Literary Obscenities

Bachman, Erik M.

Published by Penn State University Press

Bachman, Erik M.
Literary Obscenities: U.S. Case Law and Naturalism after Modernism.
Penn State University Press, 2018.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/58830.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/58830
2. How to Misbehave as a Behaviorist
(if You’re Wyndham Lewis)

Accepted as a sort of disciple of Watson, I attracted to myself a modicum of limelight. I had a measure of success. “How Science can be almost more entertaining than Fiction”—you know the sort of idea. “People Behaving” the first of these two books was called. This gave the critic of the silly season (it is always the silly season in the “Book Pages”) his opportunity, as indeed I had calculated it would. “People Misbehaving” the cheerful ruffian called it, with great satisfaction. This did a lot of good.

—WYNDHAM LEWIS, SNOOTY BARONET, 1932

With all this war stuff abaht it might do no harm to indicate that you did in 1916 or 17 (Cantleman) what the lot of em are now cashing in on. Can’t remember whether Cantleman was suppressed or not?????? However things have moved since.

—EZRA POUND, LETTER TO WYNDHAM LEWIS, 1930
As a matter of fact, Cantleman was suppressed, though Pound can be forgiven this lapse in memory because an awful lot was happening during the final year and a half of World War I. Leaving Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry* (1912–present) in a huff, he had recently taken up foreign editorship duties for *The Little Review* (1914–1929). Wyndham Lewis—whose work, along with that of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, was to be Pound’s most substantial contribution as editor for this quintessential modernist little magazine—had finally been deployed to the front around the beginning of June 1917 as an officer in the 224 Siege Battery of the Royal Garrison Artillery. And, around the time that the Bolsheviks were storming the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, *The Little Review* was being denied use of the mails by the U.S. Post Office and the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York.

Anticipating the almost mythically outsized ordeals undergone by the journal in its serialization of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the November 1917 obscenity trial concerning the publication of Wyndham Lewis’s wartime short story, “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate,” seemed at first glance to confirm that *The Little Review* was finally pursuing in earnest its no-quarter-given covenant between its readers and itself: “No Compromise with the Public Taste.” Foreshadowing what would later happen to Joyce’s text three times leading up to the “Nausikaa” trial, the District Court denied Margaret Anderson’s motion to restrain the postmaster of New York. According to Judge Augustus Hand, Lewis’s story addressed itself to readers’ bodies in ways that could not be contained through contemplation: “The young girl and the relations of the man with her are described with a degree of detail that does not appear necessary to teach the desired lesson, whatever it may be, or to tell a story which would possess artistic merit or arouse any worthy emotion.” What brought Hand up short were the excessive qualities of Lewis’s text. In its overmastering attention to salacious details and the striking development of those details into protracted descriptive passages, the story seemed committed to undermining the very sorts of moral and aesthetic designs to which it might otherwise lay claim. Hand thereby affirmed the postmaster’s administrative judgment that “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” was in fact “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” under the terms marked out by Section 211 of the U.S. Criminal Code and therefore could not be mailed to *The Little Review*’s subscribers.

“Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” remains one of the minor side attractions of modernist obscenity, seldom discussed in terms other than those that would present it as a negligible dress rehearsal for the later, more consequential trials of *Ulysses*. By contrast, this chapter contends that there is more to Lewis and obscenity than Leopold Bloom, Gerty MacDowell, and the Litany of Loreto. Comparing representations of animality in Lewis’s story to the early popular comparative psychology essays of John B. Watson (the “father” of behaviorism), it demonstrates that “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” not only expresses behaviorist assumptions regarding
obscenity considered as a reading practice but also anticipates Lewis’s subsequent critical and satirical engagements with behaviorism in the 1920s and 1930s. At least since 1954, when Hugh Kenner noted the “latent contradiction” between the attacks on behaviorism in Lewis’s criticism and the behaviorist premises nevertheless at work in much of Lewis’s fiction, the study of this obstinate modernist’s relationship to behaviorism has proven quite generative. Even when they write against him, however, most critics since Kenner have tended to follow his lead and take as their focus Lewis’s behaviorist novel, *Snooty Baronet* (1932). Here I argue that the continuity of behaviorist preoccupations in Lewis’s fiction extends much farther back than has often been assumed and that such preoccupations get expressed in his writing through the complementary experiences of animality and obscenity.

Equally important, however, “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” provided the first occasion for a United States judge to assess a modernist piece of writing in terms of legal obscenity, and as such it offers us a useful opportunity for reflecting on the horizon of legibility of modernism for its contemporaries. As this chapter demonstrates, it was clear to Judge Hand that something new and untoward was happening in Lewis’s short story, but in 1917 there did not appear to be enough principled aesthetic or literary grounds on which to exempt “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” from proscription for obscenity, at least no grounds of the sort that protected the “classics” of literature at that time. Such grounds would not be forthcoming until the innovations of modernism became more intelligible to writers, readers, lawyers, and judges alike by the early 1930s, which makes Hand’s interpretation of Lewis’s story all the more valuable as a description of modernist writing at a historical moment in which modernism as such was far from appearing credibly artistic or literary to judges.

I

Lewis drafted “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” during the long period of waiting for his belated deployment to the front around the beginning of June 1917 as an officer in the Royal Artillery. Fittingly enough, the story focuses on waiting to go to war rather than on war itself. In fact, violent scenes of battle only intrude in the final two sentences, when the contemptuous Cantleman compares the “impartial malignity” with which he beats a Hun’s brains out to the predatory sexual use he makes of his spring-mate, Stella, earlier in the narrative. In fact, Stella—and not the brutally beaten German—comprises Cantleman’s principal antagonist and scapegoat throughout the story, and in many respects Lewis’s short story functions to provide a naturalistic alibi for Cantleman’s impartially malign treatment of her.

The story opens with Cantleman overwhelmed by the literally steaming sexual energy given off by the animal life in the fields through which he is walking on his
way back to camp. Horses are appetizingly appraising the “masses of quivering shiny flesh” of the mares surrounding them (“CS-M,” 8). Female birds, though critical of the peeps and chocks making up the love songs of their partners, nevertheless admit that each of their male counterparts does indeed represent “a fluffy object from which certain satisfaction could be derived” (8). Even swine are getting in on the act:

The sow, as she watched her hog, with his splenetic energy, and guttural articulation, a sound between content and complaint, not noticing the untidy habits of both of them, gave a sharp grunt of sex-hunger, and jerked rapidly towards him. The only jarring note in this vast mutual admiration society was the fact that many of its members showed their fondness for their neighbor in an embarrassing way: that is they killed and ate them. But the weaker were so used to dying violent deaths and being eaten that they worried very little about it. The West was gushing up a harmless volcano of fire, obviously intended as an immense dreamy nightcap. (“CS-M,” 8)

Perhaps even more so than the embarrassing expression of “this vast mutual admiration society” in terms of homicidal and carnivorous violence, the last sentence sounds the passage’s jarring note, for it disrupts the salacious wildlife observations of the opening paragraph to resituate its enduring seasonal themes within a more urgent human framework. In noting Cantleman’s receptiveness to the fecundating activities of the animals around him, the end of the first paragraph reveals his ambivalence toward the war in which he is about to fight, insofar as death, or rather “the prospect of death” in battle, does indeed provide the “philosophic background” for his opening “cogitation on surrounding life” (“CS-M,” 8–9). Although he very well may die in action at the front, Cantleman insists that he is not naïve enough to believe that his death will thereby achieve anything like lasting significance. Far from representing an event of any historical consequence whatsoever, World War I is for Cantleman simply “a harmless volcano of fire” or “an immense dreamy nightcap” when compared to the timeless fucking, fighting, and feasting under way in the pressure-cooked fields he attentively traverses.

In short, the free indirect discourse of the opening of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” appears to subjugate the putative nonevent of World War I and its prospects of violent death to a vaguely registered but nevertheless overmastering law of nature. Another way of putting this would be to say that the hyperbolically aroused natural life seen in “the strenuous fields” surrounding Cantleman only superficially appears to be so many anthropomorphized projections of that soldier’s own spring-ignited lust (“CS-M,” 8). The matter of who projects what onto whom, however, becomes a good deal more vexed as the opening paragraph unfolds. Fredric Jameson has
usefully categorized the growing confusion of what constitutes cause or agency in this story as a peculiar instance of hypallage, according to which owner and property relations get scrambled by the syntactical reorientation of the adjective. For Jameson, hypallage is not so much a rhetorical device in “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” as it is a stylistic modus operandi that can be found throughout Lewis’s fiction: “Lewis’ hypallage, where the attributes of actor or act are transferred onto the dead scenery, generates a kind of contamination of the axis of contiguity, offering a glimpse of a world in which the old-fashioned substances, like marbles in a box, have been rattled so furiously together that their ‘properties’ come loose and stick to the wrong places—a very delirium of metonymy of which, as we shall see, Lewis’ subsequent writings provide some stunning examples.” If, as Jameson argues, the adjective “strenuous” seems at first glance to mismodify the noun “fields” (for surely it is the walking of Cantleman that is strenuous here), then as the paragraph develops it becomes clearer and clearer that “strenuous” is the right word after all to describe the quasi-mechanistic couplings and steamy physical exertions that in fact constitute the fields. In other words, Lewis rattles his box of marbles not to achieve new figures thereby but rather to reorder both reality itself and one’s relationship to it. Therefore, a preexisting affective ferment within Cantleman does not motivate his engrossed interest in the animal orgy occurring around him; his figmentary “instincts” cannot be said to have been projected onto the field. Rather, the horses, the mares, the birds, the hogs, and the sows all rub their animal instinctual responses off on Cantleman, meaning his heightened libidinal state is no innately prescribed reaction to the green fuse of spring. The story’s founding move, then, is to counter Romanticism’s pathetic fallacy with a rigorously pursued anti-pathetic fallacy.

As it turns out, the paradoxical and estranging goal of Cantleman’s “cogitation on surrounding life” is to become something less than kin or kind to the human as such: “On the other hand, Cantleman had a little more human, as well as a little more divine, than those usually on his left and right, and he had had, not so long ago, conspicuous hopes that such a conjuncture might produce a new human chemistry. But he must repudiate the human entirely, if that were to be brought off. His present occupation, the trampling boots upon his feet, the belt that crossed his back and breast, was his sacrifice, his compliment to, [sic] the animal” (“CS-M,” 10). World War I names the occasion not for a Zarathustrian flight into the wilderness but rather for a sacrifice of humanity’s “meagre stream of sublimity” to the animal by hazarding one’s very life (9). Nevertheless, if Cantleman has apparently developed beyond a passing youthful fancy for pseudo-Nietzschean theatrics, his disillusioned maturation still seems to have produced little more than an inverted fantasy image of Nietzsche’s most enduring popular myth, for his hopes here for “a new human chemistry” are frankly more underdog than Übermensch. It must also be kept in mind, however, that Cantleman’s is not a complete sacrifice, for what is
said to differentiate his animalistic acceptance of a world order governed by some sort of law of nature from the assent given by swine, birds, and horses is the fact that his is consciously granted and pursued, even though consciousness is said to be the very thing that makes being human so disgusting to Cantleman: “The newspapers were the things that stank most on earth, and human beings anywhere were the most ugly and offensive of the brutes because of the confusion caused by their consciousness” (“CS-M,” 9). The problem of his own consciousness notwithstanding, Cantleman’s gambit remains that of stampeding recklessly and hilariously through the war as if he were nothing more than an animal used to dying a violent death, as if his consciousness did not stink like that of any other human being.

Far from being “an immense dreamy nightcap,” World War I offers instead an absolute set of proving grounds for Cantleman’s drastic reorganization of life, for which Stella provides something of a war game. In this case, the carnal pleasures of coupling pursued as an end in itself are Cantleman’s implicit sacrifice to the animal. Moreover, he plays the part of the soldier-suitor for Stella because that is the sort of role to which she seems most susceptible. In fact, she presumably takes on the corresponding part of a game rustic mate with some alacrity: “The young woman had, or had given herself, the unlikely name of Stella” (“CS-M,” 12; emphasis added). Though the role-playing dimensions of their spring encounters are perhaps not lost on either of them, Stella and Cantleman still materially differ in the expectations they bring to their respective parts. While her response to Cantleman’s cynical gift of a ring is somewhat equivocal—“Her melting gratitude was immediately ligotted with long arms, full of the contradictory and offending fire of the spring” (“CS-M,” 13)—Stella at the very least does seem to expect Cantleman to share responsibility for their child when she later begins inundating him with letters at the front regarding her pregnancy: “They came to Cantleman with great regularity in the trenches; he read them all through from beginning to end, without comment of any sort” (“CS-M,” 14). Cantleman’s response is effectively a nonresponse because all that Stella is to him is someone who once represented the most proximate means of partaking in the transferable libidinal intensities suggested to him earlier by the spring pursuits of the swine, birds, and horses:

In the narrow road where they got away from the village, Cantleman put his arm around Stella’s waist and immediately experienced all the sensations that he had been divining in the creatures around him; the horse, the bird and the pig. The way in which Stella’s hips stood out, the solid blood-heated expanse on which his hand lay, had the amplitude and flatness of a mare. Her lips had at once no practical significance, but only the aesthetic blandishment of a bull-like flower. With the gesture of a fabulous Faust he drew her against him, and kissed her with a crafty gentleness. (“CS-M,” 12)
Presenting himself to his spring-mate as if he were merely a diabolic lover cut to a ready-made pattern, Cantleman presses Stella’s body to his own and feels beneath her dress not the ruse of human flesh but rather “the amplitude and flatness of a mare” as the porously contiguous world produced by the narrative achieves a delirious climax here: the rustic fields are indeed strenuous, Stella is in fact little more than a palpably blood-warmed collage of horse-bird-swine, and Cantleman’s spring pursuits turn out at last to encompass so many thinly veiled acts of bestiality.

II
As drastic as this vision of the Üblemensch in rout, beating a conscious retreat into the nearby sow in heat, may at first appear to be, it was no mere idiosyncrasy of Lewis’s soldier. Compare, for instance, Cantleman’s cogitations in an English field in the spring of 1917 with the following remarks made by a Johns Hopkins experimental and comparative psychologist in a winter 1910 issue of Harper’s Monthly:

The point that I would make in all this is that there is no royal road to habit and knowledge. Man gets his first steps in exactly the same way as does the animal. Studies in animal behavior, while not fulfilling the hopes of the early students of evolution in showing that animals have exalted types of intellect, nevertheless are forcing us to reconsider our extravagant notions of the all-sufficiency of the human mind. Continuity between the mind of man and brute, the idea of the early students, will still be shown to exist, not by exalting the mind of the brute, but rather by the reverse process of showing the defects in the human mind."

Though he was three years away from drafting what would become the behaviorist manifesto (“Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It”), John B. Watson can already be found here attempting to cut the Gordian knot formed by dualist conceptions of a mind independent of a body along with the mentalist assumptions of interiority as such. In particular, Watson undercuts those of his peers who were cussedly holding on to a more anthropocentric worldview by demonstrating that the experimental study and observation of behavior, whether human or animal, was the only way to make psychology a natural science. A debasing material contiguity between the human and the animal was to be the new order of the day:

How do we make a laboratory study of the mind of an animal? It is not possible to get into its mind and see for ourselves the drama of mental events which is taking place there, consequently how is it ever possible to get any clear insight into the workings of its mind? At first sight we seem to have here an insuperable obstacle to the study. A little reflection, however, will show that we are forever
debarred from studying the mind of our human neighbor in this direct way; yet surely no one in this day would be hardy enough to deny that we can and do get a very definite and scientific notion of the way our neighbor’s mind works.12

This further exemplifies the bottom-up nature of Watson’s radical reformulation of psychology in the early decades of the last century, insofar as the impossibility of studying states of animal consciousness entails not the discarding of animal psychology as a science but rather the overturning of human psychology as it had been hitherto investigated. In other words, states of consciousness were no longer the privileged objects of psychological study, because the laboratory study of animals had at last revealed consciousness itself to be the real obstacle in the way of contemporary psychological studies of human subjects. According to Watson, psychology thus had to sacrifice consciousness to see at last what ultimately binds us to animals: observable behavior. Much like Cantleman, Watson’s article contemplates a momentous transvaluation of values by making the animal the measure of man rather than the obverse.13

Lewis’s culture critiques in the 1920s and 1930s consistently anathematized behaviorism as an especially insidious factor in the mechanization of daily modern life. Yet the relationship of his fiction to contemporary versions of behaviorism is a good deal more complex than these later critical writings would seem to suggest on their face. While it would no doubt be spurious to take behaviorism, in a sort of historicist coup de main, as the “origin” of Cantleman or the “key” to his actions, I nevertheless do submit that early, exploratory formulations of behaviorism provide important contexts for assessing the obscene potentials of Lewis’s narrative, particularly how he inhabits a quasi-behaviorist point of view from within by way of free indirect discourse.

This appears illogical at first sight, for interiority was precisely the sort of thing behaviorism was understood to be in the process of extirpating altogether, in psychology as in life. It was in this connection, after all, that Watson tirelessly sought to undermine the reliability and utility of the types of introspective reports influentially described and modeled by William James in The Principles of Psychology (1890).14 On the one hand, Watson argued, there is no way of eliciting introspective responses from pigeons or rats experimentally. On the other hand, at a methodological level, introspection necessarily fails to achieve intersubjective agreement among scientists because of its necessary lack of objectivity. On this count, Watson reminded his peers that they need only refer to the state of psychological research on emotions at that time to see that no meaningful consensus was then possible, because the terms in which psychologists had introspectively formulated the field were arbitrary and incommensurate: whereas James divided emotions into the coarse (e.g., grief, fear, love, rage) and the subtle (e.g., the moral, the intellectual,
How to Misbehave as a Behaviorist

and the aesthetic), William McDougall had taken to pairing every primary emotion with an instinct (e.g., fear was to be coupled with the instinct for flight, anger with that for pugnacity, subjection with that for self-abasement), and neither approach could be used to disprove or modify the other, because no common objective method guided either psychologist in putting together his respective schema.\(^{15}\) Were this mentalist line of inquiry to be pursued for much longer, there would eventuate as many theoretical accounts of emotion as there were psychology departments. According to Watson, experimental observations of behavior would be able to fare better because such observations are refutable and accordingly subject to the sorts of comparisons and verifications that make possible the objective grounding of psychology as a natural science.\(^{16}\) In thus placing the human and the animal on the shared plane of observable behavior, Watson strategically reduced the psychologist’s world to one consisting entirely of observable physiological processes. That is to say, it was to be a world of surfaces behaving.

Considered simply as a methodology, then, behaviorism seems the ideal shell for Lewis’s brand of literary modernism. For one thing, his culture critiques tend to appear almost surgical in their treatment of impressionistic renderings of interiorities and popular experiences, both of which Lewis operates on as if they were cancerous cysts. Perhaps the most productive structuring enmity in The Art of Being Ruled (1926), after all, is that of inside and outside, with Lewis relegating to the inside almost everything that he regards as an unnecessary impediment to the imminent restructuration of the world on socialist grounds, which he welcomes with more equanimity here than he was ever able to muster again for such projects. For instance, the putative impersonality of science, Bergsonian vitalism, psychoanalysis, Gertrude Stein, Henri Matisse, and “the Small Man” (or entrepreneur) of capitalist competition are all shown by Lewis to prey upon and live irrationally within “the smoking-hot inside of things, in contrast to the hard, cold, formal skull or carapace.”\(^{17}\) Each of these diverse phenomena and figures comprises a forfeiting of “objective qualities” for “more mixed and obscure issues.”\(^{18}\) For Lewis, this forfeiture betokens not only the confusions that follow upon the privileging of emotions but also the annihilation of intellectual activity altogether: “All the meaning of life is of a superficial sort, of course: there is no meaning except on the surface. It is physiologically the latest, the ectodermic, and most exterior material of our body that is responsible for our intellectual life: it is on a faculty for exteriorization that our life depends.”\(^{19}\) Intellect, in this view, represents the pyrrhic maintenance of minimal distinctions in our lives, for to linger upon the ectodermic is to maintain one’s capacity to separate inside from outside along with subject from object. The chitinous skin-shell, in turn, functions as a shield against the outer object-world (a world increasingly difficult to differentiate from its passive consuming subjects) and against the affective threats posed by the intestines, by the interior and its leveling
peristaltic mechanisms: “Love, as we discursively understand it, can only exist on the surface. An inch beneath, and it is no longer love, but the abstract rage of hunger and reproduction of which the swallowing of an oyster, or the swallowing of the male by the female epira, is an illustration. And it is the existence of the artist that maintains this superficiality, differentiation of existence, for us: our personal, our detached life, in short, in distinction to our crowd-life.”

20 The artist in this scheme acts to foreclose mechanisms and techniques of social identification (e.g., ritualized or mimetic forms of association, role-playing), which Lewis graphically conveys throughout The Art of Being Ruled by images of autopsied bodies (because on the inside we are all one big gut-crammed mass of viscera and torpidly secreting glands indistinguishable from each other). Against this broad cultural and sociopolitical drift in postwar life in the West toward the corruption of subject-object relations, Lewis's antagonizing artist offers us the possibility of a world of calcified and non-interpenetrating forms. The artist's civic function, therefore, is to hold out the mere prospect of difference, or, more provocatively still, the possibility that to love and to eat are not commutative activities, despite what Cantleman's cogitations reveal to him in the spring of 1917 (“many of [the animals in the field] showed their fondness for their neighbor in an embarrassing way: that is they killed and ate them”).

21 Moreover, the baleful gaze of the detached, quasi-behaviorist observer endlessly preoccupied with the surface life of things constitutes perhaps the formative compositional perspective adopted in Lewis's satirical fiction. In fact, in the course of defending his idiosyncratic concept of nonethical satire in Men without Art (1934), Lewis explicitly counterposes introspective techniques to more shapely, exteroceptive forms: “To let the readers ‘into the minds of the characters;’ to ‘see the play of their thoughts’—that is precisely the method least suited to satire. That it must deal with the outside, that is one of the capital advantages of this form of literary art—for those who like a resistant and finely-sculptured surface, or sheer words.”

22 What disqualifies stream of consciousness or interior monologue from possessing more deliberately secondhand, ironic use in Lewis's satire is the fact that such devices tend to take subjectivity for granted, whereas Men without Art would insist not only that subjectivity as such has undergone a dangerous slackening in the early decades of the twentieth century but also that this reduced or dissolved subjectivity may now be said to constitute satire's chief subject matter: “For what else is a character in satire but that? Is it not just because they are such machines, governed by routine—or creatures that stagnate, as it were ‘in a leaden cistern’—that the satirist, in the first instance, has considered them suitable for satire?”

23 If the generalized condition of man as a mimetically governed machine provides satire with its stock situation, then according to Lewis one of satire's main functions is to break up the devious standardizing forces in contemporary life by exaggerating them to the point of riant agitation:
But “men” are undoubtedly, to a greater or less extent, machines. And there are those among us who are revolted by this reflection, and there are those who are not. Men are sometimes so palpably machines, their machination is so transparent, that they are comic, as we say. And all we mean by that, is that our consciousness is pitched up to the very moderate altitude of relative independence at which we live—at which level we have the illusion of being autonomous and “free.” But if one of us exposes too much his “works,” and we start seeing him as a thing, then—in subconsciously referring back to ourselves—we are astonished and shocked, and we bark at him—we laugh—in order to relieve our emotion. 

The agency, autonomy, and freedom we so casually ascribe to ourselves and our respective consciousnesses in daily life are wholly illusory. The truth of this observation, Lewis argues, frequently enough gets confirmed by our fellow humans, who cannot help but fail to keep up the elevating pretenses of their own unique beings because they recurrently and inadvertently expose how thoroughly routinized their every move is. They cannot help but reveal their ludicrous susceptibility to various mimetic modes of social identification, their “works” as it were. By focusing almost exclusively on the superficiality of people and their machinic actions, by treating them as so many things, the satirist can thereby offer to his readers the only real measure of agency, autonomy, and freedom left to any of us, for it is our alleviating barks of laughter that both confirm our thingness and our vestigial sense of self: “And yet [our deepest laughter] is non-personal and non-moral. And it enters fields which are commonly regarded as the preserve of more ‘serious’ forms of reaction. There is no reason at all why we should not burst out laughing at a foetus, for instance. We should after all only be laughing at ourselves!—at ourselves early in our mortal career.”

Lewis’s satire thus presents us with a kind of performative contradiction familiar to readers of literary naturalism, in which depictions of closed worlds often have a tendency to call forth antithetical responses. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the determinist networks unveiled in literary naturalist texts only appear to bar the possibility of human agency and social reform so long as one treats these texts as autonomous artifacts. Yet in principled theoretical expressions of literary naturalism, the seemingly ruthless representation of coercive social powers is often the vehicle by which these same works communicate their vested interest in intervening, through scientific and political means, into the administration of societies, bodies, and time. In addition, the apparent closures effected in works as seemingly diverse as Zola’s *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871–93), Giovanni Verga’s *I Malavoglia* (1881), and Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* prove to be provisional, insofar as the reader’s affective response must always be reckoned into the evaluations summoned
forth by a naturalist work. Thus, the violent morcellation of satiric laughter is said by Lewis to act as a paradoxical preservative (or as an “anti-toxin of the first order”) ensuring that a person yelping in hilarity is not yet completely machine-like, that he is not entirely subject to the osmotic forces of social identification that rule all. As Tyrus Miller has succinctly put it, for Lewis satirical laughter represents a timely and potent rephrasing of the Cartesian thesis: “I laugh, therefore I (still) am.”

Satire in Lewis’s work is accordingly the form that behaving surfaces take when amplified to an unqualified degree, indicating that the worlds such satire presumes are those of an infernal behaviorist utopia. Watson himself began offering a schematic Pisgah sight of such a utopia (minus the diabolism, of course) as early as 1913: “In a system of psychology completely worked out, given the response the stimuli can be predicted; given the stimuli the response can be predicted. Such a set of statements is crass and raw in the extreme, as all such generalizations must be. Yet they are hardly more raw and less realizable than the ones which appear in the psychology texts of the day.” For Watson, the twin goals of behaviorism were nothing less than the prediction and control of behavior. Above all else, therefore, his formulations of behaviorism sought to reconstitute determinism solely as a problem of pedagogy and social management. Heredity and our genetic stock may contribute greatly to our variable ability to learn, function, or respond, but in his writings Watson was adamant in subordinating such matters to the more significant features of our environment, howsoever “natural” or constructed that environment may have happened to be: “Much of our structure laid down in heredity would never come to light, would never show in function, unless the organism were put in a certain environment, subjected to certain stimuli and forced to undergo training. Our hereditary structure lies ready to be shaped in a thousand different ways—the same structure—depending on the way in which the child is brought up.”

In this regard, Watson’s emphasis on the importance of animal psychology for human educational development in the 1910 essay in Harper’s becomes perhaps even more significant: “Educational systems dealing with that most precious article, the human child, are necessarily conservative, and are slow to introduce changes and to have resort to experiment. Fortunately, there is no such sentiment in regard to the courses of study prescribed for animals. We may vary the course of training ad libitum.” According to the behaviorist study of habit formation and learning under Watson, a rat potentially has more to tell us about the upbringing and educational organization of a human child than the child itself does.

Watson’s behaviorist ideal (“given the response the stimuli can be predicted; given the stimuli the response can be predicted”) thus affirms the technocratic aims underlying his reconstitution of psychology on behaviorist grounds, to for see and describe complex organic matter simply as a function of stimuli and responses is to become restless ultimately with mere describing and seeing. Behaviorism’s real
value could only be realized by treating it as an *applied* science because the behaviorist “wants to control man’s reactions as physical scientists want to control and manipulate other natural phenomena.” One way of effecting this control in early behaviorist terms was both to study extensively and thereafter to shape the (male) role-playing of which everyday life seems to consist: “In general, we are what the situation calls for—a respectable person before our preacher and our parents, a hero in front of the ladies, a teetotaler in one group, a bibulous good fellow in another.”

According to Watson, behaviorism presents us with the latest way of making men be what the situation called for, and it was to be behaviorists who could best guide their making and decide upon the situations calling forth the desired behaviors from the subjects thereby fabricated. As he asserts at the end of *Behaviorism* (1924; revised 1930): “For the universe will change if you bring up your children, not in the freedom of the libertine, but in behavioristic freedom—a freedom which we cannot even picture in words, so little do we know of it. Will not these children in turn, with their better ways of living and thinking, replace us as society and in turn bring up their children in a still more scientific way, until the world finally becomes a place fit for human habitation?”

Watson’s behaviorism thus holds out the promise of making life and its social organization not just better over time, but so much better that our current world will eventually appear to our behaviorist-shaped grandchildren as a time and place that were positively inimical to human life itself. The principal rhetorical address of Watson’s *Behaviorism* is consequently interpellative: you, the present-day reader, can begin to ameliorate our current uninhabitable conditions by following my (Watson’s) conclusions regarding the conditioning of infants, by learning to verbalize accurately your visceral behavior, by exposing yourself to stimuli contrived by behavioristically trained educators to change your personality traits for more socially desirable ones, and so forth. Watson’s behaviorist ideal, therefore, is not devised to assuage men and women adrift in a universe entropically winding down; it is instead an exemplum out of a future in which everything will finally be set to rights: “I am trying to dangle a stimulus in front of you, a verbal stimulus which, if acted upon, will gradually change this universe” (*B*, 303).

**III**

Humans, in this view, are simply animals with complicated sets of learning schedules, reflex arcs, and repertoires of behavior. To paraphrase Lewis’s *Men without Art*, they are potentially just machines governed by routine rather than ground down by thermodynamics. Consequently, any stress put upon the machine-like qualities of the (behaviorist) man in Watson’s work is little more than a figural move made to reduce these organized complexities to an order digestible by an educated lay
public. Watson’s behaviorism often constructs machines out of humans to make a point, but such analogies are themselves not the point they so often are in Lewis’s satirical fiction. For instance, when Watson describes how “the arms are levers built to permit wide excursive movements,” he would seem to demote our upper limbs to mere implements in the application of force (B, 201). Likewise, when he depicts how the “tongue, while bearing very delicate receptors, is on the muscular side a bulk organ for rolling our food around,” he apparently relegates that tissue-mass to the status of an imprecisely blunt aliment-mover (B, 240). In contrast, Lewis reassembles these disaggregated odds and ends into a fully functioning whole, as, for instance, happens in the final version of his postwar short story, “Bestre”:

With a flexible imbrication reminiscent of a shutter-lipped ape, a bud of tongue still showing, [Bestre] shot the latch of his upper lip down in front of the nether one, and depressed the interior extremities of his eyebrows sharply from their quizzing perch—only this monkey-on-a-stick mechanical pull—down the face’s centre. At the same time, his arms still folded like bulky lizards, blue tattoo on brown ground, upon the escarpment of his vesicular middle, not a hair or muscle moving, he made a quick, slight motion to me with one hand to get out of the picture without speaking—to efface myself.

Bestre’s body is made up of a curious mixture of mechanical and animalistic components: he is not an ape but “a shutter-lipped ape”; he does not give his eyebrows a mechanical pull but rather a “monkey-on-a-stick mechanical pull.” Yet, if his face presents the narrator, Ker-Orr, with the countenance of an ape-android, then Bestre’s arms are simply “bulky lizards” resting upon his chest. The effect of the passage is not so much the effacement of Ker-Orr as it is of Bestre himself. The reduction of Bestre to ape-monkey-machine-lizard calls into question the possibility of human agency while recalling Cantleman’s mimetic self-assimilation to his encompassing environment at the beginning of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate.”

The “Bestre” passage also evokes the behaviorist man-machine by way of the Cartesian animal. In the fifth part of his *Discourse on Method* (1637), René Descartes describes at length the ways in which animals already present us with so many “natural” automata, made up as they are of protomachinic assemblages of organs, arteries, bones, nerves, and muscles disposed to produce particular actions when placed in particular environmental arrangements. It is because of this disposition, Descartes contends, that we would be wholly unable to differentiate a real ape from an ape-android were the two displayed before us: “were there such machines exactly resembling in organs and outward form an ape or any other irrational animal, we could have no means of knowing that they were in any respect of a different nature from these animals.” Conversely, according to Descartes, were
we to be presented with a human-android, “capable of imitating our actions as far as it is morally possible,” we would nevertheless be able to detect the subterfuge because (1) such an android “could never use words or other signs arranged in such a manner as is competent to us in order to declare our thoughts to others,” and (2) this hypothetical human-android would prove wholly incapable of acting from knowledge or reason because its activities would be restricted “solely [to] the disposition of [its] organs.” The human-android would give the game away to an observing “real” human because it would out of necessity behave exactly like an animal; in other words, it would prove itself incapable of appositely communicating with other humans just as it would finally expose itself to be “destitute of reason.”

Watson's behaviorism conforms to the Cartesian preoccupations within man's relationship to animal and machine even as it nominally betrays that relationship itself. In making humans and animals equivalent by way of observable behavior and patterns of habit formation, Watson no longer makes Descartes's distinctions between people and animals-machines qualitative. To argue in this way is to question the sufficiency of speech and reason as the differentia specifica of being human. Since Watson disregards reason, he ends up throwing mind and consciousness out with the homunculus in the bathwater, castigating all talk of them as a regrettable heritage of our savage past. Against the superstitious legacy of linking mind and cogitation to metaphysics and the soul, “thought” for Watson is simply a term that encompasses the implicitly coordinated activities of the body as a whole, including visceral reactions and more organized verbal responses to stimuli.

We can also note here that human speech in Watson's behaviorism represents something like an instance of economy or frugality, insofar as the principal function of words is said to consist of their capacity to act as time-saving replacements for objects. In a behaviorist world patterned after Watson, words are capable of “call[ing] out all of [the human being's] manual activity. The words function in the matter of calling out responses exactly as did the objects for which the words serve as substitutes.” Though they may save us a considerable amount of time in our daily lives, there is nothing all that special or ennobling about words. They remain for Watson within the realm of observable behaviors, acting as and responding to stimuli, not at all unlike an ape lifting a branch threateningly at another ape, or a monolingual American gesturally directing a Romanian nurse's attention toward a cupboard in which can be found a box of oatmeal and a matchbook.

Despite these differences, however, early behaviorism certainly remained within the Cartesian framework insofar as “Nature” is always already a machine for both Watson and Descartes. Watson's sole “innovation” is to take man down a notch or two and put him back in his place among his ape, rodent, and android cohort, a feature that Lewis himself discerns in the cultural and social life of postwar
Europe with his characteristic mixture of marvel and disgust in *Time and Western Man* (1927):

Descartes called animals *machines*: they had not the rational spark. But men use their rational spark so unequally, and are so much machines too, that, on the face of it, that generalization is a very superficial one—one that you would expect in “the antechamber of Truth” (as Leibniz called cartesian philosophy), but not in Truth's presence. Many animals, indeed most, are more dignified, much freer, and more reasonable than men, in the conduct of their lives: and the “language habit,” as the behaviourist calls it, is a servitude for those who are unable to use it, but have to be content to be used by it. It is not a thing to boast about that you *talk*, and that the elephant does not. It depends on what you say.46

Lewis more drastically upends Descartes's oppositions here than Watson's work ever expressly does. Descartes's positive valuation of reason, for instance, gets moved to the animal-machine column of Lewis's accounting ledger, whereas that of language stays put on the human side even as it receives a negative sign provisionally placed in front of it. In such a world as this, Descartes's casual assurance that the human as such can easily be distinguished from the android becomes entirely ungrounded, as in fact we see occurring time and time again in works such as Lewis's 1930 satire, *The Apes of God*, a novel populated with nothing but Cartesian human-androids (the titular apes), who endlessly mimic creativities and subjectivities they can never hope to embody or instantiate fully themselves. As the ever-absent Pierpont, who in the end is himself the very sort of ape he attacks, writes in his encyclical in that novel: “It is to what I have called the Apes of God that I am drawing your attention—those prosperous mountebanks who alternately imitate and mock at and traduce those figures they at once admire and hate.”47 In such a book and within such a worldview, it is the “real” artist and the “real” human who would give the game away to the hypothetical objective observer, and not, as Descartes would have it, the other way round.

Yet if, as behaviorists like Watson contend, language leaves us more “done to” than “doing,” then at least one tactical way of maintaining a vestigial sense of rational agency would seem to be “the dead and pulverizing silence” of a Bestre (“B,” 82), Ker-Orr's most important instructor in the skirmishes waged upon the puppets of *The Wild Body* (1927).48 Bestre's weaponry, for one thing, is strictly ocular:

It was a matter of who could be most silent and move least: it was a stark stand-up fight between one personality and another, unaided by adventitious muscle or tongue. It was more like phases of combat or courtship in the insect-world. The
Eye was really Bestre’s weapon: the ammunition with which he loaded it was
drawn from all the most skunk-like provender, the most ugly mucins, fungal
glands, of his physique. Excrement as well as sputum would be shot from his
luminous hole, with the same certainty in its unsavoury appulsion. Every resource
of metonymy, bloody mind transfusion or irony were also his. (“B,” 82–83)

Idly stirring up stray animosities with his pupillary discharges, Bestre stocks these
silent blasts with all the noisome resources of scatological sound. Expectorated
orts, feces, and mucus (“the most skunk-like provender”) unsavorily shoot out of
his eyes (“his luminous hole”) in an even coarser version of hypallage perhaps than
“Cantleman’s Spring-Mate.” Aiming and shooting out the waste of his other orifices,
Bestre’s eyes attempt to avoid language altogether, for the mouth is no longer the
organ of speech so much as it is a bronchial torpedo bay, the functions of which the
eyes can perform just as well. In fact, the eyes arguably fulfill this office even better
than does the mouth because Bestre’s sole weakness turns out to be his regrettable
tendency to use his mouth in order to boast rather than to spit and spew forth still
more filth at his auditors. Ker-Orr somewhat deflatingly ends his account of Bestre
by observing, “I have noticed that the more cramped and meagre [Bestre’s] action
has been, the more exuberant his account of the affair is afterwards. The more
restrictions reality has put on him, the more unbridled is his gusto as historian of
his deeds, immediately afterwards. Then he has the common impulse to avenge
that self that has been perishing under the famine and knout of a bad reality, by
glorifying and surfeiting it on its return to the imagination” (“B,” 87). It is, in other
words, as storyteller of his own silent misdeeds and antagonisms that Bestre fails
ultimately to do justice to their admittedly scanty—but nevertheless, for Ker-Orr
at least, exemplary—violence.

Furthermore, it is in this regard that we can begin to understand why Ker-Orr
is convinced that Bestre’s best last word remains his terminal offensive assault on the
wife of a “pretentious peppery Paris Salon artist,” to whom Bestre one day exposes
the bestial expressiveness of his eye along with that of his genitals (“B,” 84): “The
eye was his chosen weapon. Had he any theory, however, that certain occasions
warranted, or required, the auxiliary offices of some unit of the otherwise subor-
dinated mass? Can the sex of his assailant give us a clue? I am convinced in my
own mind that another agent was called in on this occasion. I am certain that he
struck the death-blow with another engine than his eye” (“B,” 85). Comparing this
account of Bestre’s silent victory with that of his subsequent defeat by way of speech
and storytelling, we can see that, despite Watson’s aforementioned claims, words
do not in the end merely constitute substitutes for the objects they propositionally
name in Lewis’s fiction. A lewd man necessarily remains more lewd than a lewd
story or report of that same lewd man’s lewd actions. Consequently, though Lewis’s
far-from-silent satires may presume the operative existence of so many behaviorist worlds and utopias, the very words they use do not therefore necessarily ventrilo-quizze the assertions of Watson’s behaviorism.

IV
We must be careful, however, not to read too much of Lewis’s postwar culture critiques and compositional methods back into his prewar fiction without making some effort at explanation. World War I not only interrupted Lewis’s grand designs on single-handedly building up a British avant-garde culture in his own image but also left him adrift as to what to do once it ended, and he found himself among those passed over by the war itself. It was, as he points out in his first autobiography, Blasting & Bombardiering (1937), the great event in his generation’s life, by which all previous and subsequent time was thereafter to be measured: “The War is such a tremendous landmark that locally it imposes itself upon our computations of time like the birth of Christ. We say ‘pre-war’ and ‘post-war,’ rather as we say B.C. or A.D.” At a more personal level, Lewis used this autobiography to offer a singular and defensive view of the strange turns his life as an artist and writer had taken following the war. If he was a one-man British avant-garde unto himself before 1914, then he would have us see him now (in the post-postwar period) as a one-man self-advertising agency, tirelessly recasting and buffing his career on the model of a resurrection man: “I started as a novelist and set a small section of the Thames on fire. My first book Tarr was a novel (1918). Then I buried myself. I disinterred myself in 1926, the year of the General Strike—but as a philosopher and critic. This was considered very confusing.” What exactly took place between the end of the Great War and the onset of the General Strike in Britain—the book-ends of Lewis’s “post-war” period—is never directly confronted by him. As he remarks early in Blasting & Bombardiering, “1918–1926 is a period marked ‘strictly private.’” Instead, he only obliquely approaches this momentous interlude in his life by way of metaphors, such as the sacrilegious one he makes in comparing himself to Jesus, though Lewis would have us know that he was buried for eight years (no measly three days would do for him) before exhuming an utterly transformed version of himself in the mid-1920s. Should we misunderstand Lewis’s impiety here as insincerity, however, we need only look at the material remainders of his transformation to disabuse ourselves: during the off-limits postwar phase of Lewis’s life, almost all of his prewar literary output—including, most significantly, the stories in The Wild Body, the Vorticist prose drama Enemy of the Stars (1914/1932), and Tarr (1918/1928)—underwent revisions that markedly changed the style and in some cases the content of these pieces. With Lewis’s new self came a new (because entirely rewritten) literary past as well.
A notable exception to Lewis’s postwar revisionary frenzy, however, was “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate,” which began reappearing in the second edition of Blasting & Bombardiering released by the University of California Press in 1967 without any alterations save a minor substitution of em dashes (—) for Lewis’s “=,” an idiosyncratic punctuation mark characteristic of his prewar writings. While I am not interested in Lewis’s motivations or intentions in neglecting to revise “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” along the lines of Tarr or the narrative cycle in The Wild Body, I do think that the story’s uncastigated integrity through and beyond the postwar period tends to justify its juxtaposition with the strategies and concerns evinced in the final version of “Bestre.” Perhaps most importantly, although these two pieces face each other across the putatively insurmountable partition set up by the Great War and the postwar, both narratives are structurally homologous insofar as they concern themselves principally with the representation and critique of failed (or otherwise fatally flawed) comportments toward hostile milieus.

As we have seen, the problem with Bestre’s strategy has little to do with his spectacular antagonisms in and of themselves. If anything, Ker-Orr’s story expresses bemused wonder at the subtle blows and pains one can deliver solely with the aid of one’s own eyes as well as at the scrupulous dedication Bestre brings to his role in these mute quayside brawls: “The key principle of his strategy is provocation. The enemy must be exasperated to the point at which it is difficult for him to keep his hands off his aggressor. The desire to administer the blow is as painful as the blow received. That the blow should be taken back into the enemy’s own bosom, and that he should be stifled by his own oath—that Bestre regards as so many blows, and so much abuse, of his, Bestre’s, although he has never so much as taken his hands out of his pockets, or opened his mouth” (“B,” 84). In their repetitiousness, their calculated coordination of stimuli and responses, and their reliance on nothing more than a balefully steady gaze, Bestre’s campaigns resemble crude behaviorist experiments, with Bestre doing triple duty as observer, stimulus, and lab rat. What in turn makes Bestre’s revisionary version of behaviorist experimentation so instructive for Ker-Orr and (presumably) Lewis is that it reduces the world not so much to behaving surfaces as to badly behaving surfaces. Bestre’s eyes act to break up the socially scripted complacencies and roles of those they malign through the act of observation itself; they work by singling someone out from the herd and fixing him or her with a confrontational stare, thereby disrupting the mimetic lures to which this particular person’s public life may be otherwise susceptible. Against the standardizing tendencies of Watson’s behaviorist machine, Bestre operates by aggressively drawing out his opponents’ singular identities over against those forces (advertising, cinema, books, etc.) that tend to dissolve such identities into one big undifferentiated mass. As argued previously, however, the signal failure of Bestre’s approach occurs when he stops staring and starts to open his mouth to speak, for
it is then that he gives in, along with his contingently encountered enemies, to the sorts of “common impulse[s]” governing all and against which he otherwise doggedly hurls the waste matter of his body, if only by way of his nauseating glances (“B,” 87).

Cantleman, in this regard at least, would appear to turn himself to account better because he manages to remain silent. An occasional sidelong reference is made to conversations he has with Stella, but the story never gets around to reporting his speech directly. Instead, the narrative emphasizes his stratagems in gaining the attention of the young woman, which looks an awful lot like what those of a novice Bestre might be: “At the village he met the girl, this time with a second girl. He stared at her ‘in such a funny way’ that she laughed. He once more laughed, the same sound as before, and bid her good evening. She immediately became civil” (“CS-M,” 10). What of course sets Cantleman’s funny stare apart from that of Bestre’s, however, is that the former aims to seduce in order to covertly antagonize. That is to say, Cantleman’s sacrifice to the animal and, correlative, to nature has all the doubtful efficacy of a performative contradiction:

In the factory town ten miles away to the right, whose smoke could be seen, life was just as dangerous for the poor, and as uncomfortable, as for the soldier in his trench. The hypocrisy of Nature and the hypocrisy of War were the same. The only safety in life was for the man with the soft job. But that fellow was not conforming to life’s conditions. He was life’s paid man, and had the mark of the sneak. He was making too much of life, and too much out of it. He, Cantelman [sic], did not want to owe anything to life, or enter into league or understanding with her! The thing was either to go out of existence: or, failing that, remain in it unreconciled, indifferent to Nature’s threat, consorting openly with her enemies, making a war within her war upon her servants. In short, the spectacle of the handsome English spring produced nothing but ideas of defiance in Cantleman’s mind. (“CS-M,” 13)

Consequently, Cantleman’s retreat into putatively lower life-forms is tactical; he gives in to the natural world around him in order to wage war against that world, just as he plays the part of suave soldier-suitor in order to take out his aggressions on Stella. Like the dangling feet of the bacillary Phasmidae, the excrement-smearred *Chrysomelid* larvae, and the magic rituals of primitive civilizations later described by Lewis’s younger contemporary Roger Caillois in “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” (1935), Cantleman’s mimetic self-assimilation into his immediate surroundings acts to derange spatial perception and to achieve his apparent depersonalization. Persisting illusions of velleity, however, are precisely what Cantleman continues to believe separate him from tribal magicians and insect
larvae. Cantleman’s wager is that the merest of intentions distinct from one’s actions have the potential to transform utterly the significance of those actions by the bare force of will itself. In other words, to act as if one has depersonalized oneself by retreating into pigs, birds, and horses is understood by Cantleman to perform the function of a sort of modern-day moly that ensures that he remains consistently himself despite this drastic assimilation. Angling ultimately to play the part of a modern-day Odysseus, Cantleman casts himself as Circe and as Odysseus’s metamorphosed shipmates in order to rail at both. Yet, what Cantleman cannot see without becoming Lewis, Bestre, or the narrator of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” is the degree to which there is no way to distinguish as if from as in nature or life: “And when [Cantleman] beat a German’s brains out, it was with the same impartial malignity that he had displayed in the English night with his Spring-mate. Only he considered there too that he was in some way outwitting Nature; he had no adequate realization of the extent to which, evidently, the death of a Hun was to the advantage of the animal world” (“CS-M,” 14).

V

Upon hearing of the U.S. Post Office’s decision to confiscate the October 1917 issue of The Little Review, Margaret Anderson quickly took out a motion to restrain the postmaster of New York, and at trial the inimitable modernist art collector, patron, and lawyer John Quinn “brilliantly and . . . humorously” defended The Little Review, much as he would do four years later when the journal again faced charges of obscenity for publishing the “Nausikaa” episode of Ulysses. As would happen in these later legal ordeals surrounding the serialization of Joyce’s novel, however, Quinn’s defense did not prevent the little magazine from being found “obscene, lewd, or lascivious” under Section 211 of the U.S. Criminal Code.

Manifestly ambivalent about affirming the postmaster’s decision, Judge Augustus Hand remarks at some length in his opinion as to the uneven merits of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” considered both as a piece of art and as a moral tale. After briefly describing the circumstances surrounding the case as well as quoting the relevant portions of the statute at issue, Hand’s brief opinion begins by offering a pretty astute summary of the story’s plot in which he emphasizes both its deterministic milieu and the rebellious reactions that this milieu occasions in young Cantleman:

The publication which is particularly objected to by the Postal Authorities is a short story about a soldier in the British Army who reflects upon the topsy-turvy condition of the world and feels that gigantic forces, which he is pleased to call those of nature, are arrayed against the individual—forces that in most cases will overpower him. He regards his own destruction in the
present European conflict as more than likely, and under all these conditions feels at war with the world. With satirical satisfaction he seduces a young girl and disregards her appeals when she becomes a mother. In his revolt at the confusion and injustice of the war he feels justification at having wreaked his will and obtained his satisfaction—thus, as he says, outwitting nature.

Hand admits that a number of reassuring morals can be glimpsed in all of this, whether these be understood as the demonstration either of “the wickedness of selfishness and indulgence” or of “the degradation of camp life and the demoralizing character of war.” In particular, he readily concedes that Lewis’s narrative “naturally causes a reflecting mind to balance the heroism and self abnegation that always shines forth in war with the demoralization that also inevitably accompanies it. The very old question suggests itself as to the ultimate values of war.”

Hand’s qualms about ultimately acceding to the putatively conventional morality of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate,” however, have to do with what he regards to be the untenable assumption that the story is aimed at those with reflecting minds like his own. After all, what is perhaps most objectionable about “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate,” he argues, is the relish with which it addresses itself to readers in ways that cannot be contained or mastered through contemplation: “But no outline of the story conveys its full import. The young girl and the relations of the man with her are described with a degree of detail that does not appear necessary to teach the desired lesson, whatever it may be, or to tell a story which would possess artistic merit or arouse any worthy emotion. On the contrary it is at least reasonably arguable, I think, that the details of the sex relations are set forth to attract readers to the story because of their salacious character.” The first thing to note here is the degree to which Hand’s comments in the first Little Review trial anticipate the holistic test for obscenity most famously articulated sixteen years later in John Woolsey’s favorable opinion in United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses.” In that case, it will be remembered, Woolsey held that “reading ‘Ulysses’ in its entirety, as a book must be read on such a test as this, did not tend to excite sexual impulses or lustful thoughts but that its net effect on them was only that of a somewhat tragic and very powerful commentary on the inner lives of men and women.” For many interpreters of this test, aesthetic judgments on the model of something like form-content relations could hereafter be used to mediate the application of obscenity statutes to works with literary or artistic pretensions. Understandably, liberalizing jurists and literary critics have tended to present Woolsey’s holistic test as an unequivocal victory in the fight of artistic expression against its suppression. Within the terms such a test sets out, after all, it seems possible in theory to see any and all troubling content in a book as passing, negligible moments of an integral and nonobjectionable whole. In this view, United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses” was understood to have
set an important and incontrovertible precedent for the deprescription of book obscenity, and to cite and make use of its test from here on out was to be as good as deprescribing book obscenity through piecemeal judicial effort.

This is all well and good, save for the fact that it shuts its eyes both to history and to Woolsey’s holistic test itself. For one thing, judges in the 1940s who scrupled giving “literary” books a free pass when it came to obscenity proved more than adept at regrounding their proscriptions in aesthetic terms and concepts. To insist that art required more of judges than the technocratic application of statutory and precedential standards alien to art itself did not in turn require courts to cede the field of obscenity altogether to aesthetic autonomy. This proved especially true in those cases where the charged book, when judged as a whole, arguably did tend or aim to excite sexual impulses or stir up lustful thoughts. At the very least, to deny that such aims and tendencies in fact predominate in works such as William Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959) or John Cleland’s *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–49) is to risk inadvertently admitting that one has read neither text. Moreover, in its explicit separation of the one from the other, the *Ulysses* holistic test would disqualify sexual excitation and lust from artistic production altogether, resulting in what one critic has charitably described as Woolsey’s “well-intentioned lies” regarding the immanent differences separating art from obscenity or pornography. Such a distinction seems illegitimate, however, if we consider at all closely the mutually interdependent development of aesthetic taste and the pornographic book trade since the eighteenth century.

Burroughs, for his part, impishly forces the issue by putting a protracted graphic description of a snuff film at the center of his novel. Rereading Hand’s opinion on Lewis’s story in light of the *Ulysses* case thus reveals the merely formal nature of Woolsey’s test, which now appears as the value-neutral device it always was. Hand has no problem admitting that a compelling argument can be made for the conventionality of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate,” for taken as a whole it is indeed an artfully written narrative pointing out the timely return of a “very old question” pertaining “to the ultimate values of war.” What keeps him from giving Lewis’s text a pass, however, is the pointed attention it pays to salaciously developed details. Hand’s own holistic test for obscenity is therefore more forthright in confronting the discomfiting possibility that there might now exist artistic practices that give the lie to hoary old assumptions regarding form-content relations. What, after all, is one to do with those texts whose parts not only evade being assimilated into a totalizing whole but also address themselves to the body more explicitly than does that same text taken as a whole? How does one adjudicate the potential for obscenity of a work whose net effect fails to stimulate the lustful thoughts and sexual impulses of its readers but whose parts may be quite efficacious in doing precisely that? In short, what defense can aesthetics offer to art if it cannot guarantee the separability of art from pornography or obscenity?
Because he is willing to face up to the possibility that these questions and the problems they partly circumscribe cannot be thought away with the reverent incantation of the words “aesthetics” and “art,” Hand’s opinion seems the more insightful piece of literary criticism than does Woolsey’s celebrated affirmation of a masterpiece of literary modernism. At the very least, Hand entertains the possibility that something was happening to and within art. While this “something” may have not been specified at the time (for an educated lay audience at any rate), it nevertheless did appear to “reflecting minds” that clichés and commonplace notions about the integral relations of form and content could no longer adequately grasp these “new” developments in art. Hence Hand’s reluctance to countermand the decision of the postmaster of New York and his judgment that the October 1917 issue of *The Little Review* could not be mailed. Because he was unable to articulate what Lewis’s preoccupation with sordid details had to do with his story considered as either literature or moral pedagogy, Hand had to concede that the postmaster had not abused his administrative duties: “While it has been urged with unusual ingenuity and ability that nothing under consideration can have the tendency denounced by the Statute, I do not think the complainant has made out a case for interfering with the discretion lodged in the Postmaster General, whose ‘decision must be regarded as conclusive by the courts, unless it appears that it was clearly wrong.’” In 1917 something may have been changing in art, but artists had not as yet gotten around to explaining themselves with sufficient persuasiveness as to be heard in official quarters.

In her article in *The Little Review* responding to the suppression of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate,” Margaret Anderson is quick to grant that something indeed was happening to art, but she was by no means going to be the broadcaster of its secrets. Lewis, she argues in that essay, is incontrovertibly a writer of prose, by which she means “that he is master of the mysterious laws by which words are made into patterns or rhythms, so that you read them for the spirit contained in the rhythm,—which is the only way of getting at the context; which in fact is a thing of distinct and separate entity, existing above and beyond the context. Many fairly good writers and critics do not understand these laws. It is not surprising that the Postoffice [sic] department does not understand them.” Distinct from the law of obscenity are the “mysterious laws” of prose, which Anderson says lift all such writing from its transient milieu and hence beyond the reach of postmasters and Societies for the Suppression of Vice. Anderson avoids explaining of what exactly these laws of prose may be understood to consist, beyond a fleeting glance toward the spiritual metamorphosis of mere words “into patterns or rhythms.” Her willfully mystifying commentary is calculated to advance a much more ambitious agenda to change public policy, to have art’s claims of autonomy registered by courts of law, a goal that would eventually be given (as we have seen) its most memorable expression in the form of Woolsey’s “well-intentioned lies.”
Courts after Woolsey’s *Ulysses* decision were even more firmly persuaded that they must directly confront the challenges and problems that art posed to their attention, with the result that respecting art’s autonomy increasingly meant integrating its principles into the more pressing matter of how to correctly apply the statutory and precedential standards regulating book obscenity. One conspicuous effect of this developing receptivity to art’s difference as the century progressed was a growing willingness in many courts to accede to the testimony of experts, particularly in the field of literature. Woolsey himself had set an informal precedent for just such a procedure in the *Ulysses* case when he confessed to having two friends—“literary assessors” he calls them—separately read Joyce’s novel and then casually compare their impressions with the present-day legal definitions of obscenity.\(^65\) It must be stressed, however, that the mere fact that a Norman Mailer or an Allen Ginsberg was later allowed to defend the literary or social merits of an “obscene text” in a court of law did not entail that their opinions would thereafter be dispositive. Famously, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in *Besig v. United States* (1953) had little difficulty in affirming a judgment of obscenity despite granting the literary merits of Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) based on the “voluminous affidavits and exhibits” filed on the behalf of various literary experts in that case.\(^66\) Ultimately, to admit that a book was “literary” or “artistic” did not thereby make it any less obscene in the decades separating Woolsey’s decision from the U.S. Supreme Court obscenity cases between 1957 and 1973.

Nevertheless, the year following *United States v. One Book Called “Ulysses,”* the Second Circuit Court of Appeals ended up affirming Woolsey’s decision. Though doubtful of the claims made by “Joyce’s laudators” as to the lasting value of the novel in literary history, the presiding circuit judge insisted that art should be given a chance to develop new techniques out of itself without the infringement of court supervision in matters such as obscenity: \(^67\) “Art certainly cannot advance under compulsion to traditional forms, and nothing in such a field is more stifling to progress than limitation of the right to experiment with a new technique. . . . We think that *Ulysses* \(^{sic}\) is a book of originality and sincerity of treatment and that it has not the effect of promoting lust. Accordingly it does not fall within the statute, even though it justly may offend many.”\(^68\) With seventeen years of modernist art production and criticism separating this case from the first *Little Review* trial, the inability of a judge to account for the unsettling quality of an experimentally “obscene” text no longer seemed to matter much—for the time being, at least. Something may have happened to art, and judges may never be given the training needed to grasp quite what that “something” was in time to have this competence guide their decisions; nevertheless, by 1934 they could most likely trust in artists to pursue “originality and sincerity of treatment” without intruding upon the grounds of obscenity for the sake of obscenity. Contemporary art worthy of the name had
proven itself to be a disciplined and disciplining project, meaning that offenses occasioned by it were “just” and should be allowed to pass without proscription. According to the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, such art could be trusted to treat “obscenity” as a technique like any other, as a means to ends greater than the mere promotion of lust. Lies such as these were not only well intentioned but also exigent. The circuit judge who ensured that Woolsey’s decision and holistic test would stand as landmark precedents in U.S. obscenity case law? None other than Augustus Hand.

VI
If I have exhumed and reviewed the relationships between Hand’s reluctant suppression of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” and his subsequent affirmation of Ulysses’s nonobscenity, then it has been to resituate the temporal and public dimensions of modernism in terms of broader applicability than the idiosyncratic periodizations (prewar, postwar, post-postwar) Lewis develops in Blasting & Bombardiering. For one thing, the organs of Anglo-American modernist publicity (particularly its little magazines) had made their mark on popular consumer culture to such an astonishing degree in the 1920s that by 1933 (the year of the Woolsey decision) Gertrude Stein had moved from the pages of transition (1927–38) to the best seller list with The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. The following year, one could read about the “fad” of Gertrude Stein in Vanity Fair; see productions of her opera, Four Saints in Three Acts (written 1927–28), in either Hartford or New York; hear Stein herself lecture in numerous cities across the country; and buy The Making of Americans (written 1902–11; first published 1925) in a mass-market edition. Moreover, by the end of the 1920s, modernism and its public forums appeared to young struggling writers such as Erskine Caldwell to be vitally important to their professionalization, even if the work these writers produced had little overt relationship to the projects, forms, and devices usually ascribed to literary modernism as such. No longer regarded as desirable venues of publication in and of themselves, significant little magazines such as transition, New Masses, Blues, and Pagany instead appeared to writers such as Caldwell to encompass so many way stations along the road to bigger and better things, such as Scribner’s Monthly, Esquire, and (eventually) the lucrative mass-market paperback boom of the 1940s. Hereafter, modernism could be treated as an artifact of one’s aesthetic self-formation.

Consequently, the Woolsey decision must be understood first and foremost as indexing the absorption of modernism into commercial mass culture. For one thing, by accentuating the artistic merits of Ulysses, Woolsey gave credence to those who sought to defend modernist literature as a legitimate form of aesthetic expression, howsoever strange or disturbing it may have once appeared to contemporary
minds and sensoria. In turn, by maintaining that art in and of itself was not at all reducible to obscenity, Woolsey exempted from proscription any claims “new” art made on the body. Such works were to be excepted from obscenity on grounds similar to those used in defending the “classics,” so long as one could reliably discount the possibility of their unreflective reception, which seemed a reasonable assumption provided these texts made a point of compositionally sublimating their pleasures—even if, as in Ulysses, these pleasures were scatological, masturbatory, or sadomasochistic. Crucially, Anderson's essay on Augustus Hand's ruling against the October 1917 issue of The Little Review also calls into question the claims modernist writing makes on bodies. For her, to read literature—or rather “prose”—involves our gaining access to spiritualizing laws superior to those of our temporal institutions. Ideally, then, reading provides both the means of contemplative escape from the vulgarity of prevailing conditions as well as the occasion for consorting with that select group of contemporary readers and writers who share our tastes, biases, and experiences regarding art and its superiority to life as it is now lived. The emphasis in Anderson's account is not only on subordinating life to art but also on building a select community constituted by refusing access to the many (e.g., the masses, the public). Indicative of both these points are Anderson's concluding remarks in her response to Hand's opinion: “Any life that is capable of being destroyed, in the popular sense of the term, should be destroyed. It might then take on that tragic significance which would make it material for Art. That these arguments may still be regarded as childish or immoral by the majority of the world is the supreme human joke. That I could be called an ‘iconoclast’ for making them is a measure of contemporary fatuity.”

In the end, it is on grounds such as these that Anderson “can see nothing brutal in ‘Cantleman's Spring-Mate.’ [She] can see no warning or lesson in it.” Lewis's story can neither be reduced to a function nor proscribed for its loose moral economy. To judge it in terms other than those called for by the self-reflexive and ineffable standards of art is simply to mark one out as the fatuous Other against whom journals such as The Little Review and their readers partly constituted their social identities.

Despite Anderson's protests, however, it takes an awful lot of mental acrobatics to deny that Lewis's story is brutal or that its brutality derives in no small part from its willingness, unlike Anderson, to depict reading as a potentially hazardous activity. On the third page of the narrative—but diegetically before Cantleman's salacious experience in the field—Lewis reveals an unlikely motivating force for Cantleman's prewar all-out assault on nature: Thomas Hardy. Contrary to one's likely expectations, however, the specific model for Cantleman's carnal and carnivorous rampage is revealed not to be Jude the Obscure (1895), Hardy's “obscene” novel; instead, the relatively minor (and most certainly unwarlike) historical novel, The Trumpet-Major, instigates the soldier's premature martial pursuits. At those
regrettable times when he finds himself stuck in camp, Cantleman avoids all social intercourse with his roommates (whom the narrator gives letters—A., B., C., and D.—rather than names) by voraciously digging into a copy of Hardy’s novel that he has stolen from one of these very same roommates:

[Cantleman] had even seemed to snatch Hardy away from B. as though B. had no business to possess such books. Then [Cantleman’s roommates] avoided his eye as though an animal disguised as an officer and gentleman like themselves had got into their room, for whom, therein, the *Trumpet-Major* and nothing else exercised fascination. He came among them suddenly, and not appearing to see them, settled down into a morbid intercourse with a romantic abstraction. The *Trumpet-Major*, it is true, was a soldier, that is why he was there. But he was an imaginary one, and imbedded in the passionate affairs of the village of a mock-county, and distant time. Cantleman bit the flesh at the side of his thumbs, as he surveyed the Yeomanry Cavalry reveling in the absent farmer’s house, and the infantile Farnese Hercules, with the boastfulness of the Red, explaining to his military companions the condescensions of his infatuation. Anne Garland stood in the moonlight, and Loveday hesitated to reveal his rival, weighing a rough chivalry against self-interest. (“CS-M,” 11–12)

On its face, Cantleman’s encounter with Hardy’s text here would seem to hew closely to Anderson’s argument, at least so long as his responses confine themselves to reflective and contemplative reactions that protectively lift him up from and beyond the reach of his degraded camp surroundings. Lewis’s “imaginary” soldier likewise more happily consorts with Hardy’s “imaginary” soldier, who is unsuccessfully courting an “imaginary” woman in “the village of a mock-county” existing in a “distant time.” The characters of Hardy’s Wessex at the time of the Napoleonic wars, thus, appear to provide Cantleman with a more consequential set of companions, interlocutors, and models for approaching his own time’s great war than do the persons with whom he must have daily, but meaningless, contact.

Yet the passage quoted just now also intimates a relationship between reader and text excluded entirely from Anderson’s account, for in reading of John Loveday’s quaint dilemma when faced with the opportunity of revealing the drunken state of his rival to their mutual object of affection, Cantleman bites (satirically? amorously? jadedly?) the fleshy sides of his thumbs. Later, Lewis describes in even greater detail Cantleman’s boisterous reactions to Hardy’s novel: “[Cantleman] chuckled somewhere where Hardy was funny. At this human noise [his roommates] fixed their eyes on him in sour alarm. He gave another, this time gratuitous, chuckle. They returned with disgust at his habits, his peculiarity, to what he considered their maid-servant’s fiction and correspondence. Oh Christ, what abysms! Oh Christ,
what abysms! Cantelman [sic] shook noisily in the wicker chair like a dog or a fly-blown old gentleman” (“CS-M,” 12). In part, Cantelman’s superfluous chuckles reproduce Anne’s own hilarity at Festus’s advances as well as the “fly-blown” state of old Benjamin Derriman, the elderly property owner whose role in *The Trumpet-Major* depends principally upon his paranoiac and comically lame attempts to keep his final will and testament out of the hands of his good-for-nothing nephew, Festus. Yet mimetic parallels such as these between the behaviors of “imaginary” characters and those of one of their “imaginary” readers are negligible when compared to the spectacular effects Hardy’s text seems to have on Cantelman’s body more generally. Reading for Cantelman, as it turns out, is a thoroughly corporeal activity and performance: he reads with his whole body (letting loose a chuckle when Hardy earns it) for the benefit of others (“He gave another, this time gratuitous, chuckle”). An adequate account of his reception of *The Trumpet-Major* thus has to address the effects of that text on his body, be it in the form of gnawed fingertips, palsied fits of chortling, and, as it happens, even more violent modes of physical expression.

As much as he may enjoy reading, Cantelman’s “morbid intercourse” with Anne, Festus, and the Loveday brothers ultimately demands more than immediately achieved gratification with Hardy’s words and their ticklish aftereffects on his diaphragm. What simply reading Hardy’s text leaves wanting, in fact, is a wider scope for action in the here and now: “In [Cantelman’s] present rustic encounter, then, he was influenced by his feelings towards his first shepherdess [i.e., Stella] by memories of Wessex heroines, and the something more that being the daughter of a landscape-painter would give. Anne, imbued with the delicacy of the Mill, filled his mind to the injury of this crude marsh-plant. But he had his programme. Since he was forced back, by his logic and body, among the madness of natural things, he would live up to his part” (“CS-M,” 12). What catches Cantelman’s eye and guides his plan for action is neither the plot of Hardy’s historical novel nor the ironic defense of decorum and chivalry it nostalgically proffers but rather the arousing figure that Anne Garland cuts. If Augustus Hand suppressed the October 1917 issue of *The Little Review* because he was reluctant to ignore the vividly descriptive parts that do not quite make a whole out of “Cantelman’s Spring-Mate,” then that reluctance finds its indirect confirmation in Cantelman’s habits as a reader of Victorian historical novels. In particular, the attraction of reading for one such as Cantelman appears to be the attention one can devote to desirable parts without concerning oneself at all with the compositional functions and forms of the whole, and this is true even if such parts do not in and of themselves seem all that libidinally suggestive. Compare, in this instance, Cantelman’s aggressive sexual desire for Anne (desire that makes her the physical superior in every way to the “real” body of Stella, that “crude marsh-plant”) and the sorts of descriptions of her in *The
Trumpet-Major that occasion it. Hardy’s narrator observes that “Anne was fair, very fair, in a poetic sense; but in complexion she was of that particular tint between blonde and brunette which is inconveniently left without a name. Her eyes were honest and inquiring, her mouth cleanly cut and yet not classical, the middle point of her upper lip scarcely descending so far as it should have done by rights, so that at the merest pleasant thought, not to mention a smile, portions of two or three white teeth were uncovered whether she would or not. Some people said that this was very attractive.” Except for the detail regarding her faulty upper lip, Hardy’s description of Anne is pointedly nondescript, and upon cursory reflection, it appears in keeping with the overdeveloped irony of Hardy’s novel taken as a whole. Even if one were to consider this passage in all of its specificity (with modes and claims of address of its own), this initial descriptive account of Anne’s person would still continue to operate so as to take the wind out of any presumptive claims to beauty a reader might come to expect of the heroine in a novel such as this: “Some people [not the narrator, surely] said that this was very attractive.” Yet walking home with Stella after his transformative experience with the horses, birds, and pigs in the field, Cantleman refers directly to this passage from The Trumpet-Major: “He wished that [Stella] had been some Anne Garland, the lady whose lips were always flying open like a door with a defective latch” (“CS-M,” 10). Anne Garland’s “defective latch” lips are not a blemish to ignore; instead, they are a feature to seek out and lament the absence of in those rustic mates who happen to be around and very much game for a roll in the hay. Amazingly, Cantleman is able to muster and then sustain his lust for the composite Anne/Stella not despite but because of the ironic and critical narration of Hardy’s text. Notwithstanding Augustus Hand’s certainties about such things, Cantleman’s implacably reflecting mind makes Anne all the more arousing.

VII
“Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” thus presents obscenity to us as a violation of the rules of use, whereby reading—and not writing—more appositely forms the crux of the problem obscenity names. In this view, Lewis’s story does not demonstrate that Hardy pulled a fast one on the Victorian authorities but instead discloses that he who finds Anne Garland not merely attractive but literally fuckable is potentially a very, very dangerous sort of reader. In this respect, “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” can be seen to take its rightful place alongside Joyce’s “An Encounter” (1905) as one of the great early twentieth-century short stories in which the onus of obscenity shifts conspicuously from production to reception. In Joyce’s story, it will be remembered, though the narrator and his boyhood schoolmates get rebuked by their instructor for reading “chronicles of disorder” such as westerns and American detective fiction, it turns out that the “classics” upheld as exemplary by Father Butler end
up corrupting readers even more completely than do the dregs of contemporary popular commercial publishing. While playing hooky from school, the narrator and a friend (Mahony) meet an old bookworm who tries to draw them out on the subject of their reading habits as well as their interactions with girls before he moves away from them to engage in a bit of public masturbation while viewing—and in full view of—they. The man is physically grotesque, and from his twitching forehead down to his gapped yellow teeth and his generally shabby attire, he provides the narrator with a living image of the sort of fellow Father Butler describes when referring slightly to the hypothetical writer of detective and cowboy narratives as “some wretched scribbler that writes these things for a drink.” Yet in his conversation with the boys, the old bookworm reveals himself to be well versed not in penny dreadfuls but in the “classics,” by which he would have the boys understand him to mean the works of authors such as Sir Thomas More, Sir Walter Scott, and Edward Bulwer-Lytton. In fact, it is on these figures that Joyce’s narrator dwells in order to make the point that no matter how lofty Father Butler’s standards may appear to his terrorized pupils, “An Encounter” places them on the same level as the old bookworm’s overworked genitalia.

If we take obscenity law and its enforcement as comprising an important context for these two narratives, then both Campleman and the old bookworm emerge as oblique—if nevertheless tendentious—responses to what is arguably the most infamous decision in Anglo-American obscenity case law, Regina v. Hicklin. As we saw earlier, Lord Chief Justice Alexander Cockburn had held that the proper test for obscenity simply involved the determination of “whether the tendency of the matter charged as obscenity is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall.” Though subject to numerous criticisms in the decades to come, Cockburn’s test proves upon closer inspection to offer a more nuanced approach to obscenity than many of the liberalizing judges and jurists were willing to admit in the first half of the twentieth century. For one thing, in drawing attention to the uneven demographics of the state’s literate population, Cockburn does not comfort himself with illusions of such a thing as a universalized (aesthetic) subject. Unlike Woolsey’s l’homme moyen sensuel or the converging opinions of his “literary assessors,” the depravable, corruptible minds in Hicklin are not presented as absolutes. Cockburn is careful instead to mark these minds and their corruptive reception of a given “obscene” work as thoroughly exceptional, though in doing so he further attests as to why they pose such a problem for state management and regulation. Therefore, anticipating developments in obscenity case law that would not occur in the United States until the 1960s, the Hicklin test presents obscenity as exceedingly variable: it is not so much a quality of a text or object but rather of the shifting relations between channels of distribution and targeted audiences. As some critics have described
it, Cockburn’s nascent formulation of variable obscenity “was [not] a sign of middle-class hypocrisy. It simply meant—as literary theory is now claiming to have discovered—that a book is not the same across different contexts of consumption and use.” The problem with the Hicklin ruling, however, of course remained that while Cockburn was able to conceptualize the relativity of textual reception, he was far too comfortable with constructing a test for the total proscription of obscene books based on this differential distribution and formation of cultural capacities. Whereas his premises refreshingly avoid absolutes, his conclusions nevertheless insist on them.

“An Encounter” comprises a noteworthy intervention into the field of obscenity as delimited by nineteenth-century legal discourses such as Hicklin. For one thing, as we have seen, it puts the “classics” and ephemeral cultural matter such as The Apache Chief on a level playing field: neither the artistic qualities of the former nor the supposedly gauche artlessness of the latter guarantees their socially normative reception once they are out in the world. As a result, despite the tacit hierarchies underwriting Woolsey’s holistic test, high/low distinctions in literary production appear to be of no use when it comes to dealing with obscenity, and it is in this regard that the elliptical lapses in Joyce’s story’s narration start to accrue an added significance. Somewhat notoriously, the narrator proves to be so squirrelly about revealing what exactly happens in “An Encounter” that Grant Richards, the eventual publisher of Dubliners (1914), did not realize what the old bookworm was doing in the story until Joyce made the unwise decision of telling him. Thereafter, six years of struggle between Joyce and Richards ensued before Richards finally agreed to publish the story collection with “An Encounter” included. The reasons for this initial oversight by Joyce’s publisher are not incidental failings on his part, however, because the narrator treats the story he tells as if it were in fact an “elaborate mystery.” While the old bookworm publicly masturbates, the narrator ensures that his retrospectively presented boyhood self keeps his eyes looking elsewhere so that all he can report of it are Mahony’s elliptical exclamations:

After a silence of a few minutes I heard Mahony exclaim:
— I say! Look what he’s doing!
As I neither answered nor raised my eyes Mahony exclaimed again:
— I say . . . He’s a queer old josser!

What Joyce’s story presents is a narrator who would make a piece of detective fiction out of public masturbation and the threat of pederasty, thereby reducing the threats both acts pose to a simple matter of epistemological nonrecognition. Despite Richards’s worries, in other words, “An Encounter” came before its public already precensored, insofar as the story’s narrator uses popular genre forms to
depict his boyhood self as the product of outdated ways of organizing subjectivity, whereby obscenity appeared to be a pathological matter in need of juridico-medical policing.85

If Joyce’s story looks backward with a great deal of criticism, then Lewis’s Cantleman shows the budding head of the behavioristically constituted subject, replete with hideous zoomorphic pedigrees, finding happiness in its states of absorption in sexual activity and raising merry hell on its way into a hideously blank and violent future. Rather than take stock of inherited forms of subjectivity, Lewis has Cantleman read the work of an influential late Victorian in order to reveal a historical mutation in the field of cultural reception. For in the end what Cantleman constitutes a prelude to is the imminent extirpation of subjectivity as such by a variety of convergent social forces. In his exhaustively developed cultural critiques of the 1920s and 1930s, Lewis seeks to reveal to the lay European’s sight the multiform and impending threats undermining the stability of subjective identity in the early decades of the twentieth century. Because it often seems that these threats assail the resisting subject equally from everywhere at once, even Lewis’s best works in this vein of cultural criticism can strike one as the insights of an exceptionally gifted paranoiac for whom every popular trend and every cultural figure plays a malignant part in a totalizing conspiracy whose object is the erasure of the paranoiac’s very self.86 After all, to see Henri Bergson, Albert Einstein, and Anita Loos as interchangeable agents in an all-encompassing cultural project aiming to rub out the stable self root and stock does indeed strain the present-day reader’s credulity.87 Yet precisely because Lewis is so insistent on detecting a consistent ideological undertow in widely divergent cultural phenomena, his essays and fiction can be understood as ultimately comprising so many complementary reinscriptions of the classic naturalist problematic. His fictional and satirical works depict, estrange us from, and beset lifeworlds in which one’s actions prove to be hopelessly more determined than determining. As a result, this evocation of a faintly registered but nevertheless omnipresent sense of control by outer forces makes his work naturalistic if not strictly naturalist.

Given the invidious short- and long-term effects ascribed to forces such as relativistic physics, behaviorist advertising, and childishly stammering literature, such naturalistic depictions could no longer trust that the descriptive monographs of nineteenth-century naturalism were at all equal to the representational challenges this spectacular and cyclopean modernity posed. It seems reasonable, therefore, to view Lewis’s uncommon facility with a host of modernist styles—which he discards almost as soon as he evinces a passing mastery of them—as the symptomatic reflux of his critical projects as social diagnostician and surgeon. If the threats to the integral self were in fact as variable and parlous as Lewis believed them to be, then there was no hope in approaching them with a single ready-made mode of writing,
least of all one left over from the last century. On the one hand, the cultural field had developed so expansively that it now contained and made use of hitherto separate spheres of human activity to such a degree that likely would not have been conceivable to the likes of a Zola. On the other hand, the category of the new, whether deriving from avant-garde or modernist practices, had been so successfully assimilated by the broader culture that any attempt to embody social critiques like Lewis’s in fictional forms had to keep up with what happened to be in fashion, whether intellectually, artistically, or popularly. Making manifest the psychic pressures then being exerted by the vulgarization of Bergson’s flux-philosophy, for instance, may have demanded *Finnegans Wake* (1939) parodies and Steinian stream-of-consciousness stutters in *The Childermass* (1928) but not necessarily the gestural puppet show machinations of *The Apes of God*, which attacks instead the increasingly indiscernible boundaries porously separating artist from public and patron.

Keeping this in mind, we can finally approach “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” as a first take in Lewis’s representation of the sociocultural assault on individuality and the self. In particular, this suppressed story confronts the behaviorist functions of just such an assault, meaning that the relationship between writing and reading has as much thematic weight as the relationship between humans and animals in the text. After all, as Lewis would later contend in a characteristically ironic passage included in both *The Art of Being Ruled* and *Time and Western Man*, words comprise the major obstacle to the smooth functioning of Watson’s projected behaviorist utopia:

> We live largely, then, in an indirect world of symbols. “Thought” having been substituted for action, the word for the deed, we live in an unreal word-world, a sort of voluminous maze or stronghold built against *behaviour*, out of which we only occasionally issue into *action* when the cruder necessities of life compel us to. Some of us live in this world more than others, of course. Some of us actually *like* it. And (a democratic note) *what* sort of person do you suppose enjoys living in this word-world? Words are symbols of ideas, as the old psychology would put it—some people “have ideas,” are “theorists,” “highbrows,” and so forth: and some (like you and me) are just plain people who prefer *deeds* to *words*! (that’s us—that’s our way!) What’s the use of a word-world to *us*? We’re not brilliant conversationalists, or anything of that sort! Speech is of silver, silence is of gold. And this is the age of *iron*, the age of *action*. We may not have much to *say* for ourselves, but we can hit a ball or turn a screw with the best. To hell with mere words! Up behavior!88

This lengthy, duplicated passage foregrounds the performative contradictions required of Lewis in his fictional and satirical depictions of behaviorism, from
“Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” onward. No matter how faithful Cantleman—the-behaviorist-reader may appear to be in his aggressive responses to literary stimuli, Lewis’s logorrhea continues to stand in the way so long as words in and of themselves resist reliably eliciting behaviorist responses from their readers. Yet this assumes of course that the technocratic aims and goals of behaviorist projects and educational theories have not yet produced a fully operational mechanistic world, crass and raw in the extreme, in which words function just as well as any other stimuli to move the ganglionic action masses that were threatening to replace people.

That such theories and projects remained a preoccupation of Lewis’s well into the 1930s attests to their enduringly menacing influence, however. In lighter moments, he remains capable of comically reducing the problem of behaviorism and obscenity to ridiculously literalized expressions. For instance, in his libelous and suppressed 1936 novel, *The Roaring Queen*, Lewis refers many times to the failed attempts of the young Honorable Baby Bucktrout to bed a member of her family estate’s staff, despite her reliance on the estimable models provided a woman of her class in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

Such easy levity, however, all but disappears in the behaviorist defense of murder cunningly and disturbingly unfolded in *Snooty Baronet*, Lewis’s “fictionist essay in Behavior.” That text cycles through a proliferating set of literary stimuli to get at the conditioning functions novels perform for the social personae assumed to be increasingly replacing individual selves in the face of new historical pressures on modern subjectivity. It is as if Lewis sought in *Snooty Baronet* to demonstrate that Watson was right and that in general men are in fact what the situation calls for—a Samuel Butler over dinner with their lover, a D. H. Lawrence in the bedroom, a white whale in a world of Ahab’s, a dangerously maladroit Ernest Hemingway in the bullring, and an expert assassin patterned after Eastern adventure stories when presented with the distant form of their superfluous, chinny literary agent.

What *The Roaring Queen* and *Snooty Baronet* cumulatively describe, therefore, is a world overrun with readers who behave like Cantleman and not at all like the consumers once found in the pages of *The Little Review*’s “Reader Critic” section. As a result, we err considerably if we take the animality depicted early on in “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” to be little more than the degradation of the human as such. In the end, the experience of animality in that story serves the more consequential function of clearing the ground for new forms of social identity and sociability patterned after acculturated behaviorist theories and methods, whereby the masses were to be reduced to a well-oiled stimulus-response mechanism. So long as behaviorism continued to comprise a substantial social force, therefore, the problem of obscenity would persist because for Lewis the problem of the obscene reader and the cultural dissemination of behaviorism were increasingly coterminous.
This is to read obscenity in Lewis as the representation of something like ironic embodiment, and what keeps it from swinging uncontrollably over into embodiment as such is repetition. Cantleman’s second rip-roaring chuckle while reading Hardy for the benefit of his fellow officers, Kell-Imrie’s second shot at Humph in _Snooty Baronet_, and even the second iteration of the lengthy passage on behaviorism from _The Art of Being Ruled_ in _Time and Western Man_—all of these second takes exist to assert a barely subsisting will independent of one’s reflexes or habituated actions. They are meant to ensure that the words one reads are held at a distance and not treated as so many coordinated stimuli demanding proximate action. Obscenity for Lewis is merely a content like any other; it does not have to get embodied like laughter does in his satirical and fictional works.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to let the matter rest there and present a Lewis for whom the paired representations of obscenity and behaviorism might appear as satisfactory responses to a world less and less livable with each passing year in the run-up to World War II. Nor, for that matter, does irony provide an easy escape hatch, for as we have demonstrated throughout this chapter, irony tends to take the form of performative contradictions in Lewis’s work, both critical and fictional. That is to say, it is far from certain that Lewis (like Cantleman before him) can play a role without losing part or all of himself. To revise ourselves a bit, it appears that what Lewis cannot see without becoming the narrator of “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” is the degree to which there is no way to distinguish as if from as in nature or life: “And when [Cantleman] beat a German’s brains out, it was with the same impartial malignity that he had displayed in the English night with his Spring-mate. Only he considered there too that he was in some way outwitting Nature; he had no adequate realization of the extent to which, evidently, the death of a Hun was to the advantage of the animal world” (“CS-M,” 14). “Cantleman’s Spring-Mate” comes down to us and should be read as an early posted warning, marking off the types of pitfalls and traps in modern life that Lewis’s subsequent fiction and critical writing would assay in ever more daredevil fashion: “Beware: whoever pretends to be a ghost will eventually turn into one.”