

Book Reviews

Michael J. K. Walsh (ed.), *London, Modernism, and 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xx + 314 pp. £50.00 (hb).

Wyndham Lewis's centrality to the modernist counter- and sub-cultures of London in 1914 is unquestionable. As the editor of, and the primary contributor to, *BLAST* (1914-15), Lewis played a hugely significant role as one of the key organizational and creative metropolitan figures of the pre-First World War period. As he only half-exaggeratedly put the point in *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), 'by August 1914 no newspaper was complete without news about "vorticism" [*sic*] and its arch-exponent Mr. Lewis' (BB 32). In this milieu Lewis befriended, antagonized, and entered into debate with some of the most advanced artists and cultural impresarios of his generation, including Jessica Dismorr, T. S. Eliot, Jacob Epstein, Ford Madox Hueffer [Ford], T. E. Hulme, Kate Lechmere, Ezra Pound, and Helen Saunders, among others. Michael J. K. Walsh's edited book *London, Modernism, and 1914* is, first and foremost, an exploration of the varied significances of England's capital city in 1914 for modernism as a whole. However, the fact that the essays collected here again and again signal Lewis's inseparability from this cultural 'moment' makes the book necessary reading for Lewisians (growing in number as they are) as much as for early twentieth-century generalists.

Walsh's collection is an important text that assembles essays by some of today's best modernist and Lewis scholars: Richard Cork, Jonathan Shirland, Louise Blakeney Williams, Andrew Causey, David A. Wragg, Sara MacDougall, Pericles Lewis, Jonathan Black, Deborah Longworth (*née* Parsons), Dominika Buchowska, and Alan Munton. The contributions of this international cast of academics are consistently illuminating. Causey's essay on Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* (c. 1913) has fascinating things to say about Epstein's work in relation to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Samuel Butler, among other things. MacDougall and Black – writing on the East End Jewish émigrés known as the 'Whitechapel boys' and on the friendship between Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Edward Wadsworth, respectively – offer useful, group-inflected contextualizations of a cultural moment that has already been

exhaustively studied and re-studied. Longworth's account of Lewis's and Osbert Sitwell's comparable but nonetheless distinct autobiographical re-visionings of 1914 demonstrates key parallels between dynamic reconstructions of traumatic events that were 'later relived as a present rather than past experience' (208). Closing the volume is Munton's critique of Pat Barker's *Life Class* (2007), in which he shows how Barker's work misremembers the pre-First World War climate and, in doing so, underplays the complexity and significance of that climate's artistic interventions, especially as manifested in the artworks of such women Vorticists as Helen Saunders and Jessica Dismorr. The chapters by Cork, Shirland, Williams, Wragg, and (Pericles) Lewis round out what is at all times a stimulating collective enterprise.

That said, far more care could have been taken in proofreading this collection, which is full of stylistic and thematic errors. These range from mistakes in spelling and grammar to inaccurate datings of what should by now be well-known texts. It is frustrating to see *Time and Western Man* (1927) inaccurately dated to 1926, for instance, when all that would have been necessary to correct such an error is a more vigilant editorial pen. Inaccuracies of this sort rarely appear in critical work on the other 'men of 1914', to take an obvious example, so it is curious as to why, even after all the criticism of this kind of slip-up undertaken by Alan Munton in the *Wyndham Lewis Annual*, such clangers are still dropped. This is in itself arguably a minor gaffe, of course, but bigger problems arise from Causey's claim that Vorticism initially maintained a 'pro-war stance' (88), or Longworth's view that the movement was 'functionalist' (196). Causey's belief that Vorticism was 'pro-war', even initially, is debatable in the light of the second issue of *BLAST* in 1915 – which dismissed the First World War as a drawn-out process of 'endless unabating [*sic*] murder and misery' (B2 16) – but it is hardly defensible in terms of the first issue either, whose 'violence' and 'aggression' is overtly satirical and psychological rather than physical and literal. To say that Vorticism was 'functionalist' is, in my view, to misread the movement's purpose, if by functionalism it is meant that Vorticism was underpinned by utilitarian determinants. Statements such as 'the artist is NOT a useful figure' (B2 40) or 'the moment [the artist] becomes USEFUL and active he ceases to be an artist' (B2 40) do not unequivocally deny such a reading of Vorticism, but they do not at the same time allow it to be supported in any straightforward sense. Such perspectives on Vorticism indicate that there is still a great deal of debate to be had in this critical sphere.

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The most bizarre chapter in the volume is the one by Pericles Lewis, in which he suggests that 'English modernism was invented during the First World War (not, [he] believe[s], after it) by writers who had little direct involvement in the war' (148) itself. Lewis rightly draws attention to the fact that the majority of modernists working in London in the immediately pre-war 'moment' were, in fact, foreigners, but it does seem odd to take this line when clearly such figures as Hulme and Ford, to name just two (men), were contributing to the emergence of a broadly English modernism well before 1910. Lewis's dating of the beginnings of modernism to the pre-war period is the right line to take, but he does not go back chronologically far enough. The First World War irrevocably changed the nature of artistic innovation in England and abroad, but it did not in any linearly causal fashion *inaugurate* that experiment so much as it transformed its shape and substance in historically important ways. This all depends, naturally, on how modernism is conceived and on which artists and writers are included in, or excluded from, the canon, a point that is relevant to Lewis's later claim that the Imagists were 'avant-garde poets' (155). If by 'avant-garde' Lewis means 'cutting-edge' then the comment is fairly inconspicuous, but if Lewis has in mind a more socially or politically interventionist sense of the word (such as the one made famous by Peter Bürger) then his discussion at this point would have benefited from a more careful overview of how avant-gardism and politics came together in the cultural nexus upon which his chapter focuses.

Part of the problem here, I suspect, is that the essays that comprise this volume, as its editor admits, are over four years old. Scholarship has moved on a good deal even in this relatively slim time period, and in certain cases that progression shows up some of the claims made in this collection as inexact, doubtful, or simply wrong. Such is the way of research, though, and as a thought-provoking collection of reflections on what is, as noted above, an extremely over-inspected phase of cultural and political ferment *London, Modernism, and 1914* contributes a good deal to our ever more nuanced view of modernism's initial stages and of one of its key metropolitan centres. Wyndham Lewis, Vorticism, and *BLAST* are referred to so frequently in the volume that it almost recommends itself to an increasingly global, and increasingly sexually democratic, phalanx of Lewis specialists. Walsh's questioning reference to whether we ought to view modernism as 'one of the first inglorious casualties of a war for which it was no match' or as 'the perfect operatic finalé to a pre-war dynamism that was

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ushered off the stage only by the arrival of the greatest war in history' (13) is a dilemma that is embodied and explored in many of the texts discussed in *London, Modernism, and 1914*. It is, also, the dilemma that at their best the essays collected here consider with great flair and perspicacity, a doubleness that (Wyndham) Lewis, no doubt, would have commended.

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