Introduction: avant-garde and avant-guerre

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On the evening of 4 August 1914 London's Café Royal was alive with its usual array of demimondes, dandies, aristocrats, émigrés, and self-styled bohemians. Noticeable on this occasion, however, was a palpable air of anticipation as the habitués awaited the news from Whitehall which they knew would so directly affect their lives and work. When the declaration of war was eventually made shortly after 11 p.m., Augustus John leaned forward and said to the youthful Bomberg, 'David, this news of the outbreak of war is going to be very bad for art.'[1] In the weeks and months that followed, and as summer turned to autumn, critic Frank Rutter confirmed that John's gloomy outlook had been well founded, observing that 'no class of professional workers is suffering or will suffer more acutely through the war than the artists.'[2] If London's modernisms and modernists had thrived on an accepted level of controversy and violence up to this point in their histories, as surely they had, it was becoming clear that the nature and scale of destruction on its way from mainland Europe might now be overwhelming, even fatal. Conflict had been the lifeblood of a generation who had demanded a cultural revolution in pre-war London, but had received in its place a global conflict.[3] The pre-war polemics had, in retrospect, merely been a complicit jousting, characterised by 'Rivalries and pacts [which] were intricate, intense and casual all at once, patterned by an unstable mixture of principle, personality, comradeship, spite and insult. Such was the tenor of these restless and inventive times on the eve of war.'[4]

Now the 'big bloodless brawl, prior to the Great Bloodletting', to use Wyndham Lewis' words, was over.[5]

In fact, the declaration of war stripped away a deceptively coherent and tranquil veneer to expose deeply entrenched radical opinions and other smaller wars, already raging in London.[6] Society, of which the youthful *esprit nouveau* was merely a component, was already riddled by conflict to the point that Sir Charles Petrie felt Britain to be on the verge of civil war by August 1914 – pulled back from the brink only by the homogenising effect

of the arrival of a European 'other'.[7] The depth and width of the domestic schism, epitomised by suffragettes, Carsonites and trade union strikers, was fully understood when Lloyd George, then Chancellor of the Exchequer, observed in July 1914 that the problems of the nation were 'the gravest with which any Government in this country has had to deal for centuries'.[8] Culturally, Sir Claude Phillips had been warning from as far back as January 1914 that a debilitating, ultra-modern and foreign virus '*is here*, no longer a thing of the future, but with us, upon us. It cannot be ignored [and is] absolutely and entirely of foreign growth.'[9] The Englishness of high art and literature (acting as a barometer for society itself), he felt, was being threatened through a continual cycle of contagion, both from within and without, and had to be arrested before the 'Nietzsche virus'[10] did permanent and irreparable damage. The rot, thankfully, was really only evident in London and so, with a tightening of ranks, could be isolated, then cauterised. For many there had clearly been a crisis long before the declaration of war, while for others, war on Germany was a long overdue assault on the lamentable 'condition of England' too.

In reality 1914 had been a remarkable year, boasting a cultural dynamism which had raged at levels of intensity perhaps never before felt. Peters Corbett observed, 'Radical art became a fashionable enthusiasm, artists were fêted and lionised, and their work seemed to attract an interest which implied a secure future within the options open to English artists.'[11] Principal among these were: Futurist exhibitions and concerts, the activities of the Francophile Bloomsbury Group, the Omega Workshops, the Camden Town Group, the Whitechapel Boys, the Vorticists and the unfettered exhibitions of the Allied Artists Association and the London Group. In the eight months from the beginning of 1914 until that fateful August evening, ground-breaking shows of individuals and coteries had been seen too, at: the Grafton Gallery (Gaudier-Brzeska, Doucet, Grant, Fry, Bell, Roberts *et al.*), the Friday Club (Bomberg), the Doré Gallery (Ferguson and the Italian Futurists), the Goupil Gallery (the London Group), the Carfax Galleries (Sickert and Bevan), the Whitechapel Gallery (*The Twentieth Century: A Review of Modern Movements*), and the Chenil Gallery (Bomberg). Ironically, one of the most eye-catching shows of 1914 was at the Twenty One Gallery, where *Modern German Art* caught the imaginations of many, before jingoism and xenophobia gripped the capital.

Art criticism and theory had evolved accordingly, notably with Clive Bell's influential *Art*, published within weeks of the start of the year, and Michael Sadler's translation of Kandinsky's *The Age of Spiritual Harmony*. Elsewhere, Ezra Pound had published *Des Imagists* and T. E. Hulme

had publicly championed Gaudier-Brzeska, Nevinson, Wadsworth and Bomberg in 'The New Art and Its Philosophy'. Small specialised journals, running at no profit, had forged forward convincingly too, serialising Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (the *Egoist*) and presenting Charles Ginner's proclamations about Neo-Realism in the *New Age*, where Sickert and Lewis were already sparring.[12] Independently, Marinetti and Nevinson had published 'Vital English Art: A Futurist Manifesto for England' in the *Observer*, while *Blast* had made it into circulation in the dying weeks of peace in late June.[13]

But to think that all of this cultural experiment was a highbrow affair, of little interest or consequence to the wider public, would be to make a fateful mistake in understanding art and its reception in 1914. Quite the contrary, the ongoing debates were there for all to read in the eloquent, concise, and often heated, writings of Arthur Clutton Brock (*Times*), Frank Rutter (*Sunday Times*), Charles Lewis Hind (*Daily Chronicle*), Charles Marriott (*Evening Standard*), P. G. Konody (*Observer*), Sir Claude Phillips (*Daily Telegraph*), and elsewhere, C. J. Holmes, Laurence Binyon, Howard Hannay, Michael Sadler and John Middleton Murray.[14] Wyndham Lewis recalled this centrality in his autobiography: 'the Press in 1914 had no cinema, no Radio and no Politics: so the painter could really become a "star" … Pictures, I mean oil paintings, were "news".'[15] It was clear that art mattered!

London itself was seen as a nexus of communication in a world network of cultural relations, and so the June 1914 *Blast* proclaimed 'WE WHISPER IN YOUR EAR A GREAT SECRET. LONDON IS NOT A PROVINCIAL TOWN.'[16] Instead, Cianci insisted:

> It was in the big city that the modernists could find commissions, publish their books, launch their campaigns, circulate their manifestos, rally their sympathisers, start their movements, found their groups and their associations. To be in a big city, to live in a capital, was essential. It was the place of growth, of fundamental transformations, explorations and innovations. Its open, dynamic space stimulated productive investigation and experiment.[17]

And so London's avant-garde was not the output of reclusive artists and writers working anonymously in damp garrets and draughty lofts in a somnolent capital. Quite the contrary, the city had taken to these eccentric and non-conformist individuals and had built up a micro-society, centred around a lengthy list of well-known venues. Though the Cabaret Theatre Club went into liquidation in 1914, there were still many other places for the bright young things of the pre-war generation to create their own collective social (dis)order, including: the Vienna Café, Dieudonné's, Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel,

the Café Royal, the Cave of the Golden Calf and the Rebel Art Centre.[18] These were crucially important 'lived spaces' in modern London; the junction at which vernacular cultures intersected and interacted with higher modernisms. It was here that commonplace social and cultural activities shared the floor with the fiery performances, provocative ideologies and self-assured manifestoes of a fragmented and competitive intellectual elite. In many cases the venues themselves became, in Cork's words, 'audacious manifestations of the new art' itself – palaces of the arts.[19] Dance too, as Lisa Tickner observed, flourished, evolved and traversed traditional boundaries in these places every bit as radically as Isadora Duncan and Diaghilev's entrancing Ballets Russes did on the larger stages of the West End.[20] Far from marginal, it was the catholic assortment of individuals at the ABC Chancery Lane, South Lodge, Dieppe, Belotti's, the Roche and Brice's (all on Old Comption Street), Pagani's (Great Portland Street), the Florence (Rupert Street) and the Crabtree Club, that gave London its *Zeitgeist* in a halcyon era of energy and innocence, at the heart of a vortex that fused intellectual pursuit and curiosity.[21] London, in Ford Madox Ford's estimation, was 'illimitable',[22] and the café society central to it as 'places to parade, be seen and hold court, to plot and plan, to write and edit in, and [places] to paint'.[23]

Osbert Sitwell knew what the sum of all this had meant and reminisced about the dying days of peace in London 'A ferment such as I have never since felt in this country prevailed over the world of art. It seemed as if at last we were on the verge of a great movement'.[24] But the great movement did not have time to blossom fully before the assassination in Sarajevo. And yet, even before the fateful shots rang out, other observers had experienced, but not really understood, a feeling that veered close to premonition: 'The season of 1914 was a positive frenzy of gaiety. Long before there was any shadow of war, I remember feeling it couldn't go on, that something *had* to happen …'[25] In retrospect David Lowe recorded dolefully 'our world seemed most beautiful just before it disappeared.[26]

With the loss of peace-time London it soon became clear that writers, painters, composers and sculptors could not just pack up and go somewhere else to carry on with their work uninterrupted. Instead they had to readjust to war-time London which, they were about to discover, was a very different place. Would an emotional public continue to embrace foreign modernists and modernisms: Irish poets, American writers, Italian Futurists, French sculptors and Russian ballet dancers? Would a hastily constructed national identity (or at least Allied identity) have to be created, to replace the now unacceptable internationalism – especially that emanating from Munich and Vienna? The dissonances of Schönberg were rapidly becoming

synonymous with the *Kultur* which burned the library at Louvain, shelled the cathedral of Notre Dame, Reims, and committed the atrocities that would eventually be published for all to read in the Bryce Report.

The events of August 1914 also placed artists and writers working in London in a uniquely difficult position. While the youth of other nations were drafted and mobilised without delay or consultation, the British army was not a conscript one, leaving male artists and writers in the position of having to volunteer for something they could scarcely comprehend. Now they stood at the crossroads, knowing that a firm decision was required of them, and soon: should they embrace the war, object to it or ignore it? And in their absence overseas other observers anticipated an historic opportunity for the impressive list of women already working in a number of capacities within the greater modernist experiment, and who up until this point had been eclipsed somewhat by their male counterparts.[27] Either that or, as C. S. H. wrote in 'After the War' on 29 October 1914 in the *New Age*, the purge would sweep away radical and violent women who protested for votes by day and danced to native beats at night, to create a 'masculine new age, with no feminist politics, more masculine literature, and a reversion to traditional art'.[28] Margaret Collins Weitz picked up on this in her 1987 study of gender and war, saying 'During total war, the discourse of militarism, with its stress on "masculine" qualities, permeates the whole fabric of society'.[29] A collision seemed inevitable then, not only between the sexes, but also within a war-society now renegotiating its attitudes to the homosexual, the homo-social and the homophobic.

In any case, artists and writers (whether male or female) had to navigate a route to survival through artistically, politically and militarily uncharted terrain. In front of unmarked canvases, standing in familiar studios, in a now eerily unfamiliar capital, how would they balance their work between the mimetic and the iconic; the mythical and the realistic; the innovative and the traditional? How would they differentiate between patriotism and jingoism; internationalism and xenophobia? And how would they deal with the conflicting demands of the nationally advocated anti-militarist myth, the modernity of the conflict, and the status and legibility of high, yet modern, art? Clearly such dilemmas no longer gravitated merely around a pedantic discrepancy concerning aesthetics; rather, they pointed to a society in the throes of vast and irreversible change the likes of which had never been seen before. The value of art and artists within this new society was also being reconsidered. Some kind of reinvention or reconciliation was clearly necessary for notoriously liberal artists, writers and critics to merge the conflicting demands of a nationally intact, and internationally significant, cultural expression.

The May 1914 *News Weekly* caricature of an unkempt Wyndham Lewis, complete with cigarette and wine glass, encapsulated the swansong of a now-doomed bohemia.[30] In the words of David Peters Corbett,

> The imaginary artist – potent, caped or business-suited, secure in the status that opposition conferred – could strut upon the stage of the London art world and receive in return for his entertainment value the image, the complicit impression of the reception he desired. That moment was not to last long.[31]

If they didn't adapt and do their bit – if they continued with the pre-war pantomime – they could expect no sympathy from a nation that had no time or patience left for them. A. R. Orage, in the *Fortnightly Review*, held back nothing, lambasting them as perfidious and even a national threat. Weren't they simply 'idlers, hiding from one reality in the pretence of another … Once more I express the hope that they may all perish in the war.'[32] A few months later W. S. Sparrow undoubtedly spoke for many when he observed that at such a crossroads as this, modern artists had been exposed as impotent, irrelevant and culturally adrift.

> To embrace a noble war when it belongs to the strife of rival ideals is to help reawaken the national genius for true greatness; but too many modernists in their heart of hearts are weak and sentimental, which explains why most of our poets and writers encounter this war in a temper of wistful resistance completely at variance with martial courage and fortitude and honour.[33]

Commentators posited modern painters and writers between three basic notions. At one extreme they were seen to represent everything that had been corrupt, disengaged, decadent and foreign (which had led to the war in the first place); more neutrally they were dismissed as a meaningless and valueless frivolity – the product of peace-time London which could now be set aside (or exterminated) as the nation got down to the serious business at hand; and at the other extreme, they were representatives of the very sophisticated and profound culture and civilisation that Kitchener's Million was being asked to defend. In the latter view, these rebels in art and literature were the 'valiant knights of the new movement' who had waged war on 'the great heart of British Philistinism'[34] and would now turn on the Central Powers. The 'artist turned warrior' could yet defend both his country and his culture, protecting it from the 'lowest and most inhuman conception of civilisation'[35] in a war where the enemy of England was the enemy of Art, and vice versa. Ruskin's grim warning seemed even more pertinent than it had been at the time of writing: 'Gentlemen, I tell you solemnly, that the day is coming when the soldiers of England must be her tutors; and the captains of the army, captains also of her mind.'[36] He had

continued, 'There is no great art possible to a nation but that which is based on battle,' then went on to extol the values of formative conflict 'To such a war as this all men are born; in such a war as this any man may happily die; and forth from such a war as this have arisen, throughout the extent of past ages, all the highest sanctities and virtues of humanity.'[37]

As such, optimism could be found concerning the role, and future, of modern art in the safe hands of artists who had resisted the pressures of their own society (and triumphed), and who would now act as guardians against, in equal measure, both foreigners and xenophobes. The *flâneur*-turned-guardian had a real value, equivalent to that of the soldier in the theoretical and philosophical cacophony which surrounded the outbreak of the war. Were not these artists alone ideally prepared to use the vocabulary of modernism to analyse, assess, interpret and depict the first industrial conflict? Was there any reason why the avant-garde should, in time of war, become the rear-guard? Clutton-Brock was sure that 'the greatest war of all time should call out the poets',[38] and Selwyn Image, Slade Professor of Art at Oxford University lecturing at the Ashmolean Museum in August 1914, even faced the future with optimism, claiming, 'War and Art are not always enemies, and Peace is not always Art's best friend.' The warrior hero would now be fighting for his lady (art) in a battle, not of flesh and blood, but of ideals that formed the backbone of civilisation.[39]

A wider debate then emerged which speculated that the war might actually have an unexpected, and long-term, positive impact, by purging England of the 'spectres of national decay'[40] which had dogged it for the past decade at least. And even if the war itself was not the agent for change it might act as the smokescreen behind which a cultural cleansing of this nature could take place. Edmund Gosse's 'sovereign disinfectant' and 'the union of hearts' brought about by the war would surely purge society of its pre-war degeneracy and reinstate the cultural and moral integrity and intactness which peace had threatened.[41] Jewish poet Isaac Rosenberg wrote in similar mode that the 'ancient crimson curse' would 'Give back the universe / Its pristine bloom'.[42] Maurice Barrès loathed such utopian daydreaming, declaring in September 1914, 'Let the most beautiful of stones be destroyed rather than the blood of my race.'[43]

C. R. W. Nevinson was more keenly focused on art and declared confidently that the war was actually going to save modernism from the terminal cul-de-sac peace had led it into, by giving it both a subject and a relevancy that had previously been conspicuous by its absence. Albert Rutherston wrote to Dora Carrington, 'I'm firmly convinced that in the end [the war] will be a good thing – events could not have gone marching on

as they were doing without disaster sooner or later.' Though the dose was undoubtedly generous, the war might yet cure art of 'the unreal & the trivial'.[44] Peter Fuller reiterated this in 1978, saying 'some painters regained what they were most quickly losing, an identifiable social function and a direct involvement with the material world, and with history.'[45] Perhaps the apparent voyeuristic gaze and high diction of modernism could now be replaced with social responsibility and erudite cultural responses, in return ennobled by the pen and the brush. If there was to be a new art forged on the anvil of the Western Front, it would indeed be, in Yeats's words, 'A Terrible Beauty'.

Within four days of the outbreak the *Evening News* declared that the first victory of the war had just been won as 'Futurism, it seems from certain events of the last month in London, is already of the past.'[46] Collins Baker, Keeper of the National Gallery and critic for the *Saturday Review*, then noted with relief that 'that vague and chaotic groping' that had characterised the pre-war years was being replaced with something altogether more serious.[47] It was an inconvenient fact that so much of this pre-war modern culture had in fact arrived from the allied nations, despite critics trying to pass off *Kubism* as some sort of Prussian invention. By December 1914, and now using Sickert (ironically, born in Munich) as an example, he noted the distinct elevation of art from the dingy Camden Town Murder scenes, to the heroic *The Soldiers of King Albert the Ready*. Was this an early sign that the antidote was working and that modern artists, no longer zealots, could remain original and potent? Was a renewal and redemption through violence re-establishing a long-missed cultural integrity in place of an infectious 'Junkerism'?[48] Perhaps this is why H. G. Wells could write in the *Daily News*, 'I find myself enthusiastic about this war against Prussian militarism. We are, I believe, assisting at the end of a vast, intolerable oppression upon civilisation.'[49] Modris Eksteins summed up: 'British involvement in the 1914 war was to turn it from a continental power struggle into a veritable war of cultures.'[50]

But the idea that the war would plough all of this malaise under was only one very extreme conservative opinion, belonging to old men, who would surely forfeit the right to be morally righteous in a war that they would never see first-hand. Instead, it would be fought by the youth, and therefore should be depicted and described by the literate generation of 1914 too. Additionally, both left and right shared the belief that art had to come down off its socially and intellectually elitist pedestal, abandoning its pre-war aloof and class-conscious posturing. The war, and art associated with it, would have to be tied to increasingly germane issues of gender, class, nationalism,

religion, labour and, more directly, the coal-face and the shipyard – something that all but a few strands of modern and conservative art had drifted some way from. If Futurism and Vorticism had provided a template for a cognitive mapping of the experience of urban modernity in the pre-war years, could they not now adopt a similar role on a grander scale on the battlefields? Would the sophisticated interrogation and critique of society convert from peace to war? Or had it been merely a self-referential and inconclusive brush with a world that it could not in fact deal with on anything other than a superficial level? C. R. W. Nevinson had no such doubts and told an eager public 'This war will have a violent incentive to Futurism, for we believe that there is no beauty except in strife, no masterpiece without aggressiveness ….'.[51] This strongly echoed the initial Futurist dictum that 'Art can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice'.[52] The artists of noise and speed (and concomitantly no stranger to a scrap) had certainly served their apprenticeships for the industrial war that was now booming only 50 or 60 miles away. As such Nevinson could look back in 1919 and state:

> The war did not take the modern artist by surprise. I think it can be said that modern artists have been at war since 1912 … They were in love with the glory of violence. Some say that artists have lagged behind the war, I should say not! They were miles ahead of it[53]

Wyndham Lewis tightened the aperture and conceded that, despite his difficulties adapting, he too had served his apprenticeship in

> the months immediately preceding the declaration of war [which] were full of sound and fury, [when] all the artists and men of letters had gone into action before the bank-clerks were clapped into khaki and despatched to the land of Flanders Poppies to do their bit.[54]

Nonetheless, everything that had gone before now paled into insignificance, being merely, 'play-boy operations upon the art-front in the preliminary sham war'[55] before the Great War 'plunged [us] like a school of pet gold fish, out of our immaculate "pre-war" tank, into the raging ocean'.[56]

Within a month of the outbreak, Rupert Brooke, the Nash brothers, David Jones, Stanley Spencer, Ivor Gurney, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, T. E. Hulme and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska were all in uniform.[57] The traditional isolation and intellectual singleness of purpose previously afforded the artist and writer seemed to have been taken away forcibly and suddenly, leaving in its place disorientation and doubt that the pen and the brush had any ability to deal with such extreme subject matter. Certainly

there was not much point in looking to the noble tradition of battle painting (or *style historique*) as these fields were going to be far from glorious when machine-guns, tanks and long range shelling broke loose. This was a war of Krupps, poison gas and the rape of Belgium, and so the pageantry, the heroism and the dashing disappeared. Even *The Times*, in an article entitled 'The Passing of the Battle Painter', declared that 'The trench is the enemy of military art …'[58] In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell focused on the inability of language to convey the sensation of the 'trench experience'[59] – the expressive capacity of Victorian high diction being no longer sufficient as a means of literary communication. The same could almost certainly be said for art.

Samuel Hynes observed, 'It is the nature of war to diminish every value except war itself and the values war requires: patriotism, discipline, obedience, endurance.'[60] As such, it was widely understood that painting and writing could, if harnessed, be immediately instrumental within, and beneficial to, the war effort. But this was anathema for those who had, only a matter of weeks earlier, railed against the same establishment and institutions they were now being asked to defend. Moreover, this created an intolerable environment for the production of intellectually challenging, socially engaged yet subjectively pertinent, cultural statements. Individualism and collectivism had collided, and so in September 1914 Richard Aldington analysed the debilitating pressure of a new 'mass mentality' on poets: 'This kind of social feeling does not produce art … The impulse is too vague, too general; the impulse of art is always clear and particular.' Ezra Pound agreed, and suggested that selective groups of individuals (should such a thing exist) close ranks, defending 'The Vorticist movement [as] a movement of individuals, for individuals, for the protection of individuality'.[61] Artists and writers not wishing to be associated with any coterie or government scheme, however secure it may have seemed in career terms, remained at a loss.[62] It was the kind of situation, as Sigmund Freud had previously observed, where 'The individual who is not himself a combatant – and so a wheel in the gigantic machinery of war – feels conscious of disorientation, and of an inhibition in his powers and activities.'[63]

D. H. Lawrence talked of living in 'one of those nightmares where you can't move', while E. M. Forster complained, 'I can do nothing.'[64] Others shunned the war for very straightforward reasons, Jacob Epstein dismissively declaring, 'Really I am too important to waste my days in thinking of matters military.'[65] Civilisation and culture could benefit nothing from such an aberration. H. G. Wells, after his initial enthusiasm (which later embarrassed him), admitted that wars do nothing but destroy and G. B. Shaw suggested,