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Political Futurism and the Myth of the Italian Revolution

[For] a long time after the Second World War, Italian Futurism fell into oblivion [and] was treated with great mistrust and suspicion. The responsibility for having [glorified] war and supported Mussolini's Fascist régime weighed heavily over it. [Only] since the 1960s has there been a reawakening of interest in the Futurist [move]ment, an interest which has grown more and more over recent years. [Once] the old prejudices had been removed, young or new scholars investigating [Futur]ist art and literature have discovered, or rather: rediscovered, the manifold [aspe]cts of the movement and its fundamental importance for the history of [twen]tieth-century avant-garde art.

There is general agreement today that Futurism, at least up until the First [World] War, was one of the most original and prolific elements of the modern-[ist] movement. One aspect, however, still remains the subject of differing inter-[pre]tations: the politics of Futurism and its relationship to Fascism.

Between 1909 and 1915, Italian Futurism was, politically speaking, pre-[dom]inantly a nationalist movement. It glorified war as the "only hygiene of the [world]", propagated Italy's entry into the First World War, and its members were [amo]ngst the first to volunteer for military service. In 1919, the principal [expo]nents of the Futurist movement participated in the founding of the Fascist [move]ment. After 1925, many Futurists were followers of Mussolini's régime, [and] their work contributed to Fascist art and the "Lictorian cult".[1] Some of [them], including Marinetti, remained faithful to Mussolini right up until the

1 For a detailed study of this see Emilio Gentile: *Il culto del littorio*, translated as *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*. Several of my previous publications have analysed with greater depth the political orientation of the Futurist movement and its connections with Fascism. See, in particular, *Le origini dell'ideologia fascista*, "La politica di Marinetti", and "The Conquest of Modernity".

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The Vortex in the Machine: Futurism in England

Introduction

For England, 1910 was a year of great ferment leading to changes so profound that Virginia Woolf described December 1910 as the moment in which "human character changed".[1] Within this context, the impact of Italian Futurism was one of the occasions which, along with two post-Impressionist exhibitions[2] and the exhibitions that Kandinsky held regularly from 1909, marked a significant renovation of English culture. Several years later, Ezra Pound remarked that "Marinetti and Futurism gave a great fillip to all European literature. The movement which I, Eliot, Joyce and others started in London would not have existed but for Futurism."[3]

From the meeting of Futurism and British culture, a new avant-garde movement was born, Vorticism[4] – founded in 1914 by Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound with the publication of the magazine *Blast* – which represented a Utopian and prophetic phase in the lead-up to the birth of modernism in the interwar years. This occurred in a country which was notoriously insensitive to avant-garde art, a fact which is also discernible in the use of the word avant-garde, often mistakenly seen as a synonym of "modernism" or even spelled incorrectly, thus further underlining its lexical, cultural, and semantic

1 Virginia Woolf: *A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays*. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Rachel Bowlby. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, p. 70.

2 Both exhibitions, organised by Roger Fry, were enormously successful. The first, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists", (8 November 1910–15 January 1911) was held at the Grafton Galleries in London, and was followed by the "Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition" (5 October 1912 – 31 December 1912).

3 Statement by Pound in Fillia: *Il futurismo*, p. 21.

4 Like Futurism, Vorticism was an aesthetic movement that comprehended all the arts, and that involved, in different ways, painters such as W. Lewis, L. Atkinson, C. Hamilton, W. Roberts, E. Wadsworth, C.R. W. Nevinson, D. Bomberg, F. Etchells, J. Dismort, and H. Saunders; sculptors such as H. Gaudier-Brzeska and J. Epstein; writers such as E. Pound, F.M. Ford, R. Aldington, and R. West; photographers such as M. Arbuthnot, L. A. Coburn.

extraneity.[5] Indeed, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot themselves are hard to locate within the context of the European avant-garde, if by avant-garde we wish to signify not only an extremist, experimental art which attacks the impoverishment of the various expressive forms, but a knowing response, bent on imposing a radical change in direction even within the social field, with its "contamination" of high and low art, Art and popular culture. In this sense, Marinetti embodied for the English *the* avant-garde, the prototype of the radical artist, intolerant and partisan, while Futurism itself represented both a "model" movement, rebellious, sectarian, and fanatical, seeking self-publicity and assuming an aesthetic position which challenged the innocuous and elegant post-Impressionist decorativism of Roger Fry, the *arbiter elegantiarum* of the period and founder of the famed Omega Workshops.

The events and publications[6] of the period from 1910 to 1914 are now well known. It is necessary, however, to look more closely at the debt Vorticism owed to the other avant-garde movements, Futurism in particular, given that Vorticism is often considered an inconsistent mixture of Futurism, Cubism, Expressionism, and Abstract Art. For while Vorticism was "the ideas of a time concentrated by an individual energy into a doctrine",[7] this does not imply that it was volatile, indiscriminate, intellectually erratic or aesthetically inconsistent.

5 See Renato Poggioli: *The Theory of the Avant-garde*. Cambridge/MA: Belknap Press, 1968, pp. 7–8.

6 The most important Futurist works were regularly printed in English newspapers and magazines from 1910 to 1914. Extracts from the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* and *Futurist Venice* were published on 1 August 1910 in *The Tramp*. The catalogue from the March 1912 exhibition included the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*, *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto* and *The Exhibitors to the Public*. Texts by Severini appeared in the catalogue for his one-man show in April 1913. The manifesto *Wireless Imagination and Words in Freedom* appeared, in the September 1913 edition of *Poetry and Drama*, while *The Variety Theatre* was published in *The Daily Mail* on 21 November 1913. In January 1914 *Down with Tango and Parsifal* appeared, and in the catalogue for the April 1914 Futurist exhibition *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*, *The Exhibitors to the Public*, and Boccioni's sculpture, *Ensembles Plastiques*. The journal *The New Age* of 7 May and 16 July 1914 printed *Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numeric Sensibility*. The first English Futurist manifesto, *Vital English Art*, by Marinetti and C.R.W. Nevinson, appeared in *The Observer* on 7 June 1914. *War, the Only Hygiene of the World* was printed in *The Little Review* in November 1914.

7 Lewis: "The Vorticists." *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 455.

The initial impact of Futurism in England

In April and December 1910, Marinetti visited London and gave his first lecture in the Lyceum Club. In March 1912, the first Futurist exhibition opened at the Sackville Gallery; for this occasion Marinetti gave a lecture at the Beckstein Hall (19 March 1912) and created a stir by taking part in suffragette protests and in an "organised attack" against the Irish journalist F. McCullagh, who had published a bitter criticism of the Italian army. In April 1913, Severini inaugurated a one-man show at the Marlborough Gallery, becoming the most famous and highly thought-of Futurist in England. In October 1913, his work was featured in the "Post-Impressionist and Futurist Exhibition" at the Doré Gallery. From 16–20 November 1913, Marinetti gave a series of lectures and, during a dinner organised in his honour, declaimed *The Siege of Adrianopoli*. 26 April 1914, saw the inauguration of another large Futurist exhibition: "Exhibition of the Works of the Italian Futurist Painters and Sculptors", at the Doré Gallery. During this period, Marinetti gave a "dynamic and synoptic" reading (April 1914), and a lecture (6 May 1914) at the Doré Gallery. On 12 June 1914, Marinetti and C. R. W. Nevinson organised a *serata* (soirée) at the Doré Gallery, which degenerated into a riot. Finally, from 12 to 15 June 1914, Marinetti gave another series of lectures and, with Russolo and Piatti, took part in a series of Futurist concerts held at the London Coliseum and the Albert Hall.[8]

Initially, English artists were receptive to the principles and themes of Futurism while regarding with suspicion the noisy publicity-seeking apparatus of the movement and Marinetti's boundless polemics, which, however, they were eventually to copy. Many artists attended the exhibitions and *serate*, in which Marinetti, with his formidable gestural and vocal capacity, declaimed "some peculiarly blood-thirsty concoctions with great dramatic force",[9] setting himself up as defender and town crier of the avant-garde. It was undoubtedly these characteristics that had such a great emotional impact on even the stiffest and most traditional members of the English public: "It was a matter for astonishment what Marinetti could do with his unaided voice [...] A day of attack upon the Western Front, with all the 'heavies' hammering together, right back to the horizon, was nothing to it."[10]

8 See Baronti Marchiò: *Il futurismo in Inghilterra*; Cianci, ed.: *Futurismo/Vorticismo*; Cooney, et al., eds.: *Blast 3*; Cork: *Vorticism and Abstract Art*; Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*.

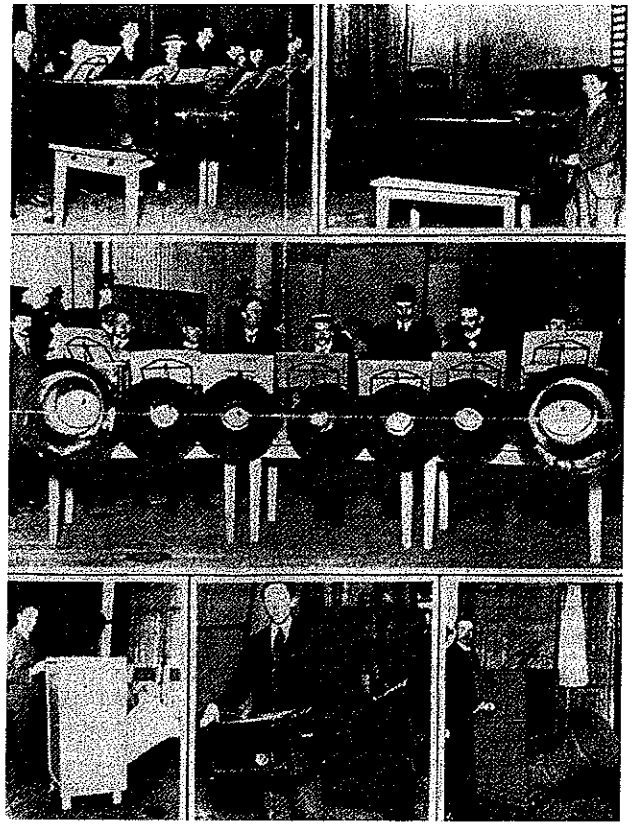
9 Lewis: The Letters of Wyndham Lewis, pp. 53–54.

10 Lewis: Blasting and Bombardiering, p. 33.

17 Marinetti, Piatti and Russolo at the Coliseum in London, 1914

The stance and vocabulary of the Futurists rapidly began to appear in the critical writings, the literary and artistic papers produced by these English artists. For example, Futurist elements can be seen in the metaphors of a technical-scientific nature – the frequent references to movement, electricity, and energy – which Pound began to use in 1911. In "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris"[11] he spoke of events that "govern knowledge as the switchboard governs an electric circuit", and of words "charged with a force like electricity, or, rather, radiating a force from their apexes – some radiating, some sucking in." In "The Serious Artist", he affirmed that "the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy,

11 This series of articles were published in instalments in *The New Age* from December 1911 to February 1912. They have been reprinted in Pound: *Selected Prose 1909–1965*, pp. 21–43.



18 The *intonarumori* at the Coliseum in London, 1914.
From *The Sketch*.

something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding and unifying."[12] The radicalism and the violence of the Futurist protest can be found in a letter from 1913 to Harriet Monroe, in which Pound declared his intention "to save the public's soul by punching its face".[13] In an article published in February 1914, Pound defended modern art, futuristically predicted the imminent seizure of power by the artist, and exalted the dissent, the primitiveness and pugnacity of the avant-garde:

12 Pound: "The Serious Artist." *Literary Essays*, p. 49.
13 Pound: *The Selected Letters*, p. 13.

> The artist has at last been aroused to the fact that the war between him and the world is a war without truce. That his only remedy is slaughter [...] He must live by craft and violence. His gods are violent gods. [...] To the present condition of things we have nothing to say.but "merde" [...] we artists who have been so long the despised are about to take over control.[14]

Wyndham Lewis, too, was not initially adverse to the Futurists, and considered Marinetti as a champion of the avant-garde and a model to be imitated. Early traces of the Futurist influence can be found in some of his paintings (*Kermesse* 1912, *Abstract Design* 1912, *Timon of Athens* 1912–1913), which revealed something of the Futurist dynamic, and in an article in which Lewis, displaying a typically Futurist view of the modern sensibility and new urban horizons, announces the birth of a group of English artists who respond to the machine age:

> A man who passes his days amid the rigid lines of houses, a plague of cheap ornamentation, noisy street locomotion, the Bedlam of the press, will evidently possess a different habit of vision to a man living amongst the lines of a landscape. [...] All revolutionary painting today has in common the rigid reflections of steel and stone in the spirit of the artist; that desire for stability as though a machine were being built to fly or kill with.[15]

Taking a cue from this expression of common ground, in September 1913 *Poetry and Drama*, a review edited by Harold Monro, dedicated space to Futurism, qualifying such a decision with the assertion that "we claim ourselves, also, to be futurists". Even though Monro believed that Futurism was "in its genesis, no more than frenzied Whitmanism, adultered by an excessive, if diverting, admixture of meridional eloquence",[16] its importance went far beyond the Italian borders in that it was "an attitude of mind, a condition of soul". Man, for Monro, had to end his sentimental contemplation of the past and "turn round and walk face forward, in love of the future."[17]

From Latin to Nordic modernism

This common sharing of themes and stance ended, however, between November 1913 and spring 1914, during which time Lewis brusquely abandoned the "inoffensive" Omega Workshops of Fry, Pound kept his distance from the rigorous and exquisitely literary experimentalism of Imagism to involve himself in the visual arts, and the English philosopher T. E. Hulme re-

14 Ezra Pound: "The New Sculpture." *The Egoist* 1:4 (16 February 1914), pp. 67–68, here: p. 68.
15 Lewis: "The Cubist Room." *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 57.
16 Harold Monro: "Marinetti." *Poetry and Drama* 3 (September 1913), p. 263.
17 Harold Monro: "Varia: Futurism." *Poetry and Drama* 3 (September 1913), p. 262.

turned from Berlin with his anti-vital, geometric abstract aestheticism. In this period, English artists began to distance themselves from Futurism, differentiating their work, in accordance with the behaviour of the avant-garde, from what preceded and from what had by now become a fashionable phenomenon that threatened their own cultural identity. This initial separation from Futurism was based on a "nordic" spirit of nationalism, bent on defending itself from the "meridionalism" of the Futurists.

In December 1913, another issue of *Poetry and Drama* was published, re-examining Futurism more coldly, highlighting its quintessentially Italian nature:

> In its origins the Futurist movement was avowedly Italian and for the Italians, rather than cosmopolitan in its aim. [...] We admire [Marinetti's] extraordinary inventiveness; we were enthralled by his declamation; but we do not believe that his present compositions achieve anything more than an advanced form of verbal photography.[18]

If the Futurists represented "the reaction of a suppressed vitality against a tyrannous and antiquated power", the needs of English art were "neither of the precise nature nor of the same intensity as those with which they are faced". Thus, as during the period of the French Revolution, England "had not the immediate need that France possessed for a violent upheaval, but profited by that of its neighbour, continuing and accelerating its own enfranchisement". But now "it is essential for us to be allowed to solve our own problems in our own manner. The Latin temperament is not ours, and its present violent materialism will fail to find a permanent footing here."[19]

In an article published in *The New Weekly*, Lewis defended Marinetti as "the intellectual Cromwell of our time" able "to instil into people the importance of the Present, the immense importance of Life [...] in this home of aestheticism, crass snobbery and languors of distinguished phlegm". He added that "a Futurism of Place is as important as a temporal one. Artists in this country should attempt to find a more exact impression of the Northern character. Much of Marinetti's vitality is untranslatable; and there are many advantages in not hailing from the South."[20] He suggested that "England practically invented this civilisation Signor Marinetti has come to preach to us about", and enthusiasm for the future, for the machine, was condemned as Romantic heresy, the result

18 Harold Monro: "The Origin of Futurism." *Poetry and Drama* 4 (December 1913), p. 389.

19 Harold Monro: "Futurism and Ourselves." *Poetry and Drama* 4 (December 1913), pp. 390–391.

20 Wyndham Lewis: "A Man of the Week: Marinetti." *The New Weekly* 1:11 (30 May 1914), 328–329, here: p. 329.

of the "extraordinary childishness of the Latins over mechanical inventions, aeroplanes, machinery etc."[21]

Blast and the beginnings of the Vorticist movement

The need of Vorticism to become autonomous of Futurism and, above all, to herald itself as a combative and polemical avant-garde movement, took shape in March 1914 with the founding of the Rebel Art Centre. The pretext for the definitive break from Futurism, however, came with the publication of the Futurist manifesto *Vital English Art* in *The Observer* of 7 June 1914. It was co-authored by Marinetti and C. R. W. Nevinson, the only English orthodox Futurist, which was interpreted by other members of the Rebel Art Centre as an attempt to force adhesion to Futurism, the impact of which led to a fight. As if to confirm this break, the magazine *Blast* was published on 20 June 1914, announcing the birth of Vorticism. The term "Vorticism" was coined by Pound, for whom a vortex, apart from its esoteric-theosophical implications,[22] had urban connotations that derived from Futurism.[23] In 1913, Pound wrote that London was "a vortex, drawing strength from the peripheries",[24] and symbolised the flow of energy in the city, in the mind, in modern art. The vortex was for Pound an image charged with energy, it was "the point of maximum energy. It represents, in mechanics, the greatest efficiency."[25]

The first issue of *Blast* included two manifestos. The first contains a series of "Blasts and Blesses". Blasts for England, for its infectious climate and its "flabby sky [...] VICTORIAN VAMPIRE [that] sucks the TOWN's heart". Blasts too for France, for its "SENTIMENTAL GALLIC GUSH", its aperitifs and triumphal arches. Blasts for humour, that "Quack ENGLISH drug for stupidity and sleepiness. Arch enemy of REAL", for sport, but above all for the Victorian Age, attacked with a Futurist, anti-passé tone. There followed a list of internationally known things and people, such as Bergson, Croce, Tagore, but also cod-liver oil, the Post Office, and the Bishop of London and all his posterity considered not arty. The list of Blessings began with England, "industrial island machine, pyramidal workshop". Blessed too is English humour, "great barbar-

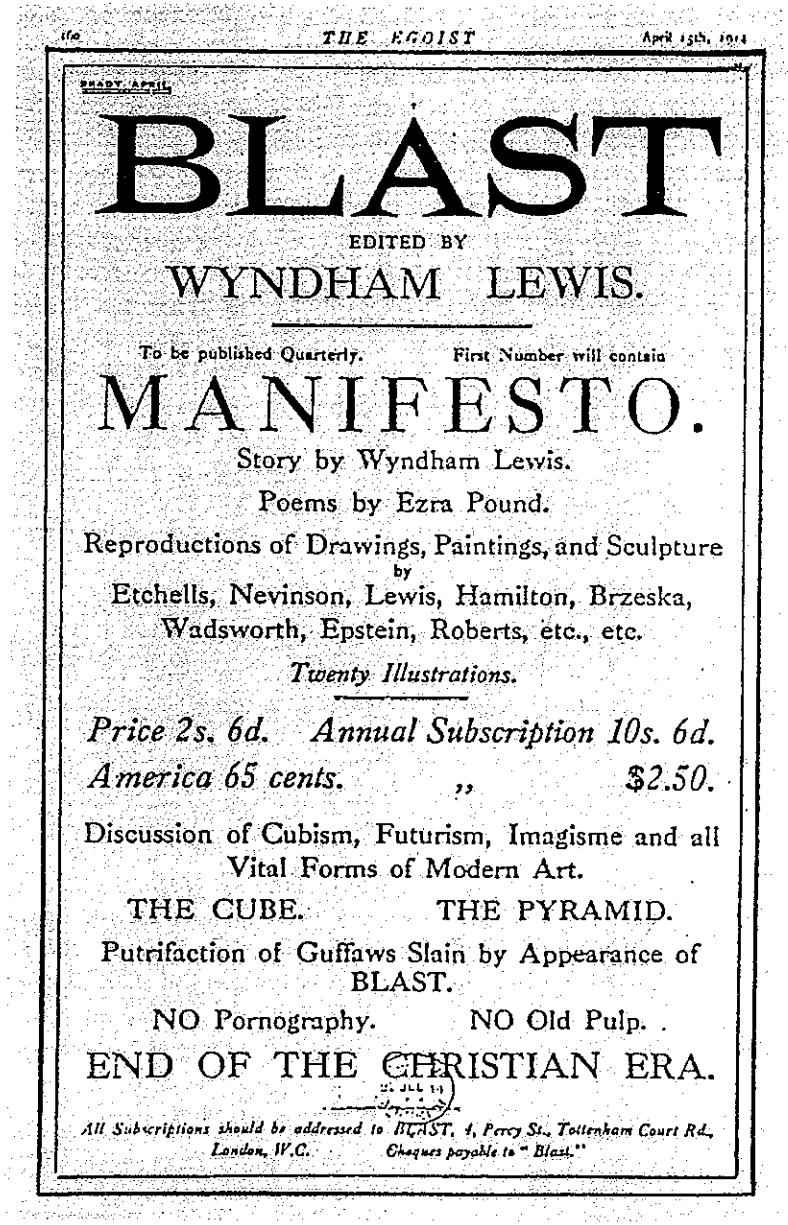
21 Wyndham Lewis: "Automobilism." *The New Weekly* 2:1 (20 June 1914), p. 13.

22 See Davie: *Ezra Pound*, pp. 41–42.

23 As a matter of fact, the vortex is often present in the works and manifestos of Boccioni, Carrà and Balla.

24 Ezra Pound: "Through Alien Eyes." *The New Age* 12:13 (30 January 1913), pp. 300–301, here: p. 300.

25 Pound: "Vortex: Pound." *Blast 1*, p. 153.



19 *Blast* advertisement in *The Egoist*, 15 April 1914

ous weapon [...] wild MOUNTAIN RAILWAY from IDEA to IDEA [...] hysterical WALL built round the EGO." Blessed is France for its vitality, scepticism and feminine qualities, for the "GREAT FLOOD OF LIFE pouring out of the wound of 1797". Blessed is the hairdresser because "he attacks Mother Nature [...] He trims aimless and retrograde growths into CLEAN ARCHED SHAPES and ANGULAR PLOTS". The manifesto ends with a list of well-known names, recognisable either for their direct connection to Vorticism, or because of their open hostility to fashion, prejudice, and cliché. Futuristically, aviators, boxers, and music-hall entertainers are blessed.

The second Vorticist manifesto appears more conventional in layout, but utilises a dense, violent language, a declamatory, grotesque tone, a taste for scandal, a call to the instinct, and the exaltation of the northern spirit as the enemy of *romance*, thus affirming a certain degree of continuity of atmosphere.

The overall impression of the magazine is a characteristic admixture of critical sobriety and wild humour; the pervading atmosphere ranges from that of the conference hall to the uproar of the boxing ring. But looking beyond the stance, to the level of accomplishment and the forward-looking nature of the work, the importance of Vorticism was much more tangible. Lewis and Pound tried to apply to writing the innovations of Vorticist painting. Pound began his avant-garde commitment as the leading exponent and theorist of Imagism, defining the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time",[26] a short-circuit which can establish and reveal the interiority and exteriority of an experience, transferring it to the conceptual plane. As with Marinetti, words acquire an almost magical value due to the evocative power they contain, and the poet is completely free in his formulation of images and analogies. Specifically, within Marinetti's concept of "essential words", which saw the abolition of adjectives, adverbs, and punctuation (*Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, 1912), there resides the need to "use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something".[27] There is also a surprising similarity between Imagist poetry – exemplified by the renowned "In a Station of the Metro": "The apparition of these faces in the crowd;/ Petals on a wet, black bough", in which "one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective"[28] – and the Futurist concept of simultaneity as the attempt to create "a sort of emotive ambience, seeking by intuition the sym-

26 Pound: "A Few Don'ts." *Literary Essays*, p. 4.
27 Ibid.
28 Ezra Pound: "Vorticism." *Fortnightly Review* 96:573 (1 September 1914), pp. 461–471, here: p. 467.

pathies and the links which exist between the exterior (concrete) scene and the interior (abstract) emotion".[29] But most interesting of all is what Pound wrote recalling his experience in the metro which was behind the creation of the poem:

> And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation ... not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that – a "pattern", or hardly a pattern, if by a "pattern" you mean something with a "repeat" in it. But it was a word, the beginning, for me, of a language in colour.[30]

Clearly, Pound attempted to apply to poetry the non-representational pictorial techniques of the avant-garde, particularly as regards the matching, or as Pound said, the juxtaposition of images, which used the technique of collage, if by collage we mean the refusal of concatenation in favour of superimposition, the rejection of linearity and chronological development with a resultant acceptance of simultaneity as a compositional mode: "In the 'Metro' hokku, I was careful, I think, to indicate spaces between the rhythmic units, and I want them observed."[31]

In this sense, the Poundian concept of the image is fundamental to any analysis of the literary form of English modernism. As Joseph Frank has noticed, it is the first example of "spatial form" in that it frustrates the readers' normal expectations of a sequence, forcing them "to perceive the elements of the poem as juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time."[32] This assembly of disparate elements and images connected only by virtue of their analogical connections led to a different layout of the text, to new typographical solutions. In the example of "In the Station of the Metro", this results in two contrasting lines, two blocks of print which, positioned on the page, highlight the crisis of compositions that belong to a clearly definable genre, such as lyrical verse, and in the same way, to their semantic coherence, even though Pound continued to believe in the possibility of language expressing meaning. But, as early as December 1912, Pound had written: "I've been writing some new stuff in an utterly modern manner",[33] a form of poetry in which language, freed from the static and fragmentary nature of Imagism and from the preciousness of the *mot juste*, became more dynamic, aggressive, sometimes satirical; developing techniques that would lead to the long poems of the period of High modernism through the collision of prose and verse, ordinary language and visual arrangement of the printed page. Now the image is "a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing", an equation extracted from concepts or emotions, intense images which concede nothing to their secondary characteristics.

29 Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla, Severini: "The Exhibitors to the Public." Apollonio: *Futurist Manifestos*, p. 50.

30 Pound: "Vorticism", pp. 465–466.

31 Pound: *The Selected Letters*, p. 17.

32 Frank: *The Widening Gyre*, p. 10.

33 Letter dated December 1912, in Humphreys, ed.: *Pound's Artists*, p. 39.

The best example from his Vorticist phase is surely "Dogmatic Statement on the Game and Play of Chess", published in *Blast 2*, in which the dynamism of verbs and words implying movement is halted by the accumulation of nominal blocks, juxtaposed asyndetically. It was to take until the *Cantos*, however, for these compositional modes of Vorticism to be fully applied.

Lewis also tried to apply avant-garde pictorial techniques to writing. He considered his literary contemporaries, and Pound too, to be "too bookish and not keeping pace with the visual revolution".[34] In *Blast 1*, Lewis published "Enemy of the Stars", a work which straddles the boundaries of drama, the prose-poem, and the oneiric short story. Here too, apart from the themes that anticipate aspects of the great works of Joyce and Beckett, making this play a significant milestone in the development of English modernism, the technical solutions are the most fascinating. Pound later wrote that "any verbal renovation of our time [...] was already in full vigour in Mr. Lewis' writings in *Blast* 1914."[35]

Apart from his experiments in genre-hybridisation, Lewis submitted writing to a process of simplification. The result was a synthetic language, functional, dependent on analogy, and telegraphic sentence construction, capable of establishing new relationships within a spatial rather than temporal logic. This abstract and static anti-vitalism manifests itself on the page as a terse style, based on unexpected leaps, short, isolated sentences which continually interrupt the flow of action, frequently creating empty spaces, which highlight the static and plastic nature of the semantic blocks. This "reticent" technique, based on parataxis, juxtaposition of images, technical and chronological rupture, collage and quotation, is common to all the greatest works of English literary modernism. In works such as these, the Vorticists seem to apply to their writing the Futurist technique of *polymaterial assemblage*, used by Boccioni and Marinetti: "Throats iron eternities, drinking heavy radiance, limbs towers of blatant light, the stars poised, immensely distant, with their metal sides, pantheistic machines."[36]

34 Lewis: *Rude Assignment*, p. 139.

35 Pound: "D'Artagnan Twenty Years After." *Selected Prose*, p. 425.

36 Lewis: "Enemy of the Stars." *Blast* 1, p. 64.

But Vorticism has a much greater debt to Futurism. *Blast*, the title[37] of which was suggested by the Futurist C. R. W. Nevinson, owes much to *Lacerba* for its dynamic typographical layout[38] and its declamatory style; the wide use of square type fonts and the pictorial layout of the printed page also recalls the manifesto *L'Antitradition futuriste*. Besides, the series of "Blasts and Blesses" recalls the Futurist use of "Merde aux... Rose aux", while the call to primitivism and human instincts, the proclamation of the "End of the Christian Era", the violent polemicism and nationalism, the search for "a correlated aesthetic"[39] which predicts a "contamination" of all the arts, the use of montage, juxtaposition and linguistic collage, were all in line with the aesthetics, tone, and typographical invention of Futurism.

Without a doubt, Vorticism responded to a very different set of socio-cultural conditions (one can think of the Vorticist suspicion of Futurist *macchinolatria* being due to a more advanced degree of industrialisation[40] or to the easier relationship they enjoyed with tradition) which created a very different aesthetic stance. For example, the greatest error committed by Futurism was seen as its indifference to formalism, technique, and precision. Both Pound and Lewis denigrated the Italian movement for its lack of form, criticising it in *Blast 1* as a sort of Impressionism: "Futurism is the disgorging spray of a vortex with no drive behind it, DISPERSAL [...] Impressionism, Futurism, which is only an accelerated sort of impressionism, DENY the vortex. They are the CORPSES of VORTICES. Marinetti is a corpse." Furthermore, they affirmed that "Futurism, as preached by Marinetti, is largely Impressionism up-to-date" and that, on the contrary, "VORTICISM is art before it has spread itself into a state of flaccidity, of elaboration, of secondary applications."[41]

37 Lewis, in an interview in the *Daily News* (7 April 1914) explained the matter: "*Blast* signifies something constructing and destructive. It means the blowing away of the dead ideas and worn-out notions. It means (according to the Anglo-Saxon interpretation) a fire or flame."

38 In England, the publication of *Blast* was an absolute novelty, as the magazine stood out from other English reviews of the time, such as *The Egoist* and *The English Review*. It was a thick volume and had a bright, magenta coloured cover, cut across transversally by the word "Blast" printed in block capital letters with no illustrations, no summary and no decoration. Nowadays, critics tend to consider *Blast* as the most accomplished Vorticist work of art. M. Perloff has noted that "it was a matter of rethinking the function of the printed page, and, beyond the page, the Idea of the Book." *The Futurist Moment*, p. 181.

39 Ezra Pound: "Affirmations II: Vorticism." *The New Age* 16:11 (14 January 1915), pp. 277–278, here: p. 277.

40 Lewis wrote in *Blast* 1, p. 40: "Machinery, Factories, new and vaster buildings, bridges and works, we have all that, naturally, around us."

41 Pound: "Vortex: Pound." *Blast 1*, pp. 153–154.

The Vorticists despised the Futurists' passionate nature, their abandon to the flow of words and images. The Futurist dynamism, connected to the machine, led to chaos and confusion, while the Vorticist privileged the rigour and solidity of a single image. For the Vorticists, probably influenced by T. E. Hulme, the propounder of geometric art, of pure lines, clarity, and mechanicalism, the machine suggested hardness, precision, and functionality which could be explicated by a more abstract language, simple and vigorous. It was necessary to imitate the normative and organisational principle of the machine, the ability to follow its functions with lucid precision, without admitting emotional confusion. The result was a far more static pictorial style, made of diagonal lines, clearly outlined forms, and precise images in which dynamism was held back in an analytical division of space, very different from the simultaneity of splintered images proposed by the Futurists. While announcing their admiration of the machine, refusing to consider it as threatening, as the Expressionists did, Vorticists believed there to be nothing new in Futurist machine cult, described by Lewis as "Automobilism". He did not experience the enthusiasm and sense of absorption of the Futurists:

> [Vorticism] did not sentimentalise machines [...] it took them as a matter of course: just as we take trees, hills, rivers, coal-deposits, oil-well, rubber-trees, as a matter of course. It was a stoic creed: it was not an *uplift* [...] The artist *observed* the machine, from the outside. But it did not observe the machine *impressionistically*: he did not attempt to represent it in violent movement. For to represent a machine in violent movement is to arrive at a blur, or a kaleidoscope. And a blur was as abhorrent to a vorticist as a vacuum is to nature.[42]

There followed a call for discipline, for order and formal rigour, in the attempt to harness the dynamism and nihilism of the Futurists, with a typically English hybridisation of avant-garde and Classical aesthetics. The Vorticists refused to allow passion to take hold; they rejected dynamism and never attempted to humanise the machine or mechanise the man, as the Futurists were to do; on the contrary, through the image of the machine, they sought to dehumanise mankind: "Dehumanisation is the chief diagnostic of the Modern World."[43] The machine idolatry and mystic vitalism of the Futurists was considered meridional sentimentalism, described by Lewis as "The Melodrama of Modernity". The relationship between the Vorticists and technology was distant, in as much as it was seen as a symptom of that profound sense of alienation which characterised the modern era. Vorticist art represented a mechanical and

42 Lewis: "The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks." *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 341.

43 Lewis: "Vortices and Notes." *Blast* 1, p. 141.

abstract reality; a reality which implied the elimination of "all references to nature", de-creation, intensity, fragmentation, a voluntary exile from the flow of life. From this position there developed the challenge to refuse all imitations of nature, and, instead, to find inspiration from its creative forces, that is, to organise mechanical images organically, following the rules of synthesis and necessity. In Vorticist painting and sculpture, figures interact with the surrounding environment and undergo a process of reduction-towards-geometry. They appear as automatons, devoid of consciousness or will, reflections of a mechanical and alienating universe.[44]

The dehumanisation which the machine necessarily implied was, however, a prerequisite of truly modern art. The ugliness, vulgarity and madness of the modern world were the causes of alienation, and it was precisely these which served the Vorticists as new sources of inspiration (as long as they could keep a certain distance from them). For Lewis, as for Nietzsche in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, a work of which Lewis was an assiduous reader in the 1910s, difficulty and adversity are sources of depth and art. For this reason he recognised England as "the Siberia of the mind [...] the most favourable country for the appearance of a great art."[45] In the same issue of *Blast* he wrote: "A man could make just as fine an art in discords, and with nothing but 'ugly' trivial and terrible materials, as any classicist did with only 'beautiful' and pleasant means."[46]

Mediating between tradition and modernity

The Vorticist's relationship with modernity as a whole was different from that of the Futurists. Vorticism, along with other great avant-garde movements, appropriated the materials and subjects of the new modern sensibility, sometimes with an anti-aesthetic function. It also regarded the advent of modernity, which was seen by other avant-garde artists as a choice or an act of will, as inevitable: an instinctive manifestation of the age, the fruit of historical contingency.[47] In 1915, Pound wrote:

> I consider [machinery] one of the age-tendencies, springing up naturally in many places and coming into the arts quite naturally and spontaneously [...] This enjoyment of machinery is just as natural and just a significant a phase of this age as was the Renaissance enjoyment of 'nature for its own sake', and not merely as an illustration of dogmatic ideas.[48]

While the European avant-garde tended to see "the new" as a break with the tradition of the past, in England it implied, diversely, a taking-up of an interrupted current, the introduction of a new link into the broken chain of tradition. For many Vorticists, and for Pound in particular, the most difficult obstacle to overcome was precisely this sense of the refusal of the past. He maintained that while the innovatory power of Futurism was important, it was also necessary to safeguard the subversive and innovatory elements of tradition. While agreeing with Apollinaire's notion that "on ne peut pas porter *partout* avec soi le cadavre de son père"[49] (one cannot take everywhere the cadaver of one's father), the polemical reaction to tradition was an exhortation to a form of renovation which did not intend to "evade comparison with the past" and that did not include the iconoclastic tone of Futurism. Pound believed that "the vorticist has not this curious tic for destroying past glories";[50] indeed the vortex is pure form, unchanging, created and supported by the power of culture and by tradition, in that Pound maintained the past to be vital and full of energy, capable of renovating and of supplying a more precise and profound vision of the present. For this reason the vortex is full of life:

> All experience rushes into this vortex. All the energised past, all the past that is living and worthy of living. All MOMENTUM, which is the past bearing upon us, RACE, RACE-MEMORY, instinct charging the PLACID, NON ENERGIZED FUTURE. The DESIGN of the future in the grip of the human vortex. All the past that is vital, all the past that is capable of living into the future, is pregnant in the vortex, NOW.[51]

The regenerative energy that Pound's vortex contained was a fusion of Futurism and Classicism, in which the revolutionary tendency of the former was

44 Lewis accepted modern city life with a certain degree of fatalism. The rigid geometrical lines in his paintings are a metaphor of the difficulties, the absurd and perverse mechanisms that constrain modern man. Human figures in his works often appear as caricatures, primitive images that refer to the grotesque reduction of man-to-thing in the modern condition. They are human beings reduced to aspects of mechanical parts. The Vorticist work that most eloquently expresses this dual sense of the predominance of mechanised man and his profound sense of anguish is *Rock Drill* (1913) by J. Epstein.

45 *Blast* 1, pp. 146, 33.

46 Lewis: "The Exploitation of Vulgarity." *Blast* 1, p. 145.

47 For modernists such as D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, and J. Joyce, the modern is the result of a crazy, chaotic dynamism, of historical and social changes from which they take refuge in introspection, in exile, and in the mythical-aesthetic dimension.

48 Ezra Pound: "Affirmations VI: Analysis of this Decade." *New Age* 16:15 (11 February 1915), pp. 409–411, here: p. 410.

49 Pound: "Vorticism", p. 468.

50 Ibid.

51 Pound: "Vortex: Pound", p. 153.

harnessed, and the rigorous austerity of the latter, softened. Revolutionary art, for Pound, was based on the archaeology of knowledge. As Eliot noted, Pound "is often most 'original' in the right sense, when he is most 'archaeological' in the ordinary sense [...] For if one can really penetrate the life of another age, one is penetrating the life of one's own".[52]

In Pound's words, the avant-garde artist is he who draws from the air about him "latent forces or things present but unnoticed, or things perhaps taken for granted but never examined [...] His forbears may have led up to him; he is never a disconnected phenomenon, but he does take some steps further: he discovers, or better, discriminates. We advance by discriminations."[53] He is an artist grounded in his society and in his tradition, who feels no deep rupture with the past.[54]

> The reactions and "movements" of literature are scarcely, if ever, movements against good work or good custom [...] only the mediocrity of a given time can drive the more intelligent men of that time to "break with tradition". I take it that the phrase "break with tradition" is currently used to mean "desert the more obvious imbecilities of one's immediate elders".[55]

The attempt to connect the *new* and the avant-garde with formalism and tradition – even when that tradition is open and dynamic in itself – is at the base of the contradictions and tensions found within Vorticism: the continual call for radicalism and discipline, instinctiveness and self-control, dynamism and stability; and in the very definition of the vortex, which is an image that contains conflicting qualities: movement and stillness, dispersion and concentration, life and death. "The Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest [...] Our Vortex desires the immobile rhythm of its swiftness",[56] all of this is synthesised in the image of the vortex published in *Blast*: a conical form of sharp, geometric lines, cut through by a tight, immobile cord around which it rotates, maintaining its stability. "You think at once of a whirlpool. At the heart of the whirlpool is a great silent place where all the energy is concentrated. And there, at the point of concentration, is the Vorticist."[57]

52 Eliot: Introduction to Pound: *Selected Poems*, p. XII.
53 Pound: "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris." *Selected Prose*, p. 25.
54 Of all the people connected with the Vorticist group, only Hulme recognised the necessity of rupture: "One of the main achievements of the nineteenth century was the elaboration and universal application of the principle of *continuity*. The destruction of this conception is, on the contrary, an urgent necessity of the present." Hulme: *Speculations*, p. 3.
55 Pound: "Notes on Elizabethan Classicists." *Literary Essays*, p. 227.
56 Lewis: "Our Vortex." *Blast* 1, pp. 148–149.
57 Lewis, as quoted in Goldring: *South Lodge*, p. 65.

These diversified positions were also due to the diversified historical and social background in which Vorticism developed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, England did not appear to be undergoing the traumatic social and institutional changes that other European countries were witnessing. It was enjoying a harmonious evolution and seemed "unselfconsciously secure, supported as [it was] by centuries of unbroken tradition and the wealth of a still submissive empire."[58] In such a climate, art could not have a revolutionary impact, it could only claim to represent an *evolution*, advancing the paradigms of tradition. Eliot was to say that "true originality is merely development",[59] to which Pound added: "Originality [...] is often sheer lineage, is often a closeness of grain".[60] The avant-garde was socially far less aggressive, because "it was easier for intellectuals in Britain to find more common ground with their societies".[61] As Lewis maintained, art and life would remain separate as long as art had no clear political significance: "We do not want to change the appearance of the world, because we do not depend on the appearance of the world for our art."[62]

The English avant-garde artist was naturally a radical-liberal, one who feared the loss of the traditional artistic foundations, a rebel but not a revolutionary. He was an artist who practised art not for the aptitude of aesthetics for projecting or anticipating the modern, but one who could, nonetheless, penetrate the sense of reality and of the present, reflecting on the problematics of modernity. He was an artist who did not feel threatened by an imminent apocalypse. The tragic-Dionysian vision that typified the European avant-garde, seen as a compulsion to undergo the violence of dismemberment and death, or as a regression towards the chaotic and primordial, and as a liberation of repressed and destructive forces, was replaced by a need for re-order and re-composition.

The Vorticists did not experience that sense of oppression and immobility that other avant-garde movements felt. Indeed they maintained that English society, for all its stodginess and sterility, could be revitalised by art, without having first to be destroyed. In such a context, "optimism is very permissible. England appears to be recovering."[63] The city of London itself was identified

58 Sheppard: "Expressionism and Vorticism", p. 160.
59 Eliot: Introduction to Pound: *Selected Poems*, p. x.
60 Pound: "Irony, Laforgue, and Some Satire." *Literary Essays*, p. 280.
61 Richard Sheppard: "The Problematics of European Modernism." Steve Giles, ed.: *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory*. London: Routledge, 1993, p. 7.
62 "Long Live the Vortex!" *Blast* 1, p. 7.
63 Lewis: "A Man of the Week: Marinetti", p. 328.

20 Wyndham Lewis: *Before Antwerp*. Cover of *Blast*, no. 2, July 1915

with "The Vortex", with that atmosphere of total renovation which one could breath, in the great metropolis. The role of art in England was not then of opposition; art was complimentary to the liberal State, which in turn granted it autonomy. The political class, including some of its highest exponents, would

often attend artistic events, even the most transgressive ones, including those of the Vorticists.[64] Wyndham Lewis in *Blasting and Bombardiering* recalls a dinner at 10 Downing Street and his meetings with the then Prime Minister, Mr Asquith, who "unquestionably displayed a marked curiosity regarding the 'Great English Vortex'", even though he viewed Lewis with "considerable mental reserve" as if "he smelled politics beneath this revolutionary artistic technique" and suspected that "an infernal machine was hidden in the midst of the light-hearted mockery of my propaganda".[65] But art and politics had different agendas and had to remain separate. Of his Vorticist experience, Lewis recalls: "All this organised disturbance was art behaving as if it were politics. But I swear I did not know it. It may in fact have been politics. I see that now. Indeed it must have been. But I was unaware of the fact."[66]

The Vorticists did not seem fully aware of the implications of the political and epistemological changes involved in their stance; but, nevertheless, it was with Vorticism that the relationship between art and society became critical. The Vorticists' sense of the future contained a political, social, and moral dimension, even though their challenge to authority was outwardly aesthetic. It is precisely this idea of "art behaving as politics" that is found in the articles written by Lewis "explaining why life had to be changed, and how",[67] in the manifestos published in *Blast*, and in the deliberately provocative slogans, such as "Kill John Bull with Art!" that make Vorticism an avant-garde movement. In the end, the artistic gesture becomes political. It is the stance and the slogan that "clamorously advocated, suggested dissatisfaction with the regime as well as with the architecture of the houses."[68]

It was this stance that the Vorticists inherited from the Futurists. Pound and Lewis too, were aware of the crisis in the concept of the intellectual as "immaculate hero". The new intellectual was a figure of controversy, who openly denied that Culture was a humanising activity. Art and literature are expressions of a state of permanent conflict, of an exasperated dissenting spirit which leads inevitably to a profound re-thinking of the role of art in bourgeois society, assuming, finally, a political content.

As with the other avant-garde movements of the prewar period, Vorticism was destroyed by the Great War – only two issues of *Blast* were ever published

64 Lewis and Nevinson were also asked to decorate the houses, as well as to attend the parties, of some members of high society: Lady Cunard, Lady Muriel Paget, Lady Lavery, Lady Constance Hatch, Lady Drogheda, and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

65 Lewis: *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 51.

66 Ibid., p. 32.

67 Ibid., p. 36.

68 Ibid., pp. 36, 52.

21 Wyndham Lewis: *Timon of Athens: Alcibiades*, 1912–13

(June 1914 and July 1915) – but nevertheless it established the aesthetic norms which determined the development of modernism. According to T. S. Eliot's 1930s formulation, modernism privileged neoclassical aspects at the expense of avant-garde dynamism while continuing to foreground themes and techniques (simultaneity, quotation, juxtaposition, negation of the Ego, dehumanisation),

which were Vorticist-Futurist in origin. The Utopian drive and prophetic role of these prewar artists was rapidly reduced to a formulated symptom of a deep malaise. The renovation to which they had aspired never came about, at least not in the way and at the time they had hoped. Lewis later affirmed that Vorticism "was a program, rather than an accomplished fact".[69] But if Vorticism represents a founding moment in the renovation of British culture, it is due to that "active and meritorious friend Marinetti",[70] from whom the Vorticists inherited their imperative to total change through innovative artistic techniques. Ford M. Ford wrote: "I think that the Vorticists came nearer to remaining Futurists *pur sang*".[71] And Pound declared that:

> Marinetti's force and significance are demonstrated in his keeping hold of the root of the matter for a quarter of a century. The root is: MAKE IT NEW. [...] Marinetti has got something done because he did not worry about the differences in detail, and has never lost sight of the basic need: renewal.[72]

69 Lewis: "The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks." *Wyndham Lewis on Art*, p. 339.
70 Ezra Pound: "George Antheil." *The Criterion* 2:7 (April 1924), pp. 321–331, here: p. 321.
71 Madox Ford: "Those were the Days", p. xii.
72 Letter from Pound, dated 10 October 1936, in Zinnes, ed.: *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, p. 310.