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## Habit, Conditioning, Modernism

TIMOTHY WIENTZEN: *Automatic: Literary Modernism and the Politics of Reflex*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. \$94.95 hardcover; \$34.95 paperback.

### Enda Duffy

As we arrive at the centenary of *Ulysses*, we celebrate too, inevitably, a century or more of Joyce criticism. When the history of this critical project comes to be written, at its heart may be an account of the rise, and fall, of psychoanalytic criticism of Joyce's *oeuvre*. Despite Joyce's own reputed disdain for psychoanalysis, as well as Freud's rumored comment that the Irish were the one people impervious to psychoanalysis, one might well argue that no other mode of criticism could so completely match Joycean literary excess, or could claim to bring to Joyce's account of human subjectivity a correspondingly rich account of the role of conscious or unconscious perception, memory, and familial relations in the modern construction of selfhood. The death in 2020 of one of the distinguished critics in this tradition, Sheldon Brivic, reminds us of the extraordinary richness of this strand of Joyce studies, whether Freudian, Lacanian, Jungian, or Kleinian. It ushered French feminist critique into Joyce-critique, especially through the work of Cixous, while Lacan's seminars on *Finnegans Wake* made that novel the field of generative engagement for a major thinker of the late twentieth century. The "psychoanalytic Joyce," marshalling a discipline as complex, modernist, and baroque as Joyce's works, could claim to be the dazzling apex of the Joyce industry, illuminating Joyce's richness with its own suggestive accounts of the architectures of alienated subjectivity, and, above all, desire.

Yet suddenly, in this century, "desire," whether as critical category, umbrella term to signal a species of subjective rebellion with libidinal investment and a purchase on subjective affect, or, simply, as a keyword in accounts of human relations as represented in culture, seems not so much to have faded as to have imploded altogether. The term, like the psychoanalytic critique which valorized it, has been overtaken by advances in brain science and their application to literary texts through literature and mind studies; further, this has been accompanied by a renewed interest in—and skepticism regarding—other approaches in the modern period to thinking about the minds

of individual subjects, and new attention to the cultural and political uses to which such approaches have been put.

It is to this latter category that Timothy Wientzen's deeply interesting study, *Automatic: Literary Modernism and the Politics of Reflex*, belongs. Wientzen's is one of a group of recent books—Scott Selisker's *Human Programming: Brainwashing, Automaton, and American Unfreedom* (Minnesota, 2016) and Joshua Gang's *Behaviorism, Consciousness, and the Literary Mind* (Johns Hopkins, 2021) are others—that focus on the emergence of the influential early 20<sup>th</sup> century mind studies that might be thought of under the umbrella of behaviorism, and then investigate their interactions with the various modernist literary experiments of the time. *Automatic* surveys in detail a range of these disciplinary growths, from the behaviorist psychology of John Watson (himself a Johns Hopkins professor, subsequently an advertising executive), to the research on conditioning and reflexes of Ivan Pavlov, and including such new fields and practices as public relations, propaganda, the pragmatism of William James, the vitalism of Henri Bergson, vitalist thinking on the topic of political violence by Georges Sorel, and the history of manners of Norbert Elias. The book shows how new thinking on individual psychological makeup quickly crossed over into new fields such as sociology, into new practices of state propaganda, consumer advertising, and public administration—how, crucially, it became the new basis for politics. It then details how key works by D. H. Lawrence, Wyndham Lewis, Rebecca West, and Samuel Beckett were influenced by and responded to this arrival of behaviorist doctrine. *Automatic*, then, bridges some of the more established perspectives of cultural and historicist studies with some of the issues raised in contemporary mind studies. Focusing on new developments in, and ranging out from, the non-Freudian early twentieth-century studies of mind, it makes clear how these were enormously influential in how everyone at the time envisioned the organization of states, economies, and citizens. In general, it judges the literary response to these developments as a skeptical one: writers partook of a general consensus on the new ability to manipulate the behavior of mass populations, yet also searched for alternatives, suggested the pitfalls of the politics implied by behaviorism, and worked in part as bulwarks against a future of brainwashing. When we consider the lessons of modernism for our own algorithm-driven, screen-mediated lives, this is clearly a timely, exciting intervention; in a ringing conclusion, Wientzen sketches the stakes here. Attending to behaviorism's implications for politics, this book works to recast the very meaning of politics in modernist literature.

“Brainwashing” might indeed be the keyword of *Automatic*; others include “reflex,” “habit,” “conditioning,” “milieu” or “environment,” “robots,”

and “automatic behavior” itself. This range suggests a work whose ambition is nothing less than to open a whole field: to understand how culture intervened in a new social order in which subtle versions of “mind control” deliver a newly administered world. Focusing on how non-Freudian psychologists and, increasingly, founders of sociology, political science, and business administration, understood that the behavior of masses of people could be subtly manipulated so that it was induced as reflex and rendered as habit, the book also plumbs the implications of the then-newly acknowledged notion that one’s environment could determine one’s behavior. As Georg Simmel described it in *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, a mass of heterogeneous signals stimulated the citizen of the modern city. These could, the behaviorists understood, be molded and smoothed via propaganda, public relations, and the new media such as the phonograph and radio, to “condition” that citizen to a belief in the naturalness of their consumer and political choices. Modernist writers are then read here as alternately intrigued and repulsed by this development. This study is not so much an exploration of the architectures of the different regimes of hidden persuasion themselves or of the specific aesthetic or formal strategies in the literary texts that might allegorize, represent, or transgress them, as it is a tracing of the development of theories of behaviorist persuasion, a tracking of their extensive absorption across diverse discourses and fields (an account of behaviorism’s influence on Carl Schmitt is followed by one on how it informs Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, for example). The four chosen authors—Lawrence, Lewis, West, and Beckett—are likewise first considered for how they read and absorbed the work of the psychologists, philosophers, and sociologists, and then for how they both used it—in the sense that they grasped ways in which new forms of literary persuasion and behaviorist tactics might be related—and how they implicitly critiqued, modified, and countered it. On each of the texts read in detail (Lawrence’s *The Plumed Serpent*, Lewis’s *The Childermass*, West’s *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, and Beckett’s *Murphy*), we get to consider how their author’s reading in behaviorism and its implications directly informs the most ambitious aspects of their writing. Each of these works, with the possible exception of Beckett’s novel, is a notably “difficult,” even controversial text of late modernism. This study reads each as a kind of cultural ganglion where ideas and aesthetic strategies meet, spaces in which, in the early days of the hidden persuaders, their authors explore how persuasion of “the masses” operates.

What, then, does this have to do with the works of Joyce? He, like the other now canon-entrenched figures who came of age before World War I—Yeats, Eliot, Woolf, Pound—fades from the picture in this study. Don’t forget, however, that the supreme late-modernist fiction is *Finnegans Wake*;

published in 1939, it is contemporaneous, for example, with Elias's *The Civilizing Process*. The efforts of Lawrence in his controversial primitivist epic *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) to ally Bergsonian vitalism with a renewed theory of the uses of mythology, discussed here in a sensitive reading, pales beside the vast turbine of myth and vitalist energy that bursts forth, to altogether different political effects, in *Finnegans Wake*.

Still, it will undoubtedly be through the thoroughly interesting and persuasive capstone chapter of *Automatic* on Beckett, that Joyceans will take on board the perspectives of this book. Beckett is the somewhat anomalous figure in the literary constellation here assembled, yet his juxtaposition convincingly highlights his points of comparison to the others: his peripheral, somewhat prickly "modernism" (even late modernism); his immersion, through active and extensive study, as his notebooks show, in the work of Pavlov and other behaviorists; his deep and profound interest in embodied knowledge and in the body as knowledge medium; and his attention to how the battered, wounded bodies of object subjects were both susceptible to such transmission and strangely resistant to it. Much of this will ring with familiar echoes in the ears of Joyceans. Reading *Automatic*, I was often struck by the thought that *Ulysses* is certainly a full-scale case study of one bourgeois subject's disjointed, but still receptive, reaction to the behaviorist-inspired stimuli and forces circulating in his milieu. The very habit of his step-by-step *flânerie* becomes the register of Bloom's automatic behavior, the rhythm of his stimulus-response. Much has been written of Bloom's ideological interpellation, and his responses to its varieties; the mark of his heroism has been taken to be his refusal of, for example, the anti-Semitic sneers he encounters. Beneath such interpellation, however, *Automatic* would suggest, there operate more subtle levels of behavior modification. Undoubtedly, this will be a rich seam for Joyceans, and Timothy Wientzen offers an extraordinary roadmap.

Given Beckett's evolving but always important relation to Joyce through these years, consider how the concerns with bodies, subjectivities, and stimuli sketched in *Automatic* also frame *Finnegans Wake*. The matter of habit, as the metronome of late-modernist embodied *hexis* in the face of what Beckett called "the whole physical fiasco," is the issue upon which Wientzen builds his careful exploration of Beckett (151). ("But habit is a great deadener," as Vladimir concludes in *Waiting for Godot* [165]). Habit, in Wientzen's perceptive reading, is the hero rocking in the chair at the opening of *Murphy*, the pulmonary "diastole-systole" of the dispersing Dublin crowd, even of the breathing of air itself, when Murphy becomes "fed up with breathing" (154, 155). Tracking variations in habit in the single day and night settings of his major works, Joyce, along with Beckett, renders such habit as basic to his

account of being, and the possibility of being different, or being differently, in modernity.

Difference may be the crux of the matter, whether it be achieved difference in being, or change achieved over time, given that an implicit aim of this study is to examine how literary texts rethink the category of politics in the new era of behaviorist conditioning. The critic avers that the writers studied here offer a roadmap to some of the critical orientations and ideological pitfalls that the politics of reflex have generated. This has profound implications for the current theories of political agency, especially those from below. The Lukacsian theory of consciousness, whether mediated for our time through, for example, Paulo Freire's notion of "conscientization," Jameson's account of "cognitive mapping," or more recently, in accounts of how knowledges emerge in "empire" or the work of decolonization, is put under pressure by the twentieth-century regimes of "the covert orchestration of behaviors" (187) wrought by the behaviorist turn, and, today, as the conclusion to this study rightly insists, by the new pervasive and global powers of digital media. Countering this power, the "choice architecture" of the various late modernisms might seem all too tenuous, and any critical confidence in the efficacy of their renewed attention to the powers of the physical subject's body, at best quixotic. Nevertheless, the articulation of a new account of the politics of culture in the era of biopolitics, what Beckett himself called the "biosocial," is still the most urgent task confronting literary criticism today. Timothy Wientzen deserves enormous credit for laying out in this carefully argued and courageous book the challenges involved in this critical project. For Joyceans, applying the insights generated here implies nothing less than a recasting of our present sense of what is at stake in the whole of the Joycean modernist project. The reward: coming to grips with the significance of *Finnegans Wake*, and by extension all of Joyce's writing, for the twenty-first rather than for the twentieth century. Reading Timothy Wientzen, one gets the impression that the politics of human *embodiment* as the basis for human *being* on the planet is beginning, in the project of modernist criticism, to come into focus, and that by examining the literary representations of such apparently simple physiological behaviors as reflex, as this work does, extraordinary vistas of the future impact of modernist literature will be opened up. *Automatic* is a path-breaking book. Joyceans would do well to pursue the paths it presents to us.

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