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Elements are VERY GLIB: Challenging the Convenience of Metaphor in the Critical Reception of *BLAST*

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Picture yourself as a first-time reader of *BLAST*, the magazine edited by Wyndham Lewis which ran for just two issues between 1914 and 1915. That unmistakeable pink cover lies in front of you. An aggressive project of some sort seems to be contained inside. What sort of ‘blast’ are you dealing with?¹

Earth, water, air, and fire all seem to be evoked in the open-ended abstruseness of the word ‘blast’ itself. We speak of blasts as violent rushes of air, yet we also know blasts as a vegetable blight, as a curse, and even as a lightning bolt. ‘VEGETABLE HUMANITY’ is a target of the *BLAST* manifesto, and there’s a kind of coruscating zig-zag in the abstracted form of Lewis’s drawing ‘The Enemy of the Stars’ (1913), but in the first volume of the magazine at any rate it’s the possibilities of ‘blast’ as an expletive (‘CURSE / the lazy air that cannot stiffen the back of the SERPENTINE’) or as a hurricane that seem to have authority.² The two possibilities unite in the *BLAST* manifesto’s desire to ‘CURSE / WITH EXPLETIVE OF WHIRLWIND / THE BRITANNIC AESTHETE’ (*BI*, p. 15), a gesture Steven Connor sees as an effort ‘to dispel the mists of glamour and stupor’ in an ‘anathematizing of the atmospheric’.³ Lewis once described the ‘position’ of the Vorticist, the figure whose ambitions are explained across both issues of the magazine, as being at ‘the heart of the whirlpool’, the ‘great silent place where all the energy is concentrated.’⁴ But in *BLAST* itself it’s the airy metaphor that stands out, a point upheld by the cyclonic design which illustrates the ‘ERRATA’ page at the start of the 1914 instalment; in its manifesto’s notion of an ideal art that partakes of tornado-like ‘insidious and volcanic chaos’ (*BI*, p. 38); in the ‘gust’ of wind that ‘blares up’ (*BI*, p. 60)

the voices of Argol and Hanp in Lewis's play, *Enemy of the Stars* (1914); and most unambiguously in the image of the storm-cone that appears intermittently in the magazine's pages.

Given these atmospheric associations, it's little wonder that so many of *BLAST*'s commentators have used atmospheric idioms to explain the magazine's impact and significance. In a cartoon published in *The Egoist* in mid-July 1914, Horace Brodzky rendered Lewis and his allies Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Ezra Pound as a trio of Israelites blasting their 'trumpets before the walls of Jericho', with a top-hatted *Times*-reader dwarfed by their combative, belligerent tooting.⁵ Years later, in *A Poet's Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (1938), Harriet Monroe described the 1914 issue of *BLAST* as the 'cyclonic' first number of a magazine designed 'to blow away' everything with which Lewis and Pound disagreed.⁶ Echoing Lewis's 1915 editorial remark about the magazine finding 'itself surrounded by a multitude of other Blasts of all sizes and descriptions'—surrounded, that is, by the political and physical explosions of war—Monroe pointed out that *BLAST* 'had scarcely appeared when all its blasts and curses were smothered, swallowed up, reduced to ignominy, by the counterblast of Mars.'⁷ This image of a beleaguered *BLAST* surrounded by blasts it had little hope of overcoming has itself had an afterlife, persisting through memoirs written by those who were there at the time and through articles, essays, and monographs written by scholars who have inherited their terminology. Yet the image of *BLAST* as a whirlwind, or as the coalescing focal point for cyclonic energies, has been no less tenacious, a fact demonstrated by recent descriptions of the magazine in its entirety as an 'explosive multi-media manifesto' and as a 'rhetorical hurricane.'⁸

At the risk of seeming po-faced, I'd like to caution here that too great a dependence on elemental metaphors risks reintroducing into our accounts of *BLAST* the very cohesiveness that so many critical analyses of the magazine have tried to avoid. Such metaphors are

gratifying to use, but it's time to drop them: because they misrepresent the supposed 'unity' of *BLAST*, and because they muddy the extent to which the magazine can or should be aligned with the ideas and attitudes of Lewis, its blaster-in-chief. No doubt their appeal lies in what Northrop Frye, in his 'Preface' to Gaston Bachelard's *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, calls the 'links of analogy', those mental processes—what Bachelard himself refers to as 'modes of explanation'—by which the properties of one thing (e.g. the flickering of flames) seem inevitably present in the characteristics of some other phenomenon (e.g. the nature of vitality), and *vice versa*.⁹ Critics tend to describe *BLAST* metaphorically as a blast precisely because the dynamism inherent in an idea of blasting seems already *there* in the ostensibly energized character of so much of its contents. But its contents don't cohere around any one kind of energy. If anything, they cohere around efforts to make miscellany have a purpose; to give multiplicity a workable shape.

All of this might seem like an ultra-pedantic way of putting things, not least because the title *BLAST* itself appears to invite the unity I'm claiming only a certain interpretation bestows on it. At first glance, the word 'blast' seems to imply a literal explosion, or at the very least a discharge of metaphorical energy; in other words, it seems to function as an emblem of conceptual and possibly also stylistic integration. Yet the word 'blast' also suggests, once we re-encounter the magazine as already established readers, an overdetermined elemental imperative—that is, it seems to denote, or can be *seen* to denote, a collection of meanings with some aspect of the elemental as their baseline. In the magazine's pages, the 'blast' of its title is most consistently aligned with the metaphorical blasting of mockery and dismissal. But the accumulated meanings assigned to that same word in later acts of commentary have tended to pull in competing directions. The 'blast' offered by *BLAST* is now just as likely to be understood as the force of conceptual aggression, as the

metaphorical explosion of satire, as a breath of fresh air, as the centripetal clarity of a whirlpool, or even, occasionally, as the explanatory charge of a thunderbolt.

Many commentators would say that the blast in question is, as Rachel Sykes puts it, the ‘explosion of noise and colour’ implied by the magazine’s gaudy, bombastic frontage.¹⁰ D. G. Bridson had something similar in mind when he claimed in *The Filibuster: A Study of the Political Ideas of Wyndham Lewis* (1972) that Lewis ‘could not be said to have made his impact upon the public as a writer until [...] he dropped his explosive review *BLAST* like a puce bomb on the Georgian parlour floor.’¹¹ In these terms, *BLAST* signifies an attempt to blow up an established scheme of artistic convention, just as D. H. Lawrence later insisted that something similar might be required to find a new novelistic form with which to explore the twentieth century’s ‘really new feelings’.¹² The possibility of such metaphorical representations derives not only from the magazine’s title but also from its manifesto-sections, whose signatories seemed to hope for an artistic tragedy that could ‘bring to the surface a laugh like a bomb’ (*BI*, p. 31). Exactly this sort of analogizing temperament enabled A. R. Orage, writing in *The New Age* as ‘R. H. C.’, to depict the countdown to the first issue of *BLAST* as a process of waiting for its ‘time-fuse’ to run out.¹³

According to such descriptions, *BLAST* was an intellectual incendiary designed to blow open a renewing space in culture. A key question to consider here is how these and other implications of the word ‘blast’ have distorted the reception histories associated with *BLAST* and the movement, Vorticism, only certain aspects of the magazine can be said to explain. Fredric Jameson argues that the directed ‘vectoral movement’ of Vorticist art, on whose behalf *BLAST* ambiguously propagandized, should be differentiated from the ‘lethal, expanding, and radiating haloes of energy’ that emanate ‘like the waves of a bomb blast’ from Futurist art.¹⁴ Likewise, Alex Runchman points out that although the figurative language deployed across both issues of *BLAST* constitutes a peculiar kind of poetry, we

should question that same language, not least because Vorticism ‘is more ambivalent about the potentiality of modern technology’ than Futurism’s mechanophilic dreaming.¹⁵

Runchman develops this idea in pursuing an account of *BLAST* as an ‘exploded collaborative poem’, one that nevertheless shouldn’t be allowed to homogenize the ‘partly choreographed and partly accidental juxtapositions’ which characterize its mix of polemics, inventories, reviews, notes, art works, and death notices.¹⁶ Runchman treads a very fine line in prosecuting this case, but others have not always been so careful—and with the twin effect that *BLAST* can be made to seem more coherent than it really is, on the one hand; and that the complexity of an important moment in the history of the avant-garde is lessened, in our retrospective accounts of it, due to the rhetorical charm of metaphorical elementality, on the other.

However attractive the strategy might be, depicting the ‘blast’ of *BLAST* in elemental terms—as an explosion, as a gust of air, as a whirl of water—cuts against the magazine’s resistances to uniformity. Part of the problem is that so many of its appreciators, myself included, remain partially or even fully wedded to the idea of trying to make it mean a singular something, a move David A. Wragg likens to a foolish attempt at silencing ‘boisterous guests at a party’.¹⁷ The resistances of *BLAST* emerge at a rhetorical level in its manifestoes—‘We fight first on one side, then on the other, but always for the SAME cause, which is neither side or both sides and ours’ (*BI*, p. 30)—and textually in the styles, forms, and experimental preoccupations that comprise its ‘multiplicity of voices’.¹⁸ We’ve been told many times now that the first issue of *BLAST* in particular contains a surprising mixture of genres and media, and that its multifarious contents—from the confrontational abstractionism of Lewis, to the much less stropic impressionism of Ford Madox Ford and Rebecca West—reflect the convoluted circumstances of its production. That awareness is attenuated, even if

only in passing, by an insufficiently guarded attitude towards the elemental metaphors so often used to account for the magazine's place in early twentieth-century culture.

Elemental metaphors can take us backwards to a sense of some singularity of purpose that publications like *BLAST* have sometimes been thought to embody, but which now seems increasingly unhelpful to historians of so-called 'little' magazines and the avant-garde cultures to which they belong. David Macauley states that the elemental 'tetrad' of earth, air, fire, and water 'need not be construed solely as objective things-in-themselves, unmediated presences or first principles—in short, as simple, indivisible constituents of the material world by way of analogy with the chemist's periodic table.' Instead, there is the option to seek a 'renewed understanding of and critical encounter with' the 'mediations that exist between us and the environment' as a way to appreciate how elementality is itself a construction of our human faculties.¹⁹ But many uses of elemental metaphor in accounts of modernist magazines enact precisely the essentializing 'thing-in-itselfing' of which Macauley is rightly suspicious. This isn't to say that metaphors don't have a place in modernist scholarship. Runchman's analysis of *BLAST*, for example, compels precisely because it sees the 'seismic energy' of the magazine as a matter of traces rather than unitary forms. But when we encounter such metaphors in the scholarship of others, or when we're tempted to deploy them in our own, we should ask questions about the functions they serve and the cultural-historical generalizations to which they can lead.

Lewis himself got the ball rolling, in this respect. In an interview published in *The Daily News and Leader* on 7 April 1914, three months before *BLAST* appeared, Lewis stated that the title 'signifies something destructive and constructive. It means the blowing away of dead ideas and worn-out notions. It means (according to the Anglo-Saxon interpretation) a fire or flame.'²⁰ The blast of *BLAST*, then, at least for Lewis at this point in time, was the blast of critique, of the forceful contradiction of cliché, orthodoxy, and habit. Like *The Blast*,

the San-Francisco-based anarchist magazine edited by Alexander Berkman from 1916 to 1917, *BLAST* sought to destroy certain tendencies in order to replace them with new, better alternatives. *The Blast* aimed at socio-political revolution, but its rhetoric was very similar to the idioms favoured by Lewis. Just as *BLAST*, in Lewis's eyes, sought a 'destructive and constructive' process, so too did *The Blast* mean 'to destroy *and* to build' on the principle that, 'socially speaking, Destruction is the beginning of Construction.'²¹ Lewis's additional remark about 'the blowing away of dead ideas and worn-out notions' being 'a fire or flame' suggests that, for him, 'blasting' was a mobile language that could absorb different kinds of conceptual contrast. The 'blast' of *BLAST* could be a whirling cyclone as much as it could be a searing blaze.

The terminology of *BLAST*, when the magazine finally appeared in July 1914, upheld the mobility of Lewis's articulations. The 'blasting' in question is simultaneously enunciated in words and metaphor as a curse, as a whirlwind, and as explosions, and in the magazine's visuals, principally in the storm-cone design, as a cyclonic impetus. In all cases the emphasis falls on the clearing away of some prior, undesirable phenomenon, be it the aesthetics of Italian Futurism, bourgeois taste, English weather, artistic amateurism, or thoughtless, unknowing laughter. And to this extent, given the influence he exerted over its contents, *BLAST* expresses what we might call Lewis's '*tabula rasa* temperament', his desire always to get back to some clear ground upon which innovations in thought and deed might be erected—an attitude running from *BLAST* through *The Caliph's Design* (1919) and onwards to *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938), in which Lewis reasserts his credentials as a man 'born, if ever a man was, for utopias'.²² Yet the fact remains that although *BLAST* bears Lewis's imprint more than that of any other contributor, it nevertheless is not and was not *his* in any simple sense of the word.

Lewis's later came to regret this. In *Rude Assignment* (1950), he turned to metallurgical imagery to characterize much of what was included in *BLAST*—mainly the poetic material ‘by Pound etc.’, and by implication a good deal else—as ‘soft and highly impure.’ As Lewis put it: ‘I wanted a battering ram that was all of one metal.’²³ He didn’t get what he was after, it seems, and neither will we, rhetorically speaking, if we stick with elemental metaphors in portraying *BLAST* as a bomb, as a whirlwind, and even, yes, as a vortex. What we’ll end up with is a less accurate image of a magazine whose contents—particularly the contributions from Ford, West, Jessica Dismorr, and Helen Saunders—are not necessarily best categorized in line with the metaphorical aggressivity of explosions, storms, and coils. Despite the unpredictable circumstances of production which generated it, we can see the conspicuous lack of synthesis that *BLAST* presents as a *celebration* of disunity, of something even bound up with an anti-totalitarian spirit.²⁴ And if we do still want to use metaphors to account for that spirit, then perhaps a better candidate would be an idiom of play. After all, so much of what ended up in *BLAST* arrived there in a mood of mischief. Maybe a better way to think about who and what featured in the magazine is to imagine that its contributors were there more or less just to have a good, satirical time—to have a blast, in fact (if the phrase isn’t too anachronistic).

¹ My thanks to Michael Shallcross for suggesting the immensely satisfying pun in my article’s title.

² *BLAST*, 1 (July 1914), ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 2002), p. 15 and p. 12. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the main body of the text as *Bl*.

³ Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion, 2010), p. 181 and p. 180.

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- ⁴ Lewis quoted in Douglas Goldring, *South Lodge: Reminiscences of Violet Hunt, Ford Madox Ford and the English Review Circle* (London: Constable & Co., 1943), p. 65.
- ⁵ Horace Brodzsky, 'THE LEWIS-BRZESKA-POUND TROUPE', *The Egoist*, 14.1 (15 July 1914), p. 272.
- ⁶ Harriet Monroe, *A Poet's Life: Seventy Years in a Changing World* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 355.
- ⁷ Wyndham Lewis, 'Editorial', *BLAST*, 2 (July 1915), ed. Wyndham Lewis (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 2000), pp. 5-6, at p. 5; Monroe, *A Poet's Life*, p. 355.
- ⁸ Helen Carr, 'Edwardian, Georgian, Imagist, Vorticist, and "Amygist" Poetry', in Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (eds), *A History of Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 157-85, at p. 174; and Andrzej Gąsiorek, "'With Expletive of Whirlwind": *BLAST* Then and Now', in Philip Coleman, Kathryn Milligan, and Nathan O'Donnell (eds), *BLAST at 100: A Modernist Magazine Reconsidered* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 17-29, at p. 22.
- ⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. vi and p. 7.
- ¹⁰ Rachel Sykes, *The Quiet Contemporary American Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 25.
- ¹¹ D. G. Bridson, *The Filibuster: A Study of the Political Ideas of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Cassell, 1972), p. 1.
- ¹² D. H. Lawrence, 'The Future of the Novel' (1923), in *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. Michael Herbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 142-6, at p. 145.
- ¹³ 'R. H. C.', 'Readers and Writers', *The New Age*, 15.6 (11 June 1914), pp. 133-4, at p. 133.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, 'Wyndham Lewis's *Timon*: The War of Forms', in Mark Antliff and Scott W. Klein (eds), *Vorticism: New Perspectives* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 15-30, at p. 24 and p. 16.

¹⁵ Alex Runchman, 'Soillure, Bomb Blasts, and Volcanic Chaos: Reading the Poetry of *BLAST*', in Coleman, Milligan, and O'Donnell (eds), *BLAST at 100*, pp. 30-43, at p. 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁷ David A. Wragg, *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), p. 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 2.

²⁰ 'Rebel Art in Modern Life', *The Daily News and Leader* (7 April 1914), p. 14.

²¹ 'WHY THE BLAST?', *The Blast*, 1.1 (15 January 1916), p. 10.

²² Wyndham Lewis, *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (London: Robert Hale, 1938), p. 229.

²³ Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography* (1950), ed. Toby Foshay (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), pp. 138-9.

²⁴ For this idea, see Dennis Brown, 'T. E. Hulme's "Cinders": Towards a Collage Aesthetic', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Great London Vortex: Modernist Literature and Art* (Bath: Sulis, 2003), pp. 96-102, at p. 101.