

Book Reviews

Deaglán Ó Donghaile, *Blasted Literature: Victorian Political Fiction and the Shock of Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 272 pp. £65.00 (hb).

Stephen Sicari, *Modernist Humanism and the Men of 1914: Joyce, Lewis, Pound, and Eliot* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 248 pp. \$59.95 (hb).

Stephen Sicari's *Modernist Humanism and the Men of 1914* proceeds in line with the key premise that while the New Modernist Studies (particularly its feminist variants) has usefully expanded the field of who and what constitutes (or constituted) literary modernism, the works of T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound remain in some important ways misunderstood. Thus Sicari focuses on these writers in a study of modernism as 'a project, perhaps a perennial one, in which a radical skepticism is preliminary and necessary to a concentrated effort to discover a permanent basis for an understanding of humanity and humanism' (xiv). Deaglán Ó Donghaile in *Blasted Literature*, on the other hand, takes a more 'current' approach to his topic – late nineteenth-century politics of terror, popular fiction, and early modernism – in that he seeks to understand the connections between 'bombs and books' (4), 'literature and terrorism' (8), and 'the act of dynamiting' and 'modernism's militant blasts against the inert weight of the literary establishment' (10). The texts chosen for analysis in Sicari's book are familiar: Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), Pound's *Cantos*, and Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets*. Those chosen by Ó Donghaile are similarly well-known: Stevenson's *The Dynamiter* (1885), James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897), Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), and Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908). Even so, both authors bring new and perceptive insights to their respective discourses: Sicari by relating his analysis of modernist selves and essences to an understanding of subjectivity inspired by the work of Charles Taylor; and Ó Donghaile by trawling through an impressively wide-ranging assortment of 'terrorist' novels, debates over the nature of

anarchism, and other materials (especially periodicals) from the Victorian period in advance of reading the Vorticist movement as a modernism 'whose aesthetic position most closely resembles the political message of anarchism' (234). Both studies contribute much to our knowledge of the complexities of modernism and, more precisely, to our enjoyment of Lewis's writing in particular.

Did Vorticism have a politics? It is tempting to answer this question with a 'yes', but the problems generated in doing so are multiple. Vorticism was hostile to the stultifying consensuses of its period, opposed to continental (and specifically Italian) Futurism (though Vorticism also borrowed from it), and committed to a new individualism by way of which a revolutionary consciousness might transform England, its place of birth. However, Vorticism in its earliest stages tended to be mediated (especially in Lewis's writings) in ways which imply recognition of the highly, almost terminally, contingent nature of its ambitions. Vorticism, at least in the *BLAST* phase of 1914-15, was a self-reflexive enterprise in which politics played at best a problematic role. Ó Donghaile makes apparent his provocative understanding of the 'politics' of Vorticism when he states that '[i]n their quest for notoriety, Lewis and his colleagues constructed an aggressive, modernist version of the explosive advertising strategy that was first developed by Charles Henry Dent and Frank Cannock with the Tamworth bomb scare of 1894' (185). The Tamworth pair, according to Bernard Porter, 'sent twenty-four copies of a magazine stuffed inside bomb shells to government offices in December 1894 in order to win a prize offered by the magazine for the most original way of advertising it.'¹ For Ó Donghaile, *BLAST* by analogy epitomizes a Vorticist 'bomb' sent into the pre-First World War culture of which Lewis and his allies were so critical: 'Vorticism [...] is marked by its attempt to commodify terrorism as a form of aesthetic practice' (185). Hence the claim that 'there is a clear link between the Vortex and political violence' and the further contention that *BLAST* owed 'its notoriety to its exploitation of this [link] and its fusion of modernism with the destructive rhetoric of revolution' (195).

As Ó Donghaile sees it, Vorticism's anarchistic, even terroristic credentials are 'clear' (his word). I wonder, though, about the desirability of describing Vorticism as a 'commodification' of terrorism in light of Lewis's professed opposition to political violence not only in the years after *BLAST* was published but in *BLAST* itself. René Harding could

be speaking for Lewis in *Self Condemned* (1954) when he says he ‘object[s] absolutely to political terrorism and philosophies of force’ (SC 131-32), an objection which dovetails with Lewis’s critique in the 1920s of ‘the stupid violence of physical force’ as opposed to the violence of one *idea* overcoming another (ABR 19). Lewis conceded that where societies are ‘very materialized or brutalized’ (ABR 19) the changing of ideas tends to be accompanied by blood, but this is in itself not an approval of physical violence *per se*. Speaking of his own critical activities, Lewis maintained that the ‘philosophic man inveighs against violence ostensibly on other people’s behalf’ when really ‘he is speaking for himself’ (ABR 64). Lewis also pointed out that ‘the white races seem almost incurably brutal, and always ready, after the regulation press provocation, to slaughter themselves’, before adding that ‘[t]he breaking of that traditional spirit in them is the most hopeful possibility’ (ABR 54) for some improved, future civilization. But Lewis knew that the ‘breaking’ of such attitudes depended on overcoming the ‘provocations’ of the media discourses through which violence – global as well as local – habitually is facilitated. Thus he wrote in *Time and Western Man* (1927) that language ‘has to be destroyed before you transform ideas at all radically’ (TWM 5), a proclamation which follows on from the Vorticist ambition to convey ‘vivid and violent ideas’ to its audiences in ways which would not ‘change the appearance of the world’ (B1 7) – i.e. in ways that would leave the *physical* world intact even if the *mental* world would have been shredded in advance of more desirable configurations.

As Alan Munton has shown before me, *BLAST* embodied ‘the satirical aggression of an avant-garde making space for itself within an unsympathetic and sceptical culture.’² Its ‘vivid and violent ideas’ were brutal inasmuch as they were intended to destroy habitual or ‘civilized’ (B1 7) forms of seeing and thinking, but they were never meant as ‘terroristic’ in the way Ó Donghaile wants them to be. To ‘commoditize’ (or ‘commodify’) terrorism, taking those words at face value and as they are defined by the *OED*, means ‘to turn into or treat as a (mere) commodity’ some ‘policy intended to strike with terror those against whom it is adopted’. These definitions, in fact, don’t go as far as Ó Donghaile does in claiming Vorticism’s satiric interventions as taking part in ‘a permanent dialectic of struggle’ (186), interventions which in *BLAST* were ‘designed to both shock the aesthetic sensibilities of its readers and to create art out of “political activity”’ (187). But while I can see that what Ó Donghaile is doing here is claiming a ‘metaphorical’

significance for Vorticism's 'assaults' on the pre-First World War literary scene, I'm still uncertain as to the appropriateness of labelling Vorticism 'terroristic' – even through a 'metaphorical' understanding of the term, whatever that might responsibly be taken to mean – first of all because the movement itself was peopled by diverse personalities with equally diverse politics, and second because the 'politics' of *BLAST* are far from being as clear as Ó Donghaile views them.

The problem of Vorticism's political 'clearness' is never adequately addressed by Ó Donghaile, I think, because he never quite pays enough sustained attention to the self-contradictory elements of the textualities in which pre-War Vorticism was advanced. Such elements are hinted at in Ó Donghaile's recognition that the goals of *BLAST* are at times 'playfully seditious' (193), but the nature of that playfulness tends to be toned down in his coverage of Vorticism's ostensibly straightforward political rhetorics. Ó Donghaile does not in any detail tackle the problem of the movement's complex (and confusing) exploitation of the manifesto genre, for instance – an omission which seems part of his willingness to read the political declarations of *BLAST* in 'straight' terms, even though the jocular spirit evident throughout its pages makes such a response highly questionable. *BLAST* for me seems to present a 'meta-politics' rather than a 'politics' as such, and Ó Donghaile's argument does not convince me otherwise. That is, I see *BLAST* as *investigating* political positions, as *questioning* what it means to be political rather than presenting or reflecting any particular political position *per se*. Part of the problem here, I suspect, is that as with all experimental modernist writings it can be easy to become desensitized to the estranging effects such writings tend to cause on a first reading. Thus politics can take shape as a more stable discourse in *BLAST* than the magazine – with its open contradictions, nonsensical claims, and grammatical breakdowns – evidently allows it to be. My account of what *BLAST* is 'evidently' like is itself open to challenge, of course, but Ó Donghaile's claims about Vorticism's 'clearly' political nature would have been more credible if he had spent more time addressing, rather than omitting, *BLAST*'s ambiguities.

Ó Donghaile's strengths lie in his archival treatment of his subject. *Blasted Literature* is an important book which provides new takes on a familiar set of literary-historical contexts: anarchist philosophy, late Victorian and Edwardian 'terrorism' novels, and pre-War avant-gardism. Ó Donghaile's reading of *The Secret Agent* in relation to Heidegger's *Being*

and Time (1927), for instance, is persuasive, as is his use of such popular fictions as Wells's *The Invisible Man* (1897), Edgar Wallace's *Four Just Men* (1905), and John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915). Most compelling of all are the many digressions into cultural history which Ó Donghaile undertakes to contextualize and detail his textual interpretations, even if these interpretations are at times dubious. All good scholarly works trying to do something new with old literary materials tend to produce debatable readings of established texts, though, and Ó Donghaile wisely grounds his scholarship in frequent reference to Victorian and Edwardian periodical cultures. The texts studied in *Blasted Literature* are inseparable from these cultures, which is why in Ó Donghaile's final chapter the attention paid to *BLAST* offers such a neat way of ending the book's lines of reasoning. The criticisms I have about his take on Vorticism concern his assumption of an unreflexive inheritance of anarchist politics in *BLAST*, which for him 'reinterpreted the impact of the shock of revolutionary violence on the constitution of the modern subject by offering a modernist "blueprint" for what Lewis regarded as an "exclusively political" twentieth century' (236). Reinterpret the impact of shock of revolutionary violence the magazine does, but if *BLAST* offers a 'blueprint' for a political future I have yet to find it.

If the Lewis of Ó Donghaile's scholarship is political, then the Lewis of Sicari's book is trying to be more than political by refocusing certain characters in Lewis's novel *The Revenge for Love* 'toward the recognition of something transcendent and true' (92). This 'something' is, for Sicari, a modernist humanism based on love, 'the most traditional theme of the most traditional novel' (100). Noting that '[n]o novel can be studied in isolation from the history of the genre or from the philosophical and cultural contexts of its own time' (95), Sicari reads *The Revenge for Love* in response to Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900), and Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), among others, as a way of showing how what is 'humanist about [*The Revenge for Love*] is Lewis's decision [...] to place love at the bottom' (101) of a fictional universe in which all other systems of value are subject to deconstruction as 'false bottoms' of contingent superstructures. Sicari points out that in this respect 'Lewis seems to have recognized [...] that demystification cannot be an end in itself but must itself have an end it serves (104), which is another way of saying that the novel's 'radical skepticism serves another purpose, to debunk any loose or sloppy claim of transcendence in order to set up a plot that may indeed rise above

this skepticism' (113). And so Sicari arrives at his main argument about *The Revenge for Love*: through the character of Margot, whose romantic literary tastes are usually seen by critics as determinants of a consciousness equally romantic, Lewis presents 'the possibility that literature may have its own political use, as material for fashioning a self capable of resisting the sway of the political' (118).

Sicari's reading of *The Revenge for Love* depends on the claim that in Lewis's hands 'love' is 'tested and found genuine, and [...] moves beyond mere human love toward something higher and more divine' (199). In this account, Lewis is the modernist artist who is attentive more than any other to the power of ideology and its 'claims in constructing the subject', one who paradoxically 'seems more adamant [than his fellow modernists] in insisting on the existence of an essential human self and its potential for agency' (94). In support of this claim Sicari conducts a lengthy close reading of *The Revenge for Love* which aims to show how, despite all the deconstructive gestures made in it, the text finally singles out the self as the ground on which ideology might most effectively be resisted, if not circumvented altogether. What, then, of moments such as the following, in which the character Serafín is exposed to a debilitating emptiness as the revolutionary Percy Hardcaster reveals that he has been motivated by 'nothing': 'Serafín himself could not have said *nothing* with more feeling for the false bottom underlying the spectacle of this universe, and making a derision of the top – for the nothingness at the heart of the most plausible and pretentious of affirmatives, either as man or as thing' (RL 247)? For Sicari, Lewis's novel works past the 'nihilism' of such passages by observing that while demystification might draw out 'hollows' of this kind, might bring them into view so they can be assessed and managed, nonetheless we as human subjects 'can build back again, this time on the delicate ground that we have chosen, as a "fiction" that we will believe in but will use to organize discrete parts into local un[i]ties in a strategy of rebuilding toward something more just and more equitable' (104).

This Foucauldian assessment of *The Revenge for Love* understands it as a text in search of a truth, one that can withstand (or recalibrate) ideology as a way of barricading the self against an apparently meaningless (or 'bottomless') universe. Margot is for Sicari the focal point of this effort, since it is she who demonstrates 'the power of love' (119) by following her husband, Victor, on a doomed gun-running mission that results in their deaths. Where Sicari's reading differs from

prior accounts of Margot's 'true' love for her husband is in his attempt to show that although her idea of love is made out of, and thus constructed by, romantic textualities, nonetheless it was her choice to read what she has read – and so she personifies the point that although 'the self may indeed be constructed, [...] we can at least choose the material for [its] construction' (118). Lewis, according to Sicari, thus presents a novel fundamentally humanist in spirit inasmuch as it shows 'the human' is a site of agency in a reality of oppressive ideological 'false consciousness', on the one hand, and that love, 'constructed' though it might be in human interactions by culture and politics, can stand as a means of 'resisting the sway of the political' (118), on the other. Sicari's line of argument rejects any possibility that *The Revenge for Love* pulls out the bottom from beneath *all* values in favour of two absolutes: that Hardcaster, the man who dupes Margot and Victor into gun-running to begin with, 'is at bottom an individualist', and that 'Margot's love is the bottom of the plot' (122).

Sicari is an effective close reader of Lewis, but he is also good at leaving out aspects of *The Revenge for Love* which problematize his position. For instance, Sicari does not discuss Margot's response to Victor's discovery of the fact that the 'guns' they have been running in the boot of their car are, in fact, 'nothing but a cargo of bricks', a discovery which prompts several profound realizations on her part: 'at last she laughed outright at the absurdity of it – a false bottom on wheels; but all full of nothing at all, except packing-paper and bricks! She went on laughing. The joke grew on her, the more she thought about it. She went on laughing more and more' (RL 331). This hardly seems to be the response of a character who is meant to promote the 'value' of love, however, for in this instant love's 'effectiveness' is revealed to be powerless against the political forces through which Margot and Victor have not managed to drive. Margot may love Victor, yes, but that love is eventually quashed by the material violence of politics, whatever value love may have. And Margot recognizes this, laughing much as Lewis said we laugh when confronted by the spectacle of 'existence' itself – laughing as a sort of 'summer-lightning' (CWB 158) that illuminates certain truths but does not allow us to 'overcome' them. And Hardcaster's recognition of the tragedy of Margot and Victor is no less problematic, for although he is haunted by his role as a 'man who led people into mortal danger' (RL 336), this recognition is itself ironized at the moment of its enactment by its presentation as yet

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another false groundwork – ‘the mask of THE INJURED PARTY dilat[ing] in a spasm of astonished self-pity’ (RL 336). Hardcaster may or may not be an ‘individualist’, but whatever he is he is an object of ridicule by this point in the narrative, as the extremely ironic capital letters in the passage just quoted indicate.

It is this kind of ‘sidestepping’ of the ambiguities of Lewis’s writing that makes these scholarly texts good but not excellent. What we have here are two extremely interesting books, neither of which quite lives up to the complex nature of their subject matter – at least as far as Lewis is concerned. But that fact should not prevent these texts from being read. At its best Ó Donghaile’s *Blasted Literature* is a carefully historicized account of interactions between dynamite violence, late Victorian and Edwardian politics, and literary form. In the same vein, Sicari’s *Modernist Humanism* works to its fullest when teasing out the intricacies of formal developments through a wide range of literary histories in relation to the problem of the self. If Lewis emerges from these studies as a less complicated figure than he might have done, nonetheless he comes through as a key artistic producer of the twentieth century – and this result, which can often be underplayed in even sympathetic general studies of modernism, is always to be celebrated.

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Notes

¹ Bernard Porter, *The Origins of the Vigilant State: The London Metropolitan Police Special Branch before the First World War* (Woodbridge, NJ: Boydell, 1987), 102.

² Alan Munton, ‘Fantasies of Violence: The Consequences of Not Reading Wyndham Lewis’, *Wyndham Lewis Annual* V (1998): 31-49, 32.