‘With Expletive of Whirlwind’: Wyndham Lewis and the Arrival of the Avant-Garde Manifesto in England, 1913-1922

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Long before donning the mask of the Enemy in the late 1920s, Wyndham Lewis the provocateur tested the patience of London’s artistic circles. Considered by many of his peers to be indelicate and overbearing, Lewis’s behaviour was, like the avant-garde manifesto, something of an anomaly in London. Even his closest rival, Ezra Pound, was excused for being soft-spoken and considerate in person. Lewis himself wrote of Pound in the first issue of The Enemy (January 1927) that ‘a kinder heart never lurked beneath a [more] portentous exterior’ (E1 61). If a kind heart was lurking beneath Lewis’s own prickly persona, he did not let it show. The first Vorticist manifesto begins contemptuously: ‘BLAST First (from politeness) ENGLAND’ (B1 11). It is only by BLASTing, Lewis’s manifestos suggest, that the artist in England will rise above the ‘heavy stagnant pools of Saxon blood, incapable of anything but the song of a frog’ (B1 32). These tactics did little to win for ‘Wyndy Lewis’ (as he was called in The New Age) friends among peers, patrons, or the press; but in retrospect he was without a doubt the leading manifesto writer in modernist England.

Lewis’s career as a polemicist and propagandist from his break with Roger Fry’s Omega Workshops to his reinvention as the Enemy divides neatly into two halves. First he was the group leader, the ‘crowd master’: organizer of the Omega insurrection, the Vorticist group, and later the artists exhibiting together as Group X. There was a brief period of indecision about his direction after the First World War, but he nevertheless emerged from the trenches to publish in quick succession The Caliph’s Design (1919), followed by the Group X manifesto (1920), and shortly thereafter a new periodical, The Tyro (1921-22). Group X, a very tenuous grouping anyway, is the exception here, the evidence of Lewis’s uncertainty. The Caliph’s Design and The Tyro, however, point to a new and independent Lewis, ‘a solitary outlaw and not a gang’ (E1 ix), as well as a writer first and a painter second. His
manifestos, even in the earlier period, often dramatize this tension between the group and the independent artist. BLAST describes itself as ‘popular, essentially’ (B1 7), but explains that this means the art of ‘individuals’. Group X, despite its name – which suggests anonymity as well as the more prosaic head count of its ten members – operated on the idea that ‘[e]ach member sails his own boat’ (WLA 184). In his later period Lewis became ‘the Enemy’, and his satirical magnum opus, The Apes of God, published in 1930 under the protective cover of a manifesto-pamphlet, Satire and Fiction, represented the culmination of his decades-long dispute with Bloomsbury and with what he called ‘the communizing principle’ (DPDS vii). Within the first phase, which I will cover in this article, two important sub-phases of Lewis’s activity as a writer of manifestos emerge: the very active period from 1912 to 1917, when Lewis worked most closely with Ezra Pound; and the post-War years 1919-1921, in which Lewis attempted to reinvigorate the London art scene as well as his own war-damaged career.

Lewis occupies a singular place among English modernists for being as well known for his manifestos, especially those contained in the two issues of BLAST, as for his fiction and visual art. Lewis lamented the lack of truly radical talent in pre-War London in his memoir, Rude Assignment (1950). ‘I wanted a battering ram that was all of one metal’ (R-A 138), he wrote. ‘A good deal of what got in seemed to me soft and highly impure. Had it been France, there would have been plenty to choose from’ (R-A 138-39). Despite its flaws, and its short-lived existence, Vorticism has been called ‘the only attempt in history (with the dubious exception of Pre-Raphaelitism) to start in England an artistic revolution that had not already occurred on the continent’. With Vorticism and BLAST, whose first issue consisted largely of manifestos, Lewis secured his place in twentieth-century British art – a significant achievement given the ephemeral nature of both the manifesto and the ‘little magazine’.

The term ‘manifesto’ occurs regularly in Lewis’s writing only during the Vorticist period of 1914-15. For the rest of his career, Lewis described his pronouncements on art and literature as ‘propaganda’, ‘treatises’, or simply ‘Blasts’, and he called himself a ‘polemicist’ or ‘pamphleteer’. In 1931, for example, he referred to his ‘bull-dog pamphleteer-double’ (DPDS viii), who defended him against his enemies. The various polemical pamphlets and articles which Lewis produced throughout his career share a distinct set of characteristics
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with the manifestos in BLAST; using the term ‘manifesto’ outside of its narrow application to the pre-War avant-garde is therefore justified. The persistent use of the term ‘manifesto’ by Lewis scholars also suggests its appropriateness as a generic term. David Trotter, for instance, describes ‘Inferior Religions’ as the ‘scintillating manifesto’ of Lewis’s 1927 collection of short stories, The Wild Body. Similarly, Paul Edwards calls The Caliph’s Design ‘a manifesto for [architectural] modernism’. In the present essay I will attempt to establish a meaningful definition of the term without either restricting the field to those texts labelled manifestos by Lewis himself (which would have an arbitrary result), or on the other hand adhering to the similarly rigid contours of a pre-War European avant-garde description of the form.

The first thing resembling a manifesto to come from Lewis’s hand was a mischief-making ‘round robin’ letter circulated in October 1913 on behalf of himself and three other discontented members of Fry’s Omega Workshops. The three-page letter advertises ‘discreditable facts’ about the organization, starting with the accusation that Fry had ‘secured the decoration of the “Post-Impressionist” room at the Ideal Home Exhibition’, which was taking place at the time, ‘by a shabby trick’, thereby cutting Lewis out of an important share in the commission (L 47-48). The second complaint involves Fry’s ‘policy of restraining artists’ (L 49) from exhibiting outside the group. This might be ‘justified’, the letter states, if Omega’s own shows were not ‘badly organized, unfairly managed, closed to much good work for petty and personal reasons, and flooded with the work of well-intentioned friends of the Direction’ (L 49). One of Lewis’s fellow rebels (and later a fellow Vorticist), Frederick Etchells, cited a combination of Lewis’s persuasiveness and Fry’s ‘complacency’ as his reason for taking part in the rebellion. The round robin, like the majority of Lewis’s ‘Blasts’, was directed at what Lewis invariably and metonymically referred to as ‘Bloomsbury’, indicating both his target of criticism and, implicitly, his audience.

Placing this first attempt at the manifesto beside the more fully realized manifestos in BLAST reveals obvious differences as well as subtler similarities. While it is not a manifesto proper, the round robin, like many of Lewis’s public declarations, shares certain characteristics with the manifesto form. The most obvious difference is that, unlike the BLAST manifestos which announce themselves loudly as being ‘manifestos’, the round robin conceals its manifesto-like declaration
inside the quieter medium of the defamatory circular letter. The BLAST manifestos, like the manifestos of Italian Futurism, were intended to serve more than just the limited purpose of propaganda: they are creditable expressions in their own right, a genre unto themselves. This is demonstrated by an advertisement for BLAST in The Egoist on the 15th of April 1914, in which ‘manifesto’, printed in large capital letters, figures most prominently in the table of contents, dwarfing the list of short stories, poems, and essays that follows.10 Another key difference is that the BLAST manifestos laid out the principles of a movement, Vorticism. The dissenting members of the Omega Workshops, conversely, were a group only in negative terms, insofar as they were united in opposition to what they viewed as Fry’s unjust leadership. Both texts do have signatories, however, and both assume the authority of a ‘body of individuals whose proceedings are of public importance’ (OED 1a) in order to make their statement. The round robin resembles a legal document in this way, being a formally-worded public notice that presents a piece of evidence to interested parties (Omega’s patrons and shareholders): ‘we beg to lay before you the following discreditable facts’ (L. 47). Furthermore, it has been argued that ‘Lewis hoped to provoke a libel suit from Fry’, which would have meant publicity for his breakaway group; sadly for Lewis, ‘none was forthcoming’.11 Lewis even went so far as to consult a lawyer before drafting the letter, apparently motivated by hope rather than fear.12

The language of the round robin alternates between the measured phrases of its legal challenge and the florid rhetoric later seen in BLAST. In a letter drafted but not sent to Clive Bell during the crisis, Lewis wrote: ‘You must excuse me for having expressed myself with certain heat and precision’ (L. 51, emphasis added). As Marjorie Perloff has noted, Marinetti declared in a letter to the Belgian painter Henry Maasssen in 1909 or 1910 that a manifesto requires, above all, ‘la violence et […] la précision’ in order to be effective.13 The key passage of the round robin, which comes near the end of the letter, is a dramatic critique of Omega’s principles. It employs some familiar modernist tropes (pioneered by Lewis, Pound, T. E. Hulme, and others), including the contrast made between Bloomsbury’s outdated Victorian domestic prettiness (Fry’s group is described as an eccentric, sickly, and almost perverse ‘family’) and the hard, ‘vigorous’ and impersonal qualities of their own art. Consequently it would not look out of place in BLAST:
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The Idol is still Prettiness, with its mid-Victorian languish of the neck, and its skin is “greenery-yallery”, despite the Post-What-Not fashionableness of its draperies. This family party of strayed and Dissenting Aesthetes [...] were compelled to call in as much modern talent as they could find, to do the rough and masculine work without which they knew their efforts would not rise above the level of a pleasant tea-party, or command more attention. (L. 49)

Lewis and his rebel artists claim to represent the ‘modern talent’ and ‘do the rough and masculine work’ at Omega. They later declare in BLAST: ‘Our Vortex rushes out like an angry dog at your Impressionistic fuss’ (BI 149). The image of BLAST is hard and brutal, expressed in the bold type and lurid (albeit pinkish) colour of its wrappers.

Design is another feature that clearly distinguishes the two texts. Although Lewis would have been familiar with examples of avant-garde (especially Futurist) layout and typography, he evidently decided against giving the round robin such a radical presentation. Instead, the document takes the unassuming form of a letter, speaking directly, that is privately, to the recipient (‘Dear Sir’), whose confidence it tries to solicit. BLAST, in contrast, seems to shout to a crowd; it presents itself as bold, daring, and charismatic. However, the round robin does display in its choice of language an intention to disrupt, slander, and simultaneously announce and enact a rupture, all of which are characteristic of the more radical type of manifesto. If it is less dynamic in its use of language, or less like poetry than the manifestos of BLAST, it must be remembered that the round robin is purely an artistic and not a hybrid literary-artistic manifesto. Its relationship with the written word is therefore more likely to be a pragmatic one. The letter concludes: ‘No longer willing to form part of this unfortunate institution, we the undersigned have given up our work there’ (L 50). The resignation came only three months after Lewis had joined Omega. Jeffrey Meyers has argued that the round robin was ‘a critical turning-point’ for Lewis: ‘It stigmatized Lewis in the eyes of the art world as an instigator of rude public combats.’ Deploying the boisterous manifesto in this quiet world was seen, in the words of Clive Bell (one of its victims), as ‘vulgarity’ and ‘provincialism’. Bell recalled telling Lewis: ‘you ought not to bombard the town with pages of suburban rhetoric’. This was
Lewis’s first ‘Blast’ against Bloomsbury, and it contains the germ of all of his subsequent pronouncements on art.

One striking aspect of BLAST is its apparent desire not only to imitate, but to align itself with, militant politics. Recent scholarship, including Janet Lyon’s Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern (1999) and Alex Huen’s Terrorism and Modern Literature (2002), has emphasized the relationship between artistic and political militancy in the pre-War period. Lyon’s book uncovers correspondences between the Vorticists and suffragettes, while Huen investigates Vorticism’s relationship with syndicalism. The crucial piece of evidence for both readings is BLAST’s ‘blessing’ of figures who represent, in Timothy Materer’s words, ‘the same disruptive movements that George Dangerfield credits with destroying the Liberal establishment in England before the war: the Labour movement, the Ulster rebels, and the suffragettes’ (P/L 63).17 My own reading, however, favours the sceptical view expressed by Leon Trotsky, who distinguished between ‘the Communist, who is a political revolutionist, and the Futurist, who is a revolutionary innovator of form’. The avant-garde, for Trotsky, borrows the gestures of political revolution in order to bring about innovation in form and a ‘break with the past’, but only within these narrow limits.18 This was, of course, even truer for Lewis than it was for Marinetti; the latter confirmed his political ambitions in 1919 by running as a candidate for the Italian Fascist Party.

In 1914, political revolution held an essentially metaphorical significance for Lewis. Politics and economics do register as concerns in the pages of BLAST, but only as they have an impact on the production of art. Political upheaval became ‘real’ for Lewis when it disrupted the art world, as it did when the suffragettes escalated their campaign of direct action, including vandalism, in the weeks prior to the appearance of BLAST in July 1914. The more famous incidents, including Mary Richardson’s slashing of Velazquez’s Rokeby Venus at the National Gallery on the 10th of March, and Mary Wood’s attack on Sargent’s portrait of Henry James at the Royal Academy on opening day (4th of May), caused some of the London galleries to be ‘barricaded’ against further injury, according to George Dangerfield.19 This alone would have created tension in London’s artistic community; as Wees observes, ‘[t]he Vorticists had some cause for worry. On 4 June 1914, a hatchet-bearing suffragette had destroyed two drawings at the Doré Gallery where several of the Vorticists exhibited their own work’, bringing
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events even closer to home.20 (The Doré was also the venue for the second major Futurist exhibition in April 1914.) This prompted ‘To Suffragettes’, the patronizing note, made much of by Vorticism’s critics, which appeared in the back pages of the first issue of BLAST, and which used hyperbole and bravado to mask its evident anxiety. ‘If you destroy a great work of art’, its authors declare, ‘you are destroying a greater soul than if you annihilated a whole district of London. Leave art alone, brave comrades!’ (B1 152).

Lyon’s stated aim in one chapter of her book is ‘to show how the rhetoric and tactics of the militant women’s movement were enfolded into the foundations of English modernism’.21 She illustrates commonalities using contemporary press coverage and by comparing avant-garde art manifestos with polemical tracts taken, for example, from Christabel Pankhurst’s The Great Scoff and How to End It (1913). Significant omissions are brought to light in her evidence. BLAST’s ‘word of advice’ to suffragettes – the anxious sounding ‘stick to what you understand’ – is revealed as a disingenuous lie: Lyon shows that many suffragettes were practising artists, and some had, as she states, ‘exhibited widely in England and France’.22 A significant number had also attended the Slade School of Art and Design, just as Lewis and other male Vorticists had done.23 The suffragette movement had received only minimal coverage in Lewis criticism during the twentieth century, an omission which represented a victory for the Vorticist-era Lewis in his effort to create ‘water-tight compartments’ (B1 147) to contain and keep separate pre-War art and politics. ‘There were no politics then’, Lewis insisted in Blasting and Bombardiering. ‘I might have been at the head of a social revolution, instead of merely being the prophet of a new fashion in art.’ He goes on to acknowledge, with hindsight, that Vorticism was ‘Art behaving as if it were Politics’, but insists: ‘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’ (BB 32).

Lewis’s testimony certainly begs scrutiny. The fault in Lyon’s argument, however, lies elsewhere. Too often it conflates Marinetti’s iconoclastic Futurism with the more conflicted, often artistically conservative principles of Vorticism. The key point of interplay between Vorticists and suffragettes centres on the vandalism of works of art. As Lyon points out, the ‘BLAST’ aimed at suffragettes ‘was probably composed […] during the height of the May-June painting slashings of
1914’. However, she moves on without examining the importance of these actions, which, as we have seen, directly threatened both Old Masters paintings (valued especially by Pound) and Vorticist paintings. Lyon describes the ‘new avant-garde’ as eager ‘to jettison past art’. While this is an accurate representation of Marinetti’s Futurism, which imagined ‘the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift […] discoloured and shredded’, it was an important note of discord between Futurism and Vorticism. The Vorticists might have tried to discredit their Bloomsbury rivals by labelling them ‘aesthetes’ and belated Victorians, but they also disapproved of Futurism’s appetite for destruction. Peter Nicholls’s comments on this point, with specific reference to Pound, are illuminating:

Pound’s sense of his own origin in “a half-savage country, out of date” drove him in search of connections with precisely that older, Latin culture which Marinetti sought to destroy. Futurism was certainly exhilarating, but Pound could not subscribe to Marinetti’s denigration of “art” and his worship of the present.

Similarly, in an article published one month prior to the first issue of BLAST, Lewis argued:

Museums and Galleries should be very strictly kept for students and Artists only. In fact, it would be a cowardly and foolish thing for the Futurists to destroy the Museums. They should be seized, rather, and kept as the private property of the Artists. It is only women and canaille that destroy beautiful things. The true Futurist will not destroy fine paintings. (CHCH 31)

Lewis chastises Marinetti here for publicly supporting the suffragettes and their tactic of vandalism – as he did in March 1912 when he joined their window smashing campaign in London – rather than defending art above all other concerns. Like the London-based painter and polemicist James McNeill Whistler before him, Lewis argued that the artist lives outside of ‘any milieu or time’ (BL 7). In terms of rejecting the past, Lewis and the other Vorticists were concerned only with what they considered to be an unhealthy or ‘morbid’ worship of the past, where history intrudes upon the present; they saw nothing wrong with progress based on past
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traditions. ‘Kill John Bull With Art’, another of Lewis’s manifestos, published in The Outlook at roughly the same time BLAST appeared, reinterprets Marinetti’s destructive proposals, toning them down while refusing to be outdone in the issuing of extravagant pronouncements. ‘We, like Mr Marinetti, or rather much more than he, are happy, and can well do without the Past’ (CHCH 38, emphasis added), he declared. ‘Our fathers are part of us, and the more we live instead of idling about their ashes the more we honour them, as of course we ought to do’ (CHCH 38). Breaking away from the past, in the BLAST manifestos as in most avant-garde manifestos, really means breaking away from the immediate past, or from movements in the present that are considered ‘passist’. The manifesto – as a genre – calls for a renewal that is usually, perhaps inevitably, based on principles borrowed from someone or something distant enough in time (Rembrandt) or space (Japan) as to seem innovative, to ‘make it new’. Use is made of a very limited sense of the term ‘past’, to denote the ideals that must be broken away from in order to undo the stagnation of the present, in this case the pre-War period. This was a time when, as Pound later recalled, ‘so few DID’. Thirty Pound, in fact, summed up Vorticism’s relationship with the past most plainly, writing in The Egoist a few days before the publication of BLAST. ‘We do not desire to cut ourselves off from the past’, he stated. ‘We do not desire to cut ourselves off from great art of any period, we only demand a recognition of contemporary great art.’

The opening manifesto of BLAST tries to defend art against the intrusion of life, and to preserve its autonomy in a way that belies its secret bonds with aestheticism. ‘We want to leave Nature and Men alone’ (B1 7), it declares. ‘We believe in no perfectibility except our own’ (B1 7). It is possible to read BLAST as being essentially reactive, heavily imbued with satire, and more critical than creative in its arguments. It seeks no change in the outside world, only in the world of art; even here the revolution, bold in design, is fairly timid in its plan of action. Lewis’s Vorticist manifestos look like their European and Russian avant-garde counterparts, but this is misleading: Vorticism uses the language of politics, revolution, and social change against its adversaries in those realms, while seeking to preserve the separate, privileged domain of the artist. Lewis uses political language and a political form (the manifesto) to undermine the idea of praxis, to parody and to protect against the intrusion of politics. Politics are brought into the equation in order to be refuted, and the language of politics is used to this end as well, just as
Whistler, in the Ten O’Clock lecture and other provocations, took on the adversarial role in order to vanquish the critic (notably Ruskin) from the realm of art. Lewis, with the help of Pound, may be seen as ‘shoring up’, the way T. S. Eliot would, using fragments of political discourse in a defensive gesture against the actual intrusion of politics into the realm of art, or, more generally, against the rising chaos in the months leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. In fact it was the War, when it finally came, that convinced Lewis of the futility of this late aestheticism. It is therefore mistaken to consider the Vorticist manifestos ‘backwards’, as it were, from the point of view of Lewis’s (and Pound’s) later incursions into politics. It was the War that brought about the desire for praxis, the desire to influence outside events. This may be seen in Lewis’s immediate post-war manifestos, most notably The Caliph’s Design. Although the influence of suffragettes and syndicalists on Vorticism is undeniable, it should nevertheless not be over-emphasized.

Lewis’s first major manifesto after BLAST, and after the Armistice, was both a continuation of, and a departure from, his earlier endeavours. Published in October 1919 by the Egoist Press, The Caliph’s Design: Architects! Where is Your Vortex? is, in Lewis’s words, ‘a sixty-page pamphlet dealing with the art position generally’ (L. 110). It is a continuation of his pre-War writing insofar as it ‘was another Blast, and it continued the criticism of Blast No. 1 and Blast No. 2’ (WLA 129), as Lewis wrote in his introduction to the 1939 edition. In the same introduction he admitted that he ‘was no longer a “Vorticist”’ (WLA 129), but he described himself using this label in several places in the pamphlet, including the title.32 The targets had not changed much since before the War: they included Bloomsbury, dilettantism, and the taste for contemporary French painting championed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. The differences, however, were equally striking. The Caliph’s Design dispenses with the principle of autonomy that underpins BLAST, and in so doing appears to signal an attempt by Lewis, in the immediate post-War years, to engage with uncharacteristic sincerity in the kind of praxis shared by the revolutionary manifestos of contemporary movements like Constructivism and De Stijl.33 It is a call to action in life as well as in art, and in architecture and design as well as in painting, as the subtitle (Architects! Where is Your Vortex?) makes clear. Paul Edwards has argued that, as an architectural manifesto, The Caliph’s Design ‘marks the aborted beginning of international Modernism in London’ (CD 150) – a manifesto without a movement, in other words, which is not
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uncommon. But despite the revolutionary fervour that can be seen in parts of The Caliph’s Design – ‘You must get Painting, Sculpture, and Design out of the studio and into life’ (CD 12) – it is ultimately a manifesto for a very well-ordered ‘new order’, framed as a return to common sense and even an Arnoldian ‘sweetness and light’ from the decadence and chaos that had reigned, respectively, in art and life.

Edwards suggests that a feeling of ‘sympathy’ gained from the war might have ‘led Lewis in 1919 to [...] actively propose a practical application of the formal inventions he and others pioneered in their geometrical paintings’ (CD 149). Lewis’s description of The Caliph’s Design to John Quinn does suggest a change of heart. He told Quinn: ‘It is an appeal to the better type of artist to take more interest in and more part in the general life of the world’ (L 110). In the pamphlet itself he states with candour: ‘I write in these notes for a socially wider and not necessarily specialist public’ (CD 41). In this period Lewis also wrote proposals for municipal art (‘Art Saints for Villages’, 1920) and art education (‘Why Picasso Does It’, 1921), and he demonstrated the desire to reach a larger audience by publishing articles in The Daily Mail, The Daily Express, and The Sunday Express.4 However, to ascribe to Lewis a feeling of ‘sympathy’ might be a step too far, for the ‘interest’ in ‘general life’ encouraged by Lewis, whatever his claims, was still that of the ‘herdsman’ to the ‘herd’. The Code of a Herdsman, a fictional manifesto published in The Little Review during the War, defines these two groups: the ‘herdsman’ is equated with the ‘mountain people’, the few, who stand aloof from the many living ‘down below’.5 Just prior to The Caliph’s Design, in The English Review of April 1919, Lewis continued his advice to the herdsman-artist in an essay-manifesto titled ‘What Art Now’. Sounding more pragmatic, and no longer using fictional characters, Lewis declared: ‘he must not be taught, but policed, simply, this big public. The public of the few thousands, on the other hand, must be carefully instructed and made into a real and responsive chorus. […] The artist has many responsibilities in these Islands!’ (CHCH 48). These ideas coalesce in the wide-ranging manifesto based on the parable of the Caliph, whose design, ‘a little Vorticist effort’, is executed (upon pain of execution) by a responsive chorus made up of his chief engineer and architect: ‘And within a month a strange street transfigured the heart of that cultivated city’ (CD 20). The authoritarian character of the parable is modified somewhat in the ‘Author’s Preface’, which emphasizes order and harmony as primary objectives: ‘we could even
dispense with a Caliph’ (CD 11), it states. ‘There need not be any bloodshed. It is a fair and smiling world!’ (CD 11). Indeed a faint but unmistakable image of the horror of War remains imprinted on Lewis’s tabula rasa, seen for example in the criticism of Picasso, who is judged ‘rather equivocal and unsatisfactory in the light of present events’ (CD 14).

By the time he reaches the middle of the first part of this lengthy manifesto, Lewis’s rhetorical pace is already slackening, his adversarial stance easing, as if he felt wearied from his years of ‘Blasting’ before and during the War. He bemoans the fact that

[the propaganda, explanatory pamphlets, and the rest, in which we, in this country, have to indulge, is so much time out of active life which would normally be spent as every artist wishes to spend his time, in work, in a state of complete oblivion as regards any possible public that his work may ever have. Yet were one’s ideas on painting not formulated […] an impossible condition would result for an artist desirous of experimenting. (CD 39)

If society were to employ the artist ‘usefully’, in a public capacity, to reorder the appearance of the world into something more beautiful and consistent, Lewis argues, the artist would no longer have to be marginalized, or even oppositional. Artists like Lewis do not seek to be ‘in the position of freaks, the queer wild men of cubes, the terrible futurists’ (CD 39), he insists. ‘No pleasurable thrill accompanies these words when used about one’s own very normal proceedings’ (CD 40).

Towards the end of Part One, Lewis imagines new possibilities for machinery, ‘a new resource’, apart from the violent applications he has witnessed in the War or the violent dynamism ‘worshipped’ by the futurists. ‘Absorbed into the aesthetic consciousness,’ he argues, showing naivety that is characteristic of some of his later prophesies, ‘it would no longer make so much as a pop-gun: its function thenceforward would change’ (CD 57). Like Whistler, the utopia Lewis imagines is one in which artists are both central – ‘suitably honoured’ – and conveniently invisible, left to ‘pursue their trade without further trouble’ (CD 58). The manifesto, then, is for the moment cast in a negative light, an ugly necessity in the real world, where the artist ‘has no role in the social machine, except that of an entertainer, or a business man’ (CD 58). The Caliph’s Design represented a last plea from the artist for a ‘social’
role, and when this plea was rejected, with the failure of Group X and the Tyro projects in the two years that followed, Lewis went ‘underground’, in his own description (BB 212-16), and emerged several years later wearing the mask of the Enemy.

A principal tenet in “The Code of a Herdsman” is: ‘Contradict yourself. In order to live, you must remain broken up.’ Whether it is this strategy at work, or simply that The Caliph’s Design is a pamphlet containing ‘rough notes; not planned, but written down hastily […]’ as some problem presented itself (RA 168), as Lewis later described it, the manifesto shifts positions dramatically from one chapter to the next. The clearest division, in fact, is straight down the middle: Parts One and Two present the sort of general diagnoses and remedies that are typical of the manifesto, whereas Parts Three and Four deal more specifically with the contemporary art scene under the headings ‘Paris’ and ‘The Studio Game’, respectively. The second half of this division begins more properly at the end of Part Two, with the chapter entitled, ‘Fashion’. It is here that the strident calls to action give way to the detached, external voice of the artist-as-critic, which describes ‘the Intellectuals, the Art World’ (CD 79) from without. The voice begins:

The Victorian age […] indulged men so much that they became guys of sentiment. Against this “sentimentality” people of course reacted. So the brutal tap was turned on, and for fifty years it will be the thing to be brutal, “unemotional.” […] And so your fashions go, a matter of the cold or the hot tap, simply. (CD 79)

This criticism of being ‘perpetually in some raw extreme’ (CD 79) marks a crucial point in Lewis’s writing: it is the curious moment when a text that begins as a radical proclamation turns against itself, conflicted, and attacks exactly what it represents – the fashionable movement, the extreme position taken for its own sake, Vorticist ‘brutality’. It becomes, in a sense, a polemic against polemics, new self against old. At this moment a new figure emerges, an early incarnation of the Enemy, who is able to see outside of fashion, ‘to gaze at a number of revolutions at once’ (CD 81). The discussion of fashion continues in Part Three, where it is seen to be a ‘useful substitute for conviction’, and even ‘the substitute for religion’, a herd activity (CD 91). Lewis then introduces a strange qualifier, but one that is consistent with ‘The Code of a Herdsman’, which instructs the disciple to ‘Exploit Stupidity’.37 He
declares: ‘What we really require are a few men who will use Fashion, the ruler of any age […] to build something in Fashion’s atmosphere which can best flourish there’ (CD 96).

In Part Four of The Caliph’s Design Lewis mounts a sustained attack on his enemies in Bloomsbury. The long discussion of French painting which precedes this attack only serves to further belittle his true target, not simply because the critics Lewis associates with Bloomsbury are dedicated to promoting French art, but by implying that Fry and Bell are not worthy of direct attention until the closing pages of the manifesto. The attack itself upholds the pattern that begins in 1913 with the round robin and culminates in the satirical novel The Apes of God in 1930. Lewis abandons the position of the detached observer and, employing satirical devices of the coarser kind, portrays his adversaries as effete homosexuals and relics of aestheticism. He attacks ‘all the colour-matching, match-box-making, dressmaking, chair-painting […] carried on in a spirit of distinguished amateurish gallantry and refinement at the Omega workshops’ (CD 124), despite his own interest, expressed in a letter to John Quinn, in forming a not wholly dissimilar art collective with Group X.38 The tone of this section drops with each juvenile pun on aesthetes who are ‘receptive’ as opposed to ‘creative’. The ‘heir to the aesthete of the Wilde period’ is described as ‘a very good example of how to receive rather than to give’ (CD 124). The point of Lewis’s criticism, that it is counterproductive to accept what is already in the world, rather than to put something new there, the paralysing effect of the critic-centred art scene, is a valid and familiar target of the avant-garde manifesto. As the passage just quoted illustrates, however, Lewis’s criticisms are invariably expressed using simplistic analogies of heterosexual reproduction. ‘Unsatisfied sex accounts for much’, Lewis continues. ‘You wonder if it is really a picture, after all, and not a woman or something else that is wanted […]’. These bawdy connoisseurs should really be kept out of the galleries. I can see a fine Renoir, some day, being mutilated: or an Augustus John being raped!' (CD 129-30, emphasis added). The Caliph’s Design begins as a ‘true’ manifesto, full of radical proposals. Following the model of the manifesto that heralds the beginning of a movement, for example, Lewis argues in Part One: ‘The first great modern building that arose in this city would soon carry everything before it’, creating ‘a new form-content for our everyday vision’ (CD 34). Later he turns to criticize movements and fashions in art, exhibiting signs of a transition from his Vorticist self
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to that 'solitary outlaw', 'the Enemy'. The pamphlet concludes, predictably, with an attack on Bloomsbury and Aestheticism, connecting this manifesto to earlier and later writings by Lewis. These final pages provide, if nothing else, some striking examples of the manifesto’s arsenal of dirty rhetorical tricks.

Lewis’s last collective manifesto was published the following year in the catalogue of the Group X exhibition at Heal’s Mansard Gallery in March 1920. The group included several ex-Vorticists, including Dismorr, Etchells, Hamilton, and Wadsworth, and although Lewis was not the principal organizer of the group, he was its chief propagandist. The Group X manifesto, written by Lewis, has the appearance of being another step away from BLAST, but in a different direction from The Caliph’s Design. Whereas the latter represents bold departures from formalism, on the one hand, and group organization, on the other, Group X represents a tentative (and short-lived) return to the idea of the artists’ collective. The name itself points in two directions: first, to the number of painters, and second, to the ambiguous nature of their corporate identity. Gone is the important ‘we’ of the BLAST manifestos: the ‘opinions’ of Group X are discussed by an ‘I’, Lewis, who refers to ‘the ten original members’ – which must include himself – as ‘they’.39 This sense of distance is exaggerated by the opening lines, ‘The members of this group have agreed to exhibit together twice annually, firstly for motives of convenience, and with no theory or dogma that would be liable to limit the development of any member. Each member sails his own boat’ (WL A 184, emphasis added). The nautical metaphor is expanded, and begins to generate some of the violent partisan tones of Vorticism. While it is not ‘a piratic community’, the ‘peaceful traders’ of Group X are ‘naturally armed to the teeth, and bristling with every device to defend the legitimate and honourable trafficking’ of their goods. The group’s important function as protection of the artist’s livelihood, by the assumption of ‘strength in numbers’, therefore remains active. Some of the ‘piratic’ character, too, is in evidence: instead of attacking Futurism, Group X targets the rival group, the Seven and Five Society, which it calls ‘six and ten, or something’ (WL A 185). It also continues the pre-War opposition to the Royal Academy (which ‘no effort can reform short of the immediate extinction of every man, woman and child at present connected with it’; WL A 185), the New English Art Club, and the London Group, which was seen as having been taken over by Roger Fry. Against these English
institutions and the ‘ clammy cloak of provincial narrowness’, it proclaims allegiance to a pan-European movement in the arts, advocating closer ties with ‘France, Spain and Italy’ (WLA 186). The Group X manifesto, or what Lewis calls the ‘general indications of policy’ (WLA 184), is a timid creature when placed beside the puce monster of Vorticism. But it is more of a manifesto than its opening lines suggest, and it marks a striking end, especially for its pan-European character, to Lewis’s ambivalent involvement with groups and movements.

Lewis devoted a substantial amount of writing to reflections on his relationship with the group structure. One of his main contentions, and one that is highly relevant to the manifesto’s slippery speaking position, is that the individual should act like a group, whether or not he or she is actually representing a group. In ‘The Code of a Herdsman’, for example, the (fictional) author advises his disciple to ‘Use your epithet as though it were used by a whole nation’, in other words, confidently. Similarly, ‘Yourself must be your caste.’ Commenting on his pre-War activities in his last published article, in 1956, Lewis claimed: ‘I expended a good deal of energy in order to create the impression that a multitude existed where there was in fact not much more than a very vigorous One’ (CHCH 382). When Lewis became ‘the Enemy’ in the late 1920s, little changed in the sense that he still felt and acted like the surviving member of a lost ‘herd’. This ‘herd’, according to Lewis, had reached its apex in the eighteenth century:

I felt it to be an accident – a disagreeable one – that I was straying around by myself. I was a group-animal, behaving as one of the solitary breeds by chance (I never confused myself with lions or eagles). […] In England there had been numbers of us at one time. I knew that from the books I read. (RA 213)

Lewis was not as alone as he might have thought; he shared with Yeats the sense of being at once (in Lewis’s words) a ‘solitary outlaw’ and a ‘multitude’. He also drew strength from the same lineage; from the ‘savage indignation’ of Swift and his contemporaries. Yeats wrote in 1937: ‘Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd. I am a lonely man. I am nothing.’ As Janet Lyon demonstrates, the manifesto always stands, in some sense, for an imaginary group. The ‘we’ it so often employs is used to obscure its limitations and lay
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claim to an authority it rarely, if ever, actually possesses, whether that
authority purports to come from the state, the voc populi, or from
history. Lewis boasted of having ‘all the confidence of a herd’ (RA 213),
but his manifestos are also clear examples of the anxiety and
compensatory aggressiveness that Martin Puchner has described.43

For Lewis, acting like a crowd involved adopting multiple and
often contradictory identities or masks. ‘Cherish and develop, side by
side, your six most constant indications of different personalities’, the
‘Code’ states. ‘Never fall into the vulgarity of being or assuming yourself
to be one ego.’44 This, then, was not only a tactic to be adopted by the
‘herdsman’ but also an ideology to follow: the ideology of what Lewis
elsewhere called the ‘split-man’.45 As Lewis’s biographical details show,
he followed this strategy in his daily life, concealing from friends and
colleagues the fact that he was married, and using multiple addresses.46

Lewis employed the espionage metaphor directly when he contrasted
the ‘bogus battalion’ of Vorticism with the ‘single spy’ he became in The
Caliph’s Design (WLA 69). Lewis spoke once more on behalf of a
collective with Group X, but afterward abandoned all collaborations,
even refusing, for example, to become a signatory of a manifesto
proposed by Ezra Pound in 1936. While Lewis often recognized, as he
did in the Group X manifesto, the need for artists to organize in order
to protect their interests, he also saw this reaction by artists against a
hostile environment as having negative side-effects, including ‘the large-

scale and well-organized coterie, like the “Bloomsburies”’ (RA 114),
which became a threat in itself.

The Tyro (1921-22), according to William Wees, ‘signalled a new,
purely individualistic phase in Lewis’s career’.47 In his autobiography
Lewis admits to ‘what must have seemed an exaggerated individualism
on my part’ (RA 212).48 The Tyros, Lewis’s fantastic, satirical creatures,
featured in one group of paintings, including a famous self-portrait of
Lewis as a Tyro. They also served to illustrate the first issue of the
magazine. By the time the second issue appeared, however, the Tyros
had already been superseded by early drawings of the ‘Apes’ that would
populate Lewis’s epic satire, The Apes of God, which started appearing in
serialized form in The Criterion in 1924. The Tyro was founded partly in
opposition to Roger Fry’s control and influence, and in this sense it
represents a continuation of Lewis’s grand project of maintaining a
viable alternative to what was, in his view, Bloomsbury’s unhealthy
monopoly on the London art scene. It is ironic, then, and very telling,
that Ezra Pound expressed doubts about the magazine’s wider appeal. ‘Cant see that TYRO is of interest outside Bloomsbury’ (P/L 127), he wrote to Lewis, indicating that although Lewis was critical of the London coteries, he had also trapped himself within the confines of that milieu, and would have to seek his audience there or change tack entirely. At the same time, Lewis demonstrated his desire for a wider context by invoking in the first issue of The Tyro, as he did in the Group X manifesto, ‘the great European movement in painting and design’ as a potential ally in the battle against what he calls the ‘aesthetic chauvinism’ (WLA 193) of England.

If Lewis’s ‘Tyro’ period has a manifesto, it is ‘The Children of the New Epoch’ from The Tyro’s first issue (1921). It begins with a performative gesture that is characteristic of the manifesto: ‘We are at the beginning of a new epoch, fresh to it, the first babes of a new, and certainly a better, day’ (WLA 195). This appears to be another attempt at the post-War tabula rasa seen in The Caliph’s Design. It also suggests the kind of grand-scale, ‘epochal thinking’ which Leon Surette has called the ‘one universal feature of modernism’, and which features prominently in many manifestos.49 But how seriously such a pronouncement can be taken is open to question. The Tyro is a new breed; they are novices by definition. It might be assumed that these ‘children’ possess a certain amount of potential. But the Tyro is, in Lewis’s words, ‘a “novice” to real life’ (CWB 359), a dilettante, and again we see a picture emerge of the inauthentic, unprofessional artist who is always Lewis’s target, even if in this case Lewis includes himself in the satire. Alan Munton has argued that a ‘transformation of life and culture throughout Europe’, a Golden Age, ‘appeared imminent’ to Lewis and other avant-garde artists before the War.50 The expression of such hopes in the immediate post-War period, however, must be treated with caution. Lewis seems to divide himself between drawing a satirical picture of the post-War artist and genuinely trying to make the best of the wasteland in which he finds himself. He declares: ‘There is no passage back across [...] to the lands of yesterday’ (WLA 195), as if it were a genuine opportunity. But the silence that followed the Tyro period, when for several years Lewis went ‘underground’, testifies to the difficulty he had in discovering a ‘new epoch’ worth celebrating. When Lewis resurfaced with the ‘Man of the World’ project (eventually broken up into several books on various subjects), he presented a complex vision of the new age, but this time he was bent upon undoing it rather than attempting, even half-heartedly, to
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sings its praises. ‘The Children of the New Epoch’ warns of ‘a sort of No
Man’s Land atmosphere’ (WLA 195) before the beginning of the new
phase, but it does not suggest for how long this atmosphere might take
hold.

Notes

1 Title quotation from BI 15.
1914); 308.
3 The first part of ‘The Crowd Master’, a short story by Lewis based on his
journey by train from Berwick-upon-Tweed to London during the
mobilization, was published in the ‘War Number’ of BLAST in 1915 (see
B2 94-102).
4 Paul O’Keeffe relates the story of Lewis’s injunction to the Sitwells,
handed down over dinner in 1919, that he should remain thirty-seven until
further notice. Lewis tells them: ‘I’m thirty-seven till I pass the word
round!’ O’Keeffe argues that it was the ‘need to make up for the time lost’
during the War rather than a crisis of ‘vanity’ that prompted the decision.
Paul O’Keeffe, Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis (London:
Pimlico, 2001), 214.
5 Hugh Kenner, Wyndham Lewis (London: Methuen, 1954), 63-64. Writing
shortly after Kenner, in 1956, Lewis called the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
‘the last contradictory impulse’ in England before BLAST once again
‘broke in upon this lethargy’ six decades later (CHCH 381).
6 David Trotter, Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the
Professionalization of English Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001),
290.
7 Paul Edwards, “It’s time for another war”: The Historical Unconscious
and the Failure of Modernism’, in David Peters Corbett (ed.), Wyndham
Lewis and the Art of Modern War (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
8 For a full account of the controversy see Richard Cork, Vorticism and
Abstract Art in the First Machine Age – Volume 1: Origins and Development
(London: Gordon Fraser, 1976), 92-93.
9 Quoted in ibid., 98.
10 For a picture of the advertisement see ibid., 234.
11 Paul Edwards, Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer (New Haven and
12 Edwards argues that ‘Fry was able to escape what was tantamount to a legal challenge from Lewis because of the “bad taste” of the letter’ (ibid.).
14 The ‘Round Robin’ followed the ground-breaking Futurist exhibition at the Sackville Gallery in March 1912, for which ‘The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism’ was reprinted in the catalogue. Lewis may also already have seen Apollinaire’s ‘L’Antirévolution futuriste’ of 1913, with its influential ‘Merde aux’ and ‘Rose aux’ lists.
16 Quoted in ibid., 44. 
18 Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, trans. Rose Strunsky (London: RedWords, 1991), 161-62. This is not to say that Trotsky was wholly sceptical of the involvement of artists in revolutionary politics. Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art (1938), co-written with André Breton but signed only by Breton and Diego Rivera (owing to concerns about personal safety that proved well justified), demonstrates Trotsky’s commitment in this regard. The manifesto sought ‘to free intellectual creation from the chains that bind it and to allow all mankind to climb those heights that only isolated geniuses have reached in the past’. Reacting specifically against Stalinism, it declared: ‘Independent revolutionary art must gather its forces [...] to assert out loud its right to exist.’ See Mary Ann Caws (ed.), Manifesto: A Century of Isms (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 472-77.
20 Wees, Vorticism, 19.
22 Ibid., 107.
24 Lyon, Manifestoes, 109.
25 Ibid., 111.
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28 In his own account of the march, Marinetti puts himself in control (‘Several of us captain the tide of women along the street’) and then, when ‘all hell breaks loose’, at the centre of the action: ‘two huge horses with two immense policemen on them charge down on our suffragettes and we all go tumbling head over heels’. See Marinetti, ‘Suffragettes and the Indian Docks’, in F. T. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. R. W. Flint (London: Secker and Warburg, 1972), 341-42.

29 This echoes James McNeill Whistler’s declaration, in the *Ten O’Clock* lecture, that ‘[t]he master stands in no relation to the moment at which he occurs.’ See James McNeill Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Heinemann, 1890), 154-55.


31 Quoted in Cork, *Vorticism*, 257.

32 To cite one colourful example, Lewis states: ‘But alas! although like the Caliph, a Vorticist, I have not the power of life and death over the Mahmuds and Hasans of this city. Otherwise I should have no compunction in having every London architect’s head severed from his body at ten o’clock to-morrow morning, unless he made some effort’ (CD 33).

33 Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner’s ‘Realistic Manifesto’ (1920), for example, declares: ‘In the squares and on the streets we are placing our work convinced that art must not remain a sanctuary for the idle, a consolation for the weary, and a justification for the lazy. Art should attend us everywhere that life flows and acts [...] at the bench, at the table, at work, at rest, at play; on working days and holidays [...] at home and on the road [...] in order that the flame to live should not extinguish in mankind’ (reprinted in Caws, *Manifesto* 396-400, 400). Similarly, the first manifesto of De Stijl (1918) declares its support for ‘all who work to establish international unity in life, art, culture, either intellectually or materially’ (Caws, *Manifesto* 424-25, 425).

34 The two articles cited are reprinted in *CHCH* 62-63 and 64-65. For a detailed description of Lewis’s publications during these years, see Omar S. Pound and Philip Grover (eds), *Wyndham Lewis: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Folkestone, Kent: Dawson and Sons, 1978).
36 Ibid., 7.
37 Ibid., 3.
38 Lewis writes to Quinn about the members of Group X ‘taking a shop or office, where it is proposed to sell objects made by them [...] and especially to have a business address from which the poster, cinematograph and other industries can be approached’ (*L. 112*).
39 Lewis told Quinn: ‘I have [...] formed a group of ten painters: Etchells, Roberts, Wadsworth, Kauffer, Dismorr, Dobson (a sculptor), three others and myself’ (*L. 111-12*).
45 This is the title Lewis gives to Part V of *The Apes of God*.
46 See, for example, O’Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius*.
47 Wees, *Vorticism*, 210. It might be useful to recall here another landmark in Lewis’s career: his first one-man show, *Guns*, which was held at the Goupil Gallery in 1919.

48 An ambitious five thousand copies were printed of the second *Enemy*, as compared with only one thousand copies of each issue of *The Tyrant*. It is also interesting to note that *The Tyrant* was, as Edwards points out, ‘produced like a weekly’ rather than like an art magazine. See Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis*, 253.