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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 that ran for just two issues between 1914 and 1915. That unmistakable 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), which appeared in the magazine's first issue. 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 (*B1*, 12, 15).[2] The two possibilities unite in the *BLAST* manifesto's desire to "CURSE / WITH EXPLETIVE OF WHIRLWIND / THE BRITANNIC AESTHETE" (*B1*, 15), a gesture Steven Connor sees as an effort "to dispel the mists of glamour and stupor" in an "anathematizing of the atmospheric" (Connor 2010, 180, 181). 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" (Goldring 1943, 65). But in *BLAST* itself it's the airy metaphor that stands out, a point upheld by the cyclonic design that illustrates the "ERRATA" page at the start of the 1914 installment; in its manifesto's notion of an ideal art that partakes of tornado-like "insidious and volcanic chaos" (*B1*, 38); in the "gust" of wind that "blares up" (*B1*, 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 (Brodzsky 1914, 272). 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 (Monroe 1938, 355). Echoing Lewis's 1915 editorial remark about the magazine finding "itself surrounded by a multitude of other Blasts of all sizes and descriptions" (*B2*, 5–6)—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" (1938, 355). 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 descriptions of the magazine in its entirety as an "explosive multi-media manifesto" and as a "rhetorical hurricane" (Carr 2015, 174; Gąsiorek 2017, 22).

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* (1964), 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 (Bachelard 1964, vi, 7). 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 (2018, 25). 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" (Bridson 1972, 1). 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" (1998, 145). 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" (*B1*, 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 (1914, 133).

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 (2013, 16, 24). 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 (2017, 34). 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" that characterize its mix of polemics, inventories, reviews, notes, artworks, and death notices (31). 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" (2005, 169). 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" (*B1*, 30)—and textually in the styles, forms, and experimental preoccupations that comprise its "multiplicity of voices" (Wragg 2005, 169). 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 stroppy 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 toward the elemental metaphors so often used to account for the magazine's place in early twentieth-century culture.

Elemental metaphors can take us backward 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 (2010, 2). 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 is not 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 April 7, 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" (14). The blast of *BLAST*, then, at least for Lewis at this point in time, was the blast of critique, the blast of 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 sociopolitical revolution, but its rhetoric was very similar to the idioms favored 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" ("Why the Blast?" 10). 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, 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 onward to *The Mysterious Mr Bull* (1938), in which Lewis reasserts his credentials as a man "born, if ever a man was, for utopias" (1938, 229). 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' 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" (1984, 229). 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 that 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 (see Brown 2003, 101). And if we do still want to use metaphors to account for that spirit, 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.

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Endnotes

1 My thanks to Michael Shallcross for suggesting the immensely satisfying pun in my article's title.
2 Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the main body of the text as *B1*.