

Jonathan Black

32 Great Britain

Futurism arrives in the United Kingdom

Parts of the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* were first published in English in the unlikely context of a magazine entitled *The Tramp: A Journal of Healthy Outdoor Life for the Adventurous Gentleman* in August 1910 (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde*, 96). It seems fitting that the movement, often regarded in the United Kingdom as outré and problematically unconventional, should appear in a publication aimed at a select, minority readership, whose interest focussed not only on camping outdoors and mountaineering but also on vegetarianism, nudism and other ‘experimental forms’ of modern life. It also must be admitted that the credibility of Futurism within Great Britain, especially in England, suffered severely from the fact that its creator, F. T. Marinetti, and its leading artistic proponents were Italian. In Georgian Britain, the very words ‘Italy’ and ‘Italians’ invariably generated a host of unfortunate instinctive stereotypes and prejudices. Italy was perceived as a picturesque yet governmentally ramshackle and technologically backward country, whose people – especially its males – were regarded as noisy, unstable, illogical, over-emotional, treacherous and cowardly (Black: “Taking Heaven by Violence”, 29–30). To promote Italian Futurism in the United Kingdom was always going to be a very hard sell indeed. British artists were part of one of Western Europe’s most advanced industrial powers and invariably proud of belonging to the world’s largest Empire. So, why should they embrace and adopt a movement headquartered in Milan?

Marinetti’s first London visit, 1910

Marinetti first spoke about Futurism in London on 2 April 1910 to an audience of suffragettes at the Lyceum Club, Piccadilly. The secretary of the Club was Margaret Nevinson (1858–1932), mother of Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson (1889–1946), who would later be the lone formal English member of the Futurist movement. Margaret Nevinson later recalled that Marinetti began his lecture by praising the ‘English’ (he did not refer to the British at any point) for having retained “an unbridled passion for struggle in all its forms, from boxing [...] to the roaring monstrous mouths of your cannon, crouched in their rotating steel turrets on the bridges of your dreadnoughts.” (Nevinson: “Futurism and Women”, 112; see Marinetti: “Lecture to the English on Futurism”, 89) He was, however, dismissive of John Ruskin, whom he referred to as

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that deplorable man, who – I should like to convince you, once and for all – is utterly ridiculous. With his morbid dream of the primitive, agrarian life, with his nostalgia for Homeric cheeses and age-old “whirling spindles”, and his hatred of machines, of steam and electricity, with his mania for ancient simplicity, he resembles a man who, after attaining complete physical maturity, still wants to sleep in a cradle and be suckled at his decrepit old nurse’s breast, so as to regain the mindlessness of his infancy. (Marinetti: “Lecture to the English on Futurism”, 93)

Perhaps aware of the low reputation of the Italian male in the United Kingdom, Marinetti then attacked the vitality of contemporary young Englishmen, boldly asserting that

nearly all of them, at some time or other, are homosexual. This perfectly respectable preference of theirs stems from some sort of intensification of camaraderie and friendship, in the realm of athletic sports, before they reach the age of thirty – that age of work and order in which they suddenly return from Sodom to become engaged to some impudent young hussy. (Marinetti: “Lecture to the English on Futurism”, 91)

Marinetti concluded his fiery peroration by informing his audience: “So there, I’ve told you very briefly what we think of England and the English. And now must I listen to the polite reply that I guess is already taking shape on your lips? Without doubt, you wish to put a stop to my impoliteness by telling me all the good things you believe about Italy and the Italians... Well, no thanks. I don’t want to listen to you.” (Nevinson: “Futurism and Women”, 112) Reflecting on Marinetti’s lecture, Margaret Nevinson conceded that he had been a most invigorating speaker; however, as a feminist, suffragette and mother of two, she could not approve of Marinetti’s vision of “a machine-governed and womanless world in which even the human race may be generated by mechanism, and where everybody will be of masculine gender” (Nevinson: “Futurism and Women”, 112).

The first Futurist exhibition in London, 1912

The first exhibition of Futurist art in the United Kingdom, some thirty-five paintings in total, was held in March 1912 at the Sackville Gallery in central London (see Pezzini: “The 1912 Futurist Exhibition at the Sackville Gallery, London”). It generated enormous press coverage and made Marinetti immensely impressed with the extensive power of the British popular press. Much of this coverage of Futurism was mocking and puzzled; one newspaper condemned these “crazy exploding pictures by ‘Art Anarchists’” (Hind: “Daily Chronicle”, 5). Severini’s *The Dance of the Pan-Pan at the Monico* was likened to “an artistic bomb. Who throws bombs? Why, anarchists of course ...” (Harrison: “The New Terror”, 2). In that pillar of the establishment opinion, *The Times*, an editorial (probably by Arthur Clutton-Brock) airily concluded: “The anarchical extravagance of the Futurists must deprive the movement of the sympathy of all reasonable men.” ([Anon.]: “The Aims of Futurism”, 2)

Some influential voices were prepared to detect something valuable in the exhibits, for example, Walter Richard Sickert, veteran painter and a founding member of the Camden Town Group (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde*, 94). Marinetti gave the impression he was entranced by London's bustling energy. At the Bechstein Hall, on 19 March 1912, he both praised and damned the English, just as he had done two years earlier at the Lyceum Club. On one hand he was impressed by England's "brutality and arrogance" ([Anon.]: "'Futurist' Leader in London", 1) and yet was also repelled by "this nation of sycophants and snobs, enslaved by old, worm-eaten traditions, social conventions and Romanticism" (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde*, 96).

Boccioni also looked on the English with a rather jaundiced eye. On 15 March 1912, he wrote to a friend in Milan, Vico Baer, that "London is beautiful, monstrous, elegant, well-fed, well dressed but has brains as heavy as steaks. The home interiors are magnificent; there's cleanliness, honesty, calm, order, but at the bottom of the matter the people are idiots or semi-idiots. [...] What does it matter if one day you will dig up from under the rubble of London intact raincoats and ledgers without inkblots?" (Boccioni: *Lettere futuriste*, 37–38)

Marinetti, with his habitual acuity, was quick to grasp that New York rather than London was the true city of the future. Indeed, some of those commenting on the lectures that Marinetti gave in London in March–April 1912 wrote that his vision of Futurism seemed more applicable to an American conception of modernity and technological progress. After hearing Marinetti's talk, given in French, at the Bechstein Hall on 19 March 1912, a correspondent wrote in *The Times* two days later that Marinetti's "ideal world of the future showed a place so stripped of all tenderness and beauty that [...] it would be like New York at its worst." ([Anon.]: "The Aims of Futurism", 2) Often though, Futurism was criticized precisely for not being 'Anglo-Saxon' and for being a tempestuous, unreliable race with a propensity for trying to assassinate their King (see [Anon.]: "Attempted Assassination of King Victor."), in reference to the murder of King Umberto I in 1900, and for making a mess of defeating the sick man of Europe, the Ottoman Empire (Wheatcroft: *Infidels*, 33, in reference to the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–1912).

Some eight months after the Futurist exhibition had closed at the Sackville Gallery, Nevinson's father, the journalist and war correspondent Henry Nevinson (1856–1941), encountered Marinetti while covering the early stages of the First Balkan War in Stara Zagora on Turkish territory, recently occupied by the Bulgarians (John: *War, Journalism and the Shaping of the Twentieth Century*, 130). To an audience of stranded and startled journalists, Marinetti gave an impromptu performance of an early version of his poem *The Battle of Adrianople*, and Henry Nevinson was greatly impressed. Two years later he was to write that Marinetti had "burst like a shell in my life" (Henry W. Nevinson in the *Newark Evening News*, 17 January 1914, quoted in Cork: *Vorticism and Abstract Art*, 226).

Severini in London, 1913

In April 1913 it would be Henry Nevinson who, on encountering Gino Severini – who was in London to promote his solo exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery – would invite the painter home for dinner (Walsh: *Hanging A Rebel*, 66). It was at the Nevinsons' house on Downside Crescent, Belsize Park, that Severini met C.R.W. Nevinson – known to his family as 'Richard' (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 54). Richard Nevinson and Severini seem to have immediately hit it off. Within a few days of Severini's dining at the Nevinson family home, Richard was taking the Italian for motorcycle rides into the centre of the city (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 55).

Severini, exhibiting some twenty works at the Marlborough Gallery (7 April – 7 May 1913), did his best to court the London popular press. To the *Daily Express*, he professed himself entranced by London: "We seek for subjects in landscapes that are thick with black factory chimneys, in streets that are thick with moving throngs, in cafes that are thick with the cosmopolitan crowd [...] we understand the lyricism of electric light, of motor-cars, of locomotives, and of aeroplanes." He also made a point of praising "the essentially masculine strength of the English people which ought to understand our [the Futurist] exaltation of strength and energy [while] the architecture of London expresses the individualism and aristocratic spirit of the Englishman" (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant Garde*, 97). Severini concluded that he could only agree with Marinetti's declaration, made the previous year, that London was "the Futurist city par excellence" (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant Garde*, 103).

Later in 1913, writing from Paris, Severini informed Marinetti that in London he had met a number of English artists who seemed intrigued by Futurism. They were led by Richard Nevinson, who had introduced him to other painters such as Percy Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), Frederick Etchells (1886–1973) and Edward Wadsworth (1889–1949). Severini had also encountered the art critic and curator Frank Rutter (1876–1937) and encouraged the Englishman to plan an exhibition that would contain not only works by Italian Futurists but also examples of Futurist imagery by British artists. Rutter's exhibition, *The Post-Impressionists and Futurists*, duly opened at the Doré Galleries on New Bond Street early in October 1913 (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 56). It contained works by Picasso, Severini, Soffici, Balla, Delaunay and Kandinsky as well as paintings executed in a Futurist manner by Nevinson and Wadsworth. Among Nevinson's six exhibits were *The Departure of the Train de Luxe from the Gare St. Lazare* (now lost), which owed a debt to the example of Boccioni's *Farewells* series, and *Waiting for the Robert E. Lee* (now lost), apparently inspired by an American ragtime tune then popular but whose execution – incorporating Futurist lines of force and the jumbled fragments of intelligible reality associated with the concept of 'simultaneity' – was clearly informed by the artist's knowledge of Severini's Futurist celebrations of riotous Parisian night life such as *Geroglifico dinamico del Bal Tabarin* (Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin, 1912) and *La Danse du "Pan Pan" à Monico* (The Dance of the Pan-Pan at the "Monico", 1909–1911). Wadsworth submitted a now

lost *Omnibus* (1913) which appears to have been informed by an appreciation of Carrà and Soffici, whose woodcuts Wadsworth much admired (Black: *Form, Feeling and Calculation*, 16).

Scottish Futurism

As a consequence of the May 1913 exhibition at the Marlborough Gallery and the October 1913 show at the Doré Galleries, Severini's Futurism spread beyond London to other parts of the United Kingdom. In Edinburgh, it electrified the young Orcadian-Scottish painter Stanley Cursiter (1887–1976) and prompted him to celebrate parts of his adopted city in a dynamic Futurist manner. Inspired by press photographs of Severini's paintings, he created works such as *The Sensation of Crossing the Street* (1913, oil on canvas, Aberdeen Art Gallery), set at the busy junction of Shandwick Place, Lothian Road and Queensferry Street in Edinburgh, and *Rain on Princes Street* (1913, oil on canvas, Dundee Art Gallery and Museums), also focussing on a vibrant part of commercial Edinburgh.

Cursiter was short of money at the time and so poor that he could not afford to travel to London to see the Futurist exhibition at the Doré Galleries in April 1914. In the spring of 1914, the management of the Doré Galleries did consider sending a portion of the Futurist exhibition to a sister gallery in Edinburgh, but nothing came of the plan owing to a distinct lack of enthusiasm from the gallery in Edinburgh. Indeed, there were fears that the exhibits would so outrage the locals that they might be physically attacked (see Archival sources: Nevinson: *Letter to Wyndham Lewis*, 5 November 1913).

Marinetti in London, 1913

In November 1913, urged on by Severini and having received invitations to visit London from Richard Nevinson and Wyndham Lewis, Marinetti arrived in the city to further promote the cause of Futurism. On 16 November, he lectured and performed excerpts from *Zang Tumb Tuuum* as well as other 'dynamic poems' at the Cave of the Golden Calf, an avant-garde night club established just off Regent Street in June 1912 by Frida Strindberg (1872–1943). On 18 November, he could be seen at the Poetry Bookshop in Holborn and on 20 November in the Doré Galleries. After having experienced Marinetti performing at the Cave of the Golden Calf, Wyndham Lewis wrote to a friend: "It's a pity you didn't come along last night [to the Cave ...] Marinetti declaimed some peculiarly blood-thirsty concoctions with great dramatic force [...] He will be lecturing there again soon and [...] will no doubt be well worth hearing." (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde*, 98) A few days later, Edward Marsh, a well-known patron of the arts who had helped organize Marinetti's appearance at the Poetry Club, wrote to

his friend Rupert Brooke that Marinetti was “beyond doubt an extraordinary man, full of force and fire, with a surprising gift of turgid lucidity [...] and full of [...] a foaming flood of indubitable half-truths [...] his readings were about on the level of a very good farm-yard imitation – a supreme music hall turn.” (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde*, 99) Referring to the English music hall, Marsh was perhaps aware that portions of Marinetti’s *Il teatro di varietà* (The Variety Theatre Manifesto, 1913) had been published on 21 November 1913 under the heading “The Meaning of the Music-Hall. By the Only Intelligible Futurist”, in the mass circulation newspaper, *The Daily Mail*. During the same week, the Imagist poet Richard Aldington noted in the pages of *The New Freewoman* that Marinetti had been about in London reading his latest poems: “London is vaguely alarmed and wondering whether it ought to laugh, or not [...] It is amazing and amusing to a glum Anglo-Saxon to watch Mr. Marinetti’s prodigious gestures [he is] a much better man than the bourgeois [...] who grin at him when he reads.” (Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant-garde*, 99)

Wyndham Lewis and Richard Nevinson invited Marinetti to attend, as guest of honour, at a celebratory dinner. This was held at the fashionable Florence Restaurant, Rupert Street, Soho, on 18 November 1913 (Walsh: *Hanging a Rebel*, 71). Nevinson later recalled the occasion, attended by some twenty-six people, as an

extraordinary affair [...] Marinetti recited a poem about the siege of Adrianople, with various kinds of onomatopoeic noises and crashes in free verse [...] while all the time a band downstairs played ‘You made me love you, I didn’t want to do it.’ It was grand, if incoherent [...] It certainly was a funny meal. Most people had come to laugh, but there were few who were not overwhelmed by the dynamic personality and declamatory gifts of the Italian propagandist. (Nevinson: *Paint and Prejudice*, 77)

There can be no doubt that Nevinson had been greatly impressed by Marinetti, as in the following year he produced a striking portrait of the Italian, in gouache and ink, his domed forehead and trademark bow-tie fused with the dynamism and drama of a great metropolis with its imposing industrial buildings and tall factory chimneys.

Possibilities for English Futurism, 1913–1914

According to Nevinson, Marinetti unveiled at the dinner in Florence Restaurant his plans to launch an English chapter of the Futurist movement. Indeed, the day after the event, Nevinson wrote to Lewis, half in jest, that “I had quite a great deal of difficulty in preventing Marinetti from yet again expounding [...] his philanthropic desire to present us to Europe and be our continental guide.” (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 63) Marinetti’s wish to form those artists in London who had displayed an interest in Futurism into a band of English Futurists under his general direction thereby inadvertently laid the seed for the future repudiation of the movement by a majority among

that same small group of self-consciously avant-garde British artists. At the time, Wadsworth (from West Yorkshire) and the half-American but older and well-travelled Lewis rather bridled at the prospect of being seen to ‘take orders’ from and ‘follow the direction’ of Marinetti, an Italian, as undoubted ‘chief’ of the European Futurist movement. Then there was the factor that neither Lewis nor Wadsworth found it easy to take Marinetti as a person all that seriously (see Edward Wadsworth’s letter to Wyndham Lewis, 25 February 1914, in Wadsworth: *Edward Wadsworth*, 49).

Still, when Lewis, Wadsworth, Nevinson and others established the Rebel Art Centre on Great Ormond Street in March 1914, Marinetti was invited to speak there about Futurism (Walsh: *Hanging a Rebel*, 71). Nevinson indicated his continued adherence to Futurism in a quarter of the works exhibited in the inaugural exhibition of the London Group, early in March 1914. It included the now lost oil paintings *The Non-Stop* (inspired by a trip on the northern line of the London underground railway via Severini’s painting of the French Metro *Nord-Sud*): *The Arrival* (1913–1914, oil on canvas, Tate, London); another image of a harbour, *Le Vieux Port* (1913, oil on canvas, Government Art Collection), and a charcoal drawing, *The Strand* (1914, Private Collection), celebrating the London thoroughfare thronged with motorbuses and taxis (see Fry: “The London Group”). In the same exhibition, Wadsworth exhibited a now lost oil painting, *Radiation* (1914, oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown), which suggests his continuing awareness of Severini and Boccioni (Black: *Form, Feeling and Calculation*, 162). However, Wadsworth’s other works, as well as those submitted by Lewis, indicate a growing interest in exploring geometrical abstraction and left no room for the intelligible fragments of reality that were still retained in most Futurist paintings.

Although formally moving away from Futurism, up until the end of May 1914 Lewis often wrote very positively about Futurism and Marinetti, whom Lewis, in an article for the *New Weekly* in May 1914, dubbed admiringly “the intellectual Cromwell of our time” (Lewis: “A Man of the Week”, 328). Lewis frankly acknowledged in the article that “England has need of these foreign auxiliaries [the Futurists] to put her energies to right and restore order” (Lewis: “A Man of the Week”, 328). He was, however, at pains to remind his readers that “Futurism is largely the produce of Anglo-Saxon civilisation. As modern life is the invention of the English, they should have something profounder to say on it than anyone else.” (Lewis: “A Man of the Week”, 329)

Second Futurist Exhibition in London, 1914

By the time this article had been published, a second Futurist Group exhibition had opened in London, this time at the invitation of Frank Rutter, at the Doré Galleries (13–30 April 1914). The exhibition, which alongside Boccioni, Severini, Luigi Russolo and Carlo Carrà, included for the first time in the United Kingdom works by Ardengo

Soffici and Giacomo Balla, caused even more furore than the first, and reviews were considerably more hostile than they had been two years previously. The *Daily Express* dismissed the exhibits as “lunacy masquerading as art” ([Anon.]: “Futurist Stunts”, 4). Particular exception was taken to the sculpture by Boccioni and Marinetti’s *Self-Portrait* made from a clothes brush, matches and cigarette case and postcards hanging from the ceiling of the Doré Galleries ([Anon.]: “The Futurist Exhibition”, 6). Near abstract canvases by Balla were seen in London for the first time, for example, *Disgregamento d’auto in corsa* (Dynamic Decomposition of a Motor in Rapid Movement, 1914), *Successioni luminose x spostamenti* (Luminous Successions x Displacements, 1913), *Linee andamentali + successioni dinamiche* (Walking Lines + Dynamic Successions, 1913) and *Studio per materialità di luci x velocità* (Dynamism of Light, 1913; see the catalogue *Exhibition of the Works of the Italian Futurist Painters and Sculptors*, 30 and [Anon.]: “Futurism at the Doré Galleries”). They left a very favourable impression on Lewis and Wadsworth (see *Black: Form, Feeling and Calculation*, 23), and Nevinson, inspired by Boccioni’s *Fusione di una testa e di una finestra* (Fusion of a Head and Casement Window, 1912), produced his own ‘dynamic head’, which he entitled *The Automobilist* when exhibited at the Friday Club in February 1915.

On the evening of the opening of the Futurist exhibition, Marinetti recited in a ‘Dynamic and Synoptic’ manner his poem, *Il bombardamento di Adrianopoli* (The Bombardment of Adrianople, 1912), aided by Nevinson who later recalled: “I was given a drum to bang in order to enhance the dynamic qualities of his verse and, under his direction, I made a great deal of noise and enjoyed myself.” (Nevinson: *Paint and Prejudice*, 82) Marinetti, with a large wooden mallet in each hand, struck a desk to simulate the staccato rattle of machine gun fire. Henry Nevinson wrote at the time that Marinetti’s performance was “superb [...] No Englishman could have touched it. It overwhelmed me. It was [...] terrific.” (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 73) Edward Marsh, another observer of the performance, was less impressed by Marinetti’s dexterity with mallets than with the novelty of his “moving through the hall with dynamic gestures [...] Three blackboards had been placed at various intervals in the room and he alternately walked and ran to them [...] drawing diagrams, theorems, equations and [...] ‘Words in Freedom’ he was reciting, so that the audience had to keep swinging around to follow the rhythm of his words.” (Edward Marsh’s letter to Rupert Brooke, of April 1914, quoted in Ross: *The Georgian Revolt*, 37 and Wees: *Vorticism and the English Avant Garde*, 99)

For a while, Futurism became such a ‘craze’ in London that one could buy Futurist style socks, pyjamas, pillowcases, wall paper and painted pottery cat figures. Some of the more populist newspapers, which would be called tabloids today, anxiously asked their readers: “Would you allow your daughter to marry a Futurist?”, the *Daily Express* asked on 13 June 1914 ([Anon.]: “Futurism in London”). Once again, critics aired a myriad of offensive stereotypes at the Futurists who were frequently denied any possible legitimacy on account of their Italian origin. Lewis and Wadsworth may have been having growing doubts about the wisdom of their continued association

with Futurism, but Nevinson at least seemed more committed to the Futurist cause than ever. Early in June 1914, at the Allied Artists Association Annual Exhibition, Nevinson exhibited (with the support of the association's founder, Frank Rutter) a self-proclaimed 'Futurist Masterpiece', catchily entitled *Zang Tum Tum, Tum-Tiddly-Um-Tum-Pom-Pom* (now lost) in homage to Marinetti's recently published book, *Zang tumb tuuum: Adrianopoli ottobre 1912. Parole in libertà* (*Zang Tumb Tumb: Adrianople, October 1912. Words-in-Freedom*, 1914). The vast canvas, painted in oils with the addition of confetti, sequins and sand, had been inspired by the raucous uninhibited working-class crowds that packed Hampstead Heath, situated not far from the Nevinson family home, every Spring and August Bank Holiday (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 73). Among the swirling mass emerge recognizable faces, arms, bodies and in particular a huge, gross laughing female face, crowned by a feathered hat, which surely referenced Boccioni's *Idolo moderno* (*Modern Idol*, 1911) – a controversial image when exhibited at the Sackville Gallery show in March 1912.

The manifesto *Vital English Art* named both Marinetti and C.R.W. Nevinson as authors; however, Marinetti claimed that he had conceived it entirely and Nevinson had only co-signed the document (see Marinetti's letter to Mario Carli of 20 July 1914, in Marinetti and Carli: *Lettere futuriste tra arte e politica*, 42). When the manifesto was printed on the arts page of the *Observer* newspaper on 7 June 1914, it attracted the predictable ire not only of conservative critics, but also from Lewis and some of his allies, such as the French-born sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, who dismissed it as "tummy rot" and frivolous Futurist tomfoolery (quoted in O'Keeffe: *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 225). This "Manifesto of English Futurism" (Walsh: *Hanging a Rebel*, 86) poured scorn on what was portrayed as England's hopelessly backward and reactionary culture, enmeshed in debilitating Victorian hypocrisy and sickening sentimentality (Nevinson: *Paint and Prejudice*, 79). Drawing upon the language of Marinetti's *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*, the manifesto damned the "mania for immortality. A masterpiece must disappear with its author" and refers to "the ancestors of our Italian Art" who have "built for us a prison of timidity, of imitation and of plagiarism" (Marinetti and Nevinson: "Vital English Art", 80). They warn: "Take care children. Mind the motors. Don't go too quick. Wrap yourselves well up. Mind the draughts. Be careful of the lightning." (Marinetti and Nevinson: "Vital English Art", 80) To which the Futurists respond: "Forward! Hurrah for motors! Hurrah for speed! Hurrah for draughts! Hurrah for lightning!" The manifesto also urged the creation of

an English Art that is strong, virile and anti-sentimental. 2.- English artists strengthen their Art by a recuperative optimism, a fearless desire of adventure, a heroic instinct of discovery, a worship of strength and a physical and moral courage, all sturdy virtues of the English race [...] 4.- To create a powerful advance guard, which alone can save English art, now threatened by the traditional conservatism of Academies and the habitual indifference of the public [...] 5.- A rich and powerful country like England ought without question to support, defend and glorify its advance guard of artists, no matter how advanced or extreme, if it intends to deliver its Art from inevitable death. (Marinetti and Nevinson: "Vital English Art", 80)

Futurism and the emergence of Vorticism

Probably inadvertently, the manifesto *Vital English Art*, as printed, gave the impression that it was endorsed by members of the Rebel Art Centre. Lewis and its fellow artists could not agree to this and quickly despatched letters of repudiation to the *Observer* and *The New Weekly* (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 77). Meanwhile, on 11 June 1914, the *Daily Express* ran a story about *Blast*, a forthcoming arts magazine and platform for a new and specifically English avant-garde movement to be called ‘Vorticism’, serving as an English parallel to Cubism, Expressionism and Imagism and intending to deliver a death blow to Impressionism and Futurism.

When Marinetti and Nevinson attempted to lecture about Futurism at the Doré Galleries, on the evening of 12 June 1914, they were shouted down by a group within the audience who were shortly to emerge as the core Vorticists: Lewis, Wadsworth, Ezra Pound (1885–1972), Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915) and the critic Thomas Ernest Hulme (1883–1917). What Lewis particularly objected to in Nevinson’s talk was his claim that Britain could only avoid being overtaken as a great industrial power by Imperial Germany and the United States if its people were to embrace the dynamism of Futurism ([Anon.]: “A Lecture on Futurism”, 12). A fortnight earlier, Lewis wondered in the *New Weekly* what a nation that had produced H.G. Wells – author of *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War in the Air* (1908) – could possibly learn from such a neophyte industrial power as Italy? (Lewis: “A Man of the Week: Marinetti”, 328) Lewis further asserted that “Futurism is largely Anglo-Saxon civilisation ... As modern life is the invention of the English, they should have something profounder to say on it than anyone else” (Lewis: “A Man of the Week: Marinetti”, 329). He conceded that Marinetti may indeed be “the intellectual Cromwell of our time”, but still, the Italian betrayed a risible “Latin childishness towards machinery” (Lewis: “A Man of the Week: Marinetti”, 329).

Within a month, Lewis had launched Vorticism, his own experimental art movement committed to all that was English, dynamic and technologically modern. In the first issue of *Blast*, he airily dismissed Futurism: “AUTOMOBILISM (Marinetteism) bores us. [...] The futurist is a sensational and sentimental mixture of the aesthete of 1890 and the realist of 1870.” (Lewis: “Long Live the Vortex!”, 8) By contrast, England was presented as an “Industrial island machine” (Lewis: “Bless England”, 11), exemplar of “the modern world,” which was due “almost entirely to Anglo-Saxon genius [...] Machinery, trains, steam-ships, all that distinguishes externally our time, came far more from here than [from] anywhere else.” (Lewis: “Manifesto VI”, 39) Lewis proceeded to haughtily define Futurism as “a picturesque, superficial and romantic rebellion of young Milanese painters against Academism.” (Lewis: “Melodrama of Modernity”, 143)

Lewis’s dislike for Marinetti and Futurism further intensified when Vorticism was launched in the British press, early in July 1914, and was commonly interpreted as an English offshoot and by-product of Futurism. Reviewing *Blast* on 5 July 1914, the critic P.G.

Konody further outraged Lewis by stating, quite accurately, that the magazine would not have been possible without the example set by Futurist publications: “Without Marinetti ‘Blast’ would have been inconceivable.” (Konody: “Art and Artists: ‘BLAST’”, 12)

C.R.W. Nevinson, the English Futurist

Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson seems to have been genuinely surprised that *Vital English Art* had so upset Lewis and his allies, although he did rather bask in being labelled “the eminent English Futurist” by G. K. Chesterton in the mass circulation magazine, *The Illustrated London News* (Chesterton: “Our Note Book”, 44). Two days later, he was at pains to write to Lewis, more in apparent sorrow than in anger, that there was much more to Futurism than crass ‘automobilism’; the movement was capable of change and promised a visually stimulating development. In his view, Futurist aesthetics had developed significantly from the 1912 show at the Sackville Gallery, as could be witnessed in Balla’s paintings exhibited at the Doré Galleries in April 1914 (see Archival sources: Nevinson: *Letter to Wyndham Lewis*, 13 July 1914). Indeed, Lewis conceded in the first issue of *Blast* that he was rather impressed by Balla, whom he defined as “not a Futurist in the Automobilist sense. He is a rather violent and geometric sort of Expressionist” (Lewis: “Melodrama of Modernity”, 144).

Given that Nevinson was widely identified as the sole English Futurist, adherent of a movement that had proclaimed in its *Foundation and Manifesto* that war was “the sole cleanser of the world” (Marinetti: “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism”, 14). Richard Nevinson felt that it was incumbent upon him to be seen to be ‘doing his bit’ and volunteer for service in the nation’s military effort in the First World War. However, due to a bout of rheumatic fever and recurrent illness as a schoolboy, Nevinson’s health was not robust and he was twice turned down as a volunteer (Nevinson: *Paint and Prejudice*, 94). He was certainly interested in painting the novel sights of wartime London in a Futurist manner, for example the stimulating oil painting, *The First Searchlights at Charing Cross* (1914–1915, oil on canvas, Leeds City Art Gallery), which greatly impressed P.G. Konody when he saw it at the Friday Club in February 1915 (Konody: “Art and Artists: Futurism at the Friday Club”). In September 1914, Nevinson took heart from the assertion in *Colour* magazine that “the explosive style of the Futurists is eminently suited to the character of modern warfare and battle subjects are the very things that would appeal to their anarchic views of life. The Futurists should give us the true expression of War in Art.” (Quoted in Walsh: *Hanging a Rebel*, 95) However, by late October 1914 he was despondent; his career seemed to be going nowhere and his faith in Futurism had begun to seriously waver – Italy was as yet still neutral and did not look as if it was going to join the fray anytime soon. He even told his father that he was prepared to renounce Futurism and start his own art movement to be called ‘Mentalitism’ (see Henry W. Nevinson Diary Entry for

25 October 1914, quoted in Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 94). With the help of his father, Nevinson was able to volunteer for service with an ambulance unit established by the Quakers, called ‘The Friends Ambulance Unit’. He served with them in Belgium and France from mid-November 1914 to the end of January 1915 (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 95–97). Initially, he tended French and German wounded found abandoned in a series of railway carriages at Dunkirk train station. This was a rude awakening to the horror of what modern weaponry could inflict on the vulnerable human body. He drove a motor ambulance picking up French and Belgian military and civilian wounded from the much shelled southern Belgian city of Ypres. In all he spent about ten days driving his motor ambulance before the back of it was demolished by a shell. In December 1914, he sent Marinetti a photograph-postcard of himself standing by his yet intact ambulance and indicated with dramatic strokes of the pen which portions had been completely destroyed by the shell and which riddled with needle sharp fragments any one of which could have killed him had it reached him in the driving seat (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 95–96).

C.R.W. Nevinson and English Futurism at war, 1914–1915

Nevinson later wrote that an attack of rheumatism in his hands had prevented him from driving his ambulance any more. At the end of January 1915, he returned to London, where he painted, in a Futurist manner, the dramatic oil painting, *Taube Pursued by Commander Samson* (Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon). This along with the superb *Returning to the Trenches* (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) and the grim *Ypres After the Second Bombardment* (Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield) would be hailed as masterpieces by many critics when included in the second exhibition of the London Group, held in the Goupil Gallery in March 1915 (see the review [Anon.]: “Futurists and War”, 7).

Even those who had taken Nevinson to task for his prewar Futurism now praised him as the young British artist who had devised the formula for accurately depicting the reality of modern total war, not only the new military technology in *Taube Pursued by Commander Samson*, but also the mass mobilization in *Returning to the Trenches* as well the damage caused by modern artillery in *Ypres after the Second Bombardment* (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 113–114). His work struck many observers as so much more intelligible and relevant to the wartime atmosphere than the baffling geometrical abstractions of Vorticist images included in the London Group exhibition by Lewis, Wadsworth and Etchells (see Clutton-Brock: “Junkerism in Art”, 5). By comparison, even Nevinson’s Futurism looked the epitome of intellectual sanity and clarity, or “a clever compromise between dynamic art [...] and realism” ([Anon.]: “The Art of Coloured Stripes”, 11).

Nevinson took this opportunity to promote Futurism to a wider British public through a variety of publications. He asserted to the *Daily Express* that although he could not agree with the Futurist worship of war, “our Futurist technique is the only possible medium to express the crudeness, violence and brutality of the emotions seen and felt on the present battlefields of Europe.” (Nevinson: “The Unconscious Humorists”)

In May 1915, Henry Nevinson observed his son painting the exuberant *Bursting Shell* (Henry W. Nevinson Diary entry for 20 May 1915 in Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 128). When the work was exhibited in November 1915 at the New English Art Club, Charles Lewis Hind likened it to a “Neapolitan ice cream tormented by radium” (Hind: “Futurist Painters”, 4). However, to Hind, Nevinson’s experiments with Futurism and Cubism had lost something of the sting of their novelty and were well on their way to becoming yet another convention (Hind: “The London Group”). Later, in May 1915, Nevinson tried to return to his ambulance unit but was rejected for over-staying his leave. At the beginning of June 1915, he volunteered as a private in the Royal Army Medical Corps at the Third London General Hospital in the London borough of Wandsworth (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 120). A few days later, his sombrely coloured Cubo-Futurist *Searchlights* (Manchester City Art Gallery) was one of six works he exhibited as a ‘Futurist Independent’ in the one and only Vorticist exhibition held at the Doré Galleries in June 1915. The following month, his pen and ink drawing of *Returning to the Trenches* was reproduced in the second and what transpired to be the last issue of *Blast*. Even Lewis paid reluctant tribute to the power of Nevinson’s wartime Futurism, perhaps ironically saluting him in the magazine as “Marinetti’s solitary English disciple” (Lewis: “The Six Hundred, Verestchagin and Uccello”, 25).

In November 1915, Nevinson secured ten days precious leave to get married. He later claimed that during the last two days of his honeymoon, perhaps to the irritation of his new wife, he painted two war scenes that still define the Great War to this day: *La Mitrailleuse* (Tate Britain, London) and *Deserted Trench on the Yser* (Private Collection). Neither were executed in his accustomed Futurist style; the former work suggested that he was now pursuing a form of simplified Cubo-Futurist manner, and the latter represented a variant of nineteenth-century Japanese wood block prints à la Hiroshige and Hokusai. To a degree, the manner in which the French machine gunners are depicted mirrors the way in which Severini presented French soldiers in action in canvases such as *Train Blindé* (Armoured Train in Action, 1915), shown at the Galerie Boutet de Monvel in Paris (*Ire exposition futuriste d’art plastique de la guerre et d’autres œuvres antérieures*, 15 January – 1 February 1916).

Nevinson moves away from Futurism, 1916–1917

Nevinson exhibited *La Mitrailleuse* in March 1916 at the Allied Artists Association along with two oil paintings, *Night + Light + Crowd* and *Violence: An Abstraction*,

which contemporary newspaper descriptions suggest were executed in a more overtly Futurist style but are now lost (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 135). *La Mitrailleuse* impressed many observers: the painter Walter Sickert, who had been prepared to give Futurism the benefit of the doubt before the war but now felt that as a style it no longer had a future, described the canvas as “the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on the war in the history of painting” (Sickert: “O Matre Pulchra”, 35).

It was suggested in the British press with increasing frequency that Nevinson was now attempting to place some distance between himself and Futurism ([Anon.]: “War Pictures”). The artist, normally never slow to defend himself in print, remained quiet on the question, although he was still, albeit only intermittently, in touch with Severini. Indeed, he was hoping to invite the Italian to an exhibition of recent Modernist art from Paris he was planning to hold in central London. Unfortunately, this exhibition, which was to include Futurist works, never took place (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 153). In his own first solo exhibition, held at the Leicester Galleries from September to November 1916, no new Futurist work was included. In the catalogue to the show, Nevinson wrote a “Note by the Artist” in which he declared that he now reserved the right to paint in the style that seemed fitting for the subject matter (Nevinson: “Note by the Artist”, 7). However, as yet, he did not renounce his attachment to Futurism. Indeed, in work that followed this exhibition, flashes of Futurism still appeared in his output, for example in the drawing, *Temperature 102.4*, reproduced in the *Gazette of the Third London General* in March 1917, which depicted what it had felt like for the artist to be in a hospital ward at Wandsworth suffering from a hallucination-inducing high fever. The following month, he painted *Swooping Down on a Hostile Plane* with some diluted Futurist touches in the treatment of the British biplane diving to attack a German Taube monoplane. The painting was quickly purchased by Sir Alfred Mond, recently appointed first chairman of the new Imperial War Museum, who then donated it as one of the first works to enter the Museum’s art collection (see Archival sources: Nevinson: *Letter to Sir Alfred Mond*, 30 April 1917; quoted in Harries: *The War Artists*, 39 and Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 156). Shortly thereafter, Nevinson was appointed an official war artist working for the Department of Information and spent July 1917 in France.

When he was given his new charge, his employers had been hoping that Nevinson would paint “things full of violence and terror” (see Archival sources: Masterman: *Letter to John Buchan*, 18 May 1917; quoted in Harries: *The War Artists*, 40). Even a few thrilling Futurist images would, perhaps, be permissible (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 157). However, they were rather disappointed with what he did eventually produce back in London during the autumn of 1917. He returned in the main to a form of gritty, pared-down Realism that harked back to the look of the prewar Camden Town Group. He painted only one work in his former Futurist style of 1914–1915, an image of a British soldier throwing a grenade that seems to detonate in the air above him, entitled *The Bomber* (Private collection; lithograph from 1918, British Museum, London). While Nevinson seemed very pleased with this image, Thomas Derrick, a Department of

Information official, was left cold by it and thought that it would be best for Nevinson not to undertake any further Futurist experiments (see Archival sources: Derrick: *Letter to C.F.G. Masterman*, 16 October 1917; quoted in Harries: *The War Artists*, 40–41 and Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 161).

Futurism was almost completely absent from the works Nevinson exhibited as an official war artist at the Leicester Galleries, London in March 1918. In his preface to the catalogue, he declared: “Since my last exhibition I have experimented with various styles of painting: I wished to create a distinct method in harmony with each new picture. I do not believe the same technique can be used to express a quiet static moonlight night, the dynamic force of a bomber and the restless rhythm of mechanical transport” (Nevinson: “Preface”, 6).

Critics, who in the past never cared much for Nevinson’s Futurism, noted with considerable relish that he seemed to have abandoned the movement (Walsh: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 166). The artist himself remained silent on the matter, but during the year he occasionally created works that were executed in his old Futurist manner, such as the impressive mezzotints *Wind* (1918) and *Limehouse* (also known as *Southwark*, 1918), as well as a series of four panels in oils entitled *The Seasons*, exhibited in London at the London Group in November 1918. Two months later, in January 1919, Nevinson did formally announce that he had parted company with Futurism, although he took the opportunity to defend it against the accusation from a Danish Professor that to be a Futurist automatically indicated that one was mentally ill (Nevinson: “Are Futurists Mad? Mr. Nevinson Thinks Not”).

Post-war Futurism in the United Kingdom

Futurist elements, from time to time, could be sighted in Nevinson’s compositions, for example in *The Roof Garden* (mezzotint, 1919), a lively image of the shadows formed by a dancer’s legs, or in the lithograph *The Great White Way*, depicting the stylized rays of light blazing down on night-time Broadway in a manner that recalls pre-war Balla. For much of the 1920s, Nevinson eschewed Futurism, although towards the end of the decade Futurist fragments began to reappear in some images with a lively contemporary urban setting, such as *Amongst The Nerves of the World* (1928–1929; collection: Museum of London), exhibited in October 1930 as his tribute to the dynamism of Fleet Street, then the heart of the British newspaper industry (Ross: *Twenties London*, 10–11) and *Any Wintry Afternoon in England* (1929–1930; collection: Manchester City Art Gallery), which was exhibited to considerable acclaim in the National Society in February 1932 (Knowles and Jeffrey: *C.R.W. Nevinson*, 50–51). During this period, he also praised the use of Futurist elements in contemporary poster design, such as the superimposition and interpenetration of forms, particularly in the designs of artists working for London Underground such as Edward

McKnight Kauffer (1890–1954) and Clive Gardiner (1891–1960) (see Black: “Pictures with a Sting”, 149–153).

By the early 1930s, Nevinson made occasional references to his past adherence to Futurism, perhaps further damaging its reputation among many of his British readers by highlighting Marinetti’s involvement in the creation of Fascism in 1919 as well as the movement’s continued rôle in vividly celebrating the rule of the Duce. However, he never entirely disowned his past as a Futurist. In May 1931, he described Marinetti in the *Daily Express* admiringly as “one of the men who taught me how to live”, along with Wyndham Lewis, Van Gogh and Sigmund Freud (Nevinson: “These Men Taught Me How to Live”). Six months later, he justified his joining the Futurist movement in 1914 as an attempt to inject “some much-needed vigour into English Art” and “confront the sloppy jabber of Socialists and Victorian sentimentalities” (Nevinson: “From Paint to White Wash”).

In his autobiography, published in November 1937, Nevinson rather nostalgically recalled his prewar contacts with Marinetti, for whom he evidently still retained a degree of admiration and affection. More in sorrow than in condemnation, he lamented that Marinetti had been “the John the Baptist of the [Fascist] movement”, while “Futurism was but the candlelight for Fascism” (Nevinson: *Paint and Prejudice*, 90). He mused: “It is a black thought for me to look back and see that I was associated with Italian Futurism much as Christianity was quenched by the Spanish Inquisition [...] Mussolini seized on it and worked his thug will. What a fate for an intellectual idea!” (Nevinson: *Paint and Prejudice*, 89)

C.R.W. Nevinson, the last English Futurist, died in October 1946. In his obituaries there was much discussion of the undoubted merits of his First World War art but little recognition that some of his most impressive examples of that art had been produced when he was a committed Futurist ([Anon.]: “Mr. C.R.W. Nevinson: A Versatile Artist”, 12).

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