

Blasted Blessings of Vorticism:

Humor Fighting Tragedy

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Forget that there was little poetry, less art, and no staying power to the Vorticists. What's important is the cleverness of the attempt, Ezra Pound's wink and smile as he blasted through the schlock peddlers and "BOURGEOIS VICTORIAN VISTAS" that cluttered modernist discourse. What's important is the audacity of printing more manifesto than art. Remember the oversized parentheses that enveloped the enormous bold fonts that were marked off by both Arabic and Roman numerals. Remember that BLAST was more manifesto than poetry, and most of all remember BLAST as an angry joke. Much of the manifesto contained furious descriptions of the blasted and blessed. This calculated frivolity undermined its own binaries and used ludicrous typography to enforce the aggressive side splitting tone. Along with Wyndham Lewis and the other blessed cohorts, Pound damned nearly everyone alive who did not write for or buy into the brief genius of Vorticism.

This paper will explore how Pound and Lewis used popular neo-Nietzschean concepts to lend credibility to BLAST. They employed gleefully self-aware language, disdained simplistic binaries, and claimed their manifesto as the hero who could invigorate the language, and cast the staid "OFFICIOUS MOUNTAINS" back into "A 1000 MILE LONG, 2 KILOMETER DEEP" ocean of literary history. (Bell 70)

Just as Nietzsche called for neither the “man of reason,” nor the “man of intuition,” the Vorticists wanted neither rich nor poor, educated nor ignorant. (Nietzsche 883) Pound and Lewis used the template of “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense” to play a trick on their readers. Nietzsche’s essay first introduces the problem of language decay causing cultural decline, then seemingly defuses it with syllogisms and binaries, but concludes that oppositions in form and content are false anthropomorphic constructions. These constructions create the need for resolution through an “X which is inaccessible to us and indefinable by us.” (Nietzsche 878) BLAST follows this framework by creating an equation of oppositions that disproves itself. But where Nietzsche refused to resolve the quandary, Pound and Lewis proclaimed that BLAST held the answer and that the “VORTEX” was the new “X.” The manifesto uses Nietzsche’s language to link itself to popular conceptions of the *Urbmensch*.

BLAST’s two issues of self proclaimed brilliance were jokes, but not laughable. Inescapably clever, but never trite, Pound and Lewis’ wit defuses polarities with paradox. It comes as no surprise that the “VORTEX,” like the “X” was inescapably vague. Pound “first used the term vortex in a letter to William Carlos Williams in December 1913 to describe the general literary-art scene of London,” but knew that the image of a vortex was the kind of concrete abstraction whose meanings spiraled out to envelope both the art scene, a “great silent place where all energy is concentrated,” and the art, “every kind of whirlwind of force and emotion.” Ideally, Vorticist art was a focused rendering of this “whirlwind.” These different meanings of vortex provide insight into the Vorticist obsessions with commotion, collision, and control. (Wees, 63) Before the manifesto was

even published, Pound had found his gimmick, a word that was as visceral and violent as it was agonizingly ethereal.

Pound's vortex also captured the image of artistic tradition blown into arcs and swirls by the rapidly changing industrial atmosphere of the early 20th century. Coleridge wrote in "The Friend" that "I was a sharer in the general vortex, though my little world described the path of its revolution in an orbit of its own." Pound, classically trained and deeply read was aware that his new and personal "VORTEX" was just as much part of the literary tradition as it was reflective of the rapidly entrenching British industrial complex. The new mechanical language appropriated "vortex" to signify "a turbine in which the water enters tangentially at the circumference and is discharged at the centre." These competing definitions not only redefined the word vortex, but also helped to shape Blast's attempts to mark the "X" at the approaching intersection between mass industrial culture and canonical literature. Academic elites and blue collar workers alike could identify with the vortex without interpreting a single Vorticist work.

Pound designed the manifesto to imitate the violence and turmoil of a vortex. It set up self destructing parallelisms. The very first blast is "[1] BLAST ENGLAND !" while the first blessing is "[1] BLESS ENGLAND !" Similar structures are used to show that simplistic value judgments come from clumsy language. In "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," Nietzsche asserts that the meanings of words "have flown beyond the canon of certainty" (Nietzsche 876) and into abstraction and dilution. Pound explicates this concept in the manifesto.

I.

[1] Beyond Action and Reaction we would establish ourselves.

[2] We start from opposite statements of a chosen world. Set up violent structure of adolescent clearness between two extremes.

[3] We discharge ourselves on both sides.

[4] We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause, which is neither side or both sides and ours.

[5] Mercenaries were always the best troops.

[6] We are primitive Mercenaries in the Modern

This list at works in ways much more complex than its form would suggest. It does not sort out, divide, and simplify. It complicates the Blasts and Blessings that preceded it by revoking any value from either side. This slippery syllogism states that Vorticists are above simple “opposite statements” and “Action and Reaction” pairs. They create “the opposite statements,” and they choose the world. Therefore, they may “discharge...on both sides.” Because they created the categories, the magazine, and the Vorticism, they may “fight first on one side, then on the other” without consequence. This explanation pulls the rug out from under any reader who would read the blessings as absolute praise and the blasts as condemnation.

Pound did not randomly sling observations and phrases into groups as Blessings or Blasts, but rather he constructed the parallelisms to show that the “chosen world” of the manifesto mirrors the “UNCONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMANITY.” These structures seduce the reader with anthropomorphic binaries only to prove to them that language has become dull and pointless. If “ENGLAND !” can be blasted and blessed, then what is the point of having the word England? The deconstructed parallelisms indict those who would agree with either in this oppositional pair. Words are only worthwhile to Pound and Lewis when they radically change contexts. This violence defamiliarizes the reader and cures the blood sicknesses given by any “VICTORIAN VAMPIRE” who would fix essential meanings onto words.

In his curse of the sky, he derides “the flabby sky that can manufacture no snow, but can only drop the sea on us in a drizzle.” He goes on to “CURSE the lazy air that cannot stiffen the back of the SERPENTINE,” and calls out “May some vulgarly inventive but useful person, arise, and restore to us the necessary BLIZZARDS.” He privileges the storm over the “drizzle” because the blizzard is more exciting. Blizzards obscure the visual field in the same way that contradiction and paradox complicate the literary field.

The manifesto attempted to jar the sullen “UNCONSCIOUSNESS OF HUMANITY” from their expectations, their “stupidity, animalism and dreams,” and woke them with the shock of “Chaos invading Concept and bursting it like nitrogen.” Pound damned the lazy sky and deconstructed binaries, praised France with the veiled insults, and blustered into a “whirlwind of force and emotion.” The manifesto explained

itself by through exhibition. BLAST then becomes the first Vorticist performance space, a stage for artists who believed “in no perfectibility except our own.”

The self righteous egotism at the center of the manifesto calls for an audience that will match the brilliance of the Vorticists. Pound, never shy in his own right, blesses the “genius among races,” the “hysterical WALL built round the EGO,” and “the solitude of LAUGHTER.” After dismantling binaries, contemporaries, females, and France, not much was left for the “Primitive Mercenaries” of BLAST but themselves. The vortex metaphor implied that this movement was violent but natural, a necessary outgrowth of literary tradition spinning in the turbines of industry. If the vortex was the spontaneous “point or an intersection” of “two or three young men [who] agree, more or less, to call certain things good,” then there is no one joiner or spinner, no solitary “genius among” Vorticists. (Wees 212) The all caps and bolded “EGO” is not just Pounds, his colleagues, or the Vorticists. The one person left after all the blasting of “this insidious and volcanic chaos” is not Pound, Lewis, or even the vaporous author “WE.” The manifesto is all that remains as its language slides through jilted and bolded typography, proving itself a genius among “AMATEUR[S]” and “ART-PIMP[S]” As the manifesto states:

Blast sets out to be an avenue for all those vivid and violent ideas that could reach the Public in no other way.

Blast will be popular, essentially. It will not appeal to any particular class, but to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of people, TO THE INDIVIDUAL. The moment a man feels or realizes himself as an artist, he ceases to belong to any milieu or time. Blast

is created for this timeless, fundamental Artist that exists in everybody.

So, If “Blast will be popular,” then who read it? The unrepentant blasts of Futurists, France, women, and commoners left very few people willing to pay the sixty five cents for one issue of Blast’s “vivid and violent ideas.” Since not enough people paid for Blast, it seems that Vorticism did “not appeal to any particular class.” It is important to note, however, that Blast never intended to outsell “The Times” or even *The Egoist*. Its audience was those who would produce art. The Vorticists wanted to refurbish the language, to sharpen the pens of modernists, and inspire artistic “INDIVIDUALS” out of their Victorian doldrums.

Nietzsche describes these artistically dormant “human beings who...lie unconsciously” because their language has lost meaning (Nietzsche 878). The words are like “coins which, having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins” (Nietzsche 878). He calls for a reconstruction of the discourse that will produce a leader for the “mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms.” Dull from overuse and repetitive exchange, the language is infected and reinfected with every use. The Vorticists attempted to inject the discourse with “madness and delicacy” (Nietzsche 878)

BLAST was the syringe of delicacy and the manifesto was the needle of madness. It attempted to prick just one artist who would become, like the Nietzschean *Urbmensch*, a simple individual from any class to transcend morality and temporality. Aware of his contemporaries, he chooses to act in neither defiance nor agreement. The

righteous artist transcends the mundane mechanics of the “milieu or time.” The Vorticist “INDIVIDUAL” and Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* are both saviors of a drab culture that has lost its currency. While Nietzsche merely hoped for great individuals, BLAST proclaims that now is the “most favourable time for the individual to appear.” The Vorticists claimed that their manifesto will “WHISPER IN YOUR EAR A GREAT SECRET.” This treatise will gamble “BIG BETS ON” “Blue, Green and Red SEAS all around the PINK EARTH-BALL.” The manifesto is a whispering gambling *Übermensch* that defamiliarizes the people with their own language.

The manifesto form both embodies and explains its own aesthetics. It must advertise and perform Vorticism. It is the narrative of language in disrepair. Lost in the “OFFICIOUS MOUNTAINS” and “VAST MACHINERY” of early 20th century Britain, the Vorticist Manifesto takes the English language on a quest through catalogs, syllogisms, and parallelisms. The language finds itself lost until it realizes that the journey, the manifesto’s form and content, has been the answer. This narrative uses wit to transform chaos into order. This “Humour that has fought like Tragedy” solves for Nietzsche’s “X” and concludes that the whispering has been the great secret, the manifesto is the art, and the reader is the turbine blade spinning the vortex.

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