

A Vital Little *BLAST*: The War Number as a Key to Wyndham Lewis's Thought

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A hundred years after its publication, the second and final edition of *BLAST* continues to be viewed as the poor relation, or at least the quiet relation, to its brashly confident predecessor. The editor himself no doubt suspected that this would be the case when he noted that the magazine '[found] itself surrounded by a multitude of other Blasts of all sizes and descriptions'. Then again, a wry recognition of comparative scale can be turned into a declaration of self-assurance when it is written by Wyndham Lewis: even as he indicates that his radical publication might now be drowned out by the tumult of the world war that had broken out only a month after its first issue, he offers a tacit assertion that its blunt, explosive, monosyllabic title – loaded with the metaphorical payload of Vorticist energy and prophetic intent – had been the right one for the age. The second issue is known as the 'War Number', of course, and it was not content to simply be lost to the noise and trauma of the conflict raging across the channel: it was also engaged, crucially and complicatedly, *with* that conflict. The distinct nature of the second *BLAST*, and much of its subsequent reputation, are inextricably bound in with its primary function as a device for calibrating the cultural phenomenon of Vorticism – or perhaps, more accurately, the cultural phenomenon of Lewis – with the cultural phenomenon of the war.

With this in mind, and given the specific historical enormity of its context, the more striking disjunction must surely be between the relative obscurity of the 'War Number' and the continuing impact and influence of its predecessor. Some might consider that the initial *BLAST* had been hurled in anger as a blatantly theatrical act

within a phoney war, whereas the second *BLAST* had a real crisis to confront. Its relative anonymity must therefore seem curious, if not surprising. Paul Peppis has remarked that ‘one expects to find numerous studies of *Blast: War Number*’ but that there has been ‘comparatively little critical interest [in it], particularly in its political art and polemics’. Scott Klein, reviewing Peppis, makes the same point, describing the second *Blast* as ‘an almost entirely overlooked aesthetic artifact, usually overshadowed by the flashier first issue’. It is interesting to note that even Lewisian scholars have tended to be drawn towards the intense pink glow of the 1914 publication. A quick tally of index references in Jeffrey Meyers’ biography of Lewis, for instance, shows that there are twenty-four to the first *BLAST*, covering twenty-nine pages, and only nine to the second *BLAST*, covering ten pages. Even Paul Edwards, who provides a characteristically incisive and persuasive reading of the War Number in *Wyndham Lewis: Artist and Writer*, has seven index references to *BLAST 1* (ten pages) and only two to *BLAST 2* (two pages). This is not a scientific survey of coverage, admittedly, and it is methodologically and critically dodgy-as-hell in seeming to equate quantity with quality, but it does suggest a sizeable weighting of attention and appreciation towards the inaugural *BLAST*. Such a suggestion will come as a shock to no-one in this room: indeed, it might be considered a rather long-winded statement of the bleedin’ obvious. Even so, the clear implication is that the second *BLAST* is, essentially, an inferior product, and certainly less interesting than its forerunner.

Meyers’ remarks that *BLAST 2* is ‘much thinner’ than *BLAST 1*, which is undeniable: 102 pages compared to 160 pages. Size is, of course, in this as in so many things, a distraction, but it is as reasonable a place to start as any, and O’Keeffe also begins his appraisal with the relative dimensions:

It had fewer pages than the first and was a dour companion to that brash tome of the previous year. With the harsh angularities of its cover design, black on off-white, it matched the gravity of its block-lettered subtitle:
WAR NUMBER.

In going beyond the merely quantitative into aspects of quality, specifically of tone and aesthetics, O’Keeffe is in agreement with Meyers’ assessment that the follow-up had ‘replaced the earlier wit and exuberance with a grim severity’. To establish the grounds for brief harmony between the biographers of Lewis might be achievement enough for the second *BLAST*, but these descriptions are in line with other writers, too, notably Tom Holland, who refers to the ‘lack of punch when compared to the first issue’, and Julian Hanna, who states that ‘[it] is immediately distinguished from its predecessor by its sober tone and its sombre brown-paper cover’. Elsewhere, Hanna writes:

The bright puce wrapper of the first issue was replaced by a sombre khaki. Lewis admitted: ‘The war has exhausted interest for the moment in booming and banging.’

Khaki, brown, black on off-white: however distinct it might be from its forerunner in other ways, the second *BLAST* shares with it an apparent ambiguity of hue. This is not as glib a point as it might seem, since a core element within my argument here will be the quality of unsettlement that the ‘War Number’ represents in relation to Lewis’s work, an unsettlement expressed in the evasiveness of its colour scheme.

It's always perilous to judge a book by its cover, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the realms of Lewis, where it might lead us to think of *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* as one of his finest publications. And if we place the two editions of *BLAST* alongside each other in competitive alignment, it's difficult to know which criteria we could meaningfully use to choose between them: from the same gene pool they may be, but they are vividly different offspring, and it would take a tough, kinky or indolent review to confidently assert that the woodcut fronting the 'War Number' is, on the whole, weaker than the excessive pink minimalism of the first *BLAST*. The earlier cover is more startlingly direct, of course, more easily imitated or spoofed, and its cultural influence is easier to trace through the subsequent century. In this sense, no doubt, it is a better example of graphic design. As an artwork, on the other hand, *Before Antwerp* must be considered a richer piece of creative engagement, and Peppis might well be right in identifying it as an explicit satire on Walter Sickert's *Soldiers of King Albert Ready*:

Lewis's visual counterattack expressed commitment to the war against Germany and the war for modernism: his angular military men appear at once as Allied soldiers braced against German assault and as artistic soldiers braced against established art.

Edwards takes issue (rightly, I think) with Peppis's reading of *Before Antwerp* as a commemorative celebration of Gaudier-Brzeska's death, the heroic modernist soldier-artist lost to the struggle against German nationalism and romanticism. More broadly, he disputes the argument that the 'War Number' is best understood as an attempt to reconcile radical art and conservative politics as elements within the Vorticist

enterprise. Peppis's text – 'the only thorough analysis of *Blast* no. 2', Edwards acknowledges, and 'a valuable essay' – is most important in taking the second issue seriously on its own terms as a more or less coherent attempt to articulate a position for Vorticism at a time of violent historical turbulence. I would like to go further, though, in suggesting that it is a key document for understanding the development of Lewis's ideas in art, culture and politics, representing a complex and vital moment in a complex and vital career.

O'Keeffe notes that Lewis wrote more than half of the contributions within the second *BLAST* and, although it might be (and *has* been) claimed that this constitutes an egotistical narrowing of the Vorticist project, it can also be argued that it results in a greater coherence of concern and approach, if not a greater consistency of viewpoint. It certainly implies that the 'War Number' can offer a more complete and concentrated picture of Lewis at this formative stage of his career than was afforded in the earlier volume. The contents can be read as predictive of Lewis's career in a number of literal and perhaps rather obvious ways. The absorption in European politics and associated issues of nationhood and national character, democracy, and the role of the individual, anticipates (for good and ill) his political writings of the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, it initiates a discourse that will continue to the end of Lewis's creative life, culminating in *America and Cosmic Man* in 1948. Similarly, the focus in 'A Review of Contemporary Art', and elsewhere, on tensions between form and flux in creative production will form the basis for discussion in books ranging from *Time and Western Man* in 1927 to *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* in 1954. Even the brief but original reflections on Shakespeare in 'The Art of the Great Race' look towards *The Lion and the Fox* a decade later. These are, of course, simply thematic signposts within a bibliography: the real importance of *BLAST* no. 2 is, it

seems to me, its ability to reveal the subtlety of Lewis's thinking and, in doing so, to challenge a number of destructive misunderstandings of his work.

These misunderstandings are not difficult to rehearse and the need to respond to them critically has been an enduring, perhaps obsessive, strand in my recent work on Lewis. I have summed them up recently – in a chapter for the forthcoming *Critical Guide* – through reference to John Carey's sustained assault in *The Intellectuals and the Masses* and James Fox's more recent parody in the BBC4 *British Masters* series. For Carey, Lewis is 'powered to a considerable degree by hatred and resentment'. Fox calls him 'a misogynist, fascist and anti-semitic' and claims that he possessed 'one of the most poisonous minds of the twentieth century'. That's surely sets our man up against some notoriously stiff competition, but isn't out of alignment with William M. Chace's earlier attempt to list Lewis's prejudices: women, blacks, Jews, pacifists, feminists, jazz lovers, and so on – pretty much any human being with a pulse, in fact, and quite a few without one.

Given the context of the *BLAST* 'War Number', written and compiled at a time of extreme historical (and some personal) pressure, it might be expected to represent a prime exhibit in the case against Lewis, almost a dry run for his disastrous appeasement trilogy of the 1930s. Some perspectives on the magazine have, in effect, endorsed this conception of it, with Peppis summarising the attendant narrative in plain terms:

the *War Number* is [seen as] a rather tragic document of artistic (and political) concession in the face of war; its less radical, less innovative artworks and polemics demonstrate not just a decline from *Blast* 1's more genuinely oppositional and progressive standards, or even the lamentable

death of Vorticism (or the avant-garde), but perhaps, and most disturbingly, a tendency to anticipate modernism's later retrograde politics. At best the *War Number* is a casualty of war, at worst an ur-text of fascist modernism.

It is, indeed, possible to identify and quote passages from Lewis's contributions to the second *BLAST* which would support the received view of his ideas as toxic, reactionary, aggressive and intolerant. There is Lewis the supposed advocate of violence, who writes that 'Murder and destruction is man's fundamental occupation' and goes on to promote, in Marinettian terms, the essential misanthropic hygiene of war: 'We only begin decaying like goods kept too long, if we are not killed or otherwise disposed of. Is not this proof of our function?' This flows neatly, and some would say inevitably, around Lewis's turn as a misogynist:

Women's function, the manufacturing of children (even more important than cartridges and khaki suits) is only important from this point of view, and they evidently realize this thoroughly. It takes the deft women we employ anything from twelve to sixteen years to fill and polish these little human cartdridges [sic], and they of course get fond of them in the process.

Then there is Lewis the racial chauvinist ('The monstrous carnival of this [German] race's thwarted desires and ambitions is what 1914 has sprung upon us') and inscriber of national stereotypes: 'The English sense of humour is a perpetual, soft, self-indulgent, (often maudlin) hysteria, that has weakened the brain of Britain more than

any drug could.’ And, of course, there is Lewis the enemy of democracy (‘to become anxious is to become democratic’) and proto-fascist:

The only person who objects to uniformity and order – One art, One life – is the man who knows that under these conditions his “individuality” would not survive. Every real individuality and excellence would welcome conditions where there would inevitably be a hierarchy of power and vitality. The Best would then be Free.

The problem is that quotation out of context (Carey’s preferred strategy) and a refusal to actually *read* Lewis (another one) can summon up any number of fierce historical demons or tempt the easy creation of the most grotesque patchwork of a political Frankenstein’s monster. But this is why Lewis has been so persistently and ruinously misunderstood. Because, as Andrzej Gąsiorek has written, ‘Lewis’s politics are a complex affair’. His meaning is never straightforwardly misogynistic or crudely racist, he is not an instinctively hostile nationalist (quite the reverse) and his attitude in politics (rather than in prose or art) is pacifist rather than warlike. He is not a fascist (no, not even in *Hitler* or *Left Wings Over Europe*), although his frantic urge to avoid a second world war would lead him into some ludicrous, dangerous and deplorable misreadings of fascism in Europe. This is why, no doubt, I’m so fond of quoting Jessica Burstein’s remark that ‘[b]eing Wyndham Lewis means never having to say you’re sorry. Being a Lewis critic, on the other hand, means constantly apologizing’.

In place of constant apology (but here I go again, perhaps, in a roundabout way), I have preferred to identify two coordinates between which I tend to negotiate any discussion of Lewis’s political and cultural views. They take the form of maxims

from opposite ends of his career, the first from the *BLAST* 'War Number' – 'You must talk with two tongues if you do not wish to cause confusion' – and the second from *The Writer and the Absolute*: 'It is dangerous to live, but to write is much more so.' The second of these is significant in its phrasing, I think, because it specifies the danger of Lewis's literary as opposed to his visual art: the stylistic radicalism of his drawings and paintings would always have proved antagonistic and provocative, but it is the words that he wrote around his art that have caused him long-term harm. This is not the place to undertake a comparative survey of the impact of words and images in relation to either Lewis's reputation or, more interestingly, our understanding of his unique vision. I have written elsewhere of the compelling dynamic between text and image in Lewis's work, but there can be little doubt about which aspect of his output he himself viewed as most important. Here in the second *BLAST*, in the initial Notice to the Public, he makes the case plain:

as this paper is run chiefly by Painters and for Painting, and they are only incidentally Propagandists, they do their work first, and, since they must, write about it afterwards.

Painting first, then, and words second, in Lewis's estimation at least. But *BLAST*, in both its manifestations, gives us an early and powerful formal representation of the literary framing the visual, and of the visual complementing the literary. 'You must talk with two tongues...' The reason I am drawn to these two brief statements as markers in my analyses of Lewis is that they seem to me to encapsulate the dual core of his creative character: the first is a quality of unsettlement that is totally at odds with views of him as fixed, dogmatic, obdurate, the second is an instinctive spirit of

dissent, which will surprise no-one. Both of these aspects are fully on display in the second *BLAST*, and they will be my focus for the remainder of this paper.

Simplistic readings of Lewis tend to view (but not really *see*) the hard lines and sharp edges of his artwork and accept the caricature of his politics, leading to a solidification of his cultural identity. He becomes the artist of abhorrence and fixed, belligerent viewpoints, frozen in attitudes and opinions that emerged early and never shifted. To a considerable degree, undoubtedly, Lewis invited the formation of this distorted effigy of himself through the development of his ‘Enemy’ persona, his valorization of hard surfaces over soft depths, the clean line over the fuzzy, and his calculated presentation of monomaniacal outlooks – in the title, themes and language of his remarkable poetic sequence *One-Way Song*, for instance. There remains a profound irony, though, in the durability of this reduced, static version of Lewis, and it is an irony exposed by a close study of his writings in the ‘War Number’. This is evident not only in the sections which are explicitly socio-political in their concerns, but also in those which are primarily directed towards an evaluation of artistic trends and conditions. So, in ‘A Review of Contemporary Art’, the long essay that sits at the heart of *BLAST 2*, Lewis shows characteristic disapproval of what he sees as the fluid motion of Kandinsky’s purely abstract method – ‘He allows the rigid chambers of his Brain to become a mystic house haunted by an automatic and puerile Spook, that leaves a delicate trail like a snail’ – at the same time as criticising Cubism for its ‘deadness’, describing it as ‘a series of very solid, heavy and usually gloomy Natures Mortes’.

These two analyses – let alone these two analyses together, in the same review – could hardly have been written by a critic with a fixed and dogmatic sensibility. They seem to me to indicate a restless and elusive agenda, consistent with the gnomic

exhortations which follow ‘You must talk with two tongues’ in the Vorticist notes towards the end of the ‘War Number’:

You must talk with two tongues, if you do not wish to cause confusion.

You must also learn, like a Circassian horseman, to change tongues in mid-career without falling to Earth.

You must give the impression of two persuaders, standing each on a different hip – left hip, right hip – with four eyes vacillating concentrically at different angles upon the object chosen for subjugation.

There is nothing so impressive as the number TWO.

You must be a duet in everything.

For, the Individual, the single object, and the isolated, is, you will admit, an absurdity.

Why try and give the impression of a consistent and indivisible personality?

Alan Munton has argued that Lewis is an essentially dialogical thinker, working in dyadic structures and making use of a supple, destabilising irony that is very easily missed. The effect of these aphoristic notes, entitled (on the page but not in the contents) ‘Wyndham Lewis Vortex No. 1. Art Vortex. Be Thyself’, is to position their author as an artist of unsettled, wayward and sceptical engagement. They are of a piece with some of the axioms included in ‘The Code of a Herdsman’ two years

later, specifically ‘*Never* fall into the vulgarity of being or assuming yourself to be one ego’ and ‘Contradict yourself. In order to live, you must remain broken up’. In effect, they are the key to a document that is itself the key to an entire body of work.

These aphorisms target the traditional unity of the subject and I have referred to them before, both in relation to the vocal slippages between Ned and Launcelot in *Count Your Dead: They Are Alive!* (a badly failed experiment, but a fascinating one) and in discussion of the narrative voice in *One-Way Song* (less of a failure, and still fascinating). They predict, in a playfully prophetic manner, the conception of the carnivalesque formulated by Julia Kristeva in her essay ‘Word, Dialogue, Novel’. Here she speculates on the interplay of two distinct genres within the carnival mode, Socratic dialogue and Menippean discourse. Taken together, in complex correlation, these can not only be discerned within Lewis’s prose but also amount to an uncannily precise description of his distinguishing features. Dialogism, Kristeva writes, is ‘a destruction of the person’ that enacts ‘the text as social activity’, generating ‘diatribe, soliloquy and other minor genres of controversy’. The Menippean, on the other hand, linked to works such as Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, encourages ‘cynical frankness’, the ‘scandalous and eccentric’, a ‘desecration of the sacred’. It is a mode typified by its ‘fascination with the “double”’, ‘politically and socially disturbing’ but with a kind of undiplomatic immunity: ‘The word has no fear of incriminating itself. It becomes free from supposed “values”...’ Welcome, we might say, to the world of Wyndham Lewis.

Kristeva’s presentation of the destabilised subject resembles Lewis’s account of personality in ‘Inferior Religions’, written as a preface for *The Complete Wild Body* in the months following the publication of *BLAST 2* and shortly before he joined the Royal Garrison Artillery. Here is Lewis:

The chemistry of personality (subterranean in a sort of cemetery, whose decompositions are our lives) puffs up in frigid balls, soapy Snowmen, arctic carnival-masks, which we can photograph and fix.

And here is Kristeva:

the subject is reduced to nothingness, while the structure of *the author* emerges as anonymity that creates and sees itself created as self and other, as man and mask.

The similarities are richly suggestive, and it is intriguing to note that when Meyers discusses Lewis's use of 'masks' he does so with specific reference to the Vortex notes from the 'War Number' and 'The Code of a Herdsman'. The menace of the biographical digression is especially pronounced for the student of Lewis, as Meyers demonstrates with his habitual predilection for the sensational, here portraying the artist as a kind of pseudo-Byronic pantomime villain, complete with hat and cape and an urge to be scary. Lewis is subtler than his biographer, though, and he realises – in a foreshadowing of Marshall McLuhan's theories of media – that a mask is simultaneously an extension and a covering of the self. It offers concealment, as Meyers *does* recognise, at the same time as it ensures conspicuousness. It is, in other words, the ideal form and symbol of the 'harmonious and sane duality' that Lewis appeals to in *BLAST 2*, the 'amorphus [sic] imitation of yourself inside yourself'.

Edwards writes about Lewis using the ‘War Number’ and other works of the period (*Tarr*, in particular) to resolve, or at least begin a resolution, of complex tensions and contradictions in his thinking. This is discovered in a dialectical interrogation of what he regards as the major cultural mythologies: the individual and the masses, the man of action and the man of thought, art and life, war and peace, self and world. Vital among these is the insistent argument between nationalism and internationalism. It is an argument that would preoccupy Lewis throughout his life, one in which he has frequently been cast as a nationalist (not least by himself) but in which his most consistent instincts seem to have been internationalist. The early short fictions and the first issue of *BLAST* show the argument taking shape in vigorous and often witty ways, but it is in the second *BLAST* that it is finally subjected to serious and sustained scrutiny. There are no easy answers, as Lewis makes clear, adopting a position of unsettled tenacity that those who take a reductive view of his work have either disregarded or misconstrued:

No clear cut lines, except on condition of being dual and prolonged.

You must catch the clearness and logic in the midst of contradictions: not settle down and snooze on an acquired, easily possessed and mastered, satisfying shape.

It is hard to recognise in this the figure disdained by Carey as a fixed, narrow dogmatist with ‘a relatively small collection of ideas’.

Elsewhere in the journal, Lewis proposes that ‘The best artist is an imperfect artist’, and the statement is pointedly metacritical. Written to the moment and showing signs of haste, the ‘War Number’ is a distinctly imperfect object. It responds to the real and immediate pressures of historical calamity, losing the performative exhilaration and sheer rowdiness of the original *BLAST* but gaining a diagnostic curiosity that is tonally flatter and visually less spectacular but ultimately more revealing. Although it is often depicted as a rather bland document, with Richard Cork stating that Lewis ‘struggled hard to inject some of the old venom’ into its pages, it nevertheless stands as a remarkable example of dissenting journalism. The character of Blenner in the experimental and unfinished fiction ‘The Crowd Master’ which concludes the magazine is emblematic in this respect, resembling Lewis in his impulse to provoke: ‘Blenner was a very moral character. His soul easily fell into a condition of hard, selfish protest.’ This retired 1st Lieutenant in the Indian Army – a projection, in part, of his creator’s edgy anticipation of military service – is an Enemy in embryo, personifying Lewis’s instincts as a cultural upsetter: ‘The joy of protest was deeply ingrained in him, and he instinctively sought opportunities of feeding it.’

If the protest of the ‘War Number’ is more measured and (not quite the right word) responsible, it is also, in some ways, more affecting. The prickly unease and air of vital uncertainty that permeates Lewis’s apparently confident essays is signalled in the riddling constructions of ‘Art Vortex. Be Thyself’. It is also perceptible in the spectral presence of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a disquieting shadow drifting between the lines. Peppis glorifies Gaudier-Brzeska as a sacrificial soldier-artist, but he seems to me to signify something more haunting and disturbing – more tragically *human* – than that. His contribution, sent from the trenches, is the only written piece in the volume to be wholly concerned, like most of those by Lewis, with the circumstances

of the war. (These are alluded to elsewhere, in poems by Ford Madox Hueffer, Helen Saunders, and Jessica Dismorr, but only Lewis and Gaudier-Brzeska dedicate whole texts to them.) ‘Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska’ is followed, famously, by an announcement of the artist’s death in action: ‘MORT POUR LA PATRIE.’ And yet, throughout most of *BLAST 2*, both before and after the obituary notice, Gaudier-Brzeska is intensely alive. Lewis writes of him in the present and future tenses in a number of pieces, and he is, presumably, one of the unnamed ‘accomplices’ referred to in ‘Artists and the War’ who is going to help him to erect statues of Picasso and Van Gogh in London squares once the guns fall silent. Obviously, Gaudier-Brzeska’s undead or revenant status in the ‘War Number’ is an accident of editorial chronologies, processes and demands, but it is also a startlingly authentic embodiment of the unsettled energies of Lewis’s work. The paragraph dedicated to him in the review of ‘The London Group’ carries a particularly ferocious charge, beginning with a casual reference to him being ‘busy elsewhere’ and ending with a line of terrible pathos: ‘Here is one, a great artist, who makes drawings of those shells as they come towards him, and which, thank God, have not killed him or changed him yet.’

David Trotter has written of Lewis’s ‘less than human nature’, a statement that epitomises a widespread and, frankly, shocking prejudice. As always, Lewis has done a good deal of his detractors’ work for them, and here – in ‘Life Has No Taste’ – plays up to his own emergent myth by declaring that ‘You should be human about EVERYTHING: inhuman about only a few things.’ It seems to me, though, that the *BLAST* ‘War Number’ is a deeply human and humane artifact, and one that gestures towards the more general humanity of Lewis’s art and writing. Not without its formal flaws and its moments of moral unease and awkwardness, it offers a distillation of methods, habits and obsessions that would recur throughout Lewis’s career. The anti-

democratic animus that is beginning to form in the magazine - 'To become anxious is to become democratic' – is troubling but unsurprising, and rarely clear-cut:

A democratic state of mind is cowardice or muddle-headedness. This is not to say that in certain periods “the people” are not far preferable, individually, to their masters.

I believe, in fact, that the 'War Number' is primarily – and astonishingly, given the brutal circumstances of Europe at the time – a utopian document, one that looks at the war but also looks *beyond* it, placing its emphasis on vitality and possibility. Its tone can be sardonic, satirical, even cynical, and yet its insistence on proportion – 'This is obviously not the most significant war in history because it is the largest' – and its willingness to think on a grand scale of a future beyond bloodshed is strangely optimistic. The brief discussion of Shakespeare – 'Only in a universal theatre could [he] be adequately staged. No country can be possessive about a man like that...' – is of a piece, in this respect, with the speculations towards internationalism in 'The Art of the Great Race'. In years to come Lewis's engagement with issues of race and nation would lead him into self-destructive errors of judgement but here his thinking is tending towards conclusions he would eventually reach beyond the mess of *Hitler*, in the final decades of his life.

Lewis is idealistic about radical modern art, of course, which he sees as being in a position to survive the war unscathed, but more than this: he seems, even in the 'impressive and appalling' bloodshed of imperial conflict, to be proposing, or at least imagining, an ideal future for humanity. The word 'life', often capitalised, recurs

throughout his essays, forming (literally) a vital counterbalance to the inevitable presence of death:

The art of to-day is a result of the life of to-day, of the appearance and vivacity of that life. Life after the War will be the same brilliant life as it was before the War – it's [sic] appearance certainly not modified backwards.

And, again, when writing about Wadsworth's *Blackpool*:

To synthesize this quality of LIFE with the significance or spiritual weight that is the mark of all the greatest art, should be, from one angle, the work of the Vorticists.

Vorticism is on the side of life: on that, at least, Lewis is emphatic, however complex and uneasy the alliance might be (as dramatised in *Tarr*). And there are passages in *BLAST 2* which not only convey this with force and feeling, but also demonstrate a sensitivity to human suffering that surely could never have been written by the cold, hard, right-wing, chauvinist brute that is still the dominant image of this unique artist:

There is a tragedy of decay and death at the end of all human lives. It is all a matter of adjustment of tragedy: a matter almost of Taste – where to place the Tragedy, like where to place a blackness in a picture. But this is perhaps rather consolation that anything else. And it would be no consolation for the people this War will have crushed with grief.