Jellyfish and Treacle: 
Lewis, Joyce, Gender and Modernism

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Wyndham Lewis, who coined the phrase “the men of 1914” to privilege Joyce, Pound, Eliot, and himself as modern writers, will serve me in discussing the relatively new designation, “male modernism,” and in considering whether James Joyce belongs in such a category. Lewis has entered the field of modernist definition previously. Before modernism had become a widely used designation, Hugh Kenner proposed that Lewis’s term, “vorticism,” might supply a name to the movement of which both Joyce and Lewis were a part, and for which Eliot’s “still point of the turning world” from “Burnt Norton” provides a most memorable image (Faulkner ix). Vortex: “a shaped, controlled and heady circling, centripetal and three-dimensional, around a funnel of calm” (Kenner, Gnomon 6). With its calm, its control, and its geometric design, the vortex overcame the fear of the void, the unconscious, and the cosmic chaos suggested by the modern world and entered by other artists, ones Lewis would have labeled “feminine.”

The theory that modernism can be divided on gender lines into “male modernism” and “female modernism” serves to remind us how little female modernists were once read and studied. Lewis named no women of 1914, though he knew some—Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, Beatrice Hastings, and Harriet Shaw Weaver among others. Until about ten years ago, what we studied and taught as modernism was (with the occasional exception of Woolf or Stein) the product of male artists and in large part male critics. To cite Kenner once again, we might note that he assigns Joyce to an eighteenth-century tradition (Dublin’s Joyce) rather than connecting him to the romantic era or to the company of such female modernists as Virginia Woolf, whom he denounces for middle-brow aesthetics and a “treacly” mind (Pound Era 553). Feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar work with the term “male modernism” and suggest that Joyce deserves assignment to this limited category. In particular, they find in Joyce the practitioner of a “patrilingualistic ethic.” Indeed, a logocentric, classicist

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vision of Joyce was encouraged by Joyce critics. But the current wave of Joycean feminist criticism suggests that Joyce was capable of feminine as well as masculine writing. I don’t propose to take up the charges of Joycean phallogocentricity here. A more appropriate topic to a comparison of Wyndham Lewis and Joyce is male modernism, as deliberately defined and practiced by Lewis. I hope to demonstrate how Joyce coincides with some of Lewis’s definitions early in his career, and how he and Lewis parted company in the 1920s, partially over the issue of the feminine. It is a debate that previously came to us under the masculine designation of Joyce as “the time man.” As we play with new definitions involving gender and modernism, we discover that “the time man,” one of “the men of 1914” was at least part woman, and that there was a great deal of “treacle” on and in his mind.

One way of comparing aspects of gender and modernism in Lewis and Joyce is to turn to their two early novels, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Tarr*, run in immediate sequence by Harriet Shaw Weaver’s *The Egoist* in 1918. I think it is interesting that Miss Weaver could identify with Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s novel, but never took to *Tarr* in the same way. Lewis’s work was “clever and interesting and unusual” and “a conglomeration of smart views.” Weaver’s relationship to Joyce’s work was personal; Lewis’s brought only an intellectual response. Dora Marsden, former editor of *The Egoist*, worried that Pound and the vorticists would use *Tarr* as a “bridgehead” to occupy their journal (Lidderdale 111-14). It seems typical of Lewis’s incapacity for friendship, or his capacity for envy that he tipped off Miss Weaver to Joyce’s considerable drinking. Joyce’s letter in his own defense has been analyzed in various ways, but one interpretation is to see in it a critique of male camaraderie:

> There is a curious kind of honour code among men which obliges them to assist one another and not hinder the free action of one another and remain together for mutual protection with the result that very often they wake up the next morning sitting in the same ditch. (Lidderdale 186-87)

Molly Bloom implicates the same male pattern in the (presumably) alcohol-related death of Paddy Dignam in *Ulysses*: “they call that friendship killing and then burying one another” (*U-G* 18.1270-71).

*Tarr* and *A Portrait* are most comparable for their exploration of the aloof young male artist, for the aesthetic discussions they offer, and for their encounters of women in art and life. In the life cycle,
Lewis's novel might be said to take up where Joyce's leaves off. Lewis offers no sympathetic evocation of childhood; he had little sympathy for children. There is no mother figure in Tarr. Lewis was strongly attached to his own mother, and vice versa, but he refuses to grant the mother an important place in his writings. (It has been argued by Colin MacCabe [66] that Joyce did the same through much of Dubliners.) There are many more young women in Lewis's novel than in Joyce's, and Tarr has become involved in relationships, however imperfectly, while Stephen Dedalus merely blunders at initiating one with E.C., or avoids his sisters, or visits prostitutes. Tarr has left his native England to live in Paris, a city which already disappoints him; Stephen is only approaching such a move.

Tarr and Stephen have quite a few attitudes in common. They are egocentric, aloof to bourgeois middle-class culture, and distant from women. The misogyny of both young men has been noted, Suzette Henke, for example, writing on Stephen, and Michael Levenson on Tarr (241-42). Tarr and Stephen tend to be protective of their artistic energies. For Stephen, this means denying equal education, and even food to his siblings, and particularly to his sisters. To Tarr, this means a different deployment of sexuality:

The artist is he in whom this emotionality normally absorbed by sex is so strong that it claims a newer and more exclusive field of deployment. Its first creation is the Artist himself, a new sort of person; the creative man...

The tendency of my work...is that of an invariable severity. Apart from its being good or bad, its character is ascetic rather than sensuous, and divorced from immediate life. There is no slop of sex in that. But there is no severity left over for the work of the cruder senses either. (12-13)

Tarr and Stephen are both ascetics and classicists in education, and they orient their intellectual lives toward other men. The above passage, for example, comes from a largely one-sided dialog of Tarr with Hobson. We might compare this performance to Stephen's aesthetic discussions with Temple and Cranly. Tarr and Stephen conceive of God and power as male, and like Aristotle and Nietzsche, place the female at the bottom of their conceptual hierarchies, with the mud, the vegetables, and the jellyfish. Tarr elaborates in a later dialog:

Woman and the sexual sphere seemed to him to be an average from which everything came: from it everything rose, or attempted
to rise. There was no mysterious opposition extending up to Heaven, and dividing Heavenly beings into Gods and Goddesses. There was only one God, and he was a man. A woman was a lower form of life. Everything was female to begin with. A jellyfish diffuseness spread itself and gaped on the beds and in the bas-fonds of everything. Above a certain level of life sex disappeared, just as in highly organized sensualism sex vanishes. And, on the other hand, everything beneath that line was female. . . . He enumerated acquaintances evidently below the absolute line and who displayed a lack of energy, permanently mesmeric state, and almost purely emotional reactions. He knew that everything on the superior side of that line was not purged of jellyfish attributes. (334)

As artists, Stephen and Tarr position themselves like the god in this paradigm. We have only to recall Stephen's "artist, like the God of creation. . . ." P 215).

I should like to take up the two principal women Tarr encounters in Lewis's novel, drawing some comparisons to Stephen's encounters with women to examine their respective attitudes toward the feminine. Tarr's encounters are much more tangible than Stephen's voyeuristic, internal renderings of women. There is some validity to Frederic Jameson's claim that Lewis is more richly dialogic than Joyce (39), though I would restrict this observation to their early stage of writing or to the strictest sense of dialog. Lewis's is a very restrained and protected dialog, compared with the exchanges eventually performed in Finnegans Wake. Though Tarr has a network of relationships, there is no depth or substance in any of them. Tarr wishes them to serve the process of his self-definition and his base needs. Lewis does achieve ironic distance from his protagonist—as Joyce does with Stephen—showing that Tarr does not succeed fully with his plan of artistic detachment and asceticism.

Bertha, a German and the first woman Tarr is involved with, is bourgeois, sentimental, vegetative; he insultingly calls her a "pumpkin." In short she is a safe venture for the artist wishing to preserve his energies because she is so alien and low. Through much of the novel, Tarr seeks ineffectually to rid himself of her attachment:

He had presumably been endowed with the power of awakening love in her. He had something to accuse himself of. He had been afraid of giving up or repudiating this particular madness. To give up another person's love is a mild suicide; like a very bad inoculation as compared to the full disease. His tenderness to Bertha was due to her having purloined some part of himself and cov-
pered herself superficially with it as a shield. Her skin at least was Tarr. She had captured a bit of him, and held it as a hostage. She was rapidly transforming herself, too, into a slavish dependency. She worked with all the hypocrisy of a great instinct. (61)

Tarr has been implicated and incorporated into the feminine "madness" of love—a primordial plot perpetrated by female instinct. He cannot get away cleanly with his skin. There is an appalling egotism to the attachment—an admiration of skin or surface that is himself. Repudiation of her is inoculation—an artificial, scientific antidote. Bertha herself is the "full disease," the dangerous germs that lurk in a female physical interior. The Bertha subplot also allows Lewis to make cynical comments on the institution of marriage—an institution attacked in the more realistic writing of Edwardian ideologues like George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells. Joyce has Stephen Dedalus take up these arguments with another bourgeois female, E. C., particularly in *Stephen Hero*.

Tarr encounters an alternate, more masculine woman in Anastasya, a figure Rebecca West described in her review of *Tarr* as "the kitch Cleopatra from Dresden," though, in a more serious vein, she also praised Lewis's Russian sensibilities. Unlike Stephen, who after *Stephen Hero* has no serious discussion on gender or art with women, Tarr has substantial dialogs with Anastasya. But he cannot figure out how to have both sexual and intellectual relations with a woman:

"What a big brute!" Tarr thought. She would be just as good as Bertha to kiss. And you get a respectable human being into the bargain! He was not intimately convinced that she would be as satisfactory. Let us see how it would be; he considered. This larger machine of repressed, moping senses, did attract. To take it to pieces, bit by bit, and penetrate to its intimacy, might give a similar pleasure to undressing Bertha! (218)

The sexual encounter anticipated here is destructive, dismembering. Though Anastasya seems masculinely machinelike and self-possessed, Tarr suspects that this is a bluff, and he fears for his art: "Surrender to a woman was suicide for an artist. Nature, who never forgives an artist, would never allow her to forgive" (219). In their dialogs, Anastasya accuses Tarr of a "schoolboy" attitude toward women, and tries to sell him on her blend of intelligence and deep sensuality. She reassures all too blatantly,

"Well, I have a cave! I've got all that, too. I promise you. Her promise was slow and lisping. Tarr once more had to deal with himself. (313)
Anastasya has severely threatened Tarr's compartmented vision of femininity and creativity, and his own means of self-protection:

He had always been sceptical about perfection. Did she and he need each other? His steadfast ideas of the flower surrounded by dung were challenged. She might be a monotonous abstraction, and if accepted, impoverish his life.... Irritants were useful though not beautiful. He reached back doubtfully toward his bourgeoise. But he was revolted as he touched that mess, with this clean and solid object beneath his eyes.

Though Tarr positions Anastasya "above the line" of messy femininity, Lewis fails to give her a creative role, beyond her efforts to educate Tarr. We find Tarr mentally working her into the cubist-vorticist, machinelike shapes of Lewis's own portraits, the hard factuality of things admired and promoted by Pound in Joyce as well as Lewis.

Stephen makes art of E. C. and the bird girl in A Portrait. He is moved partially by what he perceives as the messy, degrading aspects of womanhood to write his Villanelle: "a tender compassion filled his heart as he remembered her frail pallor and her eyes, humbled and saddened by the dark shame of womanhood" (P 222). The muck of menstruation humbles her in Stephen's imagination. It is not quite as severe an attitude as Lewis's scheme of placing women below the line, or Stephen's earlier labeling women "marsupials" in Stephen Hero (176, 210). Stephen thinks of his sinning—meaning primarily his consorting with prostitutes—as a comparable degradation he has experienced, a comparison that does not stand up logically when we consider the role of volition in his action versus female bodily function. As with Lewis, female sexuality is dangerously demeaning. But for Stephen, an early artistic work, the Villanelle, is produced out of a fantasy of fluid female engulfment that is described in vital, bright, mysterious terms:

Her nakedness yielded to him, radiant, warm, odorous, and lavish-limbed, enfolded him like a shining cloud with a liquid life: and like a cloud of vapour or like waters circumfluent in space the liquid letters of speech, symbols of the element of mystery, flowed forth over his brain. (P 223)

With the prostitute, a younger Stephen had been touched physically on the lips, and metaphorically, upon the mind; he yielded and received a new language:

He closed his eyes, surrendering himself to her, body and mind, conscious of nothing in the world but the dark pressure of her
softly parting lips. They pressed upon his brain as upon his lips as though they were the vehicle of a vague speech.... (P 101)

This primal encounter is echoed in the Villanelle scene. It suggests, as Lewis had, that the feminine threatens to capture the male, and to overcome his control. The Villanelle is one long appeal to a "temptress" to give up enchanting him; her powers include a religious dimension missing in Lewis's females. As in Tarr's formulation, the feminine is the foundation that Stephen's art arises from. More than that, Stephen discovers a feminine language of mystery and silence that has its own power and he does surrender.

Stephen had mentally rendered the bird girl he encountered in the previous chapter of *A Portrait* as a bird and an angel. She has her own liquid language, expressed in her action after "sufferance" of his "gaze" for some time, as she bent her eyes "towards the stream, gently stirring the water with her foot hither and thither. The first faint noise of gently moving water broke the silence, low and faint and whispering, faint as the bells of sleep..." (P 171). Stephen's response is orgasmic and ecstatic. He founds his artistic vocation on her appeal, and upon the murky realms Tarr seeks to avoid. "His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea" (P 172). He is in the jellyfish realm.

Tarr, unlike *A Portrait*, does offer reactions of female characters to male aesthetics and actions. I have already introduced Tarr's dialogs with Anastasya. One of the most extraordinary moments in Lewis's novel comes when art and sensuality have a violent merger in Bertha's rape by a painter. The artist in this instance is not Tarr, but a fascist named Kreisler. Tarr dismisses Kreisler's painting as the product of an average man's sex instinct—more action than art, "embedded in sex, in fighting, in affairs" (320). Kreisler is as hopelessly engulfed in chaos as his female, bourgeois object. Woman is victim of such art, and Lewis allows us to experience Bertha's immediate reaction to rape in art. The rape is described in vorticist terms as the "whirlpool towards which they had, with a strange deliberateness and yet aimlessness, been steering" (195):

She saw side by side and unconnected, the silent figure drawing her and the other one full of blindness and violence. Then there were two other figures, one getting up from the chair, yawning, and the present lazy one at the window—four in all, that she could not bring together somehow, each in a complete com-
partment of its own. It would be impossible to make the present
day one at the window interest itself in these others. A loath-
some, senseless event, of no meaning, naturally to that figure
there. (195)

Bertha and Kreisler both spend time in the uncontrolled, swirling
region of the vortex. Bertha sees Kreisler in multiple spatial/temporal
relations to the vortex as sexual arena—getting up to approach,
reclining afterwards, and violently involved, as well as silently paint-
ing, the aloof artist. While she may no longer be swirled in the
vortex, her consciousness retains its dizzying effect in these simulta-
nous images, and is far from the poised, calm view of the vorticist
male artist. Perhaps as interesting as the fragmentation of Kreisler
in Bertha's consciousness is her socialized assumption of responsibility
for the incident: "the moral, heavily, too heavily, driven in by her
no doubt German fate... What Tarr had laughed at her for...that
silly and vulgar mush, was the cause of all this" (196). We never
see Tarr painting Bertha; he is able to distance himself from this
invasion of sexuality into art. Still, Lewis has made a powerful
connection, and a statement on the victimization of woman as
art object.

Lewis continued to define the feminine in art. His most coherent
definitions concerning genders and modernism come in his chapter
on Virginia Woolf in *Men Without Art*, where he claims to have
taken the feminist "cow by the horns" (170). Here he dismisses
Woolf's disputes with Arnold Bennett as petty disagreements between
two orthodox writers, denying Woolf the eminence of the modernist
revolutionary, and calling Bennett's realism a dead issue. As he shows
with the "friskily feminine" character, Hobson in *Tarr* (5), Lewis is
only too willing to dismiss most of his English colleagues of both
sexes to the cultural realm of feminine mediocrity. Jeffrey Meyers's
identification of Hobson as Clive Bell brings him into Bloomsbury
territory (50). Lewis's theories of gender in writing are amusingly
written; they have a satirical edge that may also have served a need
to deny emotional involvement in such issues:

Now there is one obvious division or opposition staring you in
the face—and inviting you, on one side or the other, to drop
into its pigeon hole and be at peace—that is the classification
by gender: the Masculine and the Feminine depths of the universe.
It is necessary for us to repeat here for the thousand and first
time how illusory this division is found to be; to point out how
many women are far more grenadiers or cave-men than they are
little balls of fluff...that a veneer of habit, and a little bit of hair on chin and chest, is about all that fundamentally separates one sex from the other? (Men Without Art 159)

Though Lewis is not deterministic about sex and gender in writing, he dismissively assigns Woolf to the feminine category, along with his Bloomsbury enemies like Lytton Strachey. The attributes of the feminine are paleness, "a bogus sort of 'time' to take the place of the real 'time'—to bring into being an imaginary 'time' small and pale enough to accommodate their not very robust talents," a "salon scale" (167). We are "invited...to install ourselves in a very dim Venusberg indeed: but Venus has become an introverted matriarch, brooding over a subterranean 'stream of consciousness'—a feminine phenomenon after all—and we are a pretty sorry set of knights too" (167).

Lewis resents Woolf's use of Joyce's Ulysses to derive what he considers a "feminine" description of modernism as "a little good stuff by fits and starts, a sketch or a fragment" (164). To Lewis, Ulysses is "robustly complete... It is not the half-work in short 'pale' and 'dischevelled' of a crippled interregnum" (167). He explains, "Mrs. Woolf is merely confusing the becoming pallor and uncertain untidiness of some of her own salon pieces with that of Joyce's masterpiece" (166).

In Time and Western Man (1927) Lewis had begun to challenge Joyce's feminine side. As a "time man" Joyce was falling into the same pigeon hole as Woolf (86-88). In his essay "Satire and Fiction" Lewis attacks Joyce's "internal method" regretting that it has "robbed Joyce's work as a whole of linear properties—contour and definition in fact":

In contrast to the jelly-fish that floats in the center of the subterranean stream of the 'dark' Unconscious, I much prefer, for my part, the shield of the tortoise, or the rigid stylistic articulations of the grasshopper.

Lewis locates creation in human, controlled, mechanical artistic production, disqualifying mimetic art and creation in nature, especially in motherhood. It was the transparent envelope of the jelly-fish, the darker, psychological Joyce that had won the admiration of that female definer of modernism, Virginia Woolf (154).

Joyce provided deliberate responses to Lewis's brand of male modernism in Finnegans Wake, as its annotators have consistently recognized. Joyce's critique of gender in Lewis can perhaps be best
viewed at the end of the fable of "The Mookse and the Gripes," which rewrites Lewis's *Time and Western Man* as "Spice and Westend Woman" (*FW* 292.6). While it still suggests that little girls are made of sugar and spice, and reminds us of the position of the London West End prostitute, this title is also subversive of Lewis's sexism, and makes his sort of blasting appear pseudo-revolutionary. *Woman* provides an end to the Western patriarchal values which have produced a literature of wasteland and fascism. Her "spice" presents a potent, exotic contrast to male modernist dullness of sensation, repetition, linear surface articulation, and sterility. "The Mookse and the Gripes" seems to end indecisively, with the two advocates of space and time (Lewis's space man, the Mookse; Joyce's time man, the Gripes) receding; they still carry on their tedious argument—"bullfolly andswered volleyball." They are watched by "Nuvoletta," but her coy flirtation (compounded of sugar and spice, perhaps) fails to distract them from their argumentative sports. Her sighed, "There are menner" (*FW* 157.8-158.5) seems an admission of hopelessness in gender. The scene continues, however, shifting to the omnipresent, feminine river, embodiment of the natural flow—if not the female modernist treacle—that Lewis scorned.

The siss of the whisp of the sigh of the softzing at the stir of the ver grose O arundo of a long one in midias reeds: and shades began to glidder along the banks, greepsing, greepsing, duusk unto duusk, and it was glooming as gloaming could be in the waste of all peacable worlds (*FW* 158.6-10)

Into this setting of twilight waste and feminine lament come two mythical women (the washerwomen) who carry off the Mookse and the Gripes, metaphorically dealing death to their arguments. They challenge Lewis's position that God is male, since they suggest the cyclical role of the great goddess. It seems particularly damning that the woman who carries off the Mookse, the Lewis character, is described as a powerful black woman, a political entity that counters Lewis's classicism, sexism and racism.

Then there came down to the thither bank a woman of no appearance (I believe she was a Black with chills at her feet) and she gatheredup his hoariness the Mookse motamourfully where he was spread and carried him away to her invisible dwelling... (*FW* 158.25-29)

The allusion to Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* unsettles masculinity and heterosexuality in the scene. This final shift takes
us to "mother spacies," a laundry, or a literary salon, and to writing that is comparable to the work of notable women modernists. I am reminded of the family allegories, the dark, carnivalesque landscapes and the sexual as well as animal metamorphoses of Djuna Barnes' *Ryder* and *Nightwood*. Gertrude Stein was engaged in a problematic working out of racism in her more realistic portrayal of the black woman of "Melanctha" in *Three Lives*. Virginia Woolf's last artist-heroine, Miss La Trobe of *Between the Acts*, ultimately rediscovered words in mud when she too faced "the waste of all peacable worlds." The mature Joyce was willing to yield control to the feminine in writing and in time. One of the "men of 1914" had failed Lewis as a male modernist and challenged him in "femaline" language (*FW* 251.21).

**NOTES**

1. A similar analysis of this passage of *Finnegans Wake* appears in my *James Joyce* (105–6).

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