roadside strike in southern Missouri that had made headlines in the news at the time the award was being decided (see Wylie, Clifford, Strickland). Moreover, Lewis had counted on the prestige of the Harriet Monroe Lyric Poetry Prize. Yet, he acknowledged, recent

events—foremost, the Soviet-Nazi pact—had sharpened differences on the left: “. . . our souls may be literally screaming against each other nowadays.” The Soviets, Lewis claimed, had acted wisely. Let the fascists “smash each other. . . . I am an isolationist, believing that this comprehends the best possible social revolutionary or liberal or democratic tactic. . . .”³⁹ Siding with the “cool-headed revolutionaries” as early as 1932, as Daniel Aaron writes, Wilson nonetheless continued to hold literature to standards free of dogma of any kind. His position, Aaron points out, “satisfied neither the literary Left nor the literary Right” (Aaron 196; see also 251). Cowley, however, agonized over his own position in a letter to Wilson in 1940, resolving “to get out of ‘the movement,’ as it was vaguely called, and take no further part in public arguments until I had made peace with my inner convictions” (Cowley, —*And I Worked* 157).

The third unsuccessful application for the Guggenheim caused Lewis, in a letter to Cowley, to suspect that Henry Allen Moe, the foundation’s secretary, was biased on account of Lewis’s political convictions. Cowley defended Moe, a summertime neighbor in Connecticut, urging that Lewis turn from writing political satire to poems like the “Sharecropper Songs.”⁴⁰ But Moe had been added to Lewis’s list of those who thwarted recognition. Learning that Williams had mentioned his “struggle” in a talk at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association poetry forum in New York City, Lewis fired a broadside against the Guggenheim secretary. Once again Williams’s support unwittingly blew up the embers of Lewis’s smoldering anger against the “literary clique.” He encouraged Williams to continue disclosing the “facts” of his struggle, which now was focused on the Communist Party (of America) hierarchy itself.

To make his case, Lewis arrived in New York City, armed, as poet Alfred Kreymborg wrote in *New Masses* (April 28, 1942), “with an enormous sheaf of poems—songs, ballads, jingles, free verse narratives, prose rhythms—on every conceivable phase of the life of the underprivileged in his part of America.” Kreymborg, who hosted a performance of Lewis’s poems, set to music by David Schlein, at a meeting of the League of American Writers, wrote very favorably of the Missouri “farmhand poet” in the article, citing his “poetic style that is truly impassioned and original,” and urging publishers to give him a wider audience.⁴¹ Whenever Lewis saw what he thought was justice done he proudly put it to use. He walked into the *New Masses* offices without notice and confronted editor Mike Gold, who had some ten years before claimed that Lewis was “as politically backward as thousands of his neighbors.” Lewis hoped to stir things up among party leaders, as he wrote Williams, in a “revolution within the revolution.”⁴²

There was evidence that as the party retrenched, preparing for the “counter-

revolution” that was sure to follow war’s end, it began to distance itself from political wild cards like Lewis. Joy Davidman, associate editor of *New Masses*, proved to be an exception among party people in keeping a door open for Lewis. A gifted poet (recipient of the Yale Younger Poets Prize), Davidman shared Williams’s interest in Lewis’s creative work. In a five-page letter of closely argued detail, Davidman suggested that in order to connect with the people Lewis must avoid obscure, fancy diction, sticking instead to plain language and simple forms such as the ballad. A ruling class that is remote from the people develops “first a distinct dialect, then a distinct language, which the ruling-class scholars preserve in a mummified state while the language of the people continues to change and grow.” Echoing Cowley’s advice Davidman urged Lewis to “appeal to the imagination and the emotions; correct political statement is not enough, otherwise why not write an editorial and the hell with verse?” “Stop reining in your imagination,” Davidman concluded: “let it go and take a look at the real lives and sufferings of real people on this earth. Then come back and tell simply what you have seen. I’m pretty sure you can do it; and that will be poetry.”⁴³ It was good advice that cut through the political dissension that had ensnared Lewis for too long. It was time to leave the “angry decade” (Leo Gurko’s term for the 1930s) and devote his energy and talent to poetry. Lewis might have heeded the advice except that his tendency to view himself as a victim had begun to develop into delusional behavior. Lewis failed to act on it, wasting his talent and energy in controversies mainly of his making.

Lewis wrote in triumph to his congressman and to Conroy that the Japanese-American scholar, Sachio Oka, who in 1934 had translated into English an essay entitled “H. H. Lewis, the American Satirist Poet” authored by Japanese proletarian writer Masaki Ideka for the magazine *Shi-Seishin*, was linked to a conspiracy involving the infamous Black Dragon Japanese espionage network. Oka, a Communist Party member, was subsequently cleared of suspicion.⁴⁴ Lewis’s bouts of delusional behavior and angry denunciations distanced him from the party and many of his onetime supporters—except Conroy, whose advice and good-natured humor succeeded in tempering Lewis’s self-defeating impulses and tirades, and Williams, who, it appeared, dismissed what others thought about Lewis and encouraged him to accept a similar attitude. “They’ll always attack your verse,” Williams wrote Lewis in August 27, 1943, “let ‘em do it—and keep on writing.” Yet, Williams added, the wartime paper shortage was making publication difficult. At least that was the reason publishers were giving Williams for not taking his collection of poems. “They tell me it’s due to a paper shortage—while more paper is wasted for asinine purposes than there is piss in an army latrine.”⁴⁵

In late summer, 1947, Williams and his wife Floss drove their “old Buick” across the country to take part in a literary conference at the University of Utah. They had hoped to stop by Cape Girardeau to visit Lewis during their return trip. Time ran short, however, as Williams explained to Lewis in a letter, deciding them against stopping. Nonetheless, Williams sought from Lewis “the low down on what you are doing and thinking.” “Let’s have your answers to the problems of the age.”⁴⁶ The causes of Lewis’s growing isolation, having alienated—indeed frightened—friends and admirers, seemed not to disturb Williams, for whom Lewis’s behavior—it’s likely Williams knew little of it—was merely consistent with the original character and inventiveness of his verse. It was the last communication between them.

Williams’s own literary recognition was late in coming; his contemporaries Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound had achieved renown at a much earlier age. By war’s end, however, the “American” qualities of Williams’s writing had gained him considerable recognition, including from fellow poet-critics such as Horace Gregory and Norman Macleod, who singled out his ability to speak for the “common reader, American style,” in language that “is consistently his own . . .” (Gregory 186).⁴⁷ In the postwar years Williams won acclaim for creating a distinctly American presence in poetry, assuming the title of “patron saint of American poetry.”⁴⁸ While Williams’s quarrels with Eliot, Pound, and others concerned their Anglophile postures and neglect of the “common reader,” Lewis’s battles were narrower, focused mainly on the obstacles to his own recognition within the left’s systems of literary production. Slipping into oblivion and eventually delusory paranoia, Lewis had been raised high on the tide of cultural politics in the Great Depression and cast upon a deserted shore as the climate of literary reception shifted and the country nervously embraced the bomb and the House Un-American Activities Committee inquisitions following World War II.⁴⁹

In his search for what Mencken called “the low-down Americano,” Williams, like John Dewey, sought the universal in the local, focusing on “the life before his eyes,” as Kenneth Rexroth wrote.⁵⁰ Lewis was the very figure of the poet writing from within the particulars of his existence, which he viewed in a spirit of hard-bitten humor:

Workers stooping in a clump,

Black and White and all a-lump

Grayishly blended by the Slump,

Men and women, “vag” and “frump,”—

Picking at a garbage dump.

See:

Now an old “retired” Hump

Limping

Back to

Utter-

Ly. (Lewis, *Road 10*).

Likely Williams saw Lewis as a kindred spirit, admiring his lusty spirit, vivid imagination, and faith in the new. It is certain that he judged the bootheel farmhand to be a strong and innovative voice in the effort to create poetry from American materials. His work obscured by literary politics, his talent wasted in fruitless contention, Lewis never fully achieved the promise that Williams, who followed a wiser course, perceived in him. Taking positions as he sought fit, Williams nonetheless held to an independent course apart from the polarized factionalism and shifting cultural politics of the left in the 1930s and 40s. In looking for poetic language “modified by *our* environment; the American environment,” Williams himself finally became the distinguished embodiment of his search.

Notes

1. The uniquely “American” qualities of Williams’s work have received a great deal of critical attention, including Beck, Breslin, Coles, Conrad, Doyle, Duffey, Guimond, Mariani, Tapscott, and Weaver. While Williams’s contributions deserve the highest esteem, there were other artists at the same time pursuing a similar aim but taking a different course to achieve it. The leftist cultural movement in the Popular Front era, in an effort to link its programs of social justice and political change to indigenous traditions, encouraged writers to explore from within their particular locales the relation between artistic expression and place in order to help define a cultural identity that elaborated the left’s visions of a just society.

2. A few studies have attempted to lift H. H. Lewis from obscurity and evaluate his achievements. See Dellinger, Conroy, Wald, Nelson, Salzman, Wixson.

3. See Lewis to Robert Morss Lovett, September 11, 1938. Also see Harold Dellinger, in *West End 5* (Summer 1978): 46.

4. Mencken wrote in praise of Ring Lardner: “Without wasting any wind upon statements of high-falutin aesthetic or ethical purpose, he is trying to get the low-down Americano between covers” (qtd. in Singleton 83).

5. The poems, too long to quote here, are available in the June 1938 issue of *Poetry* and the Oscar Williams anthology.

6. See Ogilvie. World War I, illiteracy, antisedition laws, and an entrenched rural Democratic Party stifled anticonformist movements and Socialist stirrings in Missouri and Arkansas.

7. See Ralph Cheyney and Lucia Trent's introduction to the *Anthology*, 42–4.

8. Letter, Michael Gold to H. H. Lewis, 1929. Copy with Conroy papers, Newberry Library.

9. Henry George Weiss to Lewis, ca. 1932. Copy with Conroy papers, Newberry Library.

10. See Ogilvie. Kate Richards O'Hare came to speak in 1914 at Kennett, not far from Lewis's home.

11. *The Anvil* 12 (July–August 1934): 14.

12. Conroy's slogan for *The Anvil* was "We prefer crude vigor to polished banality."

13. Jack Conroy replied to Benet's review in *The Rebel Poet* 15 (August 1932): 2.

14. Letter, September 25, 1934. Copy with Conroy papers, Newberry Library. Lewis's poem, "Kicked Along," appeared in *Blast* 5 (October–November 1934).

15. Williams's work also appeared in *New Masses*.

16. Catherine Lewis Bock, "Biographical Sketch of Harold H. Lewis," n.d., unpublished, in my possession.

17. Lewis to Edmund Wilson, letter, August 6, 1937. Courtesy of Yale University Library.

18. Lewis to Cowley, 1935. Copy with Conroy papers at Newberry Library.

19. The two magazines had joined in an ill-advised merger the year before, engineered by the Communist Party's Alexander Trachtenberg. See my *Worker-Writer in America*, 411–19. The letter is from the *PR and Anvil* editors to Lewis, February 4, 1936. Copy with Conroy papers at Newberry Library.

20. Qtd. in *PR and Anvil* letter to Lewis, February 4, 1936.

21. Lewis to Williams, June 26, 1936. Courtesy of Yale University Library.

22. My thanks to Debra White for pointing this out in a letter to me, January 24, 1996, and drawing my attention to Lewis's letter to Le Sueur. With the Le Sueur papers, courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society.

23. Lewis to Meridel Le Sueur, June 16, 1937. Courtesy of the Minneapolis Historical Society, Le Sueur papers.

24. Lewis's poem, "Eads Bridge—and How" appeared in *Midwest's* final issue, January 1937.

25. "An American Poet" is reprinted in *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties*, 257–63.

26. "As my contribution to the *New Masses*," Williams wrote, "was of longer standing and of more importance to me than the other and since I found the *New Masses* violently opposed to you on political grounds so much that they refused to print me if I remained a contributor to *Partisan Review*, I made my choice in their favor" (qtd. in Mariani 406).

27. See Wixson, chapters 7–10.

28. "The Temptation of Dr. Williams," *PR* 4 (January 1938): 61–2.

29. *TNR* (November 9, 1938). Reprinted in Salzman and Wallenstein, 297–300.

30. The demise of *The Anvil* shut off a major publication venue for radical writers like Lewis. It is likely the circumstances of that loss inspired in great part his growing animus towards the “Kaffee Klatsch Klan.”

31. “Twilight of the Thirties,” *Partisan Review* 6 (Summer 1939): 15.

32. Lewis explained his plaint: “There’s only one clique that really concerns me—the doddblasted Kaffee Klatsch Klan of literary commissars who want to monopolize American proletarian literature and who have functioned through *Dynamo*, *Partisan Review* and *New Masses*. They sabotaged the W. C. Williams essay on my work for two years. I have a watertight case against them, and I KNOW there is this clique. . . .” Lewis to Edmund Wilson, August 29, 1937. Lewis had begun a book-length work “on the history of the Williams essay” as part of his “research into present-day literary cliquery. . . .” Lewis to Wilson, August 6, 1937. Both letters courtesy of Yale University Library.

33. Conroy to Lewis, September 13, 1937. Copy with Conroy papers, Newberry Library.

34. *Poetry* 52 (June 1938): 169–70.

35. Lewis to Edmund Wilson, June 18, 1938. Courtesy of Yale University Library.

36. Cowley to Lewis, March 28, 1938. Copy with Conroy papers, Newberry Library.

37. Lewis to Wilson, September 11, 1938. Courtesy of Yale University Library.

38. Lewis to Lovett, September 11, 1938. Copy with Conroy papers.

39. Lewis to Wilson, September 14, 1939. Courtesy of Yale University Libraries.

40. Cowley to Lewis, June 28, 1940, August 7, 1940. Copies with Conroy papers Newberry Library.

41. “Farmhand Poet,” *New Masses* (April 28, 1942): 22. Kreymborg was Williams’s close friend.

42. Lewis to Williams, March 15, 1942. Copy with Conroy papers. Leftists like Harold Preece warned Lewis not to air his grievances in mail to the Highland Folk School in Tennessee. The school was already under attack by red-baiters, he said. The party, it appears from this and other communications at the time, was growing evermore defensive and secretive, sensing a change in national temper toward the left.

43. Joy Davidman to Lewis, June 7, 1943. Davidman later moved to England and married Anglican poet C. S. Lewis.

44. Feeling personal loyalty, Lewis defended Oka at first against treason charges under investigation by the FBI. Subsequent correspondence with Oka, however, changed Lewis’s attitude toward Oka’s activities.

45. Letter with H. H. Lewis Papers, Series II, Box 1044, Folder 14, Courtesy of Kent Library. Responding in the same letter to Lewis’s disloyalty charge against Oka, Williams wrote: “Sorry to hear Oka turned out to be a skunk and that you have not [sic] had to suffer for your confidence in him. To hell with him.” For a brief time Lewis’s suspicions rested on Conroy, then were withdrawn. Near war’s end Lewis trained his sights on party functionaries such as V. J. Jerome. Conroy warned Lewis against denouncing Jerome to the FBI as a Japanese agent involved in the Pearl Harbor surprise attack. “There is almost sure to be a duplication of the Palmer Red Raids after the war is over. If you’re on the list, you’ll be one

of the victims." Conroy to Lewis, January 26, 1945. Courtesy of Kent Library. The sad debilitation of Lewis's mental stability was noted by *Poetry* magazine's Geraldine Udell in a postcard to Conroy, September 13, 1947. Udell wrote: "I would judge H. H. L. had gone over the edge, wouldn't you?"

46. Williams to Lewis, 15 September 1947. Courtesy of Kent Library.

47. His writing, Gregory notes, "grows out of and is related to an 'American' quality . . ." (186). Edited by Norman Macleod, the entire issue of *Briarcliff Quarterly* in which Gregory's "William Carlos Williams and the 'Common Reader'" appeared was devoted to Williams's work.

48. Herbert Leibowitz, "A Patron Saint of American Poetry," *New York Times Book Review* (October 5, 1975): 7:2. In an essay published in 1958, Denis Donoghue drew attention to Williams's efforts to define a language and style that were characteristically American and separate from Europe. Much earlier, in 1928, Ezra Pound had underscored Williams's aim, which was to treat America as a subject of inspection and analysis. Both essays are included in J. Hillis Miller's *William Carlos Williams*. Williams himself made his aim clear: "Not the speech of English country people, which would have something artificial about it; not that, but language modified by *our* environment; the American environment" (Int 59).

49. Lewis's paranoia grew worse with time. During one of my last visits to Lewis in the mid-1980s, several years before his death, he complained of FBI harassment (agents had in fact interviewed Lewis in the early 1950s). The windows in Lewis's shack-home were set high. At night, he claimed, agents parked their car in front of his home, jacking it up on stilts so that the headlights shone through the windows in order to disturb his sleep. Attracted to his isolation and eccentricity (and perhaps to his gaunt, haunted appearance and penetrating eyes) a group of religious fundamentalists belonging to Herbert Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God, living in a nearby trailer village, enlisted Lewis as a healer for the sick. Wooed by their attention, the old atheist-radical obliged in laying his hand on the infirm.

50. Qtd. by Tomlinson in his "Introduction" to Williams's *Selected Poems*, xii; see also Williams's *Autobiography*, chapter 58.

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