

## CHAPTER X

### OTHER MOVEMENTS

IMAGISM was selected for extended treatment in the preceding chapter because contributors to *The New Age* played such an important part in its development. But it was only one of a number of movements which contributed to the increasing exuberance of what Wyndham Lewis called the 'big bloodless brawl prior to the Great Bloodletting'.<sup>1</sup> Marinetti's energetics, the new school of English artists, *Blast* and the Vortex, and, as a symbol of the transition between pugnacious aesthetics and the European holocaust, Hulme with his brass knuckles, saying that the most appropriate method of dealing with one of his intellectual opponents would be 'a little personal violence'<sup>2</sup>—all left their mark on *The New Age* during this period.

On 1 March 1912, nearly two years after the arrival of Post-Impressionism, another artistic movement, this one of more journalistic than cultural interest, made its appearance in London. The Futurist exhibition at the Sackville Gallery which opened on that date was the first of a series of assaults which Marinetti made on the 'passéiste' sensibility of England during the following two years. In a letter to Douglas Goldring's short-lived periodical *The Tramp*, Marinetti had explained the principles of his movement in 1910,<sup>3</sup> but it attracted little attention

<sup>1</sup> *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London, 1937), p. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *NA*, XIV (25 Dec. 1913), 252. Hulme's brass knuckles were carved for him by Gaudier-Brzeska.

<sup>3</sup> *The Tramp*, I (Aug. 1910), 487.

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in England before his arrival with the exhibition of 1912. His lecture of 19 March 1912, was satirized in *The New Age* one week later, and after interviewing him, one contributor concluded that Futurism had little to offer to contemporary art.<sup>1</sup> This did not deter Marinetti from contributing to the magazine, however, and two of his pronouncements on poetry appeared in its pages.

The essential elements of Futurism are summarized in one of his contributions, 'Geometrical and Mechanical Splendour in Words at Liberty':

We have already hastily dismissed the grotesque funeral of passéiste beauty (romantic, symbolist and decadent) whose essential elements were wild picturesqueness, yearning for solitude, multicoloured disorder, crepuscular darkness, corrosion, wear and tear and grime of time, the deep track of the years, the crackling of ruins, musty smells, taste of putrefaction, pessimism, consumption, suicide, the coquetteries of agony and the adoration of death.

From this chaos of new and contradictory sensations there is born today a new beauty which we shall substitute for the former, and which I call GEOMETRIC AND MECHANICAL SPLENDOUR. . . . My futurist senses first realized this geometric splendour on the bridge of a Dreadnought: the speeds of the ship, the distance of the shots calculated at a great distance from the bridge in the fresh breeze of warlike probabilities. . . . I had noted several times, whilst spending some afternoons in the battery De Suni at Sidi-Messri, in October, 1911, how the geometric and mechanical splendour of a luminous aggressive flight, inflamed by the sun and by the quick firing, renders the spectacle of human flesh mangled or dying nearly negligible. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Futurism glorified speed, machinery, war ('the only hygiene of the world'), 'the somersault, the smack in the

<sup>1</sup> NA, X (28 Mar. 1912), 524; XII (21 Nov. 1912), 63-4.

<sup>2</sup> NA, XV (7 May 1914), 16.

face, and the blow of the fist'.<sup>1</sup> In poetry, its principles led to typographical ingenuities which make those of the Dadaists and Surrealists look unimaginative; Marinetti's articles in *The New Age* are largely devoted to an explanation of the principles underlying his unintelligible poems. The 'literature' produced by Futurism, apart from its manifestoes, seems to have excited little interest in England. Its art, however, was sufficiently novel to provoke both criticism and emulation (C. R. W. Nevinson becoming one of Marinetti's few English disciples).<sup>2</sup> As no Cubist pictures were exhibited in England before the second Post-Impressionist exhibition in the autumn of 1912, Futurism, having arrived in March of that year, had the fortuitous advantage of appearing more novel than it actually was.

With new styles and manifestoes more profuse than creative works to justify their creation, *The New Age* had the good fortune to obtain as its art critic Walter Sickert. Although his predilection for the Impressionistic tradition of which he was a product may have blinded him to some of the virtues of more recent styles, he was at least able to present, week after week, a coherent criticism of modern art based on long and careful thought. Many of the articles which he contributed between 1910 and 1915 have been republished in book form;<sup>3</sup> the following extract from one of them illustrates his attitude towards Marinetti and other innovators of his time.

Modern painting has incurred an immense debt to three

<sup>1</sup> Marinetti's 'Credo', quoted by F. S. Flint, 'Contemporary French Poetry', *The Poetry Review*, I (Aug. 1912), 411.

<sup>2</sup> One of Nevinson's Futurist lectures, 'Vital English Art' (delivered at the Doré Galleries, 12 June 1914) was printed in *The New Age*, XV (18 June 1914), 160-2, and satirized in the same issue.

<sup>3</sup> W. Sickert, *A Free House!*, ed. Osbert Sitwell (London, 1947).

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men living, a debt that it would be impossible to overstate. Signor Marinetti has hurried his little troop of painters through, and past all representative effort, to the reductio ad absurdum of statues, built up of cigarettes, and of paintings, with eye-brows and half a moustache, of Clarkson's crape-hair. . . . The arch-fumiste Picasso, wearied of what was undeniably clever-doing, has also landed his art in canvases where bits of cloth, and bits of tin, and bits of glass stuck on to their surfaces, recall in less amusing fashion, the tinsel of our grandfathers. . . . Our third benefactor has been Mr Roger Fry, the critic. I wonder if Mr Fry has not now and again qualms of regret. . . . Was it worth while to divert a whole choir of innocents from serious study to the elaboration of a fruitless game at spelicans on canvas? The Neo-pied Piper of Fitzroy Square, may he not still perhaps repent, and lead his little flock of peculiar people back to the impregnable rock of common sense?

To criticism, at least, these three men, Marinetti, Picasso, and Roger Fry, have done incalculable service. They have demonstrated, in four or five years, with the rapidity of a galloping consumption, where lies a blind-alley. Up that cul-de-sac, at least, criticism need spend no time in wandering. To that extent they have helped us in our orientation towards progress.<sup>1</sup>

The virtues of the representative technique he favoured were well exemplified in his own drawings, a number of which appeared in *The New Age*.

But Sickert did not monopolize the discussion of art in the magazine, nor were reproductions of works by those he criticized excluded from its pages. A new school of artists was emerging in England, and *The New Age* did more than any other pre-war periodical to call attention to their works. In 1912, at the height of the controversy about Epstein's Oscar Wilde Memorial, *The New Age*,

<sup>1</sup> 'Transvaluations', *NA*, XV (14 May 1914), 35.

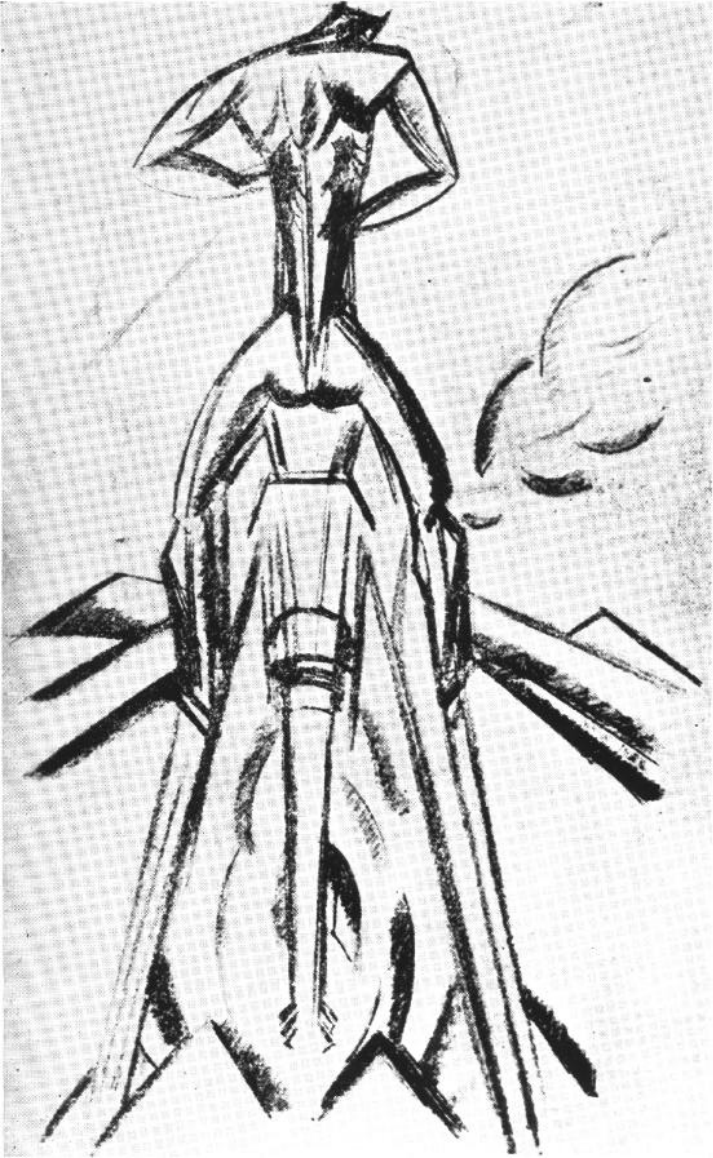
which had defended his Strand Statues from similar attacks in 1908, contained a full page gloss reproduction of that work.<sup>1</sup> In the next two years, it printed an increasing number of works by modern artists: one of Epstein's sketches for his 'Rock-Drill', drawings and paintings by Gaudier-Brzeska, David Bomberg, Wyndham Lewis, C. R. W. Nevinson, Edward Wadsworth, and William Roberts. A number of these appeared in a series entitled 'Contemporary Drawings', edited and annotated by T. E. Hulme. These experiments in hieratic and aniconic design were anathema to Sickert, who had inaugurated a series of 'Modern Drawings' by the Camden Town Group a few months earlier.<sup>2</sup> Often he would refer to his opponents as if they were scarcely worth his serious attention, as when he attempted to explain the creative process, 'Hulme and Bergson and all incomprehensible bedevilments and obfuscations and convolutions and Rogerisms apart'.<sup>3</sup> On one occasion, he was more direct:

We hear a great deal about non-representative art. But while the faces of the Persons suggested are frequently nil, non-representation is forgotten when it comes to the sexual organs. Witness Mr Wyndham Lewis's [Epstein's] 'creation', exhibited at Brighton, Mr Gaudier-Brzeska's drawing in last week's *New Age*, and several of Mr Epstein's later drawings. . . . So that the Pornometric gospel amounts to this. All visible nature with two exceptions is unworthy of study, and to be considered pudendum. The only things worthy of an artist's attention are what we have hitherto called the pudenda! *Solvuntur risu tabulae*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *NA*, XI (6 June 1912). The 'Strand Statues' were executed for the British Medical Association Building, which is now known as Rhodesia House.

<sup>2</sup> These series appeared Jan.-June 1914.

<sup>3</sup> *NA*, XIV (19 Mar. 1914), 632. <sup>4</sup> *NA*, XIV (26 Mar. 1914), 65.



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The grounds of his attack were, perhaps, ill-chosen. Wyndham Lewis replied in the following issue:

Mr Walter Sickert, for 20 or 30 years, was the scandal of the neighbourhood (as a painter) and he was very proud of it. His bedroom realism, cynical and boyish playfulness with Mrs Grundy, his French 'légèreté' (as he would write), all marked him out as a Bohemian plague-spot on clean English life—part, indeed of that larger Yellow plague-spot, edited by Arthur Symons. But now he has survived his sins, and has sunk into the bandit's mellow and peaceful maturity. . . . As for phallic aesthetics, I have no quarrel with them, only I don't happen to participate myself, that is all: though much preferring the naked and clean thing to the boudoir suggestiveness and Yellow Book Gallicisms. . . .<sup>1</sup>

If Sickert erred occasionally in criticizing contemporary art for the wrong reasons, at least he displayed a restraint unusual in his time by discussing aesthetics rather than personalities. The controversies that erupted with growing frequency in *The New Age* during 1913 and 1914 were often personal; it was as if the distinction between art, criticism, and intellectual activity on the one hand, and life with its friendships and animosities on the other, were disappearing. Artistic 'movements', originally intended to unite their members, brought to light new differences and ended in personal quarrels. Pound sarcastically referred to one of Hulme's lectures on modern art as 'wholly unintelligible'; Flint wrote a 'History of Imagism' inspired in part by malice towards Pound;<sup>2</sup> Richard Aldington satirized one of Pound's articles in a letter to *The New Age*, and *The Egoist*, of which Aldington was now literary editor, referred to Pound's poems in *Blast* as

<sup>1</sup> *NA*, XIV (2 Apr. 1914), 703.

<sup>2</sup> Pound, 'The New Sculpture', *The Egoist*, I (16 Feb. 1914), 67.

'rubbish';<sup>1</sup> Hulme and Lewis, both champions of the new school of English artists, were separated by a personal quarrel.<sup>2</sup> *The New Age* itself took on a petulant tone. A number of reviews consisted only of one or two contemptuous sentences; though many books may have deserved no better treatment, publishers retaliated by not sending review copies to the magazine.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary movements and their members provided a rich supply of material for satire, and very few escaped ridicule in the section of the magazine entitled 'Pastiche'.<sup>4</sup> Intellectual aggressiveness or violence, as manifested in the assault of Wyndham Lewis and other members of the Rebel Art Centre on one of Marinetti's meetings,<sup>5</sup> was the order of the day.

The mounting truculence and frenzy of the period reached their climax with the appearance of *Blast* in June, 1914. The magazine resulted in part from 'boredom with that feeble Europeanism, abasement of the miserable "intellectual" before anything coming from Paris, Cosmopolitan sentimentality, which prevails in so many quarters'.<sup>6</sup> It was truculently anti-Romantic, anti-Decadent, and anti-Impressionistic. More immediately, it resulted from the activities of the Futurists; the idea of

<sup>1</sup> *NA*, XVI (21 Jan. 1915), 246; *The Egoist*, II (2 Aug. 1915), 131.

<sup>2</sup> There is an allusion to the fight between Lewis and Hulme in *The New Age*, XIV (26 Mar.; 16 Apr. 1914), 661, 767. Lewis referred to Hulme's criticism of his work as an 'attack' on him: *NA*, XIV (2 Apr. 1914), 703.

<sup>3</sup> *NA*, XII (27 Mar. 1913), 504; XVI (8 Apr. 1915), 613.

<sup>4</sup> *The Egoist* and *Blast* were both satirized: *NA*, XV (25 June 1914), 186; (30 July 1914), 308. Several humorous poems contain allusions to Pound: *NA*, XVII (2 Sept. 1915), 435; XVIII (13 Apr. 1916), 572; and to Hulme: *NA*, XIV (12 Feb. 1914), 472.

<sup>5</sup> Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> 'Manifesto, III', *Blast*, No. 1 (20 June 1914), p. 34.

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organizing a movement would probably not have occurred to Lewis if Marinetti had not set an example.

According to Orage, *The New Age* shared with *Blast* a 'detestation of the Naturalistic or Realistic school', and of Lewis's 'Enemy of the Stars', which appeared in the first issue he wrote:

It deserves to be called an extraordinary piece of work. . . . [It] contains ideas of an almost grandiose dimension, though felt rather than thought. This, indeed, I take to be characteristic of the school—that they prefer the feeling of ideas to the clearly thinking of them.<sup>1</sup>

But he found the other literary contributions disappointing; it was characteristic of the period that Vorticism should have a manifesto, but few creative works to exemplify it. Of the writers who contributed to the first issue, Ford did not pretend to be a Vorticist, Rebecca West did not appear to be one, and Lewis doubted that Pound was one at heart. *Blast* was a coterie magazine without a coterie.

During these years, Orage repeatedly attempted to ascertain the direction in which contemporary art and literature were moving. He felt that in order to formulate a policy, two things are necessary: carefully defined standards and 'a perceptible drift and tendency in one's age'.<sup>2</sup> Without the latter, no standards, however excellent, could be applied in such a way as to nurture the cultural life of the time; they would be dissociated from the forces shaping the future. And what, in his opinion, was the tendency of the age?

In the first place, there are practically no schools, but only cliques of writers personally but not spiritually related;

<sup>1</sup> NA, XV (16 July 1914), 253.      <sup>2</sup> NA, XIV (9 Apr. 1914), 722.

secondly, no common problem is posed for practical solution; thirdly, there are no currents of literary opinion. Large criticism in such a world cannot possibly be consecutive, since there is no bond of unity among the various sets of writers. Today somebody publishes a realistic novel; tomorrow somebody else publishes a romantic or an historical or a genre or a fantastic novel. How can they be related?<sup>1</sup>

He found in some contemporary movements disquieting signs of eccentricity:

I received an invitation to the dinner hastily scratched up in honour of Signor Marinetti the Futurist by a London committee; but I should as soon think of accepting an invitation to dine with Barnum's freaks. Decadence I have often defined as the substitution of the part for the whole; and in this sense Futurism is decadence in extremis. I know that there is something to be said for Futurism and that it contains an intelligible idea. There is no rationalism to equal the rationalism of certain forms of lunacy . . . I have read Signor Marinetti's 'poems,' I have looked at Signor Marinetti's 'pictures'; and I see in both a cell of a healthy organism swollen and overgrown to cover and kill the organism itself.<sup>2</sup>

As war approached, he began to see contemporary movements as signs of 'spiritual anarchy' in modern society:

This, believe me, is not cant on my part. I am old enough to have lived through the *Yellow Book* period from its start and to have shared in every phase since . . . in what may be called their practice as well as their theories. Without boasting, I can say I have known them all. And the conclusion left in my mind is that for the last thirty years the spiritual character of our intellectuals has been declining. To what we must look for a renaissance I have often tried to say in these Notes; but I can see now . . . that *The New Age* must be more definite than ever in the future. To tell the truth, the work is

<sup>1</sup> NA, XV (21 May 1914), 62.    <sup>2</sup> NA, XIV (27 Nov. 1913), 113.



13. PROGRESS by Will Dyson

Post-Elliptical Rhomboidist: 'Him a modern, Bah! He paints in the old-fashioned manner of last Thursday!'

## 'THE NEW AGE' UNDER ORAGE

at present incredibly difficult. Even to think straight in these days requires an effort; as the alienist often finds it hard to perceive his sanity among his patients.<sup>1</sup>

About 1914, says Wyndham Lewis, 'Europe was full of titanic stirrings and snortings—a new art coming to flower to celebrate or to announce a “new age”'.<sup>2</sup> But the coming of war reduced the artistic cataclysm to insignificance, and the bravura of those few who continued to proclaim its importance sounded strangely hollow. 'In the *Fortnightly Review*,' Orage noted a few weeks after war was declared, 'Mr Ezra Pound writes on “Vorticism”. Whether he knows it or not, Vorticism is dead. It was, at best, only a big name for a little thing, that in the simmering of the pre-war period suddenly became a bubble, and is now burst.'<sup>3</sup> The hope for an artistic renaissance was not gone, but for the time being it was forgotten.

<sup>1</sup> NA, XV (9 July 1914), 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Blasting and Bombardiering*, pp. 255-6.

<sup>3</sup> NA, XV (10 Sept. 1914), 449.