The next matter to which we are now naturally led, demands a more delicate approach.

What book a man writes depends first on what he has to say and what is his idiom. But whatever he has to say, its character will depend on what he conceives will be the nature of his audience. His audience must to a certain extent be ideal. He must say to himself 'I will write for a few friends;' or 'I will write for some aggregate of a small audience of chosen contemporaries:' or more vaguely 'for Posterity.' Or again he will say 'I will write for the unnumbered public.' There will be no man, whatever his training or circumstances, who will not be able to read my book with pleasure.'

There is no subject on which there is more confusion than on this one. I know people who paint pictures or write books that only a trained and specialised intelligence would bear with for a moment. And yet they will use the terms that the Yellow Press public invent to convey their hatred of the Intelligence, High-Brow, Intelligentsia, and so forth, to belabour the only people in the world ever likely to take an interest in what they do. This 'fouling of their own nest' no doubt arises from the fact that it is not really their nest at all. Probably by some fluke or other they have been induced to adopt this manner, whereas in reality their 'hearts are in the Lowlands'.

And yet the small 'intellectual' public in England today no doubt deserves hard words; if only because it is very composite, and in the same way in which we have seen that those who produce the works on which it browses are hybrid. But also there is the unfortunate habit inherent in most men of accepting labels, and indeed enjoying them. This is where almost everyone breaks down, and why the general consciousness matters so much. The specially trained, student or artist, today, feeling himself violently dissociated from the Crowd, accepts the epithets spat at him, and unconsciously approximates to it's [sic] sense.

An Orifice for the Epoch: Notes to the 'Epilogue'

Lewis's writing here, far from being easy and natural, has characteristics of the 'constipated bullets' to which he refers. My interpretative notes are intended to bring the text, in the reader's mind at least, closer to a 'sluice-like discharge' of ideas. Like the exit from a toilet bowl, Lewis's argument against the water-closet takes some tight turns. By what convolutions does he argue that there is an orifice for each epoch? Writing and shifting are both natural activities that produce an excrescence, but are otherwise different. A book is not what the body rejects, but the shaping of 'picked and sifted material'. This is what gets into the book. Yet the intelligence also works on the same level as the body (this is unexpected), for just as the body rejects shit, so the mind rejects certain material—that is, what does not get into the book. The basic point is that what the mind rejects is as much detritus as what the body rejects; but there is the further point that the mind finds the body's expulsions as objectionable as does the body (acting through the nose). Lewis's tight writing and mental agility is confusing but not unclear.

The use of Rabelais is also confusing, because Lewis rejects him in the first paragraph, but keeps returning to *Gargantua and Pantagruel* to make further points. We still fall in the same baritone as *Gargantua*, but to invoke him today is to make an appeal to detritus—and Lewis believes that Rabelais himself knew that his own interest in 'the dead and stinking matter of life' was not the important thing. There is dead matter, and there is 'the spring, the terrific blow[,] of which was forged elsewhere than in the belly'. I have removed a handwritten textual mark after 'blow'. This may be a comma, but I think it more likely to be a typed comma crossed through. Inserted or not, the text means that Rabelais was dealing with more important matters than eating, drinking, farting, vomiting and defecation. Fun as that is, those days are past, and if we try to mix the Rabelaisian afflatus with that of our own times, the result will be haemorrhoids.
We can now understand the Epilogue’s third sentence: ‘There is an orifice of a fairly uniform dimension, for each epoch’. Lewis wrote ‘Hoodoos’ in 1921-22 as the literary equivalent to the Tyro paintings and drawings of those years. The Tyro portraits show imaginary beings with huge grins that signify their submission to the values by which the war had been so foolishly and wickedly fought. The grinning mouth, and not the farting arsehole, is the essential orifice of the early twentieth century.

Lewis next says that neither constipation nor loose vomiting belongs to our time. Life in the early twentieth century is conducted with moderation, and ‘fancy’ is controlled by science. Unlike Bakhtin, Lewis does not celebrate Rabelais. Yet he cannot resist returning to him, citing from chapter V of Gargantua a quasi-tragic outburst favouring drink, in order to make the point that times have changed—even if we too may end up as drunk as Gargamelle herself. Gargamelle does not in fact speak the words Lewis attributes to her; they belong to one of the unnamed drunkards who populate chapter V, ‘I les proprios des bien yvres’—but Gargamelle eats tripes and gives birth to Gargantua in the chapters on either side of that drinking-bout.

Neither Rabelais, nor Gogol, nor indeed Chekhov (I have kept Lewis’s spelling) is relevant to us; we can only be tourists in their worlds, and if we try to imitate them, we shall fall into decadence. Schoolboys, governesses, and the women of the family are in Lewis’s view partisans of the toilet and its related bodily parts. This is, apparently, another reason for rejecting the water-closet.

The critical context for Lewis’s discussion is the late Dominique Laporte’s History of Shit, which appeared in translation from The MIT Press in 2000. Histoire de la Merde was first published in Paris in 1978 by Christian Bourgois. A tour de force of wit and critical insight, it includes several illustrations showing the evolution of the water-closet, in pursuit of a broader argument about the construction of subjectivity in Europe since the sixteenth century. Of related interest is David Trotter’s Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction (Oxford: OUP, 2000), while there are remarks about mess in the same author’s Paranoid Modernism (2001, reviewed below). Trotter writes as if Lewis did not have enough to say about mess (or shit), but Lewis is decades ahead in this game. He saw the importance of shit eighty years ago, and takes off into an argument about culture and the body that leaves Laporte and Trotter mired.

After so many punning indecencies, Lewis turns delicate on the question of the writer and his audience, and traverses the possibilities of literary style. He has tried, or will try, all of them. Tarr was written for a ‘publique d’élite’ (Letters, p. 552). Time and Western Man will be for ‘the Plain Man’ or ‘“hurried man”’ (ed. Edwards, p. xii and p. xvi), and the political books of the 1930s will be written (alas) for ‘the unnumbered public’. The phrase ‘bottle arts’ derives from the heavy wine-drinker or ‘six-bottle man’ (OED), and is an oblique allusion to Rabelais. Twentieth-century art is sober.

Lewis next turns to the question of the cultural basis of the abuse of the intellect, the topic of The Apes of God, and many other works. The clause beginning ‘if only it is very composite’ is unclear, and the typescript has a manuscript loop around the word ‘works’, whilst that word itself is followed by a handwritten question mark. The composite ‘it’ is the intellectual public; and this public is ‘hybrid’ in the same way that the producers of the works upon which it browses are a hybrid grouping.

Lewis concludes with the psychology of the need for intellectuals to damage what should be most precious to them. People like and indeed enjoy being labelled—definition is a compliment of sorts, someone is paying attention to you, after all. But when such labels are accepted or internalised by those so defined (especially the artists or intellectuals who should resist such labelling), then they may begin to live according to the definitions supplied by others.
For this reason it matters who does the labelling, which is why ‘the general consciousness matters so much’. This is the psychology of humiliation, of accepting the voice of the Other, of internalising the culture. If you do that, you can no longer criticise. The meeting of psychology and culture is to be one of the major themes of The Art of Being Ruled, though at this point in the early 1920s Lewis is elaborating questions of abjection and humiliation first raised in the Bias essays. What it means to be a subject within culture is an important contemporary question. We can now see why it is necessary for Lewis, and ourselves, to get free of the implications of the water-closet. If you are stuck with shit and hold the farting arsehole in high regard, you will never drag yourself into the present.

—Alan Munton