

**sinclair lewis**  
**and the passing**  
**of capitalism**

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The apprenticeship years of Sinclair Lewis prior to the publication of *Babbitt* (1922) span a crucial transformation in the literary depiction of the American businessman. Prior to George F. Babbitt stands an array of self-made protagonists—William Dean Howells’ Silas Lapham, Frank Norris’ Curtis Jadwin, Theodore Dreiser’s Frank Cowperwood—rising and falling in the high melodrama of the market place. After Babbitt comes a collection of salesmen and middle managers—Arthur Miller’s Willy Loman, Kurt Vonnegut’s Paul Proteus, Joseph Heller’s Bob Slocum—lost in the petty tragicomedy of modern corporate life. Linear plots with clearly demarcated climaxes give way to the *deja vu* (or Catch-22) of the bureaucracy; titanic struggles are diminished in the trivial backstabbing of office politics. Along with Henry Blake Fuller, Lewis played a seminal role in puncturing and reformulating the literary understanding of American capitalism; his sensibility, as Carl Van Doren once observed, was “seismographic.”<sup>1</sup> Lewis seized the public imagination of the 1920s—and decades hence—in part because he transposed to literary form an epochal change in American middle-class life. But even today we lack a precise understanding of Lewis’ initial forays into business culture—particularly in *The Job* (1917) and the neglected “Lancelot Todd” stories—and how these works established a personal idiom which reached full expression in *Babbitt*.

Because Lewis was temperamentally an idiosyncratic and quixotic thinker, critics have generally assumed his apprentice fiction lacked a coherent intellectual rationale. Between 1910 and 1920, he drifted in and

out of the Socialist Party; he wrote upbeat serials for “New Thought” magazines; he authored seemingly “affirmative” novels about American business. Consequently, he has been variously described as a young writer “studying himself,” lacking a “settled perspective or viewpoint,” an “intellectual vagabond” practically “impervious” to the philosophical currents of his time. In particular, critics have been recurrently perplexed by Lewis’ seemingly positive portraits of business prior to 1920. How could a socialist write what one reviewer called an opiate for the tired businessman? How could a young man who seemed to extoll the power of positive thinking become the author who gave us *Zenith*?<sup>2</sup>

These apparent contradictions have been explained in a variety of ways. The least satisfactory explanation, provided in part by Mark Schorer’s biography (1961), was that much of Lewis’ early fiction was “frankly potboiling,” and that “contrived” happy endings were attributable to the demands of editors and serialization. But Lewis himself strenuously denied this charge in a letter to Van Doren; the fiction might lack polish, he said, but it was “honest” work. A second theory, advanced by Walter Lippmann, Vernon Parrington and American Studies scholarship generally, was that Lewis’ career could be dichotomized into early “novels of romance” and affirmation and later novels of “dissent” and revolt; thus Lewis came to expound the “disillusionment” of the lost generation. In one breath Lewis was called impervious to the intellectual ferment of his times; in another he was its representative. But his career showed little contact with public events—and, as revisionists have been quick to point out, *Babbitt* mocked dissent almost as much as conformity. Even the most widely accepted paradigm of Lewis criticism—which argues that he was ambivalent about business and American culture—fails to account for this apparent disjuncture in his career.<sup>3</sup>

Alternatively, I want to suggest a less cataclysmic shape to Lewis’ development, partly by resurrecting his short fiction, partly by taking his ideas more seriously. Ironically, the seeming haziness of his intellectual debts may be due largely to our own lack of precision about them. What has been largely overlooked—in essence, the “missing link” in Lewis’ evolution—was his determination to scale down the depiction of modern business life previously offered by the American naturalists. Lewis’ revision began as a quest to apply Fabian socialist theory and New Thought to a more up-to-date depiction of modern office life; initially, he hoped that an inefficient and failing capitalist system would be redeemed by “creative will.” In time, however, Lewis’ own disenchantment with office life clouded his democratic vista. Whereas early protagonists break free of their society by mustering will, later heroes are defeated by their own energies, encircled, suffocated. But Lewis’ original intellectual debts, far from being inconsequential, established the basic terms of his art even as it turned to the tragic farce of *Babbitt*. In the vacuum of enfeebled social will, Lewis crafted an idiom of entrapment: his businessman became a mildly appealing yet pathetic figure, both booster and disbeliever, spasmodically rebelling against a culture of his own making.

Sinclair Lewis apprenticed in a literary marketplace replete with business fiction and nonfiction. Success literature abounded in the Progressive era, while muckraking (such as that by Upton Sinclair, whom Lewis admired) drew more unflattering attention to frenzied finance. Editors were generally on the lookout for “timely” material appealing to newly courted male audiences. At the start of the period, George Horace Lorimer of the *Saturday Evening Post* issued a call for native writers who would forsake the “caste system” of the European society novel and embrace the “romance of real life” in contemporary capitalism; Lewis was only one of several writers Lorimer eventually promised to make a “household word” under this program. This popular demand had underwritten much of the business fiction of the American naturalists—Sinclair, Norris, Dreiser, Jack London and David Graham Phillips. At the heart of these writers’ depiction of modern business had been an effort to transcend what Norris disparagingly called the “teacup” dimensions of Bowellsian realism by infusing contemporary facts with the force of romance. Characteristically, in works like Phillips’ *The Great God Success* (1901), Norris’ *The Pit* (1903) or Dreiser’s *The Financier* (1912), the naturalists had cast the businessman in Darwinian scale, establishing a trust, manipulating the system of justice or cornering the commodities market. The key, as Norris put it, was to recognize that there was “as much romance on Michigan Avenue as there is realism in King Arthur’s Court.”<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, for many Americans a literature embodying the heroism of business life was rapidly becoming a form of nostalgia—as Jackson Lears suggests, simply another variety of historical romance. Norris’ *Pit* drew upon a grain corner of 1897-98; *The Octopus* (1901) was based upon the Mussel Slough affair of 1880; Dreiser’s *Financier* upon events in the 1870s.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as historians like Alfred Chandler, Jr., have recently told us, the ascent of these captains of industry in the late nineteenth century only masked a more subtle and far-reaching process. By and large, in this era individual and family control of business actually had passed into the hands of corporations guided by a bureaucratic pyramid of middle managers. As oligopolies acquired larger and larger shares of the market, American society was gradually transformed from a nation of individual entrepreneurs and small farmers to a land of salaried employees in increasingly routinized jobs, while often staffing massive white-collar operations. Between 1870 and 1910, the rate of growth of the “new” middle classes more than tripled that of the population at large.<sup>6</sup> For many Americans, despite the obvious attractions of a well-publicized urban nightlife, being reduced to wage status, unraveled by growing consumer hungers and subject to scientifically managed office routines often made the days look quite unromantic. We know that they often looked that way to Sinclair Lewis, whose father was the embodiment of the Protestant work ethic, but who was forced himself to write novels while riding to the office on the 7:50 a.m. Long Island commuter train.<sup>7</sup>

Much of Lewis' apprentice fiction was an attempt to grasp this fundamentally new situation. His intellectual sympathies, albeit muffled by the glib banter of reviewing, were audible in a 1914 article titled "Relation of the Novel to the Present Social Unrest: The Passing of Capitalism," a survey of contemporary fiction. Inheriting the socialist interpretation of World War I as capitalism's last gasp, Lewis wrote that practically every writer "who is gravely seeking to present the romance of actual life"—and there were many—was faced with the fact that capitalism was "a thing attacked, passing." But most American naturalists, he implied, seemed unaware of this contradiction. Norris, Lewis wrote, seemed to "take all the apparent injustice of the world as the necessary friction of progress"; Dreiser appeared to sympathize with Frank Cowperwood while failing to see him as part of a system; Robert Herrick was short on solutions. Lewis was clearly on the lookout for fiction which would convey the totality of capitalist culture, protest the system's irrationality and yet offer answers. For example, he praised the little-known Will Levington Comfort, whose *Midstream* criticized "all phases of life" under capitalism but emphasized the solution of "one's own development of a creative will and in the love of a good woman." The greatest praise, of course, was reserved for H.G. Wells.<sup>8</sup>

Critics have long recognized Lewis' primary intellectual debt. Lewis' first serious novel, *Our Mr. Wrenn* (1914), had converted Wells' *History of Mr. Polly* (1909) to the American vernacular with only a few revisions. First of all, Wells provided Lewis with a technique whereby, as the narrator of *Polly* says, one could "bridge the General and Particular." Mr. Polly was a microcosm of the larger decay of capitalism. His life, Wells said, had no tragic scale, just a "slow, chronic process of consecutive small losses"; he "lived at variable speeds," "muddled and wrapped about and entangled like a creature born in the jungle who has never seen sea or sky." He was a symptom, Wells said, of the "collective dullness of our community."<sup>9</sup>

Yet what critics have not sufficiently appreciated is that Wells also provided Lewis with a hope of cultural redemption. On the whole Lewis found Marx tough going, and never completed a projected "labor novel" despite Upton Sinclair's urging. But Lewis was drawn to the socialist theories fostered by the British Fabian Society, founded in 1883 and influential in English labor politics for years to come. Under the leadership of middle- and upper-class intellectuals like George Bernard Shaw, Beatrice and Sidney Webb and Graham Wallas, the Fabians had articulated a gradualist and democratic alternative to Marxism more appropriate to a world of trade unions, wider suffrage and a State no longer simply an instrument of the propertied. First employing a strategy of intensive research and then "permeation" of their ideas, and subsequently participating in the founding of the British Labour Party (1906), the Fabians offered a role model for American intellectuals anxious for political influence in their own Progressive era. But in the eyes of the American literary intelligentsia, as Henry May writes, the appeal of the pre-war socialist faiths often lay in their cultural iconoclasm rather than any rigid

social or political program. In particular, socialism was often embraced only as part of the larger bohemian quest for the liberating “life force” enshrined by such influential thinkers as Henri Bergson. As they did with so many European intellectual systems (Freudianism being the most obvious example), pre-war radicals emphasized the romantic, optimistic and antimaterialist sides of Fabian ideology. As Floyd Dell put it—himself a Midwestern loner swept up by the cause of Rebellion—Shaw and Wells offered an uplifting view of the future: “and it was *our* future.”<sup>10</sup>

Along with its spiritual dimension, the appeal of Fabian theory also lay in its promise that scientists, social scientists and professionals would gradually assume control of society and redeem it. Even more important for Lewis, the Fabians often stressed that change would come with the assistance of what Shaw called the “humane” sections of the disenfranchised middle class. Wells, despite his personal disagreements with the management of the Fabian society, showed a particular fascination for this possibility—for the struggle of will within the “salariat,” the little people ground between the mill-stones of capital and labor and reduced to salaried employees.<sup>11</sup> Like his contemporary, T.H. Huxley, Wells insisted upon the place of constructive human action in the drama of evolution; men would be regenerated through discovery, mastery and assertion of their creative life force. Thus, he insisted, Polly has a capacity for joy and beauty “at least as keen and subtle as yours or mine”; eventually, Polly discovers that “[if] the world does not please you, you can change it.” Lewis was clearly drawn to Wells’ fictional adaptation of Fabianism, in which social criticism was prominent but politics were recessed—where the common man could be satirized, but not abandoned. “Without ranting, without saying very much about Socialism,” Lewis wrote, Wells made “[t]he foolish haberdashery where Mr. Polly accumulated poverty and indigestion . . . frankly the symbol of all the State’s activities.” In turn, Wells was also “the discoverer of importance in the pettiest and drabbest character”; he showed that “mankind does not, as a matter of virtue and good form, *have* to be stupid.”<sup>12</sup>

This attraction to redemptive will was entirely compatible with Lewis’ simultaneous interest in the teachings of “New Thought,” one of many therapeutic philosophies arising in late-Victorian and Progressive America. Like the related “mind cure,” Emmanuel, and Christian Science movements, the essence of New Thought was its assertion of the power of positive thinking in psychological, physical and spiritual well-being. The confederated New Thought Alliance drew upon Christ, Emerson and Swedenborg, but had its real beginnings in the hands of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (a name Lewis undoubtedly appreciated), a New England mesmerist whose most famous patient had been Mary Baker Eddy. As a later disciple of Quimby put it, New Thought stressed finding human godliness “through the creative power and constructive thinking in obedience to the voice of the indwelling Presence, which is our source in Inspiration, Power, Health and Prosperity.” The movement’s prophets and pamphlets urged specific drills in mental self-help, offering a blend of

efficiency and uplift resonant in the Progressive era; even the pragmatist William James lectured upon the subject. Sinclair Lewis' principal contributions were serialized novellas written 1909-1910 for *Nautilus*, the journal founded in 1898 by Mrs. Elizabeth Towne in Holyoke, Massachusetts. *Nautilus* was one of the most successful New Thought journals of its day.

New Thought was adaptable both to Lewis' political and literary goals. It was hardly inimical to evolutionary socialism. Mrs. Towne herself, for instance, had praised indigenous radicals like Edward Bellamy; the "wildest dreams of socialism," she wrote, "were prophecy." Also like Fabianism, New Thought stressed the summoning of one's inner power or will to reinvest the tedium of daily life with new energy. Both intellectual systems, in addition, were gradualist and ostensibly "liberating" faiths. Over time the inefficient and failed life accumulated sorrow and *Pollyesque* indigestion; the personal moment of redemption was akin to a religious conversion. Moreover, positive thinking also had particularly "modern" connotations which dovetailed with Lewis' specific interest in office life. As Donald Meyer demonstrates, the new therapeutic philosophies often answered the psychic needs of individuals trapped in what Max Weber had called the "iron age" of modern corporate life. After 1900, these philosophies transposed the traditional emphases of the Protestant ethos—work, sobriety, thrift—to a new lexicon of bureaucratic skills—personal magnetism, reliability, self-confidence. Thus, in a serial Lewis wrote for Towne's *Nautilus*, a young farm boy arrived in the city, soon lost his job, but later rose to the position of office manager by gaining confidence through positive thinking. In another Lewis tale, a young department-store saleswoman escaped ruin by using a tool later cherished by Dale Carnegie: her smile.<sup>13</sup>

The coherence of Lewis' intellectual system must not be overstated; indeed, its romantic and idiosyncratic mixture was partly what made it subsequently so susceptible to modification. But Lewis was hardly untouched by the intellectual ferment of his youth—rather, he seemed responsive to it at several levels. Like other pre-war literary radicals, Lewis' socialism was a blend of liberation and cultural iconoclasm, and yet also a force of uplift, like the more popular strain of New Thought. What really differentiated Lewis from most of his contemporaries was his desire to apply this new gospel to the workaday world of the American salariat. In a series of rather bold strokes, Lewis hoped to revise the naturalist depiction of business life by a scrupulous attention to office routine, a depiction which also incorporated a glimmer of his "positive" vision. As his recurrent ridicule of "Hobohemia" suggests, Lewis' practical side seemed to feel that the new philosophies were too important to confine to the literary salon. Thus his ideas were hardly inconsequential to his art; on the contrary, Lewis' early fiction was an ambitious attempt to erect a bridge between new intellectual territory and American realities.

His most concerted attempt to combine modernized naturalism, socialism and positive thinking was *The Job*. Essentially, this novel was the story of another member of the disenfranchised middle class, "an un-

trained, ambitious, thoroughly commonplace small-town girl” named Una Golden. Upon the death of her father, Una is forced to abandon village life for the dull routine of the urban salariat. Lewis made explicit his primary goal of modernizing the naturalist rhetoric. To one sympathetic reviewer, he had vowed to write a book about “the office *as I know it*, the office of real workers, without any of the romance of the Business Melodramas and Big Deals.”<sup>14</sup> Lewis intentionally scaled down naturalist proportions: Una attends a commercial college, lives in a boarding house and learns to take orders.\* Initially, as with Wells, romance is only a *potential* quality, a life force submerged in lives of quiet desperation. Commuting to work on the El, Una sits across from a “well-bathed man with cynical eyes” (116) who fails to see the drama in her aspirations. The struggle, as Lewis saw it, was her entrapment in a world distorted by the profit motive and bureaucracy:

There was a heroic side to this spectacle of steel trains charging at forty miles an hour beneath twenty-story buildings. The engineers had done their work well, made a great thought in steel and concrete. And then the business man and bureaucrats had made the great thought a curse. There was in the Subway all the romance which story-telling youth goes seeking. . . . But however striking these dramatic characters may be . . . they figure merely as an odor, a confusion, to the permanent serf of the Subway. . . . A long underground station, a catacomb with a cement platform, this was the chief feature of the city vista to the tired girl who waited there each morning. A clean space, but damp, stale, like the corridor to a prison—as indeed it was, since through it each morning Una entered the day’s business life. (134)

Here was the Wellsian bridge between the General and the Particular. The setting symbolized a social and psychic “State,” the individual (“Una”) was representative of a class. Lewis intentionally lowers his eyes from naturalist heights to explore the catacomb of wage slavery.

For a time, Una is wholly trapped. She is besieged by office triviality, by bosses who extort work and then take credit, by advertising schemes that “make something out of nothing” (224). The struggle for her spirit is encapsulated in the novel’s love story. Una’s dalliance with the cynical publicist Walter Babson, the closest thing the text offers to the young Sinclair Lewis, temporarily breaks off; in her despair, she is engulfed in a bad marriage to a salesman named Eddie Schwirtz, a clear prototype of Babbitt. The soul of capitalism has temporarily fallen. But after dismal days of marriage (reminiscent of Dreiser’s *Carrie* with the failing Hurstwood), Una finally acquires the will to break out of her life. She does so by effecting a kind of mind cure. “Her whole point of view was changed,” Lewis writes. “Instead of looking for the evils of the business world, she was desirous of seeing in it all the blessings she could.” She is thus able to

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\* For his new wife, Lewis inscribed a copy: “A world where the Goddess of Romance doffs her turquoise robe, her silver filet & the tissue of dreams, to jerk on each morning, when the alarm clock sounds, a neat suit that doesn’t show stains or grow shiny under the sleeves too quickly.” Grace Hegger Lewis, *With Love from Gracie* (New York, 1955), 5-6.

“rise above her own personal weariness” and see business’ superiority to other “muddled worlds”; she “believed again, as in commercial college she had callously believed, that business was beginning to see itself as communal, world-ruling, and beginning to be inspired to communal, kingly virtues and responsibility” (280). On the surface, Una acquires all the virtues of modern management: dressing for success, “sincerity” and successful conversion of the “energy of life” into a career in real estate and hotel management. Her exterior is a testament to positive thinking. Internally, however, she retains a “half-comprehended faith in a Fabian socialism,” believing in an evolutionary process which would result in the “abolition of anarchic business competition, to the goal of a tolerable and beautiful life.”<sup>15</sup> Not too surprisingly, Una is reunited with Walter Babson. A story by Lewis titled “Honestly—If Possible,” printed in the *Post* in 1916, ended much the same way. Here, we see a young advertising writer named Terry Ames, bored with office life and despairing of ever being able to write “honest” copy. But Terry’s faith is restored when he falls in love with a female fellow office worker. Together, they vow to turn things around.<sup>16</sup>

And yet, this “marriage” of faiths was not only positive thinking—it was also positively wishful. Lewis, too, had found his love in Grace Hegger, who wrote a beauty column for a Grocery chain newsletter, and who shared his distaste for the office. But within Lewis himself, commuting to New York on the L.I.R.R., the will seemed to be fading. As socialist theory ran head on into his own business experience, the cumulative effect of Lewis’ quest was to drain business of romance altogether. In the short stories written in these years, Lewis evolved a darker vision eventually at the heart of *Babbitt*. The Pollys and the Wrenns, those timid birds of the fading order, failed to take up the cry of the future: instead they adopted the modern crow of the advertiser and booster.

## ii

Sinclair Lewis’ growing disenchantment with office life is easily lost in the detail of Mark Schorer’s monumental biography. Lewis had fled to book publishing from the newspaperwork that he found exhausting, and from the syndicate work that had dried up; in mid-1914 he signed on as an editorial assistant and advertising manager with George H. Doran Company. Most of the extant fragments from Lewis’ early years with Doran contrast with later (and more public) recollections which fondly recalled an office staff that could sell a “religious line to pious pigeons” equally well as tell jokes at “provincial golf clubs.” At the time, though he was notoriously energetic, Lewis referred to himself in a letter to Hamlin Garland as “stolidly and stodgily here on the job every day.” To his wife, Lewis spoke repeatedly about the absurdity of writing ad slogans and packaged lies. He referred to his desk at work as a “grey mirrored dune”; to Grace he spoke of his short stories as “our key to freedom.” In one letter, he said that he was glad neither he nor his wife wanted “a life-time of that strain, of fame



mixed with duplex apartments and motor cars and the rare privilege of being allowed to eat lobster at midnight in company with three actors and a social climber.”<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, this was not an environment in which positive thinking could survive. Part of Lewis’ faltering enthusiasm for New Thought, of course, may have simply reflected the waning credibility of the vogue itself as it attracted imitators and hucksters. Even the leaders of New Thought admitted to a lack of new ideas after the war. In 1917, Lewis wrote an article titled “Spiritualist Vaudeville,” in which a popular medium, at the young author’s own request, summoned up the spirit of H.G. Wells—who, not coincidentally, was still very much alive.<sup>18</sup> This, of course, was the development later to receive Lewis’ full attention in *Elmer Gantry*. But for the moment, far more important was the way that Lewis’ own introduction to the science of ad-writing seemed to acquaint him with the disturbing similarity between the therapy of mind cures and the “before and after” puffery of the modern advertisement. His short stories repeatedly play upon this ludicrous but disabling likeness. Finally, the stories also point to another equation formulating in Lewis’ agile mind: the way in which positive thinking, in a bureaucratic setting, often functioned simply as a superior’s way of managing office morale and productivity. Revealingly, Lewis’ fictional surrogate, Terry Ames, had once been a fan of Positive Thinking, even purchasing a book titled *Punch the Buzzer on Yourself*. Now both author and character found the creed worthless. *The Job*’s confident closing masked the fact that Lewis himself had resigned from Doran in November of 1915.

What a story like “Honestly—If Possible” really indicated, as the vascillation of the title suggested, was the wavering of Lewis’ own faith. Terry Ames’ plight alluded to this disarray. Lewis describes him as a man

facing the blankness of life as somberly as an anchorite in a parching desert cell. If he could only be heroic or tragic or criminal or anything that would make him feel things! Any sorrow rather than row on row of unchanging grey days. He wanted to do high, vague, generous things, and the city told him to attend strictly to his desk. . . .

You would have been amused—or touched or impatient or morally edified—to see Terry trying to find out what a good, clear life really meant in the case of a young man whose boss pompously encouraged him to write advertisements that were deliberate, careful, scientific lies. (28)

The alternative interpretations Lewis offered here (amusement, sympathy, skepticism) were indicative of the temporary splintering of his program. His protagonists reflected that fragmentation: they were alternately lost souls, cynics or boosters. But what Lewis was really intent upon was a character who was all three—who not only internalized faith, doubt and dissent, but who felt them reverberating in his own environment. Gradually, the Wellsian motif of reinvigoration was itself scaled down or extinguished; in its place was a kind of hall of mirrors effect. Protagonists

now saw life repeating itself; they found themselves mocked by the will of younger subordinates and blocked by the intransigence of older superiors; their schemes boomeranged back upon them.<sup>19</sup> Here was the motif of entrapment so central to *Babbitt*.

The persistence of the Wellsian premise, but not the promise, is visible in a story no doubt drawn upon Lewis' own days dragging between Port Washington and New York. His story called "Commutation, \$9.17" told the tale of a mean-spirited office manager named Whittier J. Small, a Long Islander whose defining characteristic is his absolute averageness. "His face was medium looking," Lewis wrote. "He was medium sized. He was medium." Small's main desire is to be well liked—in particular, to join locally prestigious social clubs. Like George Babbitt, later bracketed between the Doppkebraus and the McKelveys, Small is befriended by a mousy character named Percy Weather, but longs to associate instead with Cornelius Berry, a "man so accepted by smart society that he had once spent a week-end at Narrangansett Pier—where the tide rises only seventeen minutes later than at Newport." Whittier finally devises a ruse to climb. When the commuter train switches from an express to a local, he leads a contingent of suburbanites who resist having their tickets rechecked; now a hero, he snubs Weather and sits alongside Berry. But when he aspires to ascent yet another rung by repeating the same strategy, he is thrown off the train. Later, he is snubbed by friends, ridiculed at the club, loses his job—and, in final ignominy, loses his discount rate (\$9.17) as a regular commuter. Lewis obviously felt Small had escaped paying a larger price: the protagonist ends the tale chastened, not nearly so mean-spirited at a new job. Lewis' use of "commutation" obviously implied Small had barely avoided a permanent social sentencing—and imprisonment.<sup>20</sup>

This motif of entrapment appears again in "If I Were Boss," another *Post* story. Here Lewis told the tale of Charley McClure, an ambitious and good-hearted traveling salesman, "echoing millions of underdogs everywhere," convinced that if he were promoted, he would be both friendly and efficient. But when Charley does get his promotion, he begins to recognize the plight of the office manager under whom he once rebelled. Lewis writes that, at twenty, "Charley had believed that bosses were a race of congenital fiends organized to keep young men from getting jobs in the first place, and making good on them in the second. Now he was equally sure that the flighty young men of his generation were organized to teach one another new ways of being unreliable and generally worthless." The final irony comes when his immediate boss hires an up-and-coming salesman who makes proposals for improving office efficiency—and, who gradually takes over some of Charley's territory. Later, Charley slides "into a strange vision, of which he wasn't even conscious. Standing motionless, his hands prosaically in his trousers pockets, he felt he had lost all individuality as Charley McClure; that he was only an indistinguishable part of the unknown force that drives pilgrimages." Lewis says Charley sees his office comrades as "all one person, confusedly carrying on some vast work that was to make a great world . . ." Here, to be sure, was an

echo of Wells' theology of collective will. But now Charley is motionless, his place in the evolutionary process described as an act of submission, of drift rather than mastery. The point is that Charley is "Boss" of very little. In another harbinger of *Babbitt*, he returns to face his son's complaint that bosses generally will not let subordinates get ahead. Charley counsels his son to strive and succeed, while in the back of his mind, he plots ways to resist the upstart at his own office.<sup>21</sup> At the microcosm level, the evolutionary process looks suspiciously like a revolving door—which, incidentally, was invented around 1890 and installed in American buildings during these years.<sup>22</sup>

Another way to understand the momentum of Lewis' literary quest is to see that his desire to "scale down" the naturalist scenario had overshot the mark. Just as he reduced the drama of "Big Deals" to the petty intrigue of the office, the Fabian will itself was impoverished to simply the renewed energy of the office worker ready to face another day. "I guess there's nothing but petty victories in life," Terry Ames' cohort tells him, "that and the real big thing of going on fighting."<sup>23</sup> By the same token, Lewis twisted the inflated rhetoric of naturalism into a tone of mockery. Increasingly, Lewis' characters are lords over smaller and smaller plots of land—the office, the interior of a train, the social club—while their sense of romance is comically disproportionate to the trivial drama of their lives. Thus, rather than offering a sharp disjuncture with his earlier material, Lewis' idiom of satire grew organically out of his lapsed naturalism. Failed melodrama easily became farce; the quest for will became an ongoing, perpetual mid-life crisis. The "Lancelot Todd" stories, however, added another turn of the screw. Here, the sense of irony grew to claustrophobia: the businessman's own schemes came back to haunt him.

The original presentation of these tales in the *Metropolitan* magazine hinted at their autobiographical resonance. The first tale, "Snappy Display," appeared with a photograph of Lewis himself, over a caption which said: "This author is at his best when his stories center around his lurid past." Throughout the series, the hand-drawn illustrations of Lancelot Todd, advertising zealot, looked eerily like the author himself; just as Lewis described himself to friends as "the George M. Cohan, the Billy Sunday, the Mary Pickford of modern fiction," he called Todd the "prophet of Profits," the "band of bacon," the "sweet singer of shot-guns."<sup>24</sup> In this episode, we find that Todd, like Una Golden, was from a small town, but had always displayed a capacity for applying sharp words to make a sale. He applied the theology of the mind cure, modeled himself on the Reverend J. Murray Sitz (the pastor of the Church of Modernity), and became an insatiable social climber. But Todd's motorized energy is always subject to a perpetual backfire. In "Snappy Display," his attempt to enter high society, like Whittier Small's, falls short—but this time because his reputation as an office tyrant is exposed by one of his own subordinates.

"Jazz," subtitled "Lancelot Todd Vigorizes the House Organ," ends in similar fashion. Todd attempts to reinvigorate the house newsletter of

the Universal Grocery Store by inspiring what he calls “espreedy core.” “We want to make ’em *forget* their misery,” he tells his copywriter. “And we want to fill ’em so full of ambition that they’ll sell the counter and breakfast-food posters. . . . Efficiency and the Superman! Will-power! The Soul Victorious! . . . Con and Concentration.” To this end, he hires the erratic William John Buckingham (fresh from *Thought Power* magazine), an alcoholic and a brilliant mimic of Boosterese.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Buckingham exposes his charade at a banquet, and then pens a last editorial in which he tells his readers that “this glorious philosophy of hustle-jazz-pep” was just a ruse to keep them from asking for raises. “It sounds like heroic progress,” Buckingham writes, but what it meant was grinding with little time for friends and family. Like Lewis himself, Buckingham ultimately quits; unlike Una Golden, one doubts he will start his own business.

In the character of Lancelot Todd, for the most part Lewis adhered to Wells’ particularizing motive in representing the plight of capitalism. But rather than transcending that “state” by tapping will power, it is Polly’s befuddlement that returns with a vengeance. Todd is repeatedly victim of his own designs. In “Getting His Bit,” he markets a “Khaki Komfort Trench Bench” as a war profiteer, and later falsely claims veteran status; real veterans, however, kidnap him, and force him to admit his lies under threat of actual enlistment. (Thus he gets his bit.) In “Might and Millions,” Todd acquires a series of self-help books he rechristens the Will Power Library, for which he also claims authorship. But then he is accosted by an office stenographer who takes his prose wisdom to heart and threatens to undermine his own office. He is forced to pay a charlatan mystic to cart her away, only to find the two are in cahoots. Finally, in “Slip It to ’Em,” Todd takes to marketing the Vettura Six, an utterly worthless car, while he also courts a wealthy woman as a financial backer. But in the middle of a storm, he is forced to drive the woman to a train station in the Vettura itself. Needless to say, the car disintegrates en route: like the system it symbolizes, its periodic breakdown, to Lewis, was still predictable. Yet unlike earlier heroes, Todd cannot get out and effect repairs: he is trapped, in the rain, in the car itself.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, it was still several years yet to *Babbitt*, the novel Lewis originally conceived as a twenty-four hour slice in the life of an ad man named Phineas Pumphrey. But by the Lancelot Todd stories Lewis’ major idiom was nearly in place. *Babbitt* opens with a contrast of scale, and the narration of a naturalist manqué, that it rarely abandons: in sight of the “heroic” towers of Zenith, the spires of Babbitt’s faith, George himself regards the “changing from the brown suit to the grey” a “sensational event,” sees his motor car as “poetry and tragedy,” and his office as his “pirate ship.” Like earlier protagonists, he builds his confidence with home-study courses in “Power and Prosperity in Public Speaking,” faithful attendance to the sermons of “Mike Monday” and the brotherhood of boosterism. Claustrophobia advances to sheer suffocation. A modestly dishonest realtor, Babbitt nonetheless lives in a speculation

home; though an expert in consumer ploys, he is also constantly victimized by them. His children want consumer goods while his office workers want raises; the dissenting “Bunch” is as cloying as the Good Citizen’s League; conversations are so standardized it is as if everyone knows what everyone else will say. Yet George’s day is also unraveled by a “thousand nervous details” and a sense of entrapment that gives vent to a pattern of “veiled rebellions.” His loss of Paul Riesling makes him vulnerable to the “virus of rebellion” in the air—momentarily drawn even to the defense of the socialist Seneca Doane—but before long he is forced to recant in public, to reaffirm a code in which he no longer believes. “He felt that he had been trapped,” Lewis writes, “into the very net from which he had with such fury escaped and, supremest jest of all, had been made to rejoice in the trapping.” His sole consolation is that his son Ted, in an echo of Wellsian Technocracy, wants to be a mechanic. The son is told that Babbitt gets a “sneaking pleasure” out of the fact that Ted has asserted his will, because George knows that he himself has “never done a single thing” he wanted to in his whole life. All too tragically acquainted with his own limitations, Babbitt’s rebellion is now reduced to little more than rattling the cage he has built himself.<sup>27</sup>

For the apprentice novelist, “Lancelot Todd” was a fitting name for his pivotal character: it seemed to mark the death of Lewis’ own romantic hopes, though not quite his tilting at windmills. His original attempt to invest the American landscape with Fabian hope and “positive” will had arrived, in the end, at an idiom of pathos and ironic enclosure. But if anything, the scaling down of Lewis’ fiction from the naturalists’ dimensions had resulted in an even more timely resonance. Sales of *Babbitt* eventually outdistanced even those of *Main Street* (1920); in the twenties, Babbitt’s dilemma reverberated from Manhattan to Middletown. As if shaping the divided voice of the postwar decade, Lewis’ characters were both disbelievers and boosters—appealing, that is, to both a lost generation of intellectuals and to a larger mass of Americans commuting to work, shuffling through those revolving doors and stationing themselves at those “gray-mirrored” desks. As Babbitt himself comes to learn, rather than evolving into a revolutionary force, the ever-expanding “salarariat” was composed of divided souls.<sup>28</sup> By the same token, Lewis’ work was also a reminder that a tremor of doubt persisted even in the most faithful. In this more modest sense, his sensibility was indeed seismographic.

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## notes

1. Van Doren as cited in Grace Lewis, 74.

2. Quotations from Stuart Sherman and D. J. Dooley in Dooley’s *The Art of Sinclair Lewis* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1967), 53-54, and Mark Schorer, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (New York, 1961), 159, 178, 181, 184; reviewer quoted in Dooley, 17; see also 29-31, 46. The standard source on Lewis’ intellectual debts is Arthur B. Coleman, “The Genesis of Social Ideas in Sinclair Lewis,” Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1954. While generally valuable, Coleman neglects New Thought in Lewis’ system, and conflates some thinkers, especially Wells and Veblen, who disagreed with each other on points fundamental to Lewis’ outlook. See note 11 below.

3. On potboiling, see Schorer, 239, and Dooley, 53; contrast the letter to Van Doren in *The*

*Man from Main Street*, Harry E. Maule and Melville H. Cane, eds. (New York, 1955), 136-141, and Grace Lewis, 74. See also Dooley, 17-95; Vernon L. Parrington, *Sinclair Lewis: Our Own Diogenes* (Seattle, Washington, 1930), 21-23; Walter Lippmann, "Sinclair Lewis," in *Sinclair Lewis: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Mark Schorer, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1962), 84-94; Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Sinclair Lewis* (New York, 1962), 37 ff.; Thomas Feed West, *Flesh and Steel* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1967), 116-131; and John T. Flanagan, "A Long Way to Gopher Prairie," *Southwest Review*, 32 (Autumn, 1947), 403-413. Cf. also Clara Lee Moodie, "The Short Stories and Sinclair Lewis' Literary Development," *Studies in Short Fiction*, 12 (Spring, 1975), 99-107.

4. On literature and business in this era, see my "American Naturalism and the Problem of Sincerity," *American Literature*, 54 (December, 1982), 511-527. On Lorimer and Lewis, see Schorer, 228-229. On Norris' view, see E. H. Cady, *The Realist at War* (Syracuse, New York, 1958), 219; quotation from Norris in Norris and Howells, *Criticism and Fiction & The Responsibilities of the Novelist* (New York, 1962), 200.

5. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace* (New York, 1981), 103-107. See also Warren French, *Frank Norris* (New York, 1962), 29, and Charles Kaplan, "Norris's Use of Sources in *The Pit*," *American Literature*, 25 (March, 1953), 75-84.

6. Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand* (Cambridge, 1977). Figures cited in Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional Managerial Class," in *Between Labor and Capital*, Pat Walker, ed. (Boston, 1979), note on 18-19.

7. See Note 17 below.

8. Article reprinted in *MFMS*, 327-339; compare Dooley, 27, and Schorer, 217.

9. Wells, *The History of Mr. Polly* (New York, 1941), 199-200, 201, 208, 293.

10. Margaret Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (London, 1961); Henry May, *The End of American Innocence* (Chicago, 1964), 179, 230-232; Floyd Dell, *Intellectual Vagabondage* (New York, 1926), Chapter 9.

11. See Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The Fabians* (New York, 1977), 250. In this respect, Coleman's argument that Lewis adopted the viewpoint of Thorstein Veblen needs modification. As David Riesman points out in *Thorstein Veblen* (New York, 1960), in Veblen there was "nothing of the Fabian" (95). In fact Veblen explicitly ridiculed the socialists' naming of a new "business proletariat" as a "contingent which the course of economic development is bound to throw into the socialist camp." He scornfully said they were more likely to be diverted to "cultural thimbelrig" like Christian Science or New Thought. See *The Theory of Business Enterprise* (New York, 1921), note on 351; contrast Coleman, 30 ff.

12. Quotations from *Mr. Polly*, 261, and *MFMS*, 248-249. See also H. G. Wells, *New Worlds for Old* (New York, 1913), 162-177.

13. Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers* (New York, 1980), 33-37, 44; Quimby's disciple quoted on 36, and Mrs. Towne on 199; see also Schorer, 150, 159-160.

14. Lewis to Gordon Ray Young, September 20, [1915], Sinclair Lewis Collection, Yale University (emphasis mine); portion cited in Schorer, 226. Quotation on Una from *The Job* (New York, 1917), 5. Subsequent citations in text.

15. *The Job*, 235; see also the speech of Mr. Fein, 308-309.

16. "Honestly—If Possible," *Saturday Evening Post*, October 14, 1916; 28, 30, 33-34, 37. Next citation in text.

17. Schorer, 216-229; *MFMS*, 100; Lewis to Hamlin Garland, September 23, 1915, Lewis Collection, Yale. Grace Lewis, 8, 72, 74, 76.

18. "Spiritualist Vaudeville," *Metropolitan*, 47 (February, 1918), 19-23, 64-65, 66-73, 75; see also Meyer, 37.

19 Cf. Schorer, 239; see also Stephen S. Conroy, "Sinclair Lewis's Plot Paradigms," *Sinclair Lewis Newsletter*, 5-6 (1973-1974), 4-6.

20. "Commutation: \$9.17," *Saturday Evening Post* (October 30, 1915), 32-33, 68.

21. "If I Were Boss," *Saturday Evening Post* (January, 1916), 5-7, 36. Lewis himself experienced the revolving door effect. After complaining to a friend about bad reviews, he wrote: "You'll be amused at this outburst from a person who, nursing other Prom[inent] Y[oung] Authors along, daily hears such outbursts from them and comforts them." Lewis to Gordon Ray Young, September 20, [1915], Lewis Collection, Yale.

22. Robert L. Blanchard, *Around the World with Van Kannel* (New York, 1930), 81, 85.

23. "Honestly—If Possible," 37.

24. "Snappy Display," *Metropolitan*, 46 (August, 1917), 7-8, 68, 71. Compare Lewis to C. B. Tinker, December 31, [1916], Lewis Collection, Yale.

25. "Jazz," *Metropolitan*, 48 (October, 1918), 23-25, 52, 55-57. On Lewis' skills at mimicry, see Grace Lewis, 92.

26. "Getting His Bit," *Metropolitan*, 48 (September, 1918), 12-14, 58-59; "Might and Millions," *Metropolitan*, 50 (June, 1919), 30-32, 41-42; "Slip It to 'Em," *Metropolitan*, 47 (February, 1918), 19-23, 64-65.

27. *Babbitt* (New York, 1961), 11, 14, 23, 37, 66, 79, 316, 319; see also Schorer's afterword here, 320-327.

28. Compare Raymond Williams' remarks on advertisers in "Advertising: The Magic System," in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980), 170-195. On Babbitt's sales, see Schorer, note on 357.