

INTRODUCTION

Nations, empires, and the historical avant-garde

I came to the conclusion that, however good a “Pole,” a stray German, Lapp, Esquimau or other dim and hyperborean personage who had found his way to these parts might become, it took an authentic Slav to make a real “Pole.”

Wyndham Lewis, “The ‘Pole’” (1909), 218

Once this consciousness towards the new possibilities of expression in present life has come . . . it will be more the legitimate property of Englishmen than of any other people in Europe.

“Manifesto,” *BLAST* (1914): 41

Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde concerns the persistent and thorny problem of modernist politics. Not only did a number of (mostly male) modernist writers from Britain and America produce literary and polemical works in which readers have identified “reactionary” or “protofascist” tendencies (aggression, elitism, racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, homophobia);¹ not only were some attracted to, or even collaborators with, mid-century Europe’s various radical right-wing political movements; but evidence of such attitudes in the works and lives of these writers – T. S. Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Ezra Pound in particular – has spawned one of the longest-lived and most contentious arguments in the history of the study of modernism in Britain and America. For over sixty years it has raged, at least since the publication of Lewis’s somewhat enthralled study of Hitler and “Hitlerism” in 1931.² The intensity has ebbed and flowed, heating up in the face of Pound’s wartime radio broadcasts from Italy and his subsequent receipt of the Bollingen Prize for the *Pisan Cantos* in 1949, dying down with the academic ascension of Eliot, New Criticism, and the autotelic aesthetic object in the fifties and sixties. Through the seventies, eighties, and nineties, it has flared again, fueled by demographic changes in the academy and the rise of critical and theoretical methodologies respon-

sive to questions of context, psychology, and power. Throughout partisans and opponents have wrangled over what should be done about these politics; how their presence should affect our judgments of these writers and their works; what they should tell us more generally about modernism as a cultural and political movement.³

These problems invite interest in part because they remain unsettled, still nagging, regularly provoking new passion and anger. But some rather puzzling rhetorical tendencies recurring in the debate command particular attention. On one side, arguments motivated to expose and condemn modernist elitism, racism, and totalitarianism sometimes become totalizing and reductive, showing excessive indignation and contempt. On the other, arguments motivated to justify and praise modernist artistic innovations sometimes become aestheticizing, showing excessive disregard for questions of context and politics, while those aiming to explain the modernists' later politics sometimes become defensive and apologetic, tending toward special pleading and denial. This study begins with the assumption that the perseverance and the peculiarity of these debates has as much to do with us, our politics, and the way we construe the politics of modernism, as it has to do with what "reactionary" modernists originally thought and wrote.⁴

To avoid as far as possible the snares of condemnation and apology, this study takes as its field of inquiry a body of modernist politics that does not clearly fit the reigning terms of discussion. Its topic is not modernist anti-Semitism or fascist modernism. Nor is its tack to focus on those works in which reactionary politics and anti-Semitic animus are most often identified (Lewis's political tracts of the thirties, Pound's radio broadcasts or middle *Cantos*, Eliot's passing references to Jews or oblique comments on *L'Action française*, the French royalist movement led by Charles Maurras). I'm interested in the politics of modernism *before* any of these works were produced, before the Great War, when these writers were actively participating in that unprecedented international movement of artistic, social, and political experiment now known as the "historical avant-garde" and often celebrated for its more progressive art and political intentions.⁵ I concur with an increasing number of analysts that credible accounting of modernist politics after the Great War must begin with an examination of those the avant-gardists supported before it.⁶

Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde attempts to resist the temptation of anachronistically reading modernist statements about politics and aesthetics before the Great War through the lens of those

Introduction

3

made after it and thereby finding (not very surprisingly) that the early politics and aesthetics were, in effect, always already fascist.⁷ By taking more seriously the avant-gardists' original claims about their political ambitions and the political significance of their works, and by contextualizing those claims in terms of the broad body of public discourse they originally engaged,⁸ this study finds a politics and an aesthetics more complex and conflicted than many influential "political" analyses recognize.⁹ I hope to show that these findings have significant implications for the way we understand the reputations of writers like Eliot, Lewis, and Pound, the politics of the avant-garde, modernist notions of race and gender, modernism's post-war politics, and the ways these authors and topics have been institutionalized in the academy.

The decade before the Great War witnessed an unprecedented surge of artistic activity across Europe. This phenomenon of the artistic avant-garde achieved a kind of cultural "critical mass" sometime between 1907, when Pablo Picasso painted *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and 1909, when the French journal *Le Figaro* published F. T. Marinetti's first Futurist manifesto. Inspired by a Spanish painter and an Italian poet working in Paris, the avant-garde was cosmopolitan from inception. A generation of young artists and writers, sympathetic to aesthetic and social revolution and stimulated by the Cubists' experimental painting style and the Futurists' promotional and performative strategies, rapidly initiated their own rebellious art movements in nearly every European metropolis. In the next three or four years, self-consciously "modern" art and literature spread through Europe as avant-garde groups sprang up in London, Milan, Moscow, Munich, and Vienna.¹⁰

Since the early twentieth century, discussions of this international avant-garde have often focused on radical artists' efforts to alter the established relations between "art" and "life," in which the former is understood as detached from the latter. The Futurist painters insist in their first "Technical Manifesto" (1910) that they will "at any price re-enter into life."¹¹ The young Swiss writer Blaise Cendrars asserts in a 1913 manifesto that "[l]iterature is a part of life."¹² In a 1914 polemic, Lewis, then a leading spokesman for advanced English art, explains that "[i]t is necessary, in the profoundest sense, that humanity should live, and place their living above everything else, for Art to arrive at its goal."¹³ Scholars like Peter Bürger, Terry Eagleton, Andreas Huyssen, and Marjorie Perloff have followed the avant-gardists' lead, emphasizing in various ways this desire to insert art into life and thereby transform both.¹⁴ Perloff joins Raymond Williams in pointing out that the

avant-garde's innovative literary form, the art manifesto, expresses that desire by appropriating a political genre and adapting it for revolutionary artistic purposes.¹⁵ Bürger maintains that while the avant-gardists "failed" to achieve this revolutionary insertion of art into life, thwarted by the bourgeois institutionalization of aesthetic autonomy, they did succeed in revolutionizing art: by putting "life" into their art through the techniques of collage, often cited as the avant-garde's central artistic innovation, they challenged the status of the "aesthetic" as a category above and beyond "the praxis of life."¹⁶ Bürger's account of failure notwithstanding, Perloff chooses to emphasize in the "formal ruptures" of the collage aesthetic the avant-gardists' most progressive political ambitions, "the larger desire . . . to break down existing economic and political structures and to transcend nationalist barriers."¹⁷

Perloff's conjunction of cultural internationalism and progressive reform of economic and political structures in her reading of avant-garde collage reveals an interpretive preference that helps explain a tendency common among previous interpretations of the historical avant-garde. While many accounts emphasize that the Europe in which the avant-gardists attempted their progressive transformations of art and life was the bourgeois, capitalist Europe of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they often overlook or downplay the fact that the international nation-state system ruled that Europe.¹⁸ Avant-gardist efforts to *épater la bourgeoisie* and undermine the bourgeois institution of art as well as the limits placed on those efforts by that institution have been usefully illuminated. But studies too often undervalue a fact that political historians insistently promote: the nation-state system and its attendant psychological category of nationality and collectivist sentiment of nationalism shaped late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century western history no less than class, democracy, socialism, even capitalism.¹⁹ The age of the avant-garde was also, historians remind us, a moment when the imperial nation-state had become the prevailing category of international order and psychological community. It has been aptly dubbed the Age of Nationalism, the Age of Empire.

Given this historical context, it is unsurprising that the rebellious young artists and writers who were seeking to transform "art" and "life" in the early century deployed the rhetoric of imperialism and exploited the sentiments of nationalism in their polemics and performances. Even the most cursory reading of Italian Futurist and English Vorticist manifestos, for instance, cannot but reveal the centrality of these topics to the avant-gardists' artistic and social ambitions. "We wish to glorify War –

Introduction

5

the only health giver of the world – militarism, patriotism,” proclaims the “Initial Futurist Manifesto” (1909), “[i]t is in Italy that we launch this manifesto of violence, destructive and incendiary . . . we would deliver Italy from its canker of professors, archaeologists, cicerones and antiquaries.”²⁰ The Futurist painters, their “Technical Manifesto” explains, joined the movement “to protect from certain death the genius of Italian Art.”²¹ The Vorticists countered the Futurists’ formidable international popularity in their quarterly *BLAST* (July 1914) with their own brand of avant-garde patriotism: “BLESS ENGLAND”; the “Modern World is due almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon genius,” thus the “consciousness towards the new possibilities of expression in present life” should “be more the legitimate property of Englishmen than of any other people in Europe.”²² These flamboyant proclamations confirm that the historical avant-garde, like western culture more generally during the period, was, as Edward Said puts it, “manifestly and unconcealedly a part” of the “imperial process.”²³

Coming to grips with such blunt nationalism, such bold-faced advocacy of empire in the writings of authors frequently cast as cosmopolitan, progressive, or revolutionary requires understanding the dynamics of cultural competition during the Age of Nationalism. Recovering those dynamics is one of this study’s major aims. Tom Nairn’s account of the role of “uneven development” in the history of modern nationalism provides a useful opening. During the nineteenth century, as Nairn explains, the spread of an acute consciousness of uneven development among nation-states compelled “under developed” states “to attempt radical, competitive short-cuts in order to avoid being trampled over or left behind” by the extreme economic and technological transformations being brought about by the world’s “developed” nations.²⁴ Driven by the competitive dynamics of this disproportionate system, “under developed” states used nationalism to help “propel themselves forward.” Nairn contends that this use of nationalism was typically motivated by a sense of uneven economic and industrial development.²⁵ My analysis complements Nairn’s by showing that many of the young artists and writers who constituted Europe’s avant-garde movements, especially those from Italy and England (for reasons this study will elucidate), shared an acute sensitivity to evidence of uneven development in the cultural sphere.²⁶ The avant-gardists responded to their perceptions of cultural inequality in much the same way that European governments responded to perceived economic, industrial, and military inequalities: they would bring nationalism to the aid of advanced art.²⁷

Benedict Anderson has established the crucial role that print capitalism played in the rise of modern nationalism, especially in producing the “imagined community” of the nation and in fostering sentiments of national loyalty.²⁸ He argues that the nineteenth century’s imperial monarchies used technologies of print capitalism to promote nationalism and thereby legitimate their imperial dynasties in the eyes of their domestic and colonial publics, in his words, “stretching the short, tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire.”²⁹ Anderson terms this state strategy “official nationalism.” I argue that avant-garde movements followed the lead of Europe’s governments, appropriating the techniques of print capitalism and exploiting popular nationalist sentiments to advance the cause of new literature and art.³⁰

During the Age of Empire, moreover, Europe’s self consciously oppositional art movements worked to support, even lead, the official nationalist strategy that their governments were pursuing: the promotion of national prestige, a prestige that advanced artists and writers conceived as being not only military, imperial, and economic in nature, but cultural as well. Despite their commitments to transform established art and political institutions, despite their cosmopolitan interest in participating in an international effort of aesthetic and social revolution, Europe’s avant-garde art groups were particularly motivated to elevate their own nation’s prestige. Ernest Gellner has emphasized the central role that modern educational institutions played in producing national consciousness and loyalty.³¹ Anderson and Said have studied the role of the novel in the process.³² I show that avant-garde arts and polemics also contributed. Opposed in principle to state-controlled institutions of education and conventional forms of literature and art, however, the avant-gardists offered their artistic products as an alternative mode for defining, transforming, and promoting national culture.

Given the avant-gardists’ historical context and the content of their polemics then, it is surprising that literary scholars have only recently begun paying serious attention to the significance for the history of the avant-garde of the nation-state system, the dynamics of cultural competition under that system, the institutions of empire, and the cult of the nation.³³ In the case of Vorticism, the group Lewis and Pound led, the defining roles of Vorticist aesthetics and interpersonal and artistic politics in the emergence of modern Anglo-American art and literature have been thoroughly examined. The effects of nationalist politics and international affairs on English avant-garde aesthetics and politics have not. So while studies correctly argue that the founding of Vorticism

Introduction

7

should be understood as a reaction against Futurist successes in England, they almost wholly neglect the fact that the reaction was comparably conditioned by period conceptions of Britain's (failing) international status and Italy's (expansionistic) imperial activities, and above all, by a commitment among both English and Italian avant-gardists to use modern writing and art to advance empire.³⁴ And while subsequent studies aim at ever more subtle understandings of the interactions between the Futurists and Vorticists, they view those relations almost exclusively through the lens of aesthetics, finding the basis of English modernist literary practice in Marinetti's *Parole in libertà* and *L'arte di far manifesti* or in the Vorticist theories and literary works of Lewis and Pound.³⁵ As this study shows, however, English avant-garde theory and aesthetic practice before the "high" modernist years *entre deux guerres* were structured at least as strongly by avant-gardist desires to achieve international success and defend national prestige.

Indeed, historians of twentieth-century Britain remind us that in prewar England, where Vorticism was born, political and cultural circumstances intensified both international ambition and national identification.³⁶ During the Edwardian and Georgian periods profound changes were occurring in the British empire's international status and in the way the English perceived it. In the political realm, English women and men were coming to recognize that their nation had moved from its nineteenth-century position as the world's supreme imperial and economic power to its early twentieth-century position as one among a number of competing powers. Looking toward the Continent, they confronted a German-backed annexation by Austria-Hungary of the Balkan provinces Bosnia and Herzegovina, a naval build-up and increasing population in Germany, and Italian and German moves to expand their imperial possessions;³⁷ while at home, they were witnessing the "strange death" of Liberal England, with all its indications of internal instability and decline: the Suffragette movement, trade union activism, parliamentary crises, working-class agitation, Irish rebellion, unemployment, rising poverty.³⁸

And, if in the political realm the English were confronted with increasing evidence of national decline, in the cultural realm they were encountering formidable evidence of defeat: a proliferation of new European artistic and philosophical movements, a marked increase in Paris's influence on Europe's cultural activities, a domestic artistic community seemingly unable to compete with its European counterparts, and a generation of young English artists, writers, and critics who

flocked to the Continent or embraced new European cultural movements rather than the literature, art, and philosophy of their own country. Combined with the prevailing intellectual view, codified by Matthew Arnold nearly half a century earlier, that the English “spirit” was essentially practical, provincial, even philistine, these indications of cultural imbalance magnified concerns over national decline and aspirations to international success, especially among ambitious writers, artists, and intellectuals. I read the works of England’s avant-gardists as very specific responses to these anxieties and ambitions and to the authority of the Arnoldian account of English culture. Accordingly, this study takes as its principal evidence avant-gardist expressions of nationalism, analyses of nationality, and assertions of imperial ambition. Its contextualization of that evidence in terms of general Edwardian and Georgian discourse on the topics, especially concerning the interests and activities of Britain and its primary competitors (Germany in the imperial realm, the “Latin” nations of France and Italy in the cultural) sheds important light on the evolution of modernism in Britain and its complex relations to the evolution of modern nationalism in Britain and Europe generally.

This study treats the political engagements of numerous players (well known and not) active in the English cultural sphere during the years leading up (and in) to the Great War. Some, like Huntly Carter, Ford Madox Ford, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, R. B. Cunninghame Graham, W. H. Hudson, James Joyce, J. M. Kennedy, Dora Marsden, Ezra Pound, George Bernard Shaw, and Helen Saunders receive sustained attention. Others, like Clive Bell, Arnold Bennett, Robert Bridges, Rupert Brooke, G. K. Chesterton, T. E. Hulme, F. T. Marinetti, John Middleton Murry, Alfred Orage, and H. G. Wells appear more briefly. Playing a particularly dominant role, though, is Wyndham Lewis. He bulks large in this reconsideration of avant-garde politics and modern nationalism not simply because of his alleged centrality in the phenomenon of “fascist” or “reactionary” modernism after the Great War. Of all the artists and writers who participated in England’s avant-garde scene and in the development of modernist doctrine and practice before the war, he engaged most consistently the relations between nation and avant-garde, the competing claims of nationalism and internationalism in the activities of advanced art movements, and the role of national avant-gardes in the promotion of imperial prestige. Moreover, his typically Edwardian fascination with the phenomenon of “national character” – its complicated role enabling *and* constraining the activities

Introduction

9

of nations and national art movements – illuminates the complex of assumptions and expectations that underlay and structured the ways Edwardians and Georgians – even aggressive skeptics like Lewis – understood the world in which they lived and experienced national ambitions and anxieties.³⁹

These views on national character also encourage some reconsideration of the familiar picture of Lewis and his closest comrades as essentially essentialists.⁴⁰ The first three chapters together argue that in the years before and during the Great War, numerous writers, especially Lewis and others nearest to him, wrestled with the notion that persons and nations have a fixed core identity. Even as their works reveal investments in conventional notions of racial and national hierarchy and determinism, they fitfully articulate a vision of national identity as a cultural construct, susceptible to modification by cultural training and individual will. This conception of nationality as (alternately) essence and construct underwrote the greatest (and for us perhaps paradoxical) ambition of England's self-consciously "advanced" writers and artists before the war: to create in England an imperialist avant-garde art group. The arrival of that group was boisterously proclaimed in the Vorticist movement's celebrated and patriotic journal, *BLAST* (Summer 1914).

As central to this study as any particular writer or artist, indeed, are the avant-garde magazines and movements so active and influential during the period. Numerous works and debates of early modernism originally appeared in these periodicals, contributing to and conditioned by their particular cultural and political policies. Because these reviews played such a crucial role in the promotion of avant-garde movements and in the early institutionalization of modernism, they serve as primary subjects and textual sources here. Each chapter focuses on and draws its principal evidence from a single modernist magazine at the moment of its greatest cultural influence, and the group or movement most closely associated with it. Chapter 1 examines *The English Review* of 1908–10 and the "Impressionist" writers affiliated with its editor, Ford Madox Ford. Chapter 2 studies Alfred Orage's "Independent" socialist organ *The New Age* during 1910–12 and its loose federation of radical left-wing intellectuals. Chapters 3 and 4 treat the Vorticist movement of 1914–15, and the two issues of its official periodical *BLAST*. Chapter 5 considers the radical "Individualists" associated with *The Egoist* of 1914–16, the celebrated anarcho-libertarian political and cultural review edited by the dissident feminist-turned-anarchist philos-

opher, Dora Marsden. When early modernist works are read in this journalistic context, with special attention paid to the political debates featured in the magazines and the avant-gardists' participation in them, it becomes clear that nation, nationality, and empire were the subjects of continuous, often heated, debate among self-consciously "advanced" writers and artists. And as I hope to show, these debates tell us things about the political history of modernism in Britain, its institutions, and institutionalization that complicate and enrich prevailing accounts.

By setting avant-gardist treatments of nationality, nationalism, and empire in the context of the public arguments they originally engaged (both intellectual and popular), *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde* makes two broader arguments. First, the conception of nationality as essence and construct was widespread among English intellectuals⁴¹ and had significant repercussions for avant-garde aesthetics and politics. Second, the Vorticists' articulation of an explicitly nationalistic cultural doctrine in *BLAST* brought to the surface the hidden ambition of numerous (perhaps most) English intellectuals before the war: despite lingering commitments to the Arnoldian tradition of cultural internationalism and assertions of political disinterestedness or avant-garde critique, these artists and writers supported the aims of British imperialism, offering their works as a means of helping to consolidate or "revitalize" British power and prestige against rising foreign competition and domestic "degeneration" — a goal roughly consistent with popular patriotism and government policy.⁴²

The background of this argument is developed in chapters 1 and 2. The first demonstrates that Ford Madox Ford's illustrious and insistentlly internationalistic and "disinterested" little magazine, *The English Review*, where the early works of Lawrence, Lewis, and Pound among others first appeared, betrays a nationalistic investment in British imperialism common among Edwardian intellectuals, including *les Jeunes* (as Ford dubbed them).⁴³ The second chapter shows that popular anxieties of national decline and ambitions for international success conditioned the responses of both older, more self-consciously "patriotic" intellectuals (who opposed increasing international contacts), and those younger and more self-consciously "cosmopolitan" (who advocated increasing such contacts) to evidence of foreign competition, whether in the imperial-military realm or the cultural. That conditioning, chapter 3 demonstrates, shaped the consolidation of Vorticism in 1914 as an explicitly nationalistic and imperialist avant-garde movement.

Introduction

II

Yet while *BLAST* identifies Vorticism as an imperialist art movement, it also displays political commitments and national affiliations that oppose such a definition. On one hand, *BLAST*'s manifestos ally Vorticism with the anti-statist "Individualist" movement around Dora Marsden and *The Egoist*. Marsden's movement followed the lead of the German nominalist, Max Stirner, whose anti-liberal tract, *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844), became a touchstone for Anglo-American anarchists and libertarians soon after its translation into English as *The Ego and His Own* in 1907.⁴⁴ The Egoists celebrated the vital and autonomous individual, advocated an anarcho-libertarian politics, and promoted artists, writers, and art movements that manifested an appropriately "individualistic" temper. *The Egoist* implacably assailed the British state and its institutions as unnecessary restrictions on individuality, publishing positive analyses of art exhibits in which Vorticist artists were featured as well as critical and literary works by Pound, Lewis, and other contributors to *BLAST*. The Vorticists repaid the compliment. *BLAST* describes Vorticism as "an art of individuals" that will help "make individuals," and attacks, à la Marsden, those British persons and institutions the Vorticists deemed to be obstructing individual vitality and creativity.⁴⁵ Yet on the other hand, despite *BLAST*'s nationalistic assertions that the artworks it features display the "most fundamentally English" characteristics, and are thus England's "necessary native art," the majority of its polemical and literary pieces, as well as a number of the visual, were contributed by the movement's three most-celebrated figures, Lewis, Pound, and the sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska, all of whom lacked the pure "English blood" presumably necessary to establish credibility for such a project. By parental lineage, Lewis was Anglo-American (his father born in New York), Pound an American, and Gaudier French. I focus attention on these and other related contradictions, recovering and analyzing their entanglement with period notions of nationality and national competition, their various consequences, as well as what the Vorticists and their contemporaries made of them. For as we will see, the Vorticists were by no means oblivious to the complexity of their position. On the contrary, *BLAST* insists on it, loudly proclaiming Vorticism an anarcho-imperialist movement of vital individuals who have transcended the limits of nationality, even while affirming that Vorticist art is "fundamentally English" and will facilitate the pressing project of revitalizing the ailing empire.⁴⁶

Accounts of modernist politics become unpersuasive, I would argue, when they underestimate or fail to acknowledge that modernism's early

politics were not simply “protofascist,” displaying certain anticipations of later “reactionary” or “fascist” tendencies (an elitist distance from the masses, a fascination with the charismatic individual, a distrust of parliamentary democracy), but were also, in a sense, anti-fascist, committed to the radical anti-statist politics of anarcho-libertarianism, which opposed in principle the sort of centralized, authoritarian state that would later develop in Hitler’s Germany and – to a lesser extent – in Mussolini’s Italy.⁴⁷ The coexistence of these competing, at times contradictory, political commitments helps explain Raymond Williams’s productive observation that “the politics of the avant-garde, from the beginning, could go either way.”⁴⁸ Mitigating or denying the presence of the radical streak in the early politics of modernism contributes to an appealing though ultimately unsubstantiated view that underwrites the posture of certain analyses that attack (reactionary) modernism as confidently and contemptuously as Pound attacked the world conspiracy of “kike” bankers and arms merchants: namely, that modern left-wing politics are categorically different from those of the right, immune to the temptations of intolerance to which a number of modern right-wing movements and thinkers have succumbed.⁴⁹ As this study emphasizes, the political trajectory of modernism had as much to do with its “progressive” commitments to anarchism, individualism, and artistic, social, and political change, as with its “reactionary” commitments to empire, nationalism, and “racial” renewal. To adapt Williams’s formulation, in the beginning, the politics of the avant-garde (in England at least), went both ways at once. The failure to acknowledge this uncomfortable fact encourages reducing a deeply conflicted body of political beliefs and utterances to some monolithic and comfortably alien form of fascist reaction.

Once we acknowledge Vorticism’s concatenation of seemingly incompatible political aims, in which a nationalistic conviction that empire must be revitalized vies with an anarcho-libertarian belief in the vital individual as the enemy of the (liberal) parliamentary state, we are confronted no longer with the problem of recovering modernism’s protofascism, but rather with the need to account for its early anarcho-imperialism. And as this study shows, the Vorticists did not see these political aims as incompatible. Their conjunction was justified in part, we will see, by the period conception of nationality as construct and essence. It was further authorized by the cult of masculine vitality so dominant in prewar Britain, underwriting a vast range of political agendas and movements, including the government’s official nationalist

Introduction

13

doctrine of imperial consolidation and domestic renewal, the Fabian-Socialists' advocacy of gradualist social and political reform led by an elite of "brain workers" and "efficiency men," the Tories' assault on Liberal government policies (especially the effort to implement Irish home rule), the popular press's promotion of worries about national "degeneration" and foreign (primarily German) invasion, as well as the avant-gardists' critique of calcified institutions and worship of the strong individual.⁵⁰ As others have demonstrated, the changes racking English society before the war – the rise of movements for working-class, colonial, and women's political rights; the growth of foreign economic, military, and imperial competition; the attendant sense of embattlement on the part of the largely upper-class, male, and English ruling elite and intelligentsia – provoked a masculinist backlash, in which perceived threats to British prestige were gendered female and denigrated, as the traditional upholders and bastions of such prestige were gendered male and celebrated.⁵¹

One of the histories recovered here is the English avant-garde's difficult effort to position itself as a vital and manly movement for cultural, social, and political renovation, militantly opposed to outdated, decrepit, and unmanly traditions and institutions, while at the same time, countering the accusation "patriotic" guardians of those same institutions kept leveling: that the avant-garde was basically just another effeminate, degenerate rabble (tainted by foreign origin and contact) threatening national "hygiene." This problematic negotiation illuminates both the extent and the limits of avant-gardist complicity in the prevailing politics of the Edwardian and Georgian moments. The Vorticists' embrace of masculine vitality facilitated their program of anarcho-imperialism, at least theoretically. In their eyes the anarchistic opposition to tradition and statist institutions, as well as the nationalist desire to revitalize the ailing empire by reforming English culture (making it "harder" and "colder"), were motivated by the same underlying desire: to defeat the effeminate forces of degeneration and decline (whether of domestic or alien origin), and reinject manly vitality into English art and life. To the extent that they supported the goal of imperial consolidation and bought into the masculinist system of values that underwrote that goal, the Vorticists collaborated, despite noisy rhetoric to the contrary, with the overriding ambitions of the British government and popular press.

But while this subscription to the cult of masculine vitality facilitated the Vorticists' political aims of anarchist revolution and imperial reform

on the level of theory, on the level of practice, those aims were more difficult to reconcile. Not only were the avant-garde's experimentalist aesthetics, social non-conformity, and anti-statist politics practically incompatible with state mechanisms of imperial power. In addition, the empire's rulers and their allies in the intelligentsia and press believed that their interests would be better served by promoting a picture of the avant-garde not as part of the solution, but as part of the problem, yet another source or symptom of the alarming national decline the government and its supporters opposed. In the context of prewar England, *BLAST* was therefore unlikely to achieve either of its principal aims: to put English art at the forefront of European culture and to "Vorticize" the British empire.

This predicament instantiates the internal contradiction Renato Poggioli found, over thirty years ago, at the heart of the theory of the avant-garde: the ultimate incompatibility of its simultaneous effort to become, on one hand, the nation's anti-culture, the outsider society of artistic and political antagonism, non-conformity, and critique, and on the other, *the* culture of modernity and/or the future. If the avant-garde succeeds in the former aim how can it achieve the latter? If it succeeds in the latter how can it achieve the former?⁵² My analysis confirms that this theoretical doublebind obtained before the Great War in England, when the most rebellious artists like the Vorticists could hope for, as Marinetti's Futurists had demonstrated, was to create a new aesthetic and promotional style, provoke controversy about that style in the press, and achieve a faddish level of public attention (by no means insignificant achievements). But as the Futurist case indicated, no such movement could, practically speaking, either significantly affect the imperial status of its home nation or create a truly populist politico-artistic movement. Try as the avant-gardists might, their achievements, their "conquests," remained primarily in the realms of discourse, performance, and art, enacted on pages of little magazines, in bohemian auditoriums, and on gallery walls.⁵³ During the *avant guerre*, to borrow Bürger's familiar formulation, the avant-garde's revolutionary effort to insert aesthetics into the "praxis of life" and thereby transform both was only partially successful: it could only "revolutionize" art.⁵⁴ In this context, the avant-gardists' fascination with violence, and especially their proclivity to fisticuffs, indicates a physical effort to overcome or deny this limitation.

Still, this study finds at least two ways in which the prewar effort on the part of avant-garde groups like the Vorticists in England and the Futurists in Italy to serve as their respective nations' leading modernist

Introduction

15

art movements had significant practical effects. First, their self-representations as imperial avant-gardes struggling against each other in the Darwinian realm of international competition actually structured that competition. Chapter 3 traces that structuring both in the Futurists' unprecedentedly successful "conquest" of the European art world and the consolidation of Vorticism in response to the extension of that project into England. Second, in the case of England, where a traditional commitment to cultural internationalism and an investment in the notion of "disinterestedness" had long restrained intellectual embraces of any baldly "partisan" political position, the Vorticists' noisy public promotion of an explicitly nationalist cultural policy helped to legitimate patriotism among an (at least overtly) hesitant intelligentsia. Vorticism thus played a real role in encouraging English intellectuals to greet the advent of European war in August of 1914 by rushing to their nation's cause, in Rupert Brooke's famous phrase (of which he became the national embodiment), "as swimmers into cleanness leaping."⁵⁵

Chapter 4's analysis of the second issue of *BLAST*, the so-called *War Number*, published nearly a year into the Great War (July 1915) and still neglected in favor of its flashier predecessor, finds that during the earliest months of the conflict, in England at least, circumstances changed in such a way as to alleviate significantly the avant-garde's prewar inability to realize its most grandiose political ambitions (other formidable problems arose). In a context where the government was expanding control of public discourse, clamping down on dissent, and promoting an anti-modernist cultural policy,⁵⁶ the Vorticists' paradoxical project became considerably more appropriate. By reorienting the foreign target of their opposition from Italian Futurism to Prussian imperialism, the Vorticists could assert that their project was allied with the war effort against Germany. So while in the *avant guerre*, the wars, conquests, and battles the avant-gardists undertook remained metaphorical, always bracketed by quotation marks, the Great War allowed them to participate in an actual military conflict (not simply spectate on one, as Marinetti had at Tripoli and Adrianapolis). Suddenly the war the avant-gardists had so long fantasized was *real*. All they needed to do was convince themselves and their supporters that it was also a war for modernism – not an insignificant task, but one which, we will see, circumstances conspired to advance.

Chapter 4 argues that the dynamic whereby Vorticist doctrine dovetailed with wartime events in such a manner as to newly validate that doctrine, achieves its most intense and revealing expression in

“Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska,” the central contribution to the *War Number* of the young French sculptor who was killed in action, June 1915. The “Vortex” is the culminating document of the *War Number*: it extends Vorticism’s paradoxical program to its theoretical telos, recording and enacting the glorification of Gaudier-Brzeska in death. By sacrificing his life in the Vorticists’ two-front war against Germany and *passéism*, Gaudier provides the ultimate authorization of Vorticist collaboration and resistance.

The Vortex’s celebration of annihilation as the fullest proof of manly life anticipates, perhaps more than any other evidence one could cite from the early writings of Lewis, Pound, and their comrades, what has come to be called fascist modernism. Klaus Theweleit and others have argued that the German *Freikorps* novels and memoirs of the twenties, for example, similarly fetishize the moment of manly self-sacrifice in the national cause as the ultimate proof of personal and national vitality, a moment that epitomizes the masculinist psychosis of the so-called fascist unconscious.⁵⁷ In the context of this study, however, the striking resemblance reinforces two other points. First, the ideology of masculinist vitalism that would come to play such a critical part in the formation of Fascism in Italy, Nazism in Germany, and similarly oriented, if finally less popular, movements in England and France, was as much an inheritance from Europe’s prewar political culture and cultural politics as it was a product of the Great War.⁵⁸ The death and idealization of “fallen soldiers” like Gaudier and Brooke suggests, indeed, that the Great War itself was the ultimate manifestation of that prewar ideology’s internal logic, wherein ideology is relegitimated through the sacrifice of its most heroic agents. Second, avant-gardist investments in the imperial politics and nationalistic psychology of the *avant guerre* played at least as important a role in determining the modernists’ post-war political ideals, as did their prewar aesthetics, racial attitudes, or intellectual elitism. Among other things, this study tracks the complicated ways in which the avant-gardists’ commitments to nation and empire conditioned their conceptions of art, race, and social hierarchy.

Thus the fifth and final chapter develops the implications of these points for current understandings of modernist aesthetics and theories of group identity by bringing its revisionist analysis to bear on a major modernist novel, Lewis’s *Tarr*, completed in November 1915, shortly before his departure for the front. By rereading *Tarr* in the context of *The Egoist*, where it originally appeared, chapter 5 finds, somewhat surprisingly, that Lewis’s ungainly, satiric novel carries out a keen fictive

critique of Marsden's individualist anarcho-libertarianism, a critique which importantly anticipates Lewis's later role as literary satirist and "enemy" of canonical modernism. Recovering this fictional assault on Egoism also makes clear that *Tarr* marks the point in Lewis's career as avant-gardist when his commitment to aesthetic and political opposition began to outstrip both his idealism about individual creativity and his patriotic investment in British imperialism. This intensification of skepticism regarding individualism and nationalism, the chapter demonstrates, encourages Lewis in *Tarr* to articulate a conception of national character that modifies and complicates the prewar moment's (double) vision of the category as essence and construct. At the heart of *Tarr* is a dark portrayal of human identity as a site of irreducible chaos, a picture that undermines the period's two competing and entangled conceptions of national character, both of which Lewis and numerous of his contemporaries often – sometimes simultaneously – embraced: the racist view of nationality as an internal and essential category, the result of an "heredity" that fundamentally defines the character of individuals of a particular "race" or nation; and the individualist view of nationality as an external, non-essential category, the result of a restrictive regime of cultural training that persons of sufficient energy, insight, and will can and should overcome. What replaces – or rather supplements – this conception of nationality as essence and construct is a kind of "racial" determinism, if by race we understand not the different and competing (sub)species nineteenth-century racialists believed inhabited the nationalized, Darwinian world, but rather the race *in toto*.

This understanding of race urges further reconsideration of the problem of racism or racial determinism often identified as central to the development of fascist modernism. In certain accounts of modernist "protofascism," Lewis, Pound, Eliot, or others can seem to subscribe, relatively unambiguously, to the hierarchical, polygenic, racist model of humanity popular among nineteenth-century anthropologists, viewing Jews (or blacks, or women) as permanent members of an alien "race," essentially different from, and lower on the bio-cultural scale than, the manly Aryan (or Nordic, or Anglo-Saxon) race to which Lewis (or Pound, or Eliot) believes he belongs. The first four chapters of this study demonstrate that even as avant-garde writers partake of that view, they also assail it. Chapter 5's analysis of *Tarr* further complicates the picture, indicating that by the early months of the Great War (if not before), English avant-gardist writers were also entertaining a more explicitly universalist brand of "racial" determinism – itself a paradoxical

cal idea if you believe, as some do, that universalism (“all men are created equal”) is in some sense antithetical to differential determinism. This study as a whole provides significant evidence, I believe, that at least part of the reason why early century modernists could think in ways that may seem to us deeply incoherent is because these three modes of thought are not nearly as incompatible with or separable from each other as we might like to suppose. Part of what enables their conjunction is the masculinist ideology that underwrites, in one way or another, all three conceptions (even *Tarr*’s universalist racism idealizes the manly courage of an author brave enough to confront humankind’s essential ugliness). Part of what enables it is the three conceptions’ complex and parasitic entanglement with each other. Thus, for example, all three accounts depend on some form of (masculinist) bio-cultural determinism: that all men are essentially chaotic; that all men are members of distinct “races,” each of which has a particular and permanent character; or that all great men are inherently capable of escaping the biological or cultural forces that essentially define all other men.

As this chapter summary indicates, *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde* is less a work of literary or art criticism or of politico-aesthetic theory than of cultural history. My intention is not to argue for (or against) the aesthetic or political value of English avant-garde writing and art (tasks already performed by others), but to provide a fuller and more historically fine-grained accounting of the ways in which engaged writers and artists participated in and responded to the dynamic politics and political debates occurring in England between the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 and the end of the Great War in 1918. Adopting a methodology suited to its project of recovery and revision, this study employs documentary approaches to history, practicing a historicism that locates avant-garde political texts within the dense and lively public discourse of their period. Numerous such documents – many, now forgotten or neglected by canonical or familiar authors; many, by figures now forgotten or neglected – are examined in the context of the issues and events they originally engaged. I consider not only “literary” texts, like the travel tales of W. H. Hudson, R. B. Cunningham Graham, and Norman Douglas (discussed in chapter 1) or novels like Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or Lewis’s *Tarr* (treated in chapter 5), but also political journalism, newspaper cartoons, art polemics, wartime propaganda, cultural criticism, anthropological studies, and magazine editorials published in avant-garde journals like *The English Review*, *The New Age*, *BLAST*, and *The Egoist* and in popular and

Introduction

19

mass-market periodicals like *Punch*, the *Times*, and the *Morning Post*. England's avant-garde writers and movements treated these texts and the political positions they articulate as central to their ambitions and achievements; I have taken them at their word, an approach that is also in line with current practices of cultural studies and historicism in modernist studies.

These methods are not intended to access “scientifically” early modernism’s “objective existence,” however. Needless to say, the sort of archival research and contextual reconstruction carried out here cannot provide unmediated access to the original intentions of the Vorticists, their contemporaries, or to the milieu in which they lived. No brand of historicism can eliminate fully the mediation of current concepts and analytical paradigms. Any late twentieth-century effort to use historicist procedures to question established accounts of the literature and politics of the early century will be shaped by today’s academic politics, discourses on modernism, debates on historiography, not to mention such professional requirements as the need to distinguish an individual rhetorical position or establish an academic reputation. I am convinced, nonetheless, that the project of historical recovery *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde* attempts – limited and provisional though all such efforts must be – not only enriches established accounts of the English avant-garde, Edwardian and Georgian culture, the development of modernist politics, and the involvement of modern literature and art in nationalism and empire, but also helps unsettle the primacy of scholarly constructions ill-suited to register the complexity of literature and politics during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

My overriding effort to reassess the political commitments and gyrations of avant-gardists in early century England is ultimately intended as a means of continuing to open up the study of modernism and modernist politics to new possibilities. I finally hope to make persuasive the claim that once we more fully acknowledge the presence and articulate the significance of the myriad contradictions in modernism’s early politics, we will both want and be in a better position to reconsider prevailing assessments of the “reactionary” modernists, especially the development of their political ideas and commitments. Such a reconsideration should also prompt a fuller analysis of the political investments we late twentieth-century academics bring to the study of writers and artists whose politics we do not much like (or like too much), and the ways those investments have over the years conditioned our evaluations.