

**'The Grin upon the Deathshead': A Study of Satire in 1920s
British Art**

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Abstract

This study of satire in British art in the 1920s questions what prompted the reappearance of satire in painting, what characterised the new form of 'modernist' satire, if and how it relates to the English satirical tradition, and how this new mode evolved over the course of the decade. In attempting to answer these questions, consideration of the post-war context with its rapid, unsettling modernisation and profound social change is crucial.

I begin with Wyndham Lewis, whose 'Tyros and Portraits' exhibition in 1921 seems to mark the emergence of a new, more bitter and cynical, brand of satire. Lewis's return to figuration can be analysed in the context of the post-war 'rappel à l'ordre', and his *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* can therefore be interpreted as a complex dialogue with neo-classicism, used here in the service of satire as a harsh critique of post-war society. Towards the end of the decade, Edward Burra exemplifies a move away from Lewis's antagonism in favour of a more detached and amused satirical approach that echoes the writing of contemporaries such as Evelyn Waugh. His early work raises interesting questions regarding changing attitudes to gender and identity, and the influence of modern technology, cinema and jazz.

The Sitwells form an important link between these two artists in their role as sitters, patrons and self-acclaimed leaders of the modernist movement in the arts in Britain. They also play a key part in reintroducing the popular, traditional humour of the *commedia dell'arte* into a modernist context. The Sitwell trio are at once the butt of the satire these works contain, while also meting out satirical ripostes in their turn, engendering a momentum in this neglected genre that appears to me significant. I end my study with Cecil Beaton, a protégé of the Sitwells and part of a younger generation who adopted the satirical mode as expedient. Following the trajectory of Beaton's career into the 1930s illustrates the decline in power of satire, as political developments claimed attention across Europe.

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Introduction

The distinctive iconography of the 1920s has come to symbolise a certain sort of 'modernity'. But though the visual arts played a major role in defining the decade, painting in Britain struggled to reassert its avant-garde credentials after the First World War. British art cannot be compared to the radicalism of work being produced in Europe at this time; there were no movements such as Dada or Surrealism to forge a cohesive artistic modernism in Britain. Yet it is nevertheless greatly undervalued in art historical terms, and the work of individual artists played an important role in articulating the nation's psychological state in the decade following the war. And the most forceful examples of engagement with the fractured post-war society are those that employ satire. This mode, or genre, emerged at a significant historical moment, and consequently marked a turning point in the course of British avant-garde painting. The war was both catalyst and ever-present backdrop to the development of satire in the 1920s, its impact not only felt through direct experience, but also indirectly through its stimulation of technology and mechanisation, and through the breakdown of inter-generational relations that it exacerbated. That there is little focus exclusively on the art of the twenties is at least partly the result of the fracturing of avant-garde artistic groups in the aftermath of the Great War. The impact of the war on the society and culture of the 1920s cannot be overestimated; 'the twenties' becomes synonymous with 'post-war' when referring to this decade as a distinct period in British art and social history. The war will therefore play a major, though not always explicit, role in my analysis. The reappearance of satire – in terms of fine art rather than graphic art – in Britain in the twenties is an interesting, and not yet fully explored, reaction to the post-war situation. Exploring the theme of satire will allow me to focus on issues of society and the impact of modernity in this disorientating period of upheaval.

Approaching satire from a cultural angle, this study will attempt to trace its development across the post-war decade, locating its roots and exploring its progress and evolution (or re-invention) while acknowledging the complexities and contradictions that such an essentially protean genre

imposes. In order to illustrate this development I will look in detail at how satire is used in a certain paintings, how these paintings relate to literary satire and other related cultural trends of the period, and the relationship between the artists and the targets of their satire. In this task I have chosen as a starting point Wyndham Lewis's Tyro paintings of 1920-1 [figs.1 & 2]; my counterpoint at the end of the decade is Edward Burra, whose first solo exhibition was held in 1929.

The thesis therefore begins with Wyndham Lewis, whose 'Tyros and Portraits' exhibition, held at the Leicester Galleries in April 1921, appears to mark the emergence of a new, more bitter and cynical, brand of satire. Lewis, I will argue, pioneers a 'modernist' form of satire, which maintains its links with a long satirical (mainly literary) tradition while asserting its modernity by refusing satire's former moral didacticism and situating itself firmly in the complex and uncertain post-war world. This stance I aim to delineate by questioning the adoption of 'classicism' as a philosophical and political rallying point, around which Lewis's initial satirical paintings (and the corresponding literature of Joyce, Eliot and Pound, among others) were created. Lewis's satire was founded in his experience of war and his response to the post-war world. His failure to revive the radical modernism of 1914 resulted in a questioning of his identity as an artist and the consequent need to assume an aggressive posture in the face of the Bloomsbury group and their 'art-for-art's-sake' values, which formed one of the central targets of his satire. This is widely recognised in terms of Lewis's literature, culminating in his satirical tour de force *The Apes of God* (1930); however, despite the Tyro paintings being recognised as satire – and, indeed, presented as such by Lewis himself – they have not as yet been placed within a wider modernist satirical tradition. I will assert that these paintings in fact revive satire as a genre to be employed in modernist painting, and inspire other artists to adopt the genre as one with strong cultural purchase in this period. In this context I will also look at William Roberts, who, like Lewis, had been a Vorticist before the war and continued in a figurative style that addressed aspects of modern life.

The Sitwells – on whom the second chapter focuses – form an important link between Lewis and Burra, as well as many others, in their role as patrons and self-acclaimed leaders of the modernist movement in the arts in Britain, bridging the gap between the generations. In this way they illustrate the complex interrelationships between artist and patron and between the satirist and the object of satire – from both sides. They have been extensively written about biographically and in terms of literary criticism, but apart from the exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in 1994-5, their impact on avant-garde painters of the period has received very little attention. They play an important role in my research as the models for both Lewis's *Portrait of Edith Sitwell* [fig.7] and, arguably, for Burra's *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], as well as playing a part in reintroducing the popular, traditional humour of the *commedia dell'arte* into a modernist context. The Sitwell trio are at once the butt of the satire these works contain, while also meting out satirical ripostes in their turn, engendering a momentum in this neglected genre that was highly significant.

Chapter three addresses the work of Edward Burra, whose first solo exhibition took place at the end of the decade, in 1929. Burra's work shows a move away from the antagonism of Lewis towards a more detached and amused satirical approach. The difference of Burra's satirical engagement from either Lewis's or the Sitwells' testifies to a significant development within the genre over the course of the decade. This is reflected in Burra's wider viewpoint, which takes in the *beau monde* not just of London but of Europe, and his more sympathetic stance which alters the fundamental relationship between the satirist and the object of satire. Existing scholarship on Burra is essentially monographic, with surveys by John Rothenstein (1945; 1973) and, more recently, Simon Martin (2011), as well as Jane Stevenson's biography (2008), Andrew Causey's catalogue raisonné (1985) and Andrew Stephenson's doctoral thesis (1988). My research will add to this existing literature by approaching Burra's early career from a thematic angle, and placing it in a social context specific to the Britain of his contemporaries.

The fourth chapter widens this investigation of how and why satire had evolved by the end of the 1920s by looking at several of Burra's contemporaries, namely Cecil Beaton and Rex Whistler, who reflect the somewhat frivolous nature of the younger generation with their whimsical appropriation of 18th Century tropes. Indeed, such a choice serves to underline the generational aspect to satire's development by illustrating the similarities in attitude between the three artists, who all tend towards mockery in their use of exaggeration and theatrical artifice. By extending some of the assertions made in chapter three, this section aims to address more broadly the cultural context of the late twenties, looking at the influence of and interrelationships between literature, theatre and satirical art. However, the extension of the argument ultimately weakens the case for satire as a significant genre in 1920s British art; though Beaton and Whistler adopt what could be construed as a satirical attitude early in their respective careers, their mature work from the 1930s onwards refuses the claim for them as satirists. Satire can thus be understood as an apposite tool used to express a widespread, and widely acknowledged, trauma following the Great War and the subsequent post-war readjustment. The younger generation, however – Burra perhaps excluded – took up satire simply as a mode that was available to them in a vacuum of discredited values and reactionary modes of expression, lacking the real passion and bitterness that infused the satire of their predecessors. In this way the chapter looks to a conclusion in which, with the advent of the 1930s, satire appears as a cultural mode in decline, becoming a mild, reflexive ghost of itself.

There are a number of important surveys covering the art of the First World War and the interwar period in terms of the development of 'modernism' in British art – for instance, the Tate's *The History of British Art 1870-Now* (2008) edited by Chris Stephens, and David Peters Corbett's *The Modernity of English Art 1914-1930* (1997), which recognises the integral part played by the war in defining the art of the 1920s. Charles Harrison characterises the twenties as a 'hiatus' in the relevant chapter heading in *English Art and*

Modernism 1900-1939 (1994); against this negative view of the decade I have positioned my research, in contrast, as a positive reappraisal of an as yet under-appreciated period in British art history. Although other surveys may not apply such a dismissive approach, the nature of the survey necessitates a broad comparison between ages, styles or movements, therefore not allowing for the subtler – but to my mind no less important – developments. By limiting my thesis more or less to the years 1920-1930 I aim to highlight the significant innovations in painting that were sparked by the social and cultural disruption of the recent war and incipient modernisation. In addition, by focusing on a theme – satire – I intend to draw together disparate artists, as well as making connections between their work and other art forms such as literature, photography and film. Thus my research is at once more focused chronologically and thematically than much of the existing literature covering this period, while the theme also allows it to be broader in scope. From a literary point of view, on the other hand, there are many studies of satire, both general, theoretical works and those looking specifically at writers of the 1920s, such as Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh. These are useful in constructing a working definition of satire on which to base my research, and by subsequently applying this literary or theoretical analysis to painting, I aim to suggest a new concept of the term, and at the same time a more all-encompassing view of painting in the 1920s as part of a greater cultural movement.

After outlining a definition of satire to use as a benchmark in the course of my research, I propose to begin by exploring the social context of the 1920s in Britain. There are many socio-cultural histories of this period; for example, Martin Pugh's *'We Danced All Night': A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (2009), Ross McKibbin's *Classes & Cultures: England 1918-1951* (2000), and Robert Graves and Alan Hodge's *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (1963). There are also a number of important works that address the impact of the Great War on society and culture, namely Samuel Hynes' *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (1990) and Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (2000). I was

also concerned to include personal reminiscences as well as later analyses by historians – Douglas Goldring’s *The Nineteen Twenties: A General Survey and Some Personal Memories* (1945) and Christopher Isherwood’s *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties* (1979) provide first-hand (though also subjective) insights into life in the 1920s. I especially wish to look at the perception, which Hynes asserts, of a generation gap between those who fought in the war and those who came of age only after it ended – Martin Green’s *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of ‘Decadence’ in England after 1918* (1977) provides the story of this ‘Lost Generation’ as they were dubbed by Evelyn Waugh – as well as the conflict of both with the ‘father figures’, those in authority who were seen as culpable for the massacre of their contemporaries. This is crucial in defining the objects of attack in the satire of this period, and the relationship that existed between the satirist and his target. It will also be necessary here to address the influence of modern technological advances and new forms of entertainment, notably cinema and jazz, which form the subject of many of Burra’s satires in particular. The pace of modern life was initially so accelerated as to effect a sense of destabilisation and anxiety, before the pursuit of pleasure – epitomised by what has been persistently seen as the hedonistic whirl of the ‘Bright Young People’ – is ultimately perceived as hollow and futile, contributing to an overwhelming sense of cynicism and disillusionment that sharply distinguishes the satire of the late twenties. Thus a general acceptance of modernisation rapidly develops; fast cars and modern forms of entertainment are no longer seen as thrilling but as a mundane part of life, and – as depicted in Anthony Powell’s *Afternoon Men* [1931] – ultimately unfulfilling. As much of the research I will draw on is related to literary satire in this period, I have considered it useful to investigate the interrelationship between satirical art and literature, focusing on Aldous Huxley and Evelyn Waugh as appropriate parallels to such artists as Lewis and Burra.

Satire is defined in the field of literary criticism as a genre that exposes and ridicules human vice and folly, ideally with the intent of shaming individuals,

and society itself, into improvement; its purpose is not so much humour for its own sake as an attack on something strongly disapproved of by the satirist, using the weapon of wit. Satire elicits its power by distancing itself from its equivalents in reality, and through its exaggeration or excess signifying, in Heideggerian terms, what has 'gone missing from the lifeworld or what has not yet come to be within modernity.'¹ Lewis's concept of satire, which Geoffrey Wagner summarises as 'disinterested and cruel', 'violently destructive' and 'amoral', epitomises the Juvenalian brand of satire, while Burra in contrast tends towards a more Horatian version of satire, maintaining a playful, light-hearted humour, mildly and self-deprecatingly critical of social folly in its exaggerations.² The latter method acknowledges more willingly the artist's own implication in these follies – a problematic relationship of uneasy proximity rather than simple opposition between the satirist and his or her subject matter, which Michael Seidel draws attention to.³ In tracing the development of the genre through the 1920s, I will emphasise the important part played by satire in defining British art during this period, and in doing so argue a more radical stance for British art in general terms, in contrast to the widely accepted view of it as conservative and reactionary.

It is perhaps a prerequisite of all satire that it should address and critique contemporary life, yet the specificity of satire in the twenties is of a different order to that of Hogarth. While Hogarth's satire ridiculed those timeless human vices that recur in every age, the paintings of Lewis or the early novels of Aldous Huxley are more deeply rooted in the specific social and cultural context in which they were created. By analysing the work of Lewis and Burra and their contemporaries I aim to look at what distinguished the 'modernist' satire that emerged in the 1920s from traditional satire, locating this

¹ David Wragg (2005) *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen. p.217.

² Geoffrey Wagner (1957) *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. p.213.

³ Michael Seidel (1998) 'Satire, Lampoon, Libel, Slander'. In Steven N. Zwicker (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1650-1740*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.55.

phenomenon in the particular context of the post-war decade. In looking at the paintings of Lewis and Burra from a thematic angle, my thesis will also allow a reappraisal of their work, and of British art in the 1920s more generally, highlighting an underappreciated genre in modernist painting.

Satire is an elusive concept; whether it is a genre or a mode, or can be employed as both simultaneously, is still open to argument.⁴ The debate surrounding it stems from its origins – the question being whether the term evolved from the Greek Satyr plays or Roman saturnalia, medieval carnivals or formal verse satire, or from the Latin ‘satura’ meaning a ‘medley’, in reference to plates of assorted fruit.⁵ It is also closely related to, and therefore often confused with, terms such as humour, parody, burlesque, the comic, the grotesque, lampoon, and caricature. In looking at these varied definitions and theories of satire, and by applying them to, or testing them against, specific works of art and literature, the central question I am aiming to address is what distinguishes satire in 1920s Britain from that which has gone before, or that which is manifested in other contexts; and how, and if, satire evolves over the course of the decade.

Discussion of, and the attempt to define, satire is so far the work mainly of literary critics rather than art historians, who have shown little interest in the

⁴ Brian Connery and Kirk Combe assert that ‘in general usage ... satire remains less an identifiable genre than a mode, and a great variety of works have been placed under its rubric’ [Connery & Combe (Eds.) (1995) *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literary Criticism*. Basingstoke & London: Macmillan. p.9]; Leon Guilhamet, on the other hand, argues that to understand satire, ‘it is necessary to know it as a genre,’ as satire’s generic status can be defined or at least its limits better understood; the essential ingredients of generic satire, he claims, are a combination of modal satire and variable rhetorical and generic structures which are borrowed and deformed – the dynamic of satire transforms these components into a new generic identity [Leon Guilhamet (1987) *Satire and the Transformation of Genre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp.2-11]; Matthew Hodgart asserts that ‘satire is not one of the traditional literary genres’ but ‘a special category of literature which cuts across ordinary genres’ [Matthew Hodgart (1969) *Satire*. New York & Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company. p.31].

⁵ See Ruben Quintero (Ed.) (2007) *A Companion to Satire* for an introduction to the disputed origins of the term ‘satire’.

question. However, their varied definitions of the term are wide enough not to be limited to textual material, and are, I believe, equally effective (or otherwise) when applied to the visual. It is generally agreed that the eighteenth century was the 'golden age' of satire in Britain – Swift, Dryden and Pope the masters in written form; Hogarth, Gillray and Cruickshank their counterparts in the pictorial – and that the power of satire declined after this.⁶ In the twentieth century, philosophical writing such as Bergson's 'Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic' [1900, translated in 1911] and Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* [1905] renewed interest in theories of humour and the comic, and Bergson especially was a key influence on Wyndham Lewis, who had attended his lectures in Paris before the war. The 1940s and 1950s saw the appearance of a theoretical approach to satire; Northrop Frye led the way, identifying, in 'The Nature of Satire' [1944], the two essential components of satire: 'one is wit or humour, the other an object of attack.'⁷ This was, and still remains, a valid starting point; nevertheless, subsequent theorists have been quick to underline the difficulties of definition. Leonard Feinberg warns us that 'satire is such a protean species of art that no two scholars use the same definition or the same outline of ingredients' and Robert Elliott asserts that 'no strict definition can encompass the complexity of a word which signifies, on one hand, a kind of literature, and on the other, a spirit or tone which expresses itself in many literary genres.'⁸ However, they go on to offer broad, working definitions of satire as, respectively, 'a playfully critical distortion of the familiar' or as 'a

⁶ Brian Connery and Kirk Combe write that 'Swift and Pope represent a culmination of numerous cultural and literary forces at work in English society and their work now appears paradigmatic' [in Connery & Combe, 1995, p.3]; by the twentieth century, Edward and Lillian Bloom claim, the 'Age of Satire' lies in the past and they cite Roy Campbell: 'one of the chief glories of English literature has been dead for a hundred years' [Edward & Lillian Bloom (1979) *Satire's Persuasive Voice*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press. p.27].

⁷ From Northrop Frye's 'The Nature of Satire' [1944], cited in Peter Petro (1982) *Modern Satire: Four Studies*. Berlin: Mouton Publishers. p.6.

⁸ Leonard Feinberg (1967) *Introduction to Satire*. Ames, Iowa: The Iowa State University Press. p.vii; Robert Elliott's entry on 'Satire', published in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* [1965], cited in Petro, 1982, p.5.

poem in which wickedness or folly is censured.’⁹ Edgar Rosenheim Jr. emphasises another aspect of satire – namely its topicality: ‘all satire is not only an attack; it is an attack upon *discernible, historically authentic particulars*.’¹⁰

Despite Roy Campbell’s claim in 1930 that his own time was ‘so inimical to satire that there is no depth of grovelling to which its representatives will not descend,’ there was a significant revival of satire in the post-war period.¹¹ Andrew Causey writes of the re-emergence of satire in art in the 1920s – ‘the decade that broke once and for all the Victorian resistance to satire’ – stating that Wyndham Lewis and William Roberts ‘opened up for post-war British painting the art of satire, which Burra was to develop.’¹² This suggests that Causey sees satire as evolving gradually throughout the decade. Alvin Kernan believes that the re-emergence of satire in the twentieth century was due to

The fatuously simple belief in progress, progress based on some form of material improvement, on scientific achievements, and on wildly optimistic assumptions about human nature and history.¹³

Various sub-categories of satire have been identified, deriving from the formal verse satire that was developed by the Roman poets and structured around the divisions of satirist and interlocutor, thesis and antithesis, vice and virtue. Menippean satire is a form of prose satire characterized by

⁹ Feinberg, 1967, p.19; Robert Elliott, paraphrasing Dr. Johnson’s definition of satire, in Petro, 1982, p.5.

¹⁰ Edward W. Rosenheim (1963) *Swift and the Satirist’s Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. pp.317-8.

¹¹ Roy Campbell (1930) Preface to ‘A Rejected Review’. In Wyndham Lewis (Ed.) *Enemy Pamphlets No.1: Satire and Fiction. Preceded by The History of a Rejected Review by Roy Campbell*. London: The Arthur Press. pp.13-14. This vituperative comment should be put in context, as it followed the rejection by the editor of *The New Statesman* of Campbell’s review of Wyndham Lewis’s satiric novel, *The Apes of God*. Lewis was equally incensed by the rejection of a good review, and published *The Enemy Pamphlet No.1*, in which Campbell’s rejected review appears, in response.

¹² Andrew Causey (1985) *Edward Burra: Complete Catalogue*. Oxford: Phaidon. p.18; p.14.

¹³ Alvin B. Kernan (Ed.) (1962) *Modern Satire*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World. p.v.

attacking mental attitudes rather than specific individuals; Horatian satire is indulgent, tolerant, amused and witty, while Juvenalian satire is 'bitter and ironic criticism of contemporary persons and institutions that is filled with personal invective, angry moral indignation, and pessimism.'¹⁴ Leon Guilhamet focuses on satire's formalist features, as a branch of rhetoric, subdividing it into demonstrative (focusing on the present), deliberative (focusing on the future) and judicial (using a legalistic frame) satire – and also branding it as parasitic, dependent on attaching itself to other genres.¹⁵ Of these forms of satire, different approaches were chosen as the decade progressed, according to the need and intent of the satirist; in a very generalised sense, the satire in the immediate post-war years was broadly Juvenalian, while in the later twenties it tended towards the Horatian, though Menippean satire can be observed to exist simultaneously with both. Nevertheless, applying these categories – even loosely – allows one to envisage a gradual development in satire over the decade, such formalist definitions giving shape to a progress and decline that echoes the changing situation and mentality of the satirists themselves.

However, before questioning the more subtle distinctions between the various forms of satire employed over the course of the 1920s, one must ask in what ways early twentieth century satire – specifically that of the twenties – stands apart from earlier manifestations of the form. John R. Clark notes that the motifs used are darker – 'recurrent literary subjects include the anti-utopia, the scatological, cannibalism, the triumph of the machine over mankind; all diminish the human race, reducing it to manure, monkeydom, savagery, or mechanism.'¹⁶ He goes on to argue that 'horror and grotesquerie are especially suited to the modern era in which the self has been recognised

¹⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica (2013) 'Juvenalian Satire' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [online]. Available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/308986/Juvenalian-satire> [Accessed 8 May 2013].

¹⁵ Leon Guilhamet (1987) *Satire and the Transformation of Genre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp.4-6; pp.21-67.

¹⁶ John R. Clark (1991) *The Modern Satiric Grotesque: And Its Traditions*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky. pp.1-2.

as being irrational and unstable, and traumatic current events have toppled Renaissance *humanitas* and idealism.¹⁷ Lisa Colletta likewise argues that dark humour is an important characteristic of Modernism, and that 'a new form of Modernist social satire is created in the interwar period' – one that revels in the non-rational, the unstable, and the fragmented, and resists easy definition and political usefulness.¹⁸ For her, Modernist satire refuses the traditional social purpose of satire – namely to identify and discourage through ridicule man's misdemeanours, and, in correcting this vice, to reintegrate the individual into society – and consequently brings a new pessimism and ambivalence to the form. Modern satire, she claims, 'has more to do with the coping devices of gallows humour than with the corrective function of exposing wickedness or foolishness' – a nod to the Freudian psychoanalytical approach that was itself a 'modern' and sometimes unnerving way of seeing the world.¹⁹

However, the dichotomy she outlines is misleading; Wyndham Lewis provides an (admittedly isolated) example of a satirical writer and artist in the 1920s whose work, while illustrating a strong modernist tendency to fragmentation and ambivalence, also continues to see satire as a mode capable of correcting society's vices and giving moral guidance. Geoffrey Wagner describes Lewis' approach to satire as 'the correction of vice and folly,' the artist as prophet or seer, opening the eyes of humanity to their faults.²⁰ Yet despite this admirable didactic purpose, the pessimism that Colletta considers inherent in modernist satire is overwhelming in Lewis's work, and seems to deny the possibility of a happy outcome – for all his impassioned attacks on the state of the world, does Lewis ever really believe he will succeed in changing anything? Therefore Colletta's assertion that the social purpose disappears from satire in its modernist form is perhaps justified, if qualified by the recognition that this is not for lack of effort or intent.

¹⁷ Clark, 1991, p.5.

¹⁸ Lisa Colletta (2003) *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. pp.2-3.

¹⁹ Colletta, 2003, p.6.

²⁰ Wagner, 1957, p.212.

Couching her argument in the literary, Colletta acknowledges the centrality of the First World War in the transformation of the genre:

The comedic works of many British novelists between the wars are haunted by a sense of anxiety and powerlessness, marked by feelings of loss and uncertainty and shot through with the trauma of violence and the threat of further brutality.²¹

This contradicts one of the fundamental aspects of satire according to Northrop Frye, by which it requires moral norms to be 'relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured'; these are manifestly missing in the uncertain climate of the post-war years.²² The certainties of the Victorian and Edwardian ages had crumbled, accepted gender relations were being questioned and the mass murder of 1914-18 had called into question fundamental notions of good and evil. Therefore one must accept that satire can exist – and potentially – without the need for clear-cut moral standards.

Can one consequently delineate the 'new' satire of the twenties in negative terms then, as lacking the social purpose, the optimism and the solid moral foundations that underpinned the character of previous satirical forms? A negative definition works well when extended to the satirical novels of the period: apart from the two other factors identified by Frye as necessary to satire – a humour based on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd; and an object of attack – the significant feature of these novels was the absence of both plot and of any meaningful development in the characters.²³ In

²¹ Colletta, 2003, p.1.

²² Northrop Frye (1957) *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. p.223.

²³ Northrop Frye writes: 'Two things ... are essential to satire; one is wit or humour founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack. Attack without humour ... forms one of the boundaries of satire [ie: invective or denunciation] ... The humour of pure fantasy [forms] the other boundary or satire.' [Frye, 1957, p.224-5]; Stephen Jay Greenblatt cites Alvin Kernan: 'the most striking quality of satire is the absence of plot.'

comparing the novels of Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley, Stephen Jay Greenblatt concludes that there is 'rarely any significant change from the original settings, or any meaningful and lasting achievements over the course of the novel' and, similarly, the characters fail to expand their understanding, never rising to the level of true heroism or humanity, always remaining impotent, dupes or instruments of forces they cannot control.²⁴ In this sense, like Lewis's Tyros, these characters embody an element of the '*mechanical encrusted on the living*', appearing at once despicable and pitiable, their callous or questionable behaviour never entirely their own fault.²⁵ There is a pervasive sense of futility in the novels of the interwar generation – the importance of which was noted by Cyril Connolly in the literature of the 1920s. Connolly saw the re-emergence of satire as a corollary of this attitude, writing in *Enemies of Promise* [1938]: 'This is a satirical age and among the vast reading public the power of an artist to awaken ridicule has never been so great.'²⁶ The protagonists of these novels – Connolly refers specifically to those of Huxley – have no control over their destinies and life is perceived as a cruel farce. However much the authors deplore the state of affairs, they despair of ever being able to change anything; they bring a ludicrous situation to the attention of the public, but deny any route towards resolution or redemption. Viewed in this way, the purpose of the satire appears more as a palliative than a cure – a Freudian reprieve from the overwhelming horror of real life.

Another key aspect of the new ambivalence separating interwar satire from the more direct and purposeful satire that had gone before lies in its duality. It establishes dichotomies, oppositions, which rather than clarifying tend

[Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists: Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. p.107].

²⁴ Greenblatt, 1965, p.107.

²⁵ Henri Bergson (1911) *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. London: Macmillan. p. 37; this was Bergson's definition of the laughable or comic – as he describes at greater length: "*The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.*" [Bergson, 1911, p.29].

²⁶ Cyril Connolly (1961) *Enemies of Promise*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.53.

towards deceit and increasing complexity.

Most satirists ... *claim* one purpose for satire, that of high-minded and usually socially oriented moral and intellectual reform; however, they *engage* in something quite different, namely, mercilessly savage attack on some person or thing that, frequently for private reasons, displeases them. The veneer of civilized behaviour serves to mask great primitive urges. Thus, satire is a literary Trojan horse for which polite (or politic) artfulness produces a dissembling form, serving first to contain and conceal, and then to unleash the primitive passions of the satirist.²⁷

There are always multiple ways of reading such satire. Lewis repeatedly outlines his concept of satire in his writing, each time conceiving it in a slightly different light, so that if not contradicting himself outright, his idea of satire certainly appears multi-faceted, or protean – as he concedes, ‘satire is a very relative term indeed’.²⁸ In an *Satire and Fiction* he writes: ‘[the] objective, non-emotional truth of the scientific intelligence sometimes takes on the exuberant sensuous quality of creative art: then it is very apt to be called “satire” ...’ and goes on to maintain that satire is ‘based rather upon the “truth” of the intellect than upon the “truth” of the average romantic sensualism.’²⁹ Another article stresses satire’s ‘great awareness of the body’, asserting that ‘satire is anthropomorphic; it is, in the technical jargon of art, *externalist*. And the objective world of common sense is its philosophic field.’³⁰ In *Men Without Art*, Lewis writes that ‘to “Satire” I have given a meaning so wide as to confound it with “Art”’ and he later declares his support ‘for the method of *external* approach – for the wisdom of the eye,

²⁷ Brian A. Connery & Kirk Combe, 1995, p.2.

²⁸ Wyndham Lewis (1934) *Studies in the Art of Laughter. The London Mercury*. 30 (180). London: Rolls House Publishing. p.510.

²⁹ Lewis, 1930 [*Satire and Fiction*], p.48.

³⁰ Wyndham Lewis (1989) *The Satirist and the Physical World*. In *Wyndham Lewis: Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change: Essays on Art, Literature and Society 1914-1956*. (Edited by Paul Edwards). Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press. p.210.

rather than that of the ear', remarking 'and as for pure satire – there the eye is supreme'; thus, as Robert Elliott concludes, Lewis essentially asserts that 'the way of satire is the way of art.'³¹ Lewis also believed that the modern artist and satirist should engage with real life, declaring that 'art at its fullest is ... a sort of *life*, a very great "reality"' – though for satire to be effective in skewering its object of attack, he acknowledged the need to remain detached and coldly observant.³² Indeed, in *Tarr*, art is considered as cold and external, the antithesis of the human or humorous, and in *Rude Assignment* satire is described as a 'cruel and detestable sport.'³³ In describing his work thus, Lewis brands his satire as Juvenalian rather than Horatian – a satire of 'withering invective, insults and slashing attack.'³⁴ However, in terms of his literary output, Jonathan Goodwin classifies Lewis's style as Menippean satire, 'a conflict of ideas rather than character', achieved 'by piling up an enormous mass of erudition about his theme or in overwhelming his pedantic targets with an avalanche of their own jargon'.³⁵ This invites comparison with Aldous Huxley's 'novel of ideas', in which the characters' purpose is as mouthpieces for a series of ideological or philosophical viewpoints; this literary approach was pursued by Huxley throughout the twenties, from *Crome Yellow* [1921] to *Point Counter Point* [1928].

³¹ Wyndham Lewis (1934) *Men Without Art*. London: Cassell & Company. p.10; *ibid.*, pp.127-8; Robert C. Elliott (1960) *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. pp.225-6.

³² Wyndham Lewis (1931) *The Diabolical Principle and The Dithyrambic Spectator*. London: Chatto and Windus. p.69; according to Geoffrey Wagner Lewis believed, in Wagner's paraphrase, that the modern satirist 'must engage with reality on both abstract and concrete levels' to expose contemporary vice, and that satire should be 'disinterested and cruel, violently destructive and amoral' [Wagner, 1957, pp.212-213].

³³ In *Tarr*, Lewis writes that 'deadness is the first condition for art; the second is absence of soul, in the human and sentimental sense ... good art must have no inside...' [Wyndham Lewis (1928) *Tarr*. London: Chatto and Windus. p.303]; Wyndham Lewis (1950) *Rude Assignment: A narrative of my career up-to-date*. London: Hutchinson & Co. p.52.

³⁴ Dr. L. Kip Wheeler (2013) *Literary Terms and Definitions: S*. [Online]. Available at: http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit_terms_S.html [Accessed: 8 May 2013].

³⁵ Northrop Frye, cited in Jonathan Goodwin (2008) 'Wyndham Lewis' "The Childermass", and National Crisis'. *Wyndham Lewis Annual*. XIII. p.12.

Burra's satire, in contrast, was 'anarchic and picaresque, more remarkable for its range and versatility than its force', and therefore better described as Horatian.³⁶ Here again Huxley is called upon as a point of comparison; Andrew Causey likens Burra's light-hearted approach to Huxley's early novels, which Burra read as a student at Chelsea Polytechnic, and to the 'ubiquitous but loosely directed satire of Thomas Love Peacock, whom Huxley helped to bring back into fashion.'³⁷ Perhaps Huxley's novels might then be said to bridge the gap between the satire of Lewis and Burra, the two artists used in this thesis as exemplars of the genre in the early and late twenties respectively. Burra's satire was allied to a 'vein of fantasy' and excess, a 'self-consciously libertine make-believe' that sat at odds with 'an underlying classical austerity' that Causey identifies in the logic of line and space in his drawings.³⁸ This may have been inspired in part by Burra's interest in carnival scenes and the *commedia dell'arte* which saw a significant revival in popularity following the success of Diaghilev's ballets in London – the designs for *Carneval* and *Parade*, a collaboration between Picasso and Cocteau staged in London in 1926, would have left a strong impression on the young artist.³⁹ Burra's works retain a certain acerbity, their ambiguity lending a darker undercurrent to the joyful humour bubbling on the surface; this tacit acknowledgement of human vices, though they may not be outrightly attacked, allows the work to be defined as satire. The output of his contemporaries is not always so easy to define, despite being shaped by the same cultural environment and inspired by a similar spirit of fun deriving from the Ballets Russes, jazz and cinema. The elements of costume and colour, fantasy and escapism alone amount to what can more precisely be defined as pastiche or whimsy, lacking the essential bite of true satire – though this lack remains as resolutely nebulous as any positive definition of the term.

³⁶ Causey, 1985, p.18.

³⁷ Ibid., p.18.

³⁸ Ibid., p.18.

³⁹ There is no evidence that Burra saw either of these productions at first hand but having close friendships with dancers and designers at this time he would certainly have heard of them, if not seen images.

Rather than approach the theme of satire theoretically, or attempt an exhaustive definition of the term, my aim is to address satire from the point of view of cultural history. To account for the motives behind the revival of satire and the different uses to which it was put during the 1920s, it would seem pragmatic to base a definition on the meanings attributed to satire by those employing it at this time. Explicitly referred to by numerous artists, writers and critics, as I will evidence, the term was obviously widespread by the twenties. It emerged out of the collective experience of the First World War – a review of Arnold Bennett's *The Pretty Lady* (1918) in the *Athenaeum* judges this work an 'ironical satire' that would 'perhaps be the historic picture of London in the times of the Great War.'⁴⁰ Satire thus seems to have been regarded by contemporaries as a particular mode that had a cultural purchase on modern life and culture following the war.

Although written in 1937, as war once again approached, Cyril Connolly's declaration of a 'satirical age' refers to that which began after the First World War, when he and his contemporaries came of age. He proposes satire as a mode by which a writer might approach politics, and by which he might make the best use of his literary skills to 'analyse situations, draw attention to tendencies, expose contradictions and help his more active colleagues by cultivating lucidity, profundity, and detachment.'⁴¹ Aldous Huxley is used as a case in point, paradigmatic of the 'dandy' in literature. Dandyism is closely linked, in Connolly's assessment of the twenties, to what he terms 'futilitarianism' – an attitude engendered by the First World War, which 'arises from a disbelief in action and in the putting of moral slogans into action.'⁴² A similar conclusion is reached by Samuel Hynes, who asserts that 'passive suffering' became a pervasive theme in the written and visual arts

⁴⁰ 'The Unclassed' [*Athenaeum*, June 1918], cited in Samuel Hynes (1990) *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Bodley Head. pp.229-230.

⁴¹ Hynes, 1990, p.112.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.53.

after the Great War.⁴³ This passive, negative attitude breeds contempt and a certain detachment, which together generate an ironic or satirical written style. This is the manner that Huxley is held to epitomise – though only *Crome Yellow* is deemed a true ‘dandy’ novel, in which ‘his irony and lyricism are unadulterated’ and in which Huxley appears as ‘the most typical of a generation, typical in his promise, his erudition, his cynicism, and in his peculiar brand of prolific sterility.’⁴⁴ Critics would in hindsight emphasise the fact that Huxley established his reputation in the years following the First World War, and that ‘his disillusionment, reflected in his playful but bitter humour and in his mordant portrayal of human futility, fitted an era that reduced positive values to witty ironies.’⁴⁵

Goldring, looking back on the nineteen-twenties after the second war, in 1945, criticises the hostile attitude of the public and press to young British artists. The psychological effect of this, he concludes, was to ‘breed in them an affected arrogance, which is an inevitable result of real or imagined “persecution”’ – and this led to the development of ‘a vein of mordant satire’ by an artist and writer such as Wyndham Lewis.⁴⁶ Goldring corroborates Lewis in his censure of the ‘swarm of talented amateurs, using any chance advantages of birth, money or social connexions, [who] invaded the [art] market’, creating ‘cut-throat competition.’⁴⁷ These ‘hordes’ of wealthy ‘chattering, pleasure-seeking, pseudo-artist people’ who ‘dabble and daub a little’, denying the ‘genuine painter, unprovided with means’ either studio space or patronage, were one of the chief targets of Lewis’s wrath and consequently of his satire – the definitive ‘Apes of God’.⁴⁸ Satire is also listed by Goldring as one of the chief developments in poetry and fiction during this

⁴³ Hynes, 1990, p.215.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.56.

⁴⁵ Frederick R. Karl & Marvin Magalaner (1959) *A Readers Guide to Great Twentieth-Century English Novels*. London: Thames and Hudson. p.257.

⁴⁶ Douglas Goldring (1945) *The Nineteen Twenties: A General Survey and some Personal Memories*. London: Nicholson & Watson. pp.94-96.

⁴⁷ Goldring, 1945, p.96.

⁴⁸ Wyndham Lewis (1924) ‘The Apes of God: Extract from Encyclical addressed to Daniel Boleyn by Mr. Zagreus’. *The Criterion: A Quarterly Review*. 2 (7). London: R. Cobden-Sanderson. pp.303-4.

decade (barring the experimentation of advanced modernists such as James Joyce and Gertrude Stein). Of Aldous Huxley he writes 'no such blend of talent, wit, refined smut and erudition had been seen before' and he goes on to quote at length from several contemporary reviews of Lewis's *Apes of God* (1930):

Mr. Wyndham Lewis has recently developed into a species of literary searchlight, throwing dazzling and scorching beams into every cranny of the social system ... He remorselessly pierces our insular fogs of sentiment and illusion, and throws up into sharp relief the underlying currents of society ... Like a series of exhibits mounted upon slides, the *poseurs* of this decaying world of sham and irresponsibility are seen under the high-power microscope of Mr. Lewis's mercilessly analytical mind. With the aid of a whole gallery of meticulously drawn portraits ... we are shown the workings of a society in intellectual and moral dissolution.

Wyndham Lewis ... hates more thoroughly and efficiently than any writer living, and is probably effective in destroying what he hates. I can't imagine what or whom he likes, but at the moment he specially dislikes homosexuals of both kinds, the war generation still pretending to be young, messy-minded people such as Jews and Irish, artists and writers who happen to have private means, and the Sitwell family – also probably a good many others of his contemporaries ... It is exceedingly well-written, sometimes brilliantly funny, making one think hard, keeping one's mind bright and responsive the whole time – as a cold bath.⁴⁹

Satire may be a term that is applied in hindsight, but it is quite easy to discern its presence in Goldring's descriptions of the period:

⁴⁹ Goldring, 1945, p.96; Goldring cites reviews by Naomi Michison and Richard Aldington in the *Referee*, for which I have been unable to trace the original source [Goldring, 1945, pp.108-9].

It was the age of debunking, particularly in regard to sex matters, and thus a wholesome and necessary prelude to ... “moral rearmament.”⁵⁰

A key component of 1920s satire (and which differentiated this modernist revival from traditional British satire) is elucidated here, namely a disorientating atmosphere in which previously accepted moral values were challenged and rejected, leaving codes of behaviour uncertain and open to reinterpretation. Satire’s traditional function is a moralistic one, the correcting of social vices through ridicule, and though this purpose is ambiguously fulfilled in the modern era (at least in comparison to the ‘Golden Age’ of Hogarthian satire) it is still undoubtedly the spur to much of the satirical art and writing of the age. Goldring writes that those vices which ‘had hitherto been concealed from the public gaze’ were now ‘analysed and healthily ridiculed’ as if satire provided a moral “spring clean.”⁵¹ Likewise, the reaction to what was perceived as an overly serious condemnation of moral vices was also in a satirical vein. A good example lies in Duff and Diana Cooper’s response to the Billing case in 1918, a court case resulting from MP Nathaniel Pemberton Billing’s campaign against perversion in the upper classes, in which he claimed that the Germans had a ‘Black Book’ of names whom they could blackmail to extort information. Though members of the class that was being targeted, the Coopers treat the claims as ludicrous and relate spurious anecdotes to each other that belittle the potential seriousness of the situation.⁵² In a similar way, Evelyn Waugh pokes fun at the overly suspicious customs officials who confiscate Adam’s manuscript at the beginning of *Vile Bodies* [1930]. Satire in this sense counterbalanced with ridicule the mood of fear and mistrust that permeated the post-war years and

⁵⁰ Goldring, 1945, p.225.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.228.

⁵² Billing tapped into a national fear of decadence – and a strongly rooted class division – that had been brewing since Oscar Wilde’s trial. The case and the Coopers’ response to it is summarised by Samuel Hynes, who quotes from Diana’s letter to her husband on June 5th 1918: ‘Lord Albemarle is said to have walked into the Turf and said, “I’ve never heard of this Greek chap *Clitoris* they are all talking of.”’ [Hynes, 1990, pp.232].

which led to the continued exertion of censorious powers that the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) had instigated in 1914.

The most extensive discussion of satire, laughter and the comic by an artist during the 1920s comes from the pen of Wyndham Lewis. A biting riposte to Clive Bell in the *Athenaeum* gives a taste of the social critique that was to emerge soon afterwards in the form of the Tyro paintings and the accompanying journal 'The Tyro':

He is almost, you might say deliberately, the comic "Anglais" of French caricature. He is a grinning effusive and rather servile Islander, out on his adventures among French Intelligences.⁵³

In the introduction to his exhibition of 'Tyros and Portraits' in April 1921, Lewis explicitly identifies the Tyro paintings as satires:

I have just entered [a phase], that of a series of pictures coming under the head of satire ... These partly religious explosions of laughing Elementals are at once satires, pictures and stories.⁵⁴

Critics, though largely unenthusiastic about the exhibition, accepted the works as satires and judged them on this level.⁵⁵ Howard Hannay, writing in the *London Mercury*, uses the term 'satire' in his review of Lewis's show; as this publication was a stronghold of the 'Squirearchy', the conservative

⁵³ Wyndham Lewis, letter to the Editor of *The Athenaeum* [March 12th 1920] in response to an article in the same by Clive Bell entitled 'Wilcoxism' of March 5th. In W. K. Rose (Ed.) (1963) *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*. London: Methuen. p.117.

⁵⁴ Wyndham Lewis (1921) foreword to "*Tyros and Portraits*", *catalogue of an exhibition of paintings and drawings by Wyndham Lewis* [The Leicester Galleries, April 1921]. London: Ernest Brown & Phillips. pp.5-8.

⁵⁵ Paul Edwards states that the exhibition 'made little impact' [Paul Edwards (2008) 'Apes and Familiars: The Art World of the 1920s'. In Paul Edwards & Richard Humphreys (Eds.) *Wyndham Lewis: Portraits* (exh. cat.). London: National Portrait Gallery. p.33]; David Peters Corbett quotes from further reviews such as that by K. Parkes in *Drawing and Design* which describes the Tyros as 'filled with wind and Lewis...they feed on Blast and Tar' [David Peters Corbett (1997) *The Modernity of English Art 1914-30*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press. p.130].

literary establishment presided over by Jack Squire, this suggests that satire was a term in general usage, and understood to mean broadly the same thing by both the avant-garde and the establishment.

That Mr. Lewis has got a vein of satire is evident from the occasional flashes in his writing. But it becomes overlaid by a tortuous braggadocio, an excess of expressiveness. This failing is not confined to the satire: it is the chief defect of all his pictorial work.⁵⁶

At the end of the decade, Lewis concludes that *The Apes of God* (published in 1930) was 'the only one of my books which can be described as pure Satire.'⁵⁷ However, from this vantage point he is able to look back over the decade that began with his self-declared satiric 'phase' and define his views on the mode he had by this point made his own in *Satire and Fiction* (1930) and *Men Without Art* (1934). In the latter Lewis puts forward the case for a satire existing outside 'the moral sanction of the community' and which is 'not contingent upon judgements which are not those specifically of the artistic or philosophic mind'; as David Wragg asserts, 'art's role is reiterated here as a desire for immunity from current political options...' ⁵⁸ Building on his assertion that satire is anthropomorphic and 'externalist', he reverses Bergson's theory of laughter with his claim in 'The Meaning of the Wild Body' [1927] that 'the root of the Comic is to be found in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person ... from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*.'⁵⁹ Later, in *Men Without Art*, he reiterates this theory in

⁵⁶ Howard Hannay (1921) Review of 'Tyros & Portraits' by Wyndham Lewis. *London Mercury*. IV (May – October). pp.204-5.

⁵⁷ Rebecca Beasley (2007) 'Wyndham Lewis and Modernist Satire'. In Morag Shiach (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.132.

⁵⁸ Wyndham Lewis (1934) *Men Without Art*. London: Cassell & Company. p.107; Wragg, 2005, p.301.

⁵⁹ Wyndham Lewis (2004) 'The Meaning of the Wild Body: 2. The Root of the Comic'. In *The Wild Body: 'A Soldier of Humour' and Other Stories*. London: Penguin. p.158; Geoffrey Wagner argues that, rather than contradicting

the course of refuting Hazlitt's criticism of mechanical effect in Shakespeare and Jonson:

Is it not just because they are such *machines, governed by routine* ... that the satirist, in the first instance, has considered them suitable for satire? He who wants a jolly, carefree, bubbling, world chock-full of 'charm,' must not address himself to the satirist!⁶⁰

At the same time, Lewis's satire is historically and culturally specific, focused on the fractured society that emerged from the Great War. This is clear from his use of events such as the General Strike at the culmination of *The Apes of God* and his condemnation of tendencies such as the effeteness and infantilisation of the younger generation in the late twenties. Frederic Jameson notes an affinity between Lewis's aggressive satire and Fascist ideology, an assertion dependent on Lewis's satire being rooted firmly in the period that this ideology was developing.⁶¹

In a review published in the *Athenaeum* in January 1920, Aldous Huxley refers to Dryden's 'A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire', quoting: 'There is still a vast difference between the slovenly butchering of a man and the finesse of a stroke that separates the head from the body and leaves it standing in its place.'⁶² Thus, at the beginning of the decade, it is clear that Huxley had a good working knowledge of the English satirical tradition – indeed, he was regarded as 'sardonic and often savage enough to

Bergson, Lewis's views on laughter and the comic are broadly in agreement with those elucidated in 'Le Rire' [see Wagner, 1957, p.38].

⁶⁰ Lewis, 1934 [*Men Without Art*], p.113.

⁶¹ Fredric Jameson (1979) *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist*. London: University of California Press. p.5.

⁶² Aldous Huxley, review of *Prejudices: First Series* by H.L. Mencken in the *Athenaeum* [2nd January 1920]. In David Bradshaw (Ed.) (1994) *Aldous Huxley: Between the Wars, Essays and Letters*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee. pp.2-3.

lead to his being regarded as a modern Swift.⁶³ Moreover, he believed the time right for a revival of this tradition, as his review goes on to assert that

We have sore need of critics who hate humbug, who are not afraid of putting out their tongues at pretentiousness however noble an aspect it may wear, who do not mind being vulgar at need, and who, finally, know not only how to make us think, but how to make us laugh as well.⁶⁴

In a letter to Robert Nichols of 1923 offering constructive criticism on the poet's latest verse, Huxley expands his views on comic writing:

I rather feel that the sort of Miltonic, violent style is really, inherently more suitable to comic than to serious writing. That prodigious "biological" as opposed to spiritual energy which is the essential quality of real comedy requires a violent and exuberant and rather tormented style to express itself.⁶⁵

The emphasis on "biological" and violent energy as 'the essential quality of real comedy' shows Huxley's views on literary satire to be comparable to those of Lewis. Reading the terms 'biological' and 'bodily' as synonymous, Huxley's comment echoes Lewis's interest in the exterior, in the animalistic, irrational physicality of beings as the root of humour. This is expressed in no uncertain terms as early as 1917, when Lewis rewrote passages of 'A Soldier of Humour', one of the short stories that would later be included in *The Wild Body* [1927]. Here the narrator, Ker Orr, declares: 'my body is large, white and savage. But all the fierceness has become transformed into *laughter*. It still looks like a visi-gothic fighting-machine, but it is in reality a *laughing*

⁶³ A.C. Ward (1964) *Twentieth-Century English Literature 1901-1960*. London: Methuen & Co. p.65.

⁶⁴ Aldous Huxley, review of *Prejudices: First Series* by H.L. Mencken in the *Athenaeum* [2nd January 1920]. In Bradshaw, 1994, pp.2-3.

⁶⁵ Aldous Huxley, letter to Robert Nichols [204], 2nd July 1923. In Grover Smith (Ed.) (1969) *Letters of Aldous Huxley*. London: Chatto & Windus. p.215.

machine.’⁶⁶ Such descriptions could also quite reasonably be applied to the Tyros: ‘violent’, ‘exuberant’ and ‘tormented’ seem entirely appropriate descriptions of Lewis’s satirical creations.

The characters in Huxley’s early novels are used to voice his opinions on the subject of the comic. Casimir Lypiatt, in *Antic Hay* [1923], underlines the close and essential relationship between the comic and the tragic, the element of cruelty that lies just below the surface:

Everyone’s a walking farce and a walking tragedy at the same time.
The man who slips on a banana-skin and fractures his skull describes
against the sky, as he falls, the most richly comical arabesque.⁶⁷

Using the fictional artist Lypiatt as a mouthpiece allows Huxley to approach a satirical style that is partly visual – the ‘arabesque’ appears in pictorial form in the imagination, conjuring an incongruous curve in the sedate and serious onward progress of life. It is the unanticipated line made by the machine behaving like a person, the shock of which produces laughter, according to Lewis’s reinterpretation of Bergson’s philosophy. That this line appears within Huxley’s novel suggests that he was thinking at this time about the origins and causes of humour, and the contradictory nature of human responses. The basis of his own satire (and his early novels were very much received as light, satirical fare) is to be found in just this combination of farce and tragedy, as Huxley attempts to explain to his father following the publication of *Antic Hay* in the autumn of 1923:

Artistically, too, it has a certain novelty, being a work in which all the ordinarily separated categories – tragic, comic, fantastic, realistic – are combined so to say chemically into a single entity, whose unfamiliar character makes it appear at first sight rather repulsive.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Wyndham Lewis (2004) ‘A Soldier of Humour’. In *The Wild Body: ‘A Soldier of Humour’ and Other Stories*. London: Penguin. p.5.

⁶⁷ Aldous Huxley (1965) *Antic Hay*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.214.

⁶⁸ Aldous Huxley, letter to Leonard Huxley [210], 26th November 1923. In Smith, 1969, p.224.

That Huxley perceives this coalition of genres as a novelty gives an insight into how he and his contemporaries differentiated their approach to satire in the twenties from that which had gone before. Thomas Mann notes the same 'decategorisation' in terms of modern art a few years later:

For I feel that, broadly and essentially, ... the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of tragic and comic, or the dramatic classifications, tragedy and comedy. It sees life as tragicomedy, with the result that the grotesque is its most genuine style.⁶⁹

Thus a new complexity arose, a contradictory attitude that owed much to the unsettled situation most people in Britain experienced in the post-war period – Stephen Spender was later to describe the characters in Huxley's early novels as 'cut off from history, as well as from thought and religion' by the chasm that the war had metaphorically opened up between past and present.⁷⁰ And there was also a latent 'repulsion' in Huxley's words – an effect that Lewis also intended to produce by means of the Tyros. The merging of 'categories' in pursuit of new literary effects is explained with frankness and clarity; what is interesting in this excerpt is the concomitant but tacit blurring of the boundaries between the written and the visual. The phrase 'at first sight' seems odd when it is the literary content of the novel rather than the book as an object that is being discussed. In both the novel and the author's subsequent evaluation of it, there is an elision between the disciplines that can be seen as a fundamental aspect of 'Modernism' – and this

⁶⁹ Thomas Mann [1926], Introduction to a German translation of *The Secret Agent* by Joseph Conrad. Cited in Martin Green & John Swan (1986) *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination*. New York: Macmillan. p.253; Thomas Mann and Aldous Huxley both lived in Sanary in the South of France in the early 1930s, but prior to this there is no evidence that they were in close contact – the similarity of their respective theories regarding the merging of generic categories therefore strengthens the view that this was a commonly perceived development in the arts and in the attitude of writers (and artists) to the 'comic' that emerged in the early-mid 1920s.

⁷⁰ Stephen Spender (1953) *The Creative Element: A Study of Vision, Despair and Orthodoxy among some Modern Writers*. London: Hamish Hamilton. p.142.

provides a basis, like the slippage between human and machine in theories of laughter, on which to posit a Modernist Satire.⁷¹

Such slippage occurs not only between the written and the visual but also with the haptic, the use of 'violent' metaphors, like the sharp angularity in Lewis's Tyro paintings, *feels* painful. The figure of Lypiatt is used by Huxley to embody the 'clown', accepted as both amusing and slightly pathetic, yet with a disturbing element of physical pain:

Lypiatt laughed very loudly and slapped his thighs. He looked, Mrs Viveash thought, peculiarly ugly when he laughed. His face seemed to go all to pieces; not a corner of it but was wrinkled and distorted by the violent grimace of mirth.⁷²

The grin or grimace and the act of laughter (described or depicted) appear here as symbolic; and like the grin of the Tyros, it is 'violent' – threatening, defensive or bitter rather than happy and light-hearted. It is described as physically distorting Lypiatt's features, echoing the psychological mutilation represented by the Tyros' fixed grins which the Lewis likened to the 'stoic smile' of the British "Tommy", and to the 'rictus-like' grins of Burra's dancers, disillusioned and cynical.⁷³ It is telling that so many diverse writers and artists adopted this visual epithet almost simultaneously to comment satirically on modern life in the 1920s – though it remains uncertain whether this was a consciously inherited trope or mere coincidence. Nevertheless, the grin as a visual metaphor arguably stands as emblematic of the particular character that satire took on in the twenties. It certainly persists throughout the decade, from Lewis to Burra, and from Huxley to Edith Sitwell, who draws

⁷¹ This 'gesamtkunstwerk' or 'total' work of art was a founding principle of the Bauhaus which operated from 1919-1933 and influential throughout Europe at this time; Kandinsky, who taught at the Bauhaus from 1922-1933, outlined his theories on synaesthesia – the relationship between shapes, colour and music – in writings such as the *Der Blaue Reiter* Almanac Essays and *Point and Line*; the collaboration between artists, composers, dancers and choreographers in producing the works of the Ballets Russes is also typical of this modernist interdisciplinarity.

⁷² Huxley, 1965, p.75.

⁷³ Richard Humphreys (2004) *Wyndham Lewis*. London: Tate Publishing. p.43.

pungently on the image of the grin – eerily detached from the body – in ‘Gold Coast Customs’ [1929]:

“Mariner, put your bones to bed!”
But at Lady Bamburgher’s parties each head
Grinning knew it had left its bones
In the mud with the white skulls ... only the grin
Is left, strings of nerves, and the drum-taut skin.⁷⁴

Huxley’s satire, like Lewis’s, ‘arises in a very specific social milieu and the unease has a decided historical location. [*Crome Yellow, Antic Hay, Those Barren Leaves* and *Point Counter Point*] are very much *about* the twenties.’⁷⁵ Huxley and Lewis return to satire in the early twenties for very specific reasons linked to the disillusionment of the post-war generation and the disorientation of modern technological progress. This was also the case for Osbert Sitwell, who began writing satirical poetry from around 1916 as disillusionment reached a peak following the enormous losses at the Somme. His early satires were published in the *Spectator* and the *Nation* under the pen-name ‘Miles’, a pun on the Latin for ‘soldier’, and he also contributed a mildly satirical preface to the second edition of *Wheels* [1917]. Sitwell refers to his early poems (later published in *Argonaut and Juggernaut* in 1919) as satires in his autobiography: ‘*How Shall We Rise to Greet the Dawn?* ... appeared a week after Armistice Day in the *Nation*, then edited by H.W. Massingham, and the chief organ to publish my satires.’⁷⁶ Moreover, he situates these satires very specifically, not just as a response to war, but as evidence of the tumultuous feelings in 1918 of those ‘who had hardly been

⁷⁴ Edith Sitwell (1929) *Gold Coast Customs*. London: Duckworth. p.9.

⁷⁵ Malcolm Bradbury (1973) *Possibilities: Essays on the State of the Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp.151-3.

⁷⁶ Osbert Sitwell (1950) *Laughter in the Next Room*. London: The Reprint Society. pp.7-8.

given time before the war to discover in what direction they were going' and in whom the Armistice inspired 'a kind of light revolutionary fervour.'⁷⁷

Robert H. Ross wrote of *Wheels*' 'post-war spirit' of 'insolence', identifying the publication as an early example of the aggressive and cynical approach adopted by the post-war generation of writers that can in hindsight, I believe, be characterised as satire:

The first sally against Georgianism from the Leftist camp was mounted by the anthology *Wheels*. In its beginnings it was not, in fact, a post-war publication, but though three of its numbers appeared during wartime, it was the first harbinger of the post-war spirit ... *Wheels* was self-consciously *avant-garde*. Like *Blast* and several other pre-war little magazines, a part of its aim was surely *épater la bourgeoisie*; and to do it, moreover, with as much insolence as possible.⁷⁸

Ezra Pound, writing of the first issue of *Wheels*, makes direct reference to the 'pleasingly satiric cover, bright yellow, displaying a scraggy nursemaid and a makeshift perambulator. It is the proper sort of ink-pot to hurl itself in the face of senile pomposity.'⁷⁹ Satire, to Pound in 1916, clearly meant an attack on the older generation, those in authority, through a visual assault on the senses. The second edition of *Wheels: First Cycle* was prefaced by a satirical attack on the 'platitudinous multitude' who 'roar out biblical abuse' and recommend 'sweet simplicity'; this was followed up by 'Armchair' (subtitled 'In Bad Taste 2') in the *Second Cycle* (1917), 'an anti-war satire by Osbert on the aged Squirearchy who approve the war.'⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Sitwell, 1950, p.7.

⁷⁸ Robert H. Ross (1967) *The Georgian Revolt: Rise and Fall of a Poetic Ideal 1910-1922*. London: Faber and Faber. p.193.

⁷⁹ Ezra Pound (1917) 'Press Notices of the First Number. Poetry: A Magazine of Verse'. *Wheels: Second Cycle*. Oxford: B.H. Blackwell. p.110.

⁸⁰ Osbert Sitwell (1916) 'In Bad Taste'. *Wheels: First Cycle*. Oxford: B.H. Blackwell. pp.v-vi [Online]. Available at: <http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/1188560996281250.pdf> [Accessed: 7 January 2014]; Michael Cotsell, 'Wheels: An Introduction', *The Modernist Journals Project (MJP)*. [Online]. Available at:

Interestingly, in the same year that the grinning Tyros were displayed in the Leicester Galleries, Sitwell chose to describe poetry in terms of laughter:

The poet is the magician who fashions the crystal globe.

But the reader is the magician who can find in these scintillating flaws or translucent depths, a strong music made manifest, a rolling echo of Gargantuan laughter, or some new undiscovered land ...⁸¹

By 1931 Sitwell's poetry was held in high enough regard to warrant an anthology, *Collected Satires and Poems*, the choice of title proving indisputably that both Sitwell and his publishers, Duckworth, viewed his work as satire, and ensuring that the general reading public would consequently acknowledge it as such too. The writing of the Sitwells and others in the post-war years, and these authors' recollections of the circumstances of its creation, testifies to an awareness of satire as an expedient mode with which to address the war and its human, psychological repercussions from as early as 1916-17. The adoption of satire appears, therefore, a conscious choice – one acknowledged, even advertised, by its proponents.

The First World War is widely accepted as a milestone in history; the end of the 'long nineteenth century,' of the Victorian and Edwardian era with its largely stable value system, and the beginning in many senses of 'modernity.' Samuel Hynes stresses the sense of 'radical discontinuity of present from past' precipitated by the war, the way in which the 'new scale of violence and destruction' it brought about effectively changed reality, altering the way people thought about the world and about culture.⁸² This is not to deny, however, that continuities with the pre-war era did persist; for those adults

http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/render.php?id=mjp.2005.00.112&view=mjp_object [Accessed: 8 May 2013].

⁸¹ Osbert Sitwell (1921) *Who Killed Cock Robin? Remarks on Poetry, on its criticism, and, as a sad warning, the story of Eunuch Arden*. London: C.W. Daniel. p.7.

⁸² Hynes, 1990, p.ix.

who did not themselves fight in the war, the habits and morals of a Victorian upbringing were deeply ingrained. The literature of P.G. Wodehouse is a case in point: Stephen Medcalf describes the writer as 'secure in the matrix of the traditionally English and ethically Christian ... His subject matter is English society as it existed before the First World War or survived unharmed by it.'⁸³ And yet it was in the twenties that some of his best-known comic novels were published. Perhaps this decision to combat the horror of war by retreating to the security of tradition mirrors that of the many artists who chose to return to the timelessness of the British landscape, or the relative continuity in the work of the Bloomsbury group who as pacifists were able to carry on painting and whose subject matter was almost totally detached from world affairs. But if Wodehouse is proposed as a satirical novelist this complicates the assertion that satire in the twenties is dependent on a topical response to, or attack on, the modern world and is a consequence of the rupture that the war effected in culture and society. Without these elements, Wodehouse cannot be deemed satirical, but he unquestionably employs wit and humour in his novels, and so his denial of the tumultuous changes that Britain had so recently undergone places his literature in an anomalous position alongside contemporaries whose comic approach relies on this dislocation.

Wyndham Lewis's metaphor of a mountain is illustrative of the impossibility many of his contemporaries – those who had lived through the carnage – must have perceived of ever returning to a pre-war way of life:

No time has ever been more carefully demarcated from the one it succeeds than the time we have entered on has been by the Great War of 1914-18. It is built solidly behind us. All the conflicts and changes of the past ten years, intellectual and other, are terribly symbolised by

⁸³ Stephen Medcalf (1976) 'The Innocence of P.G. Wodehouse'. In Gabriel Josipovici (Ed.) *The Modern English Novel: the reader, the writer and the work*. London: Open Books. p.189.

it. To us, in its immense meaningless shadow, it appears like a mountain range that has suddenly risen as a barrier...⁸⁴

Osbert Sitwell writes of the years immediately preceding the war as of a golden age – ‘All classes still believed in absolute progress ... There was no disillusionment.’⁸⁵ His reminiscences, looking back on a period of youthful enjoyment, testify to the abundance and richness of life during the last few years of peace, and to the innocence of those living it:

The eternal innocence of an island race asserted itself again ... was it likely that the Kaiser would visit England so often, and so many Germans come to London, and so plainly love it, if they were planning a war against us?⁸⁶

Paul Fussell asserts that it was this preliminary innocence, followed by the shock of a new, mechanised warfare of unimagined violence and loss of life that engendered the subsequent, ironical form of satire:

Irony is the attendant of hope, and the fuel of hope is innocence. One reason the Great War was more ironic than any other is that its beginning was more innocent.⁸⁷

Having fought no war in Western Europe for two generations it is no wonder that the possibility seemed remote and that ideas of warfare were outdated, the Boer War providing the only recent example. There is a consequent irony in the glorification of technological progress, of the very machinery that would cause such unforeseen suffering on the battlefields, in the years before the war. Though Osbert Sitwell’s autobiographical account is clearly coloured by nostalgia and couched in a poetic literary style, it is still suggestive of a certain optimistic – almost arrogant – point of view:

⁸⁴ Wyndham Lewis (1970) ‘Children of the New Epoch’. *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*. No.1 [1921]. London: Frank Cass. p.3.

⁸⁵ Osbert Sitwell (1948) *Great Morning*. London: Macmillan. pp.230-232.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.230-232.

⁸⁷ Paul Fussell (1981) *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.18.

... every day we were being conducted by the benevolent popes of science into a Paradise, but of the most comfortably material kind ...⁸⁸

Artists likewise embraced technological progress, both literally, in Futurist depictions of speeding cars and trains, and in an abstract sense, in their use of sleek, angular forms reminiscent of steel tubes or girders – representing the human form, too, as a machine. Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* stands as emblematic of this celebratory (and portentous?) aesthetic, and its fate – amputated to a torso, vulnerable and impotent as it was once threatening and powerful – is similarly symbolic of the undermining of this perception by the carnage that ensued. It provides an ironic visual counterpoint to the assurance of the pre-war world in which the artistic avant-garde, though challenging the status quo, still depended on its entrenched value system to provide the stronghold against which to rebel. Without that stability, rebellion was futile, and the arts – painting in particular – shrank from the challenge, returning to a tentative and 'safe' representational mode, rooted in tradition. In David Peters Corbett's words, post-war British culture was 'opting for an evasion of its own modernity' and consequently 'a public language of modernism was itself negated and replaced by private and quietist "modernism" with no such ambitions.'⁸⁹

Satire was the alternative response for those determined to challenge the nebulous and uncertain state of affairs following the war. There was no appetite for direct attack among the avant-garde, but there was a general disillusionment and restlessness that sought a means of expression – and satire, as Samuel Hynes argues, presented itself as an appropriate mode.

⁸⁸ Sitwell, 1948, p.230.

⁸⁹ Corbett, 1997, p.58; see also Chris Stephens (2008) *The History of British Art 1870-Now* (London: Tate Publishing) for his survey of painting in the interwar period.

It was in satire that post-war culture found its particular bitter voice. You might say that satire was post-war culture's principal inheritance from its wartime past.⁹⁰

Paul Fussell notes a 'curious prophylaxis of language' resulting from the war years, by which the previous system of 'high diction' gave way to a style of *double entendres*.⁹¹ This notion can be applied to visual art too, and in particular to that satirical strand that emerged within it – insofar as satire, to achieve its subversive ends, is to a certain extent concealed below the outward meaning of the forms depicted and requires some degree of intellectual application in order to be understood. Samuel Hynes corroborates this view, asserting that both poetry and art saw a change in language and imagery in the later years of the war, concomitant with a change in traditional conceptions of space and time.⁹² This change manifested itself, in individual cases, as an abrupt and conscious break with the past – for instance with the Romantic tradition that had persisted throughout the long nineteenth century (a reaction that will be explored in detail in the chapter on Lewis). Hynes goes on to discuss a new tradition of war painting, recording the reality of the trenches, the disfigurement, desolation, ruin and chaos; sometimes documentary, perhaps condemnatory, and undermining traditional forms of both landscape and history painting, this was nevertheless far from satirical. Yet the satirical art that followed close on its heels, and often from the same brush or pen, has its immediate roots in this new war art, and both are a product of and a response to the war.⁹³

Wyndham Lewis is exemplary in this regard, producing in *A Canadian Gun Pit* (1918) and *A Battery Shelled* (1919) for the Canadian War Memorials Fund an important model of the new type of war art identified by Hynes, while at the same time his treatment of figures in these paintings, mid-way between

⁹⁰ Hynes, 1990, p.242.

⁹¹ Fussell, 1981, pp.22-23.

⁹² Hynes, 1990, p.191.

⁹³ Arnold Bennett sums up the key elements, in his opinion, of this new war art in his catalogue introduction to Paul Nash's 'Void of War' exhibition at the Leicester Galleries in 1918; see Hynes, 1990, p.200.

human and robotic, prefigure those of the Tyro paintings which constitute his first satirical foray in paint. Lewis himself likened the Tyros to British 'Tommies', directly linking his self-designated satires to his experience in the trenches.⁹⁴ The new scale of violence that Hynes recognises as a fundamental effect of the war is also inherent in Lewis's work – both in his language and in the sharp, fragmented, angular forms of his painting – and is addressed and explored in much of his writing in the post-war years:

'Violence is of the essence of *laughter* (as distinguished of course from smiling wit): it is merely the inversion or failure of *force*. To put it another way, it is the *grin* upon the Deathhead.'⁹⁵

Therefore, to express this new understanding of the violence that man is perceived to be capable of, Lewis aims to depict, and provoke, laughter. His concept of satire demands both an engagement with reality, and a disinterested cruelty that appears to reject reality; this duality, or contradiction, is in itself characteristic of the amorphous wasteland that the war has left in place of a previously concrete and inviolable value system.

⁹⁴ Lewis describes the fixed grin of the Tyro as the 'stoic smile typified by the British "Tommy",' which he is now unable to alter [in Richard Humphreys (2004) *Wyndham Lewis*. London: Tate Publishing. p.43].

⁹⁵ Wyndham Lewis (2004) 'The Cornac and his Wife' [1927]. *The Wild Body: 'A Soldier of Humour' and Other Stories*. London: Penguin. p.102.

Chapter 1: Wyndham Lewis & William Roberts

Art historians have long acknowledged Lewis's presentation and the initial critical reception of the Tyros as satires, and have written of them as such – for example, Tom Normand, Geoffrey Wagner, David Peters Corbett, Walter Michel, Paul Edwards and Paul O'Keeffe in their biographies or monographs on Lewis; Rebecca Beasley's essay 'Wyndham Lewis and Modernist Satire' and Robert Chapman's *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires*. However, the majority of literature on Lewis either does not position his satire as central to his career or does not place his visual satire on the same level as the written. I would argue, on the contrary, that the Tyro paintings are vital as a turning point in Lewis's career. David Peters Corbett asserts a similar position, writing of Lewis's post-war self-portraits, including *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig. 2], as 'the crux of Lewis's career' in which the artist 'describes his own exile' – one of the consequences of this position being Lewis's abandonment of painting in favour of writing.¹ However, I view the turning point as a more positive one, heralding the embrace of satire as an effective and modern mode. The satire that they introduce not only impacts on the remainder of Lewis's career, especially throughout the 1920s, but also establishes a new satirical tradition that is taken up by others, of whom Burra is a prime example. Similarly, there is much existing literature that addresses Lewis's work in the context of the First World War and the post-war period: *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War*, edited by David Peters Corbett (1998), Fredric Jameson's *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, The Modernist as Fascist* (1979), Andrew Causey's essay on the art of Lewis in the Twenties, in *Volcanic Heaven*, edited by Paul Edwards (1996), among others. This is invaluable in describing the impact of the Great War on Lewis and in defining his political views in the altered world of post-war Britain. I wish to combine the contextual and satirical readings of the Tyros, focusing on Lewis's key role in modernising the tradition of satire in order to provide a constructive tool for negotiating the function of art and culture in 'modern' society.

¹ David Peters Corbett (1997) *The Modernity of English Art 1914-30*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press. p.129.

Lewis wrote extensively during the post-war period, and this helps to illuminate his use of satire in his painting. In *Rude Assignment* Lewis describes the hypothetical writer who, like himself over the course of his multifaceted literary career, has been engaged in 'the analysis of what is obsessional in contemporary social life; in composing satiric verse; exposing abuses in art politics; celebrating in fiction picturesque parasites; in weighing, to the best of his ability, contemporary theories of the State...' ² In espousing this didactic purpose – though written with hindsight, it *does* highlight the seriousness of purpose which accompanied his satire – Lewis appears as virtually the sole example of a satirical writer in the 1920s who continues to see the mode as one capable of correcting society's vices and of giving moral guidance. As Geoffrey Wagner comments, 'Lewis approaches satire as the correction of vice, as well as of folly, and as dissatisfaction with the *Zeitgeist*, or social status quo, rather than acceptance of it.' ³ However, Lewis goes on to write that 'moral judgements chop and change ... and the moralist to day is installed indeed upon a veritable quicksand'; he goes on to proclaim 'I am not a moralist', before asserting that perhaps 'the greatest satire *cannot* be moralistic at all.' ⁴ This statement implies that satire is in some way degraded if it becomes moral, thus contradicting the interpretation of his satire as corrective or didactic; rather, he seems to advocate a satire in which vice is displayed but no solution offered. This attitude might explain Lisa Colletta's claim that the traditional social purpose all but disappears in modernist satire. She links the inability to use satire as a social corrective to the lack of stability experienced in the post-war era, which meant that dark humour had 'an emphatic lack of belief in its own efficacy as an agent of moral education.' ⁵ Lewis must have perceived such a change in attitude when he wrote of his determination to use the discredited mode to wake people out of their apathy:

² Wyndham Lewis (1950) *Rude Assignment: A narrative of my career up-to-date*. London: Hutchinson & Co. p.10.

³ Geoffrey Wagner (1957) *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. pp.212-3.

⁴ Wyndham Lewis (1934) *Men Without Art*. London: Cassell & Company. p.134.

⁵ Lisa Colletta (2003) *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel*. New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p.4.

Satire is dead to-day. There has been no great satirist since Swift. The reason is that the sense of moral discrimination in this age has been so blurred that it simply wouldn't understand written satire if it saw it.

People are, in fact, impervious to logic, so I have determined to get at them by the medium of paint.

Hence the Tyro.⁶

Thus the Tyro is posited as an object of attack on the immoral or apathetic attitudes of society. And, I will argue, as the prototype for a new form of classicism, in satiric response to the outdated romanticism that the recent war had proved defunct.

i. Wyndham Lewis's *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)*: Classicism and Post-War Satire

Catullus, Propertius, Horace and Ovid are the people who matter ... Catullus has the intensity, and Ovid might teach one many things.⁷

'Classical' is for me *anything* which is nobly defined and exact, as opposed to that which is fluid – of the Flux – without outline, romantically 'dark,' vague, 'mysterious,' stormy, uncertain.⁸

At some point during the years of the First World War, the seeds of classicism took root and a 'new classical spirit' seized the centre stage in European culture.⁹ This development has been extensively investigated both in the field

⁶ Wyndham Lewis (1982) 'Dean Swift with a Brush. The Tyroist explains his art'. [Interview published in *The Daily Express*, 11 April 1921]. In Bernard Lafourcade (Ed.) *The Complete Wild Body*. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press. p.359.

⁷ Ezra Pound, letter to Iris Barry [20th July 1916]. Cited in J.P. Sullivan (Ed.) (1970) *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.60.

⁸ Wyndham Lewis (1929) *Paleface: The Philosophy of the 'Melting Pot'*. London: Chatto & Windus. p.255.

⁹ This was prophesied by T.E. Hulme prior to his death in 1917, and his prediction appears vindicated by the multitude of classical references by the key authors of 'high modernism' such as Eliot, Pound and Joyce, as well as by Lewis;

of literary criticism, and in European art history in general terms. However, as yet there has been little research on the emergence of a new form of classicism in British art, or on the engagement of specific artists with the classical tradition in post-war Britain. It seems contradictory that, with modernism at its zenith, the influence of classical literature was so pronounced in the work of those very writers and artists who formed the vanguard. It is no surprise that they were familiar with the classics, as education still focused heavily on this subject; it is surprising, rather, that the avant-garde who did so much to reinvent ways of perceiving the world, and who challenged the conventions of the previous generation, did not feel inclined to rebel against this foundation block of intellectual traditionalism.¹⁰ Wyndham Lewis's *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] is a clear visual example of this contradictory attitude, which emerges also in the poetry of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound – an attitude that was evidently acknowledged by their contemporaries, as Stephen Spender writes of Lewis, Eliot and Pound as '*neo-traditionalists*' or '*revolutionary traditionalists*'.¹¹ The style of the painting, with its garish colours and angular mechanised figures, like the structure and arrhythmic dissonance of the poetry, proclaims a hard-edged modernism, a decisive break with tradition. So why does Ovid make such a bold

in art this classical spirit is acknowledged by Charles Harrison and Elizabeth Cowling, among others, which I will discuss further in the body of this chapter.

¹⁰ Wyndham Lewis was educated at Rugby where the curriculum would have been broadly similar to that at Eton, described by Cyril Connolly as dominated by classical literature, particularly Horace; T.S. Eliot, addressing the Classical Association on 15th April 1942 argued the importance of a classical education: 'for many generations the classics provided the basis of the education of the people from whom the majority of our men of letters have sprung...' [T.S. Eliot (1943) *The Classics and the Man of Letters*. London: Oxford University Press].

¹¹ Neo-traditionalists are defined by a 'nostalgic fallacy', a 'violent preference for the past over the present, ... [a] hatred of modern civilization' and yet also a 'willingness to support causes which use modern technology in order to re-establish forms of living to which they attribute the achievements of the enviable past'; meanwhile, 'the revolutionary traditionalists, in their criticism, studied, examined, re-evaluated the masterpieces of the tradition. And ... brought forth flowers which, however unrecognisable to the miserable armies of hack critics and English professors ... were in fact the true blossoming of the tradition.' [Stephen Spender (1963) *The Struggle of the Modern*. London: Hamish Hamilton. pp.221-2].

appearance? Why does the title draw attention to the classical past, highlighting a continuity and acceptance of this intellectual heritage? In Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and in Pound's *Cantos* too, there are explicit borrowings from the classics, and from Ovid in particular; was Lewis's friendship with the two poets behind this revival of interest, or vice versa? This question demands an exploration of the origins and implications of such an overt reference to Ovid in Lewis's painting in the context of the immediate post-war period.

The re-emergence of satire as a genre or mode within British art coincides with this appearance of a 'new classical spirit'. The two phenomena seem so bound up in a painting such as *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] that it is difficult to accept as mere coincidence. But if not coincidence, then in what way do the two interrelate? Is the new form of satire that Lewis instigates inherently classicist in some way – or is classicism used by satire as a means of achieving its critical aims? Perhaps both are true to some extent – a reciprocal dependence between them growing out of the collision of modernism and post-war disillusionment. Assuming a mutual dependence, it should be feasible, by exploring in detail the possible meanings to be derived from Lewis's reference to Ovid, to simultaneously consider the origins of a new form of satire within this painting. Satire essentially hinges on the presence of a certain incongruity or an element of the absurd, and depends also on an object of attack; by looking at how – if – these constituents are presented and successfully combined in *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1], it will become clear how far classicism is fundamental to the process, or alternatively how far it is simply an expedient. The absence of a follow-up to the 'Tyros and Portraits' exhibition in 1921 leaves open to speculation whether Lewis would have pursued the satirical path he had started on in his painting, and whether the classics might have played a key part in this. It is only possible to judge the importance of either in Lewis's work by their continued usage in his writing throughout the 1920s – and therefore it seems appropriate in this discussion to assert the contemporaneous use of classical reference in the service of satire in the poetry of Eliot and Pound.

The appropriations of Pound and Eliot from classical texts are often specific and literal. From Ovid, the references are mainly taken from *Metamorphoses*, thus foregrounding a theme of transformation. In Lewis's *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1], the immediate reference seems instead to be to the *Ars Amatoria*; Richard Humphreys comments that the Tyros are 'clearly enjoying a salacious passage from the great Roman author', grinning guiltily like schoolboys – this tallies with the general view of Ovid as far more sexually explicit in his poetry than other elegists of his time.¹² David Peters Corbett, however, points to the Ovid of the *Metamorphoses*, arguing that the theme of transformation is crucial to the painting, and particularly apt in the aftermath of a war which had mutilated millions, both physically and psychologically.¹³ But the specific work referred to is perhaps of less interest than the fact that a classical author is referenced at all. Lewis could just as easily have left the book that so amuses the Tyros unidentified and open to speculation; equally, the painting would remain unchanged, formally, if the book had been a modernist work of controversy – perhaps *Ulysses* or *The Rainbow*. So why is Ovid insisted upon and what is Lewis trying to say by this? It may be that Ovid is used here to embody classical literature in general terms, the book an attribute as in traditional portraiture, signifying the 'neo-classical ideal'. This ideal, as Hugh Witemeyer points out in his discussion of Pound's early poetry, was resurrected by Matthew Arnold in the late nineteenth century as a 'cosmopolitan internationalism of intellect and culture, a transcendence of provincial, monolingual perspectives, and an awareness of the best that has been thought and said.'¹⁴ Lewis adopts a similar philosophical position in his

¹² Richard Humphreys (2004) *Wyndham Lewis*. London: Tate Publishing. p.43; Joan Booth writes that Ovid's humour in the *Amores* is 'full-blooded, ostentatious and occasionally risqué' and that 'his preoccupation throughout is with the contemporary shock-value of claiming military status for his amatory activity' [Joan Booth (Ed.) (1991) *Ovid: The Second Book of 'Amores'*. Warminster: Avis & Phillips. p.9; p.64].

¹³ David Peters Corbett (1998) "'Grief with a yard wide grin": War and Wyndham Lewis's Tyros', in David Peters Corbett (Ed.) *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.120.

¹⁴ Hugh Witemeyer (1999) 'Early Poetry 1908-1920'. In Ira B. Nadel (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

early writing; the tension between the intellect and the senses, and by extension the traditions of the classical and the romantic, is illustrated in his early writing such as *Tarr* [1918]. In this novel – in very simplified terms – Kreisler can be seen to represent the old world of ‘Bourgeois-Bohemia’ with all its ‘Romantic faults’ while Tarr embodies the opposite, the ‘Modern’. If, as Alan Starr asserts, the novel ‘is an explanation of Lewis’s aesthetic and philosophical position c.1915’, Lewis’s identification with Tarr rather than Kreisler appears to show his support for the neo-classical ideal.¹⁵ T.E. Hulme, with whom Lewis was closely associated prior to the First World War, was the immediate influence on this aspect of Lewis’s philosophy. In his essay, ‘Romanticism and Classicism’ – which, though not published until 1924, Lewis must have been aware of when it was written in 1911 – Hulme distinguishes between the two terms, defining Classicism by its ‘finite and fixed’ qualities and its ‘dry hardness’, stressing the ‘limit of man’, and ending by heralding a ‘classical revival.’¹⁶ Lewis himself would later address in detail this same opposition between the Classical and the Romantic in *Time and Western Man* [1927]. Although SueEllen Campbell asserts that Lewis’s concept of space and stability was much the same as Bergson’s ‘classical ideal’, in fact, in writing the passage she quotes, Lewis is forcefully opposing Bergson’s values, pitting ‘nature or some development of it’ against ‘those forces represented by the philosophy of Time’:

p.44; Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* [1869] is a work of social criticism in which the values of Hellenism (leading to ‘culture, and the harmonious perfection of our whole being, and what we call totality’) are extolled in contrast to Hebraism (‘the tendency to sacrifice all other sides of our being to the religious side’) – Arnold saw human history as held in tension between these two modes.

¹⁵ Alan Starr (1982) ‘Tarr and Wyndham Lewis’. *ELH*. 49 (1). pp.179-184.

¹⁶ T.E. Hulme (1936) ‘Romanticism and Classicism’. In Herbert Read (Ed.) *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. pp. 117-126; in defining the Classical in opposition to Rousseau’s romantic assertion of the infinite possibilities of man, Hulme writes: ‘man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him’ [Hulme, 1936, p.116].

The world of classical “common-sense” – the world of the Greek, the world of the Schoolman – is the world of nature, too, and is a very ancient one.¹⁷

During the decade that passed between the publication of *Tarr* and *Time and Western Man*, Lewis had clearly considered this idea of neo-Classicism at length, and so it is hardly surprising that it should surface in both his paintings and his writing. Despite this, there has been no detailed study of the influence of Classicism on Lewis’s paintings of the early twenties, questioning how and why he addressed this tradition. It seems especially pertinent, considering the title, to explore this further in relation to the *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1]. The painting not only refers explicitly to a Classical author without any explanatory context (no notes to help the uninitiated such as Eliot produces for *The Waste Land*), but also, I would argue, uses the Classical tradition as a fundamental element in a politically and socially engaged form of satire. The Tyro paintings seem to stand as manifestoes of this new form of satire, offering a new approach to the critique of modern life; in cynically defining the modern world, the Classical plays an essential role. The function of Lewis’s Tyro paintings in relating the past to the present, the Classical to the Modern, is crucial in charting the development of satire in 1920s British art, and therefore by extension to giving a truer picture of the development of British art as a whole in the post-war decade. In the wake of the Great War all previously held principles required readjustment, and this metaphorical blank canvas provided the catalyst for a redefining of terms and a re-figuration of art historical traditions.

There was a widely perceived ‘return to order’ in the post-war period, a mood of isolation and retrenchment in which Charles Harrison perceives a spirit of

¹⁷ SueEllen Campbell (1983) ‘Equal Opposites: Wyndham Lewis, Henri Bergson, and Their Philosophies of Space and Time’. *Twentieth Century Literature*. 29 (3). p. 358; Wyndham Lewis (1993) *Time and Western Man*. Edited by Paul Edwards. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press. p.177.

‘something like classicism’.¹⁸ Elizabeth Cowling likewise emphasises this trend in her introduction to the Tate exhibition catalogue, *On Classic Ground*, arguing that, far from being limited to Britain, this return to classicism in art was Europe-wide. However, pointing to such modernist paradigms as Picasso’s *Three Dancers* of 1925, she challenges Harrison’s view of classicism as conservative and reactionary, as implicitly marking a step backwards in the context of the twenties, whereas in her view the classical was a key element of much modernist painting at this time.¹⁹ Paul Edwards notes that in Paris there was an ‘exaltation of Hellenic and Latin elements in French culture’ and goes on to describe ‘Lewis’s return to representation, adoption of a “classical” linear style of drawing ... [and] return to traditional genres’ at this time.²⁰ This tendency is signposted in a very literal manner by Lewis’s reference to Ovid. Is this intended as a criticism of the classicising tendency, of the rejection of pre-war radical avant-gardism, or as a tacit acceptance of traditional values? Lewis certainly fits Cowling’s interpretation of classicism in the twenties better than Harrison’s. Although his return to figuration after the war may appear a step backwards from the radical modernism of his abstract Vorticist works, the Tyro paintings cannot be described as conservative or reactionary. Their linearity embodies the sleek modernity of machinery and the functional, minimalist design of Le Corbusier’s International Style; and also, in its angularity, in the intersecting arcs and faceted appearance, it acknowledges the influence of Cubism. Like Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, the lozenge shapes of the Tyros’ hats and jaw-lines look sharp enough to cut like a blade, and the mask-like faces return a blank but impudent, interrogatory stare. The colours, too, are abstracted, against backgrounds similarly empty of all context, distancing the paintings from the domestic landscape tradition which provided a natural refuge for many

¹⁸ Charles Harrison (1994) *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939*. New Haven: Yale University Press. p.156.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Cowling & Jennifer Mundy (Eds.) (1990) *On Classic Ground: Picasso, Léger, de Chirico and the New Classicism 1910-1930* [exh. cat.] London: Tate. p.21.

²⁰ Paul Edwards (2000) *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. p.226.

British artists in the aftermath of the war. The Tyros may signal a certain classicism in Lewis's outlook, but it is no backward or nostalgic glance – their mischievous and enigmatic grins symbolise a refusal to participate in a 'return to order'. Lewis's protagonists show a spirit of brazen anarchy rather than caution, threatening to disrupt any fragile post-war consensus – yet, with an ironic incongruity they look to Ovid as their guide.

The Great War seemed to those who had lived through it to form an insuperable barrier between past and present, offering no hope of a return to pre-war values. Lewis puts this view forcefully in an article in the first issue of the *Tyro* in 1921, using the metaphor of a mountain range to describe the permanence and absoluteness of the obstacle that the war appeared to him to impose between the past and the present.²¹ Samuel Hynes, however, looking back from the perspective of the late twentieth century, refers to this rupture as a 'gap in history', perceiving the considerable continuities between the pre-war and post-war worlds while nonetheless conceding that the war had altered life totally for those who lived through it.²² The anxiety of adapting to a new, post-war world, in which all systems of values and hierarchies were thrown into confusion, led many to look to the past for affirmation. To make sense of this bewildering state of affairs, a form of classicism was widely adopted. On a simple level, this could be seen as an insecure clinging to the raft of tradition, a nostalgic appeal to the past in the hope of explaining the present in comprehensible terms of progression and/or continuity. However, the statement Lewis makes by referring to Ovid cannot be taken at face value. Despite his astute description of the impact of the war, he goes on to reject any recourse to the past as a means of anchoring the arts in an historical continuity, proclaiming: 'the dead never rise up, and men will not return to the Past.'²³ Rather than accepting the past as a life-raft in what he describes as a 'No Man's Land', Lewis may here refer to Ovid – symbolising classical

²¹ Wyndham Lewis (1970) 'Children of the New Epoch'. *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, no.1 [1921]. London: Frank Cass. p.3.

²² Samuel Hynes (1990) *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Bodley Head. p.ix.

²³ Lewis, 1970 [*The Tyro*, no.1], p.3.

heritage in general – as a means of ridiculing this tendency in his peers, and to criticise the weakness of those who shy away from making a fresh start and embracing modernity.

In the context of the early twenties, *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] may be understood more specifically as a response to the French ‘return to order’ that Cowling describes. Paris was the hub of the art world, setting aesthetic standards and attracting artists and writers from across the world to form a dynamic melting-pot of creativity. Nancy Cunard moved to Paris in 1920, Ezra Pound in 1921, and Ernest Hemingway in 1922 – to name but a few of the artistic and literary expatriates at this time. Lewis, however, was not persuaded to relocate, perhaps because he knew that, surrounded by such dazzling talent, he would always be second best, or perhaps, judging by his satire, he felt an altruistic need to reform the social and political institutions of his homeland. Whatever his reasons for remaining in London his paintings both engage with, and on another level parody, this modern concern for the classics. The war had inflamed nationalist passions to a new level and in France this was manifested in one extreme in a strong desire to emphasise the nation’s Classical, Latinate roots.²⁴ Julien Benda, in *La Trahison des Clercs* (1927), attacks the intellectual establishment of the 1920s for its abandonment of a universal ‘humanism’ in favour of a narrow-minded political nationalism. The desire to distinguish oneself along nationalistic lines, to feel an interest in ‘belonging to a powerful nation’, was, he asserts, especially new to the liberal arts, which were inclined more than most professions towards an international and cosmopolitan interaction.²⁵ *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] might, in this still jingoistic post-war context, be

²⁴ Charles Maurras founded the *Action Française* in 1898, which was based on the idea of an ‘integral nationalism’ with monarchism its principal cause; Maurras saw French national identity as rooted in a Latin heritage which united France with the revered cultural and artistic legacy of Italy and Greece.

²⁵ Benda goes on to remark that ‘it is certainly something new to hear artists constantly girding at the government of their country because it “does not give the nation enough prestige to impose their art on foreigners”’ [Julien Benda (1969) *The Treason of the Intellectuals (La Trahison des Clercs)* [1928]. New York: The Norton Library. p.24].

read as a parody of the glorification of national heritage, the Tyros' incomprehension revealing the French claim to the classical past to be unconvincing and politically expedient. Lewis was demonstrably aware, and contemptuous of, the French nationalistic claim to the classical past, writing in 1919:

The hysterical second-rate Frenchman, with his morbid hankering after his mother-tradition – the eternal Greco-Roman – should be discouraged.²⁶

Benda's concomitant concern for the social function of art as a civilising influence and a means of self-examination was also shared by Lewis, who criticised the intellectual class for their neglect of their cultural responsibilities.²⁷ Classicism was allied in Benda's view with universalism, and particularisms such as nationalism were correspondingly romantic in origin. The war, in calling forth nationalist passions had exaggerated the romantic element in society, so that the subsequent backlash towards the classical counterpoint seems a logical reaction, a psychological repudiation of the war and all associated with it. In addition, Lewis may also have wanted to take up the legacy of T.E. Hulme, who had died in the trenches in 1917, and whose pre-war advocacy of the Classical was of a radical, right-wing and antagonistic nature that appealed to the polemical satirist in Lewis.²⁸

²⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design* [1939 reprint]. In Walter Michel & C.J. Fox (Eds.) (1969) *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*. London: Thames and Hudson. p.182.

²⁷ Corbett notes that in *The Caliph's Design* [1919] Lewis 'linked Bloomsbury's Post-Impressionism with contemporary French art and criticised both for concentrating on the decorative ... and for ignoring the artist's responsibility to involve himself with the world' [Corbett, 1998, pp.108-9]; and Andrew Causey writes of the combined threat of herd psychology and the intelligentsia's 'cowardly abdication of responsibility' which is represented satirically in *The Apes of God* [Andrew Causey (1996) 'The Hero and The Crowd: The Art of Wyndham Lewis in the Twenties'. In Paul Edwards (Ed.) *Volcanic Heaven: Essays on Wyndham Lewis's Painting and Writing*. Santa Rosa, CA: Black Sparrow Press. p.89].

²⁸ T.S. Eliot wrote of him in *The Criterion* in response to the publication of *Speculations* in 1924: 'Hulme is classical, reactionary, and revolutionary; he is

In Pound's early *Cantos* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Rebecca Beasley sees the impact of the war manifested not only in literal or indirect references to the recent conflict, but also in the 'broader moral framework' of the poems, which both treat the war as 'a symptom of their main subject: the disintegration of civilisation in the modern world.'²⁹ The classics, among other sources, here provide a counterpoint against which to contrast the sterility of the present – the similarities of idea, emotion and belief serving to throw the contrasts into even greater relief. Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* of 1919 draws analogies between the Roman and the contemporary experience of war. Pound reflects that:

It presents certain emotions as vital to me in 1917, faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire, as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, when faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire.³⁰

Visually, the volume of Ovid in Lewis's painting can be seen as symbolic of this historical continuity, linking past and present; human nature remains flawed and wars continue to be fought from one century to the next. However, Ovid can be read simultaneously as a specific comment on the effects of modern warfare. David Peters Corbett draws a parallel between the theme of transformation in the *Metamorphoses* and the transformation of the wounded body on the battlefield, as well as the 'willed transformation that accompanies the denial of the psychic consequences of that experience.'³¹ He suggests the Tyros as mutilated victims of trench warfare – 'the chair legs become crutches

the antipodes of the eclectic, tolerant, and democratic mind of the end of the last century' [T.S. Eliot, writing as 'Crites' (1924) 'A Commentary'. *The Criterion: A Quarterly Review*. 2 (7). London: R. Cobden-Sanderson. p.231]; Hulme wrote in 'Romanticism and Classicism': 'I prophesy that a period of dry, hard, classical verse is coming' and 'in the verse which is to come, fancy will be the necessary weapon of the classical school' – fancy defined as 'new metaphors' that make plain speech more precise [Hulme, 1936, p.133; p.137].

²⁹ Rebecca Beasley (2007) *Theorists of Modernist Poetry: T.S. Eliot, T.E. Hulme, Ezra Pound*. Abingdon: Routledge. p.80.

³⁰ Ezra Pound, cited by Hugh Witemeyer, 1999, p.52.

³¹ Corbett, 1998, p.120.

and stumps on which the figures hobble or bob' – but this is depicted in so ambiguous a fashion as to offer a parallel comment on the characters' 'psychic repudiation of the realities of warfare.'³² The physical and psychological damage caused by the recent war seems an inappropriate subject for satire, but as Lewis explains in 'Studies in the Art of Laughter' [1934], the element of absurdity central to satire is not diminished by its cause: satire is indiscriminate and callous:

*Perfect laughter ... would select as the objects of its mirth as much the antics dependent upon pathologic maladjustments, injury, or disease, as the antics of clumsy and imperfectly functioning healthy people.*³³

Addressing such an emotive subject as the recent war so soon after its conclusion was only possible by detaching the subject from the personal, by abstracting it – the same process by which satire is achieved. The war had had a dehumanising effect, the sheer scale of casualties turning victims into statistics, turning men into 'cogs in the great impersonal war-machine.'³⁴ By its end, the war had become a way of life for many, and the personal injuries attributed to the Tyros are abstracted, synecdoches standing for the injury of war on human society. Thus we can laugh at the Tyros because they are 'things' without human feeling, and they condone, even encourage, our laughter by laughing at themselves. Yet the same uneasiness felt on reading lists of casualties on foreign battlefields without a flicker of emotion also lurks beneath the surface as one joins the Tyros in their mirth. *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] is a complex and contradictory response to the war; though it undoubtedly offers a tacit response to the conflict, it also denies it, paradoxically drawing attention to that which is absent.

Similarly, the recurrent appearance of classical literature in modernist art and writing illogically asserts, by its intrinsic difference, similarities with the

³² Corbett, 1998, p.120.

³³ Lewis (1975) 'Studies in the Art of Laughter'. In *Enemy Salvoes: Selected Literary Criticism*. (Edited by C.J. Fox). London: Vision Press. p.47.

³⁴ R.T. Chapman (1973) *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires*. London: Vision Press. p.60.

contemporary situation. Paul Edwards remarks of Lewis's painting that 'it both makes the ideal of classicism ... look a little foolish and asserts a continuity with Ovid's Rome that is belied by the blue business suits and modern hats of the readers', whose response testifies to 'Ovid's survival and contemporary relevance.'³⁵ If the term 'classicism' can be used to embody a wider political and philosophical viewpoint, in opposition to those attitudes summarised by the term 'romanticism', then the reference to Ovid must appear as a strong statement of the artist's ideological stance: rational, detached, intellectual, firmly on the side of order and hierarchy. The figures of the Tyros, in contrast, represent a base physicality, a purely emotional response to the text – as Robin Gibson puts it, 'these vacuous creations, grinning lewdly over Ovid, are Lewis's symbols for the intellectual dishonesty he sensed among his contemporaries.'³⁶ In this sense the 'contemporary relevance' of classical literature becomes clear as a rallying point in the post-war ideological and intellectual disorder. This chimes with T.S. Eliot's defence of tradition and assertion that classicism is the 'goal toward which all good literature strives.'³⁷ Eliot is far from saying that literature should be backward-looking; rather, that without taking into account the existing literature, which will be fundamentally altered by the addition of the new, modern art loses any lasting meaning – this meaning being dependent on an 'historical sense':

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.³⁸

³⁵ Edwards, 2000, p.262.

³⁶ Robin Gibson (1995) *The Sitwells and the Arts of the 1920s and 1930s* [exh. cat.] London: National Portrait Gallery. p.104.

³⁷ T.S. Eliot (1923) 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth'. *The Dial*. Volume LXXV, no.5. p.482.

³⁸ T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', published in *The Egoist* VI, 4 & 5, 1919, for which I have been unable to find the original source. Cited by Peter Faulkner (Ed.) (1986) *A Modernist Reader: Modernism in England 1910-1930*. London: B.T. Batsford. p.85.

Referring to Ovid in the title of his painting is clearly a deliberate strategy on the part of Lewis to force the viewer to recognise that the painting belongs within a long artistic and cultural history. However, his method is novel in its boldness and rejects the subtle references that are usually only apprehended by connoisseurs and those able to appreciate the inherited techniques of previous masters. Rather than inserting subtle visual clues he leaves the painting largely devoid of allusive details, directing the viewer towards the classical past by the direct signpost of the title. This is a tactic he uses again in *A Portrait of the Artist as Raphael* (1921), using his title to assert the painterly heritage of the Renaissance that he wishes to force the spectator to take into account. In this painting the result is less powerful, as the depiction of the artist is a traditional one in composition; there is no apparent threat to, or rejection of, the past – demonstrated by the Tyros in the contrast of their flagrant modernity – to complicate the assertion of an artistic lineage. The *Portrait* shows the limits of Lewis's satiric technique: the painting sets out to achieve a similar goal, that of placing the artist's work in an historical tradition as well as asserting its modernist context, working to show the failings of contemporary society whilst also situating the artist within it. But the overall result lacks either of the fundamental elements of satire: an object of ridicule, and a degree of wit or humour founded on a sense of the absurd. The artist here appears a believable, if nervous and unheroic, modern Raphael, and so there is no inconsistency between the image and the title to provoke laughter. Moreover, in *A Portrait of the Artist as Raphael*, the artist betrays his vulnerability, turning to the viewer as if for reassurance, his gaze ingenuous, and his mouth not quite set firm, anxious. The colours are softer and more naturalistic, contributing to a feeling that one is seeing the true Wyndham Lewis, starting out tentatively for the second time after the war – the artist before he dons the protective armour of the Tyro persona. It is a telling portrayal of the artist's search for identity, and like *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] it calls on the artistic past in its title as a touchstone or anchor, more necessary than ever in the post-war turmoil. But the honesty displayed prohibits the satire that gives the latter painting its detachment and

consequent power as a summary and critique of the situation in Britain following the Great War.

The importance of myth in modernist poetry as a means of presenting history as cyclical rather than progressive – as a continuum – is also applicable to Lewis as a painter. Both Rebecca Beasley and Hugh Witemeyer highlight the importance of the use of myth in the post-war context to draw analogies between the ancient and contemporary, and to address wider themes of culture and civilisation in order to critique the modern world.³⁹ A myth is described as ‘a sacred narrative explaining how the world and man came to be in their present form’; thus defined in aetiological terms, ‘myth’ seems an appropriate description of the modernist attempt to characterise the present by situating it within a continuous and broad historical sweep.⁴⁰ That myth should have a ‘sacred’ function is also interesting. Science and technology had made religious ritual largely redundant, and yet most modern writers recognised a deep human need for essential moral values which only religion seemed able to provide. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* was influenced by James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which elaborates a ‘myth-ritual’ theory, explaining the creation of myths around ancient magical rituals to give them a religious purpose.⁴¹ Thus both the Holy Grail legend and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* can be tied mythologically to modern civilisation, allowing Eliot to ‘draw together the central themes of religious and sexual sterility’ and point up the degradation of the current age.⁴² It is unlikely that the Tyros were painted in the spirit of a ‘sacred narrative’, but that they pose an unspoken challenge to the supremacy of science and technology is evident. The book that embodies the proposed narrative of the painting appears weighty and ancient – the antithesis of the modern paperback novel; it has the aspect of a medieval

³⁹ See Beasley (2007) and Witemeyer (1999).

⁴⁰ Alan Dundes (Ed.) (1984) *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*. London: University of California Press. p.1.

⁴¹ The influence of Frazer on Eliot is referred to by Beasley, 2007, pp.84-5.

⁴² Beasley, 2007, p.85.

psalter or a book of spells, from which the Tyros greedily devour esoteric truths.

The celebration of technological progress by the Vorticist avant-garde prior to the war had been discredited in the wake of the horror wrought by tanks and machine guns during the war, and Lewis's mechanical puppets, prone to eccentric behaviour, like automata liable to malfunction, metaphorically acknowledge this error of judgement. In the introduction to the 'Tyros and Portraits' exhibition catalogue, Lewis himself describes the Tyros as 'partly religious explosions of laughing Elementals' and goes on to explain that 'it is the child in him that has risen in his laugh [and] ... Every child has its figures of a constantly renewed mythology.' The religious reference seems at odds with the modernism of the portrayal, yet the iconic, hieratic aspect to Lewis's figures and a certain mystery to their motives signal something opposite to definable reality, which could reasonably be described as 'religious'. Ovid may show the way to a new, classical and moralistic religion, which would render the chaotic and meaningless modern world explicable. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* fulfil the function of myth in their use of allegory and personification of abstract ideas to establish models for behaviour and to validate a certain social order. This role could be applied to the Tyros, who symbolise Lewis's hopes for a new, socially engaged art. They are didactic in the sense that religious art aimed to teach the illiterate by example, to illustrate the corrupt state of the world and encourage the faithful to follow a more moral path. Classical mythology is perhaps proposed as a more pragmatic and liberal alternative to Christianity, the latter intrinsically linked to the state and to those 'father figures' of authority who were held accountable for the war. The contrast of the ultra-modern Tyros – their modernity manifested both in the appearance of the figures and the style in which they are painted – with the classical text lends a tension and a hermeneutic challenge to the work that would otherwise be absent.

In his 1923 review, 'Ulysses, Order and Myth', Eliot argues that James Joyce's use of the Odyssey had 'the importance of a scientific discovery', in 'manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity'

and in providing 'a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'; he concludes that 'instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.'⁴³ It may be argued that Eliot has adopted this same method in *The Waste Land*, described by B.C. Southam as 'a perspective of history in which (by succinct allusions and references) twentieth century forms of belief and disbelief, of culture and of life, are kept in a continuous and critical relationship with those of the past.'⁴⁴ Rebecca Beasley describes Pound's *modus operandi* in very similar terms: Pound 'draws out the continuity between myths, legends and history, suggesting the permanence of certain ideas, emotions and beliefs.'⁴⁵ However, Gilbert Highet asserts that both Joyce and Eliot 'sometimes use Greek myths ... to degrade life', which, as J.A.K. Thomson notes, is contrary to the spirit of classical art – indeed this reading turns the positive use of myth by the modernists on its head and instead suggests that they were in 'spiritual rebellion against the classics.'⁴⁶ They certainly use mythological elements with a new freedom that to an extent distorts the original (often didactic) meaning or purpose of the myth; but a degree of distortion is only to be expected in shifting the context of a narrative by a thousand years. This shift is highlighted, celebrated even, in the juxtapositions of classical myth and contemporary reality.

The literary references in both Pound and Eliot are abundant – from Sappho to Spenser, the Bible to the Upanishads. However, when looking at the classical sources, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* stands out. Pound, Yeats later recalled, elucidated his vision for the *Cantos* as follows:

⁴³ T.S. Eliot, 1923 ['Ulysses, Order and Myth'], pp.482-3.

⁴⁴ B.C. Southam (1987) *A Student's Guide to the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot*. London: Faber & Faber. p.81.

⁴⁵ Beasley, 2007, p.86.

⁴⁶ J.A.K. Thomson (1951) Review of *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* by Gilbert Highet. *The Classical Review*. 1 (1). pp.42-45.

There will be no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse, but two themes, the Descent into Hades from Homer, a Metamorphosis from Ovid, and, mixed with these, medieval or modern historical characters.⁴⁷

The theme of metamorphosis was clearly useful to both poets in expressing their complex ideas of cyclical change, continuity and adaptation. Daniel Albright expresses the multiple connotations of the term, which 'leads ugly things to distend, flatten, bristle, grow scaly, manifest their ugliness' but which is also the 'basic controlling force of human evolution' and, as such, an 'enchantment', offering a chance of salvation for the human race.⁴⁸ Metamorphosis, in its very ambiguity, serves to encapsulate the state of flux in which the post-war world was caught. This was an era of enormous change, but whether for better or worse was yet to be seen, and the uncertainty is reflected in much of the art and literature of the period.

Lewis's Tyros personify this ambiguity – do their grins convey confidence in a new world, or cover a tense anxiety? Are they ultimately cynical or optimistic? Normand perceives a tragic element in Lewis's work which is linked to a faith in the Classical; he posits Lewis as 'like Nietzsche ... a hopeless nihilist, conscious of the absurd pointlessness of existence.'⁴⁹ The interpretation of the Tyros' forced hilarity as a mask, 'putting on a brave face' in the stereotypically English way, can be read as a stalwart reaction to the recent war and also to war in general. The mythological approach emphasises the continuity of human failings – notably the recourse to violence – and ultimately must inspire a pessimistic world-view; but this is met with audacity by the Tyros, and satire provides the chief weapon of defence against despair.

⁴⁷ W.B. Yeats, 'A Packet for Ezra Pound' [1928]. Quoted in Sullivan, 1970, p.100.

⁴⁸ Daniel Albright (1999) 'Early Cantos I-XLI'. In Nadel, 1999, p.72.

⁴⁹ Tom Normand (1992) *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.61; p.197.

The years immediately preceding the First World War saw a significant quantity of new research into, and new translations of, Ovid's poetry. Ellis Robinson gave public lectures at Oxford on Ovid's *Amores* (1912) and *Tristia* (1913), while no less than four new editions of the *Heroides* appeared in 1910-11, and five edited volumes of the *Metamorphoses* between the years 1910 and 1921.⁵⁰ In addition there were regular scholarly articles on Ovid published in journals such as the *Classical Review*, the *Classical Quarterly*, and *Classical Philology* during the decade prior to 1921. On a more populist level, the Loeb Classical Library was founded in 1911 with the aim of making Greek and Latin literature more accessible. Cyril Connolly records its impact on the English schoolboy:

From that moment one could no longer ... spend hours over an author without discovering what he was like. And the knowledge was poison. Several of us began to understand what we read, and to find out that we had been learning by heart the mature, ironical, sensual, and irreligious opinions of a middle-aged Roman, one whose chief counsel to youth was to drink and make love to the best of its ability ... Henceforth the invective of Catullus, the bile of Juvenal, and the aristocratic bawdy of Petronius became the natural food of our imaginations ...⁵¹

The Tyros' reaction could quite easily be seen as an illustration of this schoolboy discovery that Latin literature could be scurrilous, and though Lewis was not at school at this point, he may have found the translations as

⁵⁰ Robinson Ellis, *The Amores of Ovid: A Lecture* (1912) and *The Second Book of Ovid's Tristia: A Public Lecture Delivered May 28th 1913* (1913); A.H. Allcroft & B.J. Hayes (eds.), *Ovid: Heroides XII* (1910), J.G.R. Lewis & L.W.P. Lewis (eds.), *Ovid's Heroides XII: Media Iasoni* (1910), A.H. Allcroft & A.J.F. Collins, *Ovid's Heroides I-X: A Translation* (1910), L.W.P. Lewis & C.H. Broadbent (eds.), *Selections from Ovid's Heroides* (1911); D.A. Slater (ed.), *Stories from Ovid's Metamorphoses* (1910), H.A. Jackson (ed.), *Selections from Ovid's Metamorphoses* (1911), F.R.G. Duckworth (ed.), *Ovid's Metamorphoses, Book II* (1911), Frank Justus Miller (trans.), *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, vol. I (2nd edition, 1921), A.H. Allcroft & J.F. Stout (ed. & trans.), *Ovid's Metamorphoses I & II* (1915).

⁵¹ Cyril Connolly (1963) *The Rock Pool* [1936]. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.8.

useful as Virginia Woolf did – enough at least to leave a lasting impression.⁵² But Ovid equally comes into play through the English satirical tradition that Lewis inherited. As Paul Edwards suggests, Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* assimilated the classical text into the ‘tradition of Fielding and Hogarth that the Tyros continue.’⁵³ He goes on to explain that ‘Lewis’s painting is arrogating membership of a tradition that includes Ovid, Dryden and Hogarth, [but] it is on a narrative level showing that this tradition has appeal to a pair of grinning idiots’; the painting, he concludes, hints at ‘the comic element in all classical revivals,’ which ‘simultaneously assert a decline from an ideal and an identity with it.’⁵⁴ It is important to recognise the satirical tradition that Lewis consciously inherited, and the fact that the English strain of this tradition owed a clear debt to classical writers such as Ovid. However, at the same time as acknowledging this comic heritage, Lewis’s Tyros affirm that a juncture has been reached at which modern values no longer tally with the accepted norms that traditional satire rests on. The basis of Lewis’s satire now rests on that rupture, the crucial element being the incongruity between the figures and their reading matter, the latter insisted on by the title of the painting and by the positioning of the book, visually, at the centre of the composition. This positioning confirms that Ovid, and classical literature more generally, was still at the heart of English culture, due to the dominance of the classics in all public school education. But, as the Tyros’ blank and ignorant reception of it illustrates, the classics had come to mean very little, so abstracted had its teaching become from the practical everyday issues that absorbed attention. Connolly’s reminiscences show the

⁵² Virginia Woolf wrote in 1917: “...the Loeb Library, with its Greek or Latin on one side of the page and its English on the other, came as a gift of freedom...” [Virginia Woolf (1968) ‘The Perfect Language’ (a review of *The Greek Anthology*, tr. by W.R. Paton, volume 2 of the Loeb Classical Library). In *The Times Literary Supplement* (24 May 1917). No.801. New York: R.R. Bowker. p.247].

⁵³ Edwards, 2000, p.262.

⁵⁴ Ibid., in a footnote to p.262; Edwards makes this point again in his essay, ‘The Apes of God and the English Classical Tradition’, stating that the English commitment to Classicism is most strongly associated with satire and mockery due to a disgust with the failure of English culture to live up to the proposed ideal. [In Carmelo Cunchillos Jaime (Ed.) (2007) *Wyndham Lewis the Radical: Essays on Literature & Modernity*. Bern: Peter Lang. p.94].

extent to which schoolboy translations had become wholly meaningless exercises, a tool of discipline rather than intellectual engagement. Consequently, what meaning did classicism as an ideal – in political or cultural terms – have in the modern age? Lewis endorses the spirit of classicism that Hulme had prophesied, in reaction to the Victorian values he characterised with contempt as ‘romantic’, but with an awareness of the distance that now existed between the living spirit of classicism and its desiccated, intellectual sense. The detachment from the ‘ideal’ of classicism, symbolised by Ovid, is conveyed in the contrast of the pulsating vitality of the Tyros. Modern man is shown as having fallen so far from the ideal that he no longer comprehends it, but yet asserts it as his birthright with a misplaced pride. The comic element therefore rests on an incongruity on several levels. Immediately legible is the juxtaposition of the modern Tyros with the classical author, suggesting the contrast of the ideal (timeless, abstract) with the real (contemporary, political), and of the physical and emotional (the romantic) with the rational and intellectual (classical). On a different level, the tradition of satire is itself satirised; it is conceived of as empty, a stylised mode without relevance to contemporary life, but for this very reason it becomes an object of ridicule and essentially comic. Out of this mockery of traditional satire emerges a new satire – thus Lewis effects a sort of satirical synthesis, if the dialectics of political philosophy can be applied to a literary-artistic genre in this way.

Satire, though an equivocal genre (or sub-genre) often confused with analogous terms, can be concisely defined for the purpose of this analysis as ‘the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people’s stupidity or vices.’⁵⁵ The identification of the volume in Lewis’s painting as Ovid rather than a popular bestseller appears as a deliberate dig at those self-satisfied dabblers in the arts who, pretending to be highly cultured, in fact have no understanding of the classics. The book functions merely as an accessory to the projection of their desired public image, the

⁵⁵ Judy Pearsall (Ed.) (2002) *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*. 10th Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.1296.

desire to belong to a long-established and esteemed heritage. Tom Normand sees the Tyros as a critique of the intellectual classes who have fallen 'into the manner of the mob', relinquishing their cultural duties; the identification of Ovid serves to back up this assertion by emphasising their empty posturing, an urge to conform based in mass psychology.⁵⁶ Ovid is used for similarly satirical purposes by Eliot in *The Waste Land*. The poem was dismissed by some contemporary critics as a joke or obscure satire, and Stephen Helmling emphasises the 'compulsive sarcasm' and 'self-lacerating jokes' voiced throughout the poem.⁵⁷ Helmling identifies the key elements of humour in the poem – incongruity, surprise of contrast, or inappropriate juxtaposition – citing Eliot's own view of his poetry as 'disparate experience amalgamated ... [into] new wholes', a 'heterogeneity of material compelled into unity.'⁵⁸ Interpreted in this way, the poem is inherently humorous as the whole is a patchwork of seemingly unrelated literary references. Placed in the post-war context, humour is used to express a general conflict of ideas and emotions, with Western civilisation 'vacillating between a comfortable narcosis of deadness and the frightening challenge of coming back to life.'⁵⁹ The incongruous juxtaposition of a volume of Ovid with the sharp-suited Tyros in Lewis's painting fits this interpretation – as Richard Humphreys puts it, 'the satire on neo-classicism is unmistakable, the meeting of Ovid and the brash children of the new age creating an absurd chasm between tradition and contemporary reality.'⁶⁰

A bitter, ironical humour is more literally represented by Eliot in the Ovidian figure of Tiresias, whose 'self-lacerating grin expresses an ironist's jaundiced view of the saint's project', forcibly anchoring the poem in a secular and

⁵⁶ Normand describes Lewis's satire as a reaction to the 'treason' of his fellow intellectuals who had 'connived in the democratisation of culture and the concomitant debasement of all values' and had thus 'betrayed the social duty of their class by failing to maintain a stratified, ordered and authoritative public world' [Normand, 1992, p.88; p.187].

⁵⁷ Stephen Helmling (1990) 'The Grin of Tiresias: Humour in "The Waste Land"'. *Twentieth Century Literature*. 36 (2). p.137.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.138.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.139.

⁶⁰ Humphreys, 2004, p.43.

flawed reality, mocking the temptation of Tiresias (or the author?) to 'conceive of himself as a Messiah.'⁶¹ Eliot and Lewis were both influenced by T.E. Hulme, who condemned the 'romantic' tendency to conceive of man as a god with limitless possibilities. He advocated the classical view of man as a 'very finite and fixed creature' whose belief in the Deity was a part of his 'fixed' nature; the 'romantic' tendency, he believed, was the result of natural, 'fixed', instincts being suppressed by the 'perverted rhetoric of Rationalism' and then bursting forth in 'some abnormal direction.'⁶² His cynical perception of man as limited, fixed in an imperfect state, is at the heart of his classical world-view, and is also a key element in the new mode of satire proposed by Eliot and Lewis. Tiresias's pessimistic recognition of the impossibility of perfection in this world, is replicated visually by the emblematic grins of Lewis's Tyros. It is an essential aspect of these characters, as Lewis describes in the introduction to his 1921 exhibition 'Tyros and Portraits':

These immense novices brandish their appetites in their faces, lay bare their teeth in a valedictory, inviting, or merely substantial laugh. A laugh, like a sneeze, exposes the nature of the individual with an unexpectedness that is perhaps a little unreal ... These partly religious explosions of laughing Elementals are at once satires, pictures and stories. The action of a Tyro is necessarily very restricted; about that of a puppet worked with deft fingers, with a screaming voice underneath.⁶³

The machine-like qualities of the Tyros are brought to the fore – in a reversal of Bergson's theory of laughter, Lewis proposes that humour results from mechanical beings behaving like people and deviating from predictable

⁶¹ Helmling, 1990, p.148; Conrad Aiken recalls that a psychiatrist, when asked about Eliot's writer's block pronounced that he [Eliot] "thinks he's God", and that this "intrusion" sparked *The Waste Land* [quoted by Wayne Koestenbaum (1988) 'The Waste Land: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound's Collaboration on Hysteria'. *Twentieth Century Literature*. 34 (2). p.115].

⁶² Hulme, 1936 [in *Speculations*], pp.117-118.

⁶³ Wyndham Lewis (1921) Introduction to *Tyros and Portraits* [exh. cat.]. London: Leicester Galleries/Ernest Brown & Phillips. pp.7-8.

behaviour. Perhaps the Tyros' choosing to read Ovid is intended to be understood as such a digression; the archetypal modern man being supposedly of low-brow taste, this reading matter would constitute a deviation from the predicted norm. Richard Aldington criticises the modern approach to reading with its ceaseless craving for novelty, asserting that 'newspapers have spoiled our sense of poetry ... no emotion is ever aroused in a person who skims through a piece of poetry as he skims through a journal.'⁶⁴ Pound likewise denounces the 'mechanical democracy of electoral franchise and mass-circulation newspapers' where political and aesthetic ideals become 'hollow mockeries.'⁶⁵ These paragons of a fair and democratic society are derided as modern deities, appearing unworthy of worship when juxtaposed with ancient religious ritual:

We have the press for wafer;
Franchise for circumcision.⁶⁶

Ovid's own poetry was primarily satirical, and therefore his appearance in *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] could be simply be Lewis's way of acknowledging his predecessor in the genre he had recently chosen as his primary means of expression. Historians of satire as a literary genre generally look to the formal verse satire of the Roman period for its source.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Richard Aldington. 'A Young American Poet' [March 1915]. In Margaret Anderson (Ed.) (1953) *The Little Review Anthology*. New York: Hermitage House. p.27.

⁶⁵ Witemeyer, 1999, p.55.

⁶⁶ Ezra Pound (1920) *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. [Online]. Oxford, MS: Project Gutenberg Literary Archive. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/23538/pg23538.html> [Accessed: 8 May 2013].

⁶⁷ The OED defines satire as derived from 'satura' meaning 'medley': 'in classical use a poem in which prevalent follies or vices are assailed with ridicule or with serious denunciation' [J.A. Simpson & E.S.C. Weiner (Eds.) (1989) *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd Edition. Volume XIV. Oxford: Clarendon Press. p.500-501]; Ruben Quintero similarly describes how formal verse satire of the Roman period was more precisely called 'satura', the satirist offering a medley of variegated but artful composition: the first-person poet-persona typically attacked forms of vanity or hypocrisy, vices of 'affectation' [Ruben Quintero (Ed.) (2007) *A Companion To Satire*. Oxford: Blackwells. pp.6-7]; see also

Horace and Juvenal have given their names to specific forms of satire, and Ovid provides a good example of the Horatian strain: his *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, a poem on women's beauty treatments, parodies serious didactic poetry, while the *Ars Amatoria* constitutes a playful, pseudo-didactic instruction in the art of seduction. However, the details of Ovid's life also throw up interesting parallels. He was born at a time of enormous political change that would alter the shape of the Roman world; Julius Caesar's death, precipitating the end of the republican regime, was followed by civil wars which were concluded by the victory of Augustus over Mark Antony, and the reinstatement of imperial rule. For those reeling from the recent European conflict and contemplating the nature of war and wholesale regime change in many parts of Europe (namely the breakdown of the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires and the Bolshevik Revolution), could this have struck a chord? The foregrounding of Ovid infers Lewis's desire to draw expansive historical parallels in his work, and when one considers that contemporaries such as Eliot and Pound also took a similarly broad historical perspective it seems not inappropriate to make such connections.

Taking the historical parallels sparked by Ovid a step further, one could propose the Tyros as modern Scythians.⁶⁸ In 8 AD Ovid was exiled by Augustus to Tomis, on the Black Sea, where he remained until his death a decade later. This area east of the Roman Empire was known as Scythia, and in *Tristia* Ovid records his impressions of the region and its people as savage and barbaric:

Great hordes of tribal nomads – Sarmatians, Getae –
Come riding in and out here, hog the crown
Of the road, every one of them carrying bow and quiver

Edward & Lillian Bloom (1979) and Leon Guilhamet (1987) as just two other examples which discuss the Roman origins of satire as a genre or mode in literature.

⁶⁸ I owe this idea of a possible identification between the Tyros and the Scythians to David Peters Corbett, in conversation.

And poisoned arrows, yellow with viper's gall:
Harsh voices, fierce faces, warriors incarnate,
Hair and beards shabby, untrimmed,
Hands not slow to draw – and drive home – the sheath-knife
That each barbarian wears strapped at his side.⁶⁹

Ovid applies the adjectives 'barbarian' and 'savage' frequently throughout the text, and thus his account is partly responsible for the enduring idea of 'Scythian' as a term synonymous with 'barbarian.' This usage was subsequently employed by, for instance, Shakespeare in *King Lear*; Lewis's education, and that of his audience, would have encompassed both Ovid and Shakespeare, and, with the prompt of the volume of Ovid, he might have expected the viewer to make a connection between the Scythian legacy and the wild, primitive demeanour of the Tyros. If the basic premise of satire lies in holding up the flaws and vices of a society for ridicule – and, ideally, rectification – then the Tyros can be seen to perform this role in their critique of modern society. They symbolise the 'life of the senses', the physical and primitive aspect of humanity, standing in contrast to the rational and intellectual.⁷⁰ This mirrors very closely the contrast drawn by Ovid between the civilised culture of Rome and the Latin language as opposed to the wild appearance and manners, and the barbarous dialects of the Scythians:

... If some phrases sound un-Latin, remember
they were penned on Barbarian soil.

... because the Barbarians' language is alien to Latin
And Greek's overlaid by Getic ...⁷¹

⁶⁹ Ovid (1994) 'Tristia'. Book V (7) ll.13-20. *The Poems of Exile*. Translated from Latin by Peter Green. London: Penguin. p.95; Herodotus also described the Scythians in detail, their nomadic life and reputation as warriors and skilled archers in Herodotus (1997) *The Histories*. Book IV. Translated from Ancient Greek by G. Rawlinson. London: David Campbell.

⁷⁰ Andrew Causey (1996) 'The Hero and the Crowd: The Art of Wyndham Lewis in the 20s'. In Edwards, 1996, p.90.

⁷¹ Ovid, 1994 ['Tristia'. Book III (1) ll.17-18; Book V (2) ll.67-68], p.41; p.88.

Lewis's satire depends for its effect on a degree of detachment from the society he lives in, and in this sense he could be seen metaphorically as an exile, intellectually and psychologically cut off from post-war reality, and thus engaging on a personal level with Ovid's position. The Tyros, embodying the 'philistine' modern man, are in this case the parallel of the Scythian warriors among whom Ovid felt so isolated.⁷² The twenties slang that Lewis parodies so sharply in his written satires such as *The Apes of God* is condemned just as sharply by this visual equivalent if one reads the reference to Ovid with examples such as those quoted above – bemoaning the bastardisation of the Latin language – in mind.

The parallels between the Tyros and Scythians, and between Lewis and Ovid, can be extended; the complex relationship between self and 'other' is in both cases upturned. Ovid realises that in Scythia, *he* is the barbarian, while in his self-portrait, *A Portrait of Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig.2], Lewis tacitly acknowledges that he is himself part of the society he condemns, the object of his own critique. Moreover, Ovid describes the barbarians as laughing at his cultured phrases, just as the Tyros do almost a thousand years later:

Here *I'm* the barbarian, understood by no one,
And these stupid peasants mock my Latin speech ...⁷³

'Barbarian' is an especially appropriate term as it is used here in Ovid's couplet; beyond its broad sense of 'a rude, wild, uncivilised person' the more specific Greek origin of the word is recalled, meaning, etymologically, 'a foreigner, one whose language and customs differ from the speaker's'.⁷⁴

⁷² 'Philistine' defined as 'an uneducated or unenlightened person; one perceived to be indifferent or hostile to art or culture, or whose interests and tastes are commonplace or material; a person who is not a connoisseur ... aesthetically unsophisticated' (www.oed.com)

⁷³ Ovid, 1994 ['Tristia'. Book V (10) ll.37-38]. p.100.

⁷⁴ Oxford English Dictionary (2013) 'Barbarian'. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/15380?redirectedFrom=Barbarian#eid> [Accessed: 8 May 2013]; the OED entry identifies the latter definition as the meaning given to the word in the Bible: 'I shall be unto him that speaketh, a Barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a Barbarian unto me' (I Cor. Xiv. 11,

While the Getae literally do not comprehend Ovid's language, Lewis is only metaphorically misunderstood. In his consciously adopted position as a modern classicist, Lewis exposes himself to the ridicule of a public who can't – or do not want to – understand his 'Latin' tongue. This public are embodied by the Tyros in their modern garb who laugh at the book of Ovid; they find the cultured phrases incomprehensible and therefore ridiculous, yet are nevertheless subconsciously discomfited by their ignorance – ashamed and angered simultaneously. This instinctive emotional response gives rise to their callous rejection of Lewis/Ovid. The idea of the 'barbarian' or uncultured 'other', as Ovid so acutely perceives, necessarily works in both directions; both parties view their own language and culture as the legitimate standard, and judge all others as aberrations that diverge to a greater or lesser extent from the ideal. Lewis is acutely aware of this dichotomy, which is the more complex for being situated within the same society; it is a barbarism of intellectual denial that he addresses, of the modern crowd psychology versus individual intelligence. On the other hand, the status of 'barbarism' might conversely be turned on those high modernist writers, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, whom Lewis attacks in *The Diabolical Principle* for their 'linguistic anarchy' which breaks all accepted values.⁷⁵ Stein and Joyce were condemned by Lewis as part of the Bergsonian 'Time School', whose 'surrender to the flux' was seen by him as a 'denial of life.'⁷⁶ Lewis's positioning of himself, through association with Ovid, as the speaker of a pure, classical 'Latin' as opposed to a modernist colloquial 'babble', once again confirms Lewis's classicist stance and status as an outsider, living among, but separate from, the majority of established modernist artists and writers.

If the Tyros in *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] depict the 'philistine' reaction of the modern English public to Lewis, whose opposing, classicist credentials

ibid.) – the large and ancient appearance of the book in *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* and the careful way that the figures handle it could argue for a simultaneous reading of the volume as a Bible.

⁷⁵ Chapman, 1973, p.35.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp.32-35.

are embodied in the volume of Ovid, the situation is reversed in *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig.2]. Here Lewis portrays *himself* as the grinning fool, baldly stating his acknowledgement that in the eyes of others *he* appears as the barbarian. As the artist, he puts himself in the position of those who do not understand his 'language' (language in the sense of meaning or import rather than, in Ovid's case, literally a foreign tongue) and mocks his own projected image of intellectual superiority. But this process demands that Lewis reconfigure himself as one of the 'barbarians' he has previously condemned, so that effectively *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig.2] is picture of a 'barbarian' by a 'barbarian.' This self-reflexive satire complicates the reading of the work by demanding a double interpretation, recognising a simultaneous identification and ironic detachment. Lewis the satirist no longer stands separate from that which he ridicules, but becomes the immediate subject of his own ridicule. He is the assailant and the victim, the judge and the accused, the psychiatrist and the patient all at once. The satire within the image is directed towards modern society as a whole, and turning his satirical eye on himself shows Lewis's awareness that he is inescapably a part of this society and therefore implicated in his own critique. However, the painting also testifies to Lewis's higher intelligence in being able to distance himself from his egocentric self-consciousness, in order to look on himself diachronically as part of an extended historical continuity, and synchronically as part of a complex social network. Another level of satire lies in the deceptive simplicity of the image, which belies the infinitely convoluted nature of the individual's position in relation to those around him.

Lewis's conception of his outsider status as an artist was far from novel; the trope of the exile has a long history, and the use of Ovid to signify this tradition is appropriate, both in making it explicit and in acknowledging the extent of its history. The idea of the prophet not honoured in his own land, the visionary reviled, is a familiar image. Lewis clearly felt underappreciated by his contemporaries; with his place at the head of an avant-garde movement having dissolved after the war and the powerful Bloomsbury clique ranked against him, an isolated and disillusioned stance developed,

becoming defined in the late twenties by his 'Enemy' persona. This outlook gradually hardened; from a dynamic and forceful challenge to modern society in the Tyros, his antagonistic pose became bitter and negative towards the end of the decade, as Lewis gradually lost faith in the power of his art to effect real change in society. Satire becomes less a pragmatic oppositionary tool than a defensive and cynical gesture of defiance. Post-war Britain became for Lewis what Scythia was to Ovid – ostensibly an outpost of the Roman Empire that formed his innate identity, yet totally foreign, a disorientating experience.

It is not only the demeanour of the Tyros that resembles descriptions of Scythians by Ovid, but also their colouring. Herodotus wrote of a tribe in Northern Scythia: 'they have all deep blue eyes, and bright red hair' – the parallel is not literal, but the brick red of the Tyros' faces and the intense blue of their suits is a striking coincidence nevertheless.⁷⁷ Moreover, a dark, reddish skin-tone had become a standardised trope in art, implying a formulaic masculinity, a brute physicality that equates to the barbarian, in contrast to the pale purity of the innocent female or the marble perfection of a classical sculpture.⁷⁸ Andrew Causey likens the Tyros to 'Hawaiian war gods with red feathered faces and sharks' teeth that Lewis would have seen in the British Museum.'⁷⁹ This description again emphasises the elemental and primitive, locating the source of the satire in the unlikely association of such beings with the study of classical poetry. Yet at the same time, the bright, acidic tones could signify an opposition to the sensual colours and romantic humanism of Lewis's contemporaries, denoting these hues, by default, as 'classical.'⁸⁰ The red skin, combined with the pointed features and wily, devilish grins of the Tyros, gives them a demonic look, the colour an allusion to the fires of hell, the Dantesque inferno. The Tyro-demons, located by their

⁷⁷ Herodotus, 1997, p.346.

⁷⁸ This differentiated colouring is clear in a painting such as Cézanne's *The Abduction* (1867).

⁷⁹ Andrew Causey (1986) 'The Everyday and the Visionary'. In Susan Compton (Ed.) *British Art in the 20th Century: The Modern Movement*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, Munich & London: Royal Academy. p.196.

⁸⁰ Normand, 1992, p.189

apparel in the present day, represent the fall from grace of contemporary society. Their attempt to comprehend the morality and ethical wisdom contained in the corpus of classical literature is doomed to futility, and the notion is therefore laughable. Again, it is clear that Lewis's approach is moral and condemnatory, but also that he offers no hope of a remedy, his contrast of classical and modern defining a bleak new form of satire.

References to Scythians surfaced in contemporary literature too. Alexander Blok's poem, 'The Scythians', was written in 1918 and published in English in 1920, just at the point when Lewis would have been formulating his Tyro imagery.⁸¹ The poem sarcastically addresses the view, dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of Russians as descendants of the Scythians. There is no evidence that Lewis had read this poem, but bearing in mind his interest in Russian literature it is not implausible.⁸² In the light of the recent Russian Revolution, the identification between Scythian ancestors and modern barbarism seems even more appropriate. The issues of nationalism and universality central to the continuing debate surrounding the 'classical' versus the 'romantic' are combined in Blok's poem, which expresses 'the dichotomy inherent in the Russian Revolution: internationalism as well as nationalism.'⁸³ Blok's 'classical' – as opposed to narrowly political – historical

⁸¹ The 'Scythians' was also the name of a literary group in Russia, to which Andrei Bely, a direct influence on the young Blok, belonged in 1913-16 [Jack Lindsay, introduction to Alexander Blok (1982) *The Twelve and The Scythians*. London: The Journeyman Press. p.5].

⁸² Augustus John writes of the influence of Dostoyevsky in the early years of the twentieth century: 'The advent of Dostoyevsky on our consciousness was an important event about this time...' Cited by Starr, 1982, p.184; Alexander Blok is described as a 'Russian intellectual in the Dostoyevskian tradition' by Kurt Dowson (1961) 'Notes to translation of Alexander Blok's "The Scythians"' [1918]. *International Socialism*. Series 1. No. 6 (Autumn). pp.24-25. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1961/no006/blok.htm> [Accessed: 8 May 2013].

⁸³ Dowson, 1961, pp.24-25; lines such as 'We understand all- sharp Gallic sense/ And gloomy Teutonic genius' resonate with Julien Benda's discussion of the modern tendency towards national consciousness 'in *everything* which makes them distinct from others', to the extent that personal characteristics are extended to an abstract nation [Benda, 1969, p.84].

conception of Russia's role in the world has parallels to Ovid beyond the explicit reference to the Scythians; he sees Russia as an imperial mediator in much the same way as Ovid must have conceived of Rome. His own position as an exile or outsider in his own country was far more complex, an intellectual in conflict with the new Bolshevik regime as well as with Western values, but essentially his melancholy at being estranged from the culture to which he felt bound seems comparable to Ovid's. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid calls upon the story of Oedipus and the Sphinx; Blok's lines 'Old Oedipus, you stand and face the Sphinx./ Spell the dark riddle of her eyes' borrow their imagery from the same episode, suggesting that Blok was familiar with the classical author.⁸⁴ The allegory hinges on clarity of thought, on reason as opposed to the archaic mysteries of the sphinx; it has equal relevance in a modern context, contrasting practical intelligence with superstition. Blok equates Russia with the Sphinx, about to be toppled by the Oedipus of Bolshevism; could Lewis be proffering Ovid as an example in the same way? The Tyros can hardly personify the sage Oedipus, so in this case must be the superstitious, the Scythian narrators of Blok's poem who speak of their love of flesh and whose 'barbarian lute' in the final stanza calls to the 'Old World' with all its sensuous, physical allure.⁸⁵

This dichotomy reasserts Lewis's recurrent concern with the conflict between the intellect and the emotions, articulated in *Tarr*, and apparent also in the figures of the Tyros. Indeed 'Tatar' is one suggested origin for the name Tarr, while 'tyro', a learner or novice, stems from the Latin word 'tiro' meaning 'recruit' – which has decidedly more military overtones. Blok's juxtaposition of images, 'With callous Science let the Horde collide,/ The Mongols with the massed Machines', precisely summarises the tension inherent in the figures of the Tyros – the smooth, mechanical perfection of their forms jarring with the atavistic, primitive wildness suggested by their leering faces and the sense of irrational, bestial force stored up within their limbs.⁸⁶ The act of laughter was

⁸⁴ Blok, 1982, p.70.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp.70-71.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.71.

itself considered uncivilised, so circumscribed had Victorian and Edwardian etiquette become, so that the open mouths and hysterical abandon of the Tyros would have designated them immediately as uncouth savages, akin to the Tatar hordes. In direct contrast, machinery was the embodiment of order and control. The arhythmic dissonance of the imagined sound bursting forth from the Tyros' machine-like exteriors upsets the predicted pattern, a 'thing' starts to behave like a 'person' with a will of its own, and threatens disruption. Experimental poetry, notably that of the Sitwells who were friends and patrons of Lewis in the early twenties, was likewise subject to widespread criticism for its rejection of the accepted norms of verse. Edith Sitwell adopted a semi-abstract technique at around this time, concerned with 'assonances, dissonances, rhythms and repetitions' – this was combined, in 1922, with William Walton's Stravinsky-inspired music to produce *Façade*.⁸⁷ In complete contrast to the harsh and raucous sound of the Tyros' implied laughter, Lewis's portrait of Edith is absolutely silent. Edith is presented as if in a trance, a hieratic, sibylline figure – or an abandoned puppet, an invalid slumped in her chair. The absence of language in this painting is a mockery in itself, denying Edith's career as a poet. Unlike the Tyros, she ignores the shelves of books in the background, confirming Lewis's conception of the avant-garde intellectual circles in London as forsaking their social responsibility, closing their eyes and ears to the vital issues at stake in the post-war world.

The difficulties of communication inherent in the term 'barbarian' are reiterated in Blok's poem, recalling Ovid's couplet quoted above: his poetry of the revolutionary years is described by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as consisting of 'mood-creating sounds, polyphonic rhythms, and harsh, slangy language.'⁸⁸ The Tyros, one imagines, would likewise speak the language of the street, the Scythian dialect or Bolshevik argot of their own time and place.

⁸⁷ John Pearson (1980) *Facades: Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell*. London: Fontana. pp.79-81.

⁸⁸ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, cited in 'Alexander Blok'. *Answers* [online]. Available at: <http://www.answers.com/topic/alexander-blok> [Accessed: 2 August 2013].

They are far from being Communist figures, but there is a threatening element about them that echoes the anxiety in Western Europe in the face of the 'red peril' at this time. Hiding behind the innocuous volume of Ovid, they might conceivably be plotting a revolution, their identical appearance suggestive of a civilian uniform, denoting a shared – political or class-based – group identity. In this scenario, Lewis may also be hinting at the element of self-deceit in contemporary mass political movements, whether left or right wing, in calling upon history to justify their principles or actions. He appears to ridicule the attempt of the Tyros to place their pragmatic modern creed on an intellectual basis, highlighting their idiocy by choosing a classical writer who is almost completely irrelevant to their cause when he could have selected, for instance, Plato's *Republic*. Whether it is Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, *Metamorphoses* or *Tristia* that they read, the incongruity of the material, in relation to the immediate concerns of socialist or fascist movements in restructuring a modernist state, is risible. A feature of these movements, which had taken hold in Russia and Europe and were an ever-present threat in the minds of the British ruling classes in the 1920s, was their specific mode of political rhetoric. The origins of rhetoric and oratory were classical, and in his polemical writing Lewis clearly looks to the example of the classics to communicate his own views. The Tyros display a comparable pleasure, having discovered in Ovid a precise, rational language in which to articulate their mysterious plans.

Another possibility is that the volume of Ovid in Lewis's painting is not in fact a direct reference to the classical author, but rather to the Ovid Press, founded by John Rodker in 1919. Rodker was associated from around 1908 with the 'Whitechapel Boys', Isaac Rosenberg, David Bomberg, Mark Gertler and others, and his poems and essays appeared in publications such as *The Dial*, *The Egoist* and *The New Age* in the years preceding the outbreak of war.⁸⁹ It

⁸⁹ Bob Taylor (2003) 'John Rodker: An Inventory of his Papers in the Manuscript Collection at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre'. Austin: University of Texas. [Online]. Available at: <http://research.hrc.utexas.edu:8080/hrcxtf/view?docId=ead/00350.xml> [Accessed: 8 May 2013].

was in these years that Pound and Lewis began to make their mark on the literary-artistic scene, and since all were contributing to many of the same literary journals, it is not surprising that they should have met.⁹⁰ The publication by the Ovid Press of limited editions of work by Eliot, Pound and Lewis would have brought all four into close contact. The Ovid Press was announced at its launch as ‘a new venture that will concern itself with the most advanced art and literature’ – and an advertisement in the *Egoist* corroborated this statement by announcing poems by Pound, Eliot and Rodker, along with drawings by Gaudier-Brzeska and Lewis.⁹¹ As with Lewis’s painting, the allusion to Ovid in the title of Rodker’s commercial publishing venture seems surprising. It again begs the question why, if radical modernism was the aim of the enterprise, a connection was asserted with classical literature? Whatever its basis, this connection could have provoked Lewis’s subsequent juxtaposition of classical and modern. The association must have occurred to Lewis, and adds – through the insistence on Ovid in the title of the painting – another point of reference to his multi-layered satire.

The work published by the Ovid Press is largely satirical in character. Lewis’s portfolio of *Fifteen Drawings* (published in 1919) included *Post Jazz* (1913), *Blue Nudes* (1912-13) and *Pole Jump* (1919), which, in Paul Edwards’ words, exemplify ‘the gamut of linear stylisation we think of as caricature.’⁹² The publication of these early figurative works in which a nascent satirical element is observed, may have spurred Lewis on towards the more forceful

⁹⁰ Pound was contributing regularly to *The Egoist* and *The New Age*, and was London editor of *The Little Review* prior to 1919, when he handed this position over to Rodker.

⁹¹ Arthur Clutton-Brock (1968) ‘Men or Machines?’ (a review of *Twenty Drawings from the Note-Books of H. Gaudier-Brzeska*). In *The Times Literary Supplement* [June 26 1919]. No.910. New York: R.R. Bowker. p.347; advert in the *Egoist* [March-April 1919]. The initial publications by the Ovid Press, as advertised, included (chronologically): *Twenty Drawings from the Notebooks of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska* [June 1919], Pound’s *Fourth Canto* [October 1919], Lewis’s *Fifteen Drawings* [January 1920], Eliot’s *Ara Vus Prec* and Rodker’s *Hymns* [1920] [as listed in Gerald W. Cloud (2010) *John Rodker’s Ovid Press: A Bibliographical History*. New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2010, pp.21-27].

⁹² These drawings are identified in Edwards, 2000, pp.222-225.

satire of the Tyros. This promotional relationship, based on satire, was reciprocal – Rodker’s satire on H.G. Wells, ‘Mr. Segando in the Fifth Cataclysm’, was published by Lewis in his journal *The Tyro* no.1 (1921). As David Peters Corbett points out, there was a pattern in Lewis’s business relations in the immediate post-war period, which saw his one-time allies become the butt of his satire, and Rodker was no exception; it is suggested that Rodker was the ‘main formulation of the figure of Ratner in the preliminary draft’ of the *Apes of God*, and thus he is ‘effectively being consigned to the trivialisation diagnosed in Bloomsbury art and aesthetics.’⁹³ The Tyros are popularly recognised as symbolising the degenerate state of post-war British society, and particularly those amateurs and ‘dabblers’ in the arts who made life so difficult for the ‘true’ artist. As in the written portrait of Ratner, then, the inclusion of Ovid in Lewis’s painting may likewise implicate Rodker in this biting visual satire. The emphasis on ‘abominable teeth’ in a letter written by Lewis to Ezra Pound, believed to describe Rodker, supports this identification of the latter with the Tyros:

I found [Rodker] a most poisonous little bugger on Saturday, repellently hoarse (this may be a form of jealousy) and with abominable teeth, not to mention his manner. I am sure you can’t say anything too bad about him.⁹⁴

The imagery of teeth is recurrent, the inevitable extension of the symbol of the grin, though more explicitly violent and threatening. Lewis’s description of the Tyros as ‘immense novices [who] brandish their appetites in their faces, [and] lay bare their teeth in a valedictory, inviting, or merely substantial laugh’ underscore the chasm that separates the ‘grin’ from the ‘smile’, the former suggesting a dangerous and predatory greed.⁹⁵ There is a tacit analogy to weapons in this description – teeth as biting or slicing – that harks

⁹³ David Peters Corbett, “‘Grief with a yard wide grin’: War and Wyndham Lewis’s Tyros’. In Corbett, 1998, p.230.

⁹⁴ Letter from Lewis to Ezra Pound [July 1915]. W.K. Rose (Ed.) *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*. London: Methuen & Co. p.68; also cited by Gerald Cloud, who identifies the description as Rodker [Cloud, 2010, p.25].

⁹⁵ Lewis, 1970 [*The Tyro*, no.1], p.2.

back to the psychological mutilation endured by the 'Tommies' of the Great War. Looking to the contemporary, peace-time, situation a similar harshness can be deduced; the Tyros keep on smiling cynically at, or in spite of, the inane social scene that characterised the 1920s. The grin – and consequent bared teeth – become, in Lewis's work, a striking visual metaphor, emblematic of the satire peculiar to the twenties.

Whether, and to what extent, one accepts the potential allusions and interpretations of Ovid in the context of Lewis's painting as outlined above, it is without question that Lewis's classical public school education allows them to be considered as possibilities. Why Lewis – as well as Eliot and Pound, among other modernist intellectuals – should have looked to their classical heritage at this point in time makes sense if one views the post-war years as a time for taking stock. This reaction was widespread, but manifested in diverse ways by different artists and writers. By some there was a total withdrawal from the modern world (as Charles Harrison describes), in others a subtle and subversive critique of the new reality; however all are alike in avoiding any direct challenge to the political or artistic establishment. Any implicit rejection of the status quo was masked by metaphorical allusions – in Lewis's case Ovid fulfilled this function.

The embrace of classicism in whatever guise seems to indicate a desire to place the historical moment in perspective, to judge it in relation to the weight of past experience. The present appeared dislocated, previously accepted values had been undermined; how, then, to make sense of the new reality? The connections made with the classical past by Lewis and his contemporaries allowed them to locate themselves and their work within an historical context, as part of the eternal circularity and immutability of human folly and endeavour. At the same time the espousal of 'classicism' in its abstract sense worked to distance them from the opposing, 'romantic', tendency, and emphasised the detached, rational and intellectual stance that Lewis insists on in his writing.

Reading the Tyro paintings as statements of a neo-classical position, and simultaneously as heralds of a new, 'modernist' satire, provides a different angle from which to view Lewis's career as a whole. Although their artistic value and art historical importance have long been acknowledged, they continue to be viewed as in some way anomalous, never achieving a stable identity as part of a coherent avant-garde movement such as Vorticism provided – and this isolated position was confirmed by Lewis's abandonment of painting altogether later in the decade. Arguments have been made for them as 'war paintings' in the sense that they convey the artist's personal response to the war.⁹⁶ However, despite the superficial continuity in style, there is little to tie the Tyros to Lewis's official war paintings, and this reading therefore reinforces their isolation within the artist's oeuvre. This is by no means to deny the key role that the war played in the formation of the imagery and the ideas expressed in the Tyro paintings – indeed, as described above, the war was fundamental in the reification of Lewis's philosophical views, which can be broadly termed as 'classicist', and in instigating his turn to satire as the tool to express these views. However, it seems necessary to stress these metaphysical concerns – and Lewis's means of communicating them and applying them in order to make them relevant to modern society – above the more immediate circumstances of their production. The reference to Ovid is crucial in this respect, harmonising the literal with the abstract, and invoking the erudition and the humour of a shared classical heritage. Lewis himself presented the Tyros, on first being exhibited, as 'satires, pictures and stories', encouraging a narrative interpretation of his figures as commentaries on modern society, but also in his title insisting on the enduring presence and influence of the past.

Lewis's own vision of his artistic future when he wrote this introduction was still fairly positive – indeed, it seems plausible to locate his subsequent negativity and frustration in the lack of commercial or critical success of the 'Tyros and Portraits' exhibition in 1921. If this had not been the case, and if other exhibitions had followed suit, Lewis's enthusiastic heralding of his

⁹⁶ See Corbett, 1998, p.100.

'immense novices' and 'laughing Elementals' might have signalled the emergence of a formal sub-division of modernism, to rival the parallel movement in literature during these years. The clear similarities that Wyndham Lewis shares with Pound, Eliot and Joyce at a time when Modernist styles were crystallising, would suggest that there are ample grounds for placing him as central to Modernism in the visual arts. That he is largely overlooked today must be a result of his isolated status as an artist, and his break from painting in the mid-twenties. Paul Edwards remarks that Lewis's work of 1921-23 'provided a foundation upon which a Modernism in England ... might have been constructed,' but instead it has remained 'a virtually unknown and apparently peripheral cul-de-sac in the stuttering history of British Modernism.'⁹⁷ Because they did not inaugurate a new movement, it is all too easy to dismiss the Tyro paintings historiographically as an interesting but parenthetical 'might have been'. However, viewing the Tyros as both satires – thus intrinsically topical and 'of the moment' – and also as embodying a Classical outlook that anchors them to a continuous, cyclical historical process and to certain abstract, timeless truths, makes a case for placing them as central to Lewis's career. Moreover, if his written and visual work are perceived not as separate, but as parts of a philosophically cohesive project, then the Tyros do seem to mark the beginning of a distinct – and distinctively modernist – form of satire. The continuity and momentum of Lewis's satirical approach, culminating with the publication of *The Apes of God* in 1930, thus becomes apparent.

ii. Satire in the work of William Roberts: from Vorticism to Social Comedy

William Roberts appears a peripheral figure both in British art history and within the narrative I am attempting to trace around the development of satire in the 1920s. He started his career prior to the outbreak of war as a Vorticist alongside Lewis, but like many of that radical avant-garde was

⁹⁷ Edwards, 2000, p.219; Ibid., p.283.

unable to return to that status in the post-war decade, moving as Lewis did towards figuration and isolation. Though his style is immediately recognizable, his post-Vorticist work is difficult to classify; his determined figuration developed into what might be termed a mild satirical style in the 1920s, one far more akin to Burra's gentle parody than to Lewis's more aggressive social critiques. Thus, having the same Vorticist background and active wartime experience as Lewis, while exhibiting a gentle satire more akin to that of Burra, he seems a vital link between these two artists, posited here as the two key figures of modernist satire.

Roberts initially followed in Lewis's path, leaving the Omega workshops after the Ideal Home row to join Lewis's Rebel Art Centre in 1913, where Vorticism was formally founded in June 1914. He had works included in both issues of *Blast*, before enlisting in the Royal Artillery in 1916, and later, like Lewis, being commissioned as a war artist by the Canadian War Memorials Fund. Perhaps the experience at the front and the demand for narrative painting from war artists produced the same effect on the two contemporaries, as both Lewis and Roberts turned decisively back to figurative work in the post-war period. However, once Group X, Lewis's short-lived attempt to revive the avant-garde that had coalesced around Vorticism, had splintered, the two artists appear to have had little further contact. Roberts, more so than Lewis, turned to social observation in a mildly satirical vein, painting scenes of jazz clubs and cinemas, charwomen and diners in a café, while Lewis retreated into himself, producing self-portraits and the imaginary beings he dubbed 'tyros'. Perhaps there was a purely practical explanation for this; Roberts had a family to support, to whom he was devoted, and consequently may have suppressed his own emotional reactions to the war and the difficult readjustment that followed the armistice. He was keen to sell his work, and so adapted the modern Cubist style he had developed pre-war to relatively 'safe' subject matter. Lewis, it is clear, had no such qualms; his work came high above any concern for his family, and he allowed full vent to his anger, frustration and disillusionment – quite in keeping with his character, later to be defined as 'The Enemy.'

The Return of Ulysses (c.1913) [Fig.3] shows Roberts developing a 'Vorticist' style that he would later make his own; an angular, mechanical style that echoes the tubular robotic figures of Léger, and prefigures the machine-like dynamism of Lewis's *The Crowd* (1915). The figures seem to tumble in a mass of angular limbs from the top left corner of the canvas to the bottom right. In the upper section of the composition they sit – drinking, conversing, even wrestling – at trestle tables; as one moves across the canvas they become more upright, running or dancing, contorted in physical movement. Steep diagonal shadows are thrown across the rich orange ground, filling the empty space with abstract colour blocks. At this time Roberts was working at Roger Fry's Omega workshops in order to earn money and further his career as an artist. Yet, following his travels in France and Italy in summer 1913, Roberts' keen interest in Cubism was further strengthened, and back at home in Cumberland Market he worked towards a personal interpretation of abstract Cubism.⁹⁸ *The Return of Ulysses* [fig.3] certainly shows the influence of Cubism on Roberts, in the distorted and fractured figures, and in the limited colour scheme of reds, ochres and browns. But, as Andrew Gibbon Williams writes, 'the treading of the fine line between two and three dimensions by use of shadows and a steep perspective is original Roberts.'⁹⁹ Moreover, unlike Cubists such as Picasso and Braque whose still life subjects denied any narrative, Roberts deliberately chose a mythological subject. In doing so he effectively combines the traditional, classical subject matter of the Old Masters with an avant-garde and abstracting technique, an approach that was totally unique, but which seems to prefigure the overt classical reference that Lewis applied to the technical modernism of his Tyros.

⁹⁸ Andrew Gibbon Williams quotes from Roberts's autobiographical essay detailing this 'Vorticist year': 'I became an abstract painter through the influence of the French Cubists; this influence was further strengthened by a stay in France and Italy during the summer of 1913' [Andrew Gibbon Williams (2004) *William Roberts: An English Cubist*. Aldershot: Lund Humphries. p.19].

⁹⁹ Williams, 2004, p.20.

The Classical element is worth investigating further. Shortly before Roberts painted *The Return of Ulysses* [fig.3] Lewis had exhibited drawings illustrating *Timon of Athens* (1912). In addition, as noted above, much scholarship on the classical authors was published or presented in the early years of this decade, which also saw the launch of the Loeb Classical Library in 1911. Therefore it is not surprising that a classical subject matter should present itself to Roberts despite the disparity between this subject and his radical modernist style. It was this same incongruity, the jarring juxtaposition between classical and modern, that would underpin Lewis's satire in the early twenties. It is not so certain, however, that Roberts's work can be interpreted in the same way; his modernity lies solely in the technique, the featureless figures in no way engaging with the viewer or offering themselves as a target for his contempt. Therefore this early example of classicism in Roberts's oeuvre does not appear in any way satirical. However, by the twenties, Roberts had turned his attention to more recognisable social types both in portraits and scenes of society at leisure – such as *The Dance Club (The Jazz Party)* (1923) and *Bank Holiday in the Park* (1923). But there is no longer any obvious element of classicism in these works. The same techniques Roberts had adopted in 1913 are visible here: a Cubist aspect to the figures with their angular, tube-like limbs, a steep diagonal composition, and a strangely shallow perspective. Features and fashions are exaggerated, locating the paintings decisively in the contemporary world. If any classical reference remained, such paintings and drawings could be viewed in a similar manner to Lewis's Tyro paintings: as satires of contemporary society that depend for their impact on the polarities, the dichotomy, between ancient and modern, continuity and abrupt change, tradition and anarchic rebellion. But without a title signposting a classical subtext this dissonance is lacking, and Roberts's pictures must remain as lighthearted sociological studies – caricatures perhaps, but, denied any cruelty, ridicule or attack, not satires. Roberts also attempted religious subjects such as the *Deposition from the Cross* (c.1925) which align him much more closely with an artist like Stanley Spencer. Although still conceived in his distinctive Cubist-Vorticist style, an image such as this, even if transposed into the present day, is concerned with bringing the

metaphysical into the real world. It may be possible to satirise the worshippers in their dogmatic belief, but not the death of Christ; satire simply doesn't work with faith.

As early as 1919-1920 Roberts was painting scenes of everyday but overtly modern life, such as *The Cinema* (1920) [fig.5], *Athletes Exercising in a Gymnasium* (1920), and *The Diners* (1919). In contrast with Lewis's paintings, these paintings depict ordinary, though anonymous and robotic-looking, people, their modernity transmitted through Roberts's angular treatment and through the activities in which they partake. Lewis took a very different approach in creating the Tyros, who take on a distinctive character of their own, and while they too are identified as modern men by their clothes and by Lewis's painterly technique, they are detached from the real world by empty backgrounds, lacking context. Rather than seeking ciphers for the modern world, Roberts depicted that world as he observed it, though exaggerated and caricatured so that its destabilizing modernity was heightened by vertiginous viewpoints and distorted proportions. The most striking of these works in terms of its dialogue with modern culture is *The Cinema* [fig.5]. Roberts recognised early in the decade that film 'was becoming the dominant visual form of the twentieth century.'¹⁰⁰ His painting looks at its cultural effect in a caricatural way, the viewers frozen and transfixed in the rich red recesses of the auditorium, in contrast to the violent action in progress on the brightly lit screen above. But the underlying anxiety this American import generated is suggested by Barnaby Wright, who identifies the figures as lower and lower-middle class, and sees them presented by Roberts as 'social degenerates framed within the hell-like spaces of popular entertainment ... condemned to meaningless existence in a trough of lethargy'.¹⁰¹ This echoes a general concern among Roberts's contemporaries that cinemas were the 'breeding

¹⁰⁰ Richard Humphreys (2001) *The Tate Britain Companion to British Art*. London: Tate Publishing. p.189.

¹⁰¹ Barnaby Wright (2000) '*A Private in the Avant-Garde: The Social Position of the Art of William Roberts in the 1920s*'. Master of Arts Dissertation. London: University of London (Courtauld Institute of Art). pp.31-2.

ground for unemployment'.¹⁰² The compositional structure emphasises the downward spiral from the real world in the top right corner to the fallen masses languishing in the pit below, their features 'grotesquely distorted by isolating and exaggerating parts of the face, giving the carved appearance of stereotyped African masks'.¹⁰³ Thus the proletarian crowds, duped and stupefied by modern entertainment, are equated with primitives, ignorant and credulous. In this respect they mirror Lewis's Tyros, those primitive 'elementals', as the artist described them, poring over Ovid with grins that might be lewd, uncouth and ignorant, or equally may be malevolent given their devil-red faces, embodying the threat of working-class anarchy. The Tyros look up, ready for mischief; Roberts's cinema-goers are, literally, 'the mob' – but a mob subdued by the new opiate of film.

Critics 'condemned the cinema as a vehicle for imposing vulgar American culture on British society' – a view shared by Aldous Huxley who described the medium as corruption by the age of 'urbanisation, democracy, and the apotheosis of the Average Man.'¹⁰⁴ The characters in Anthony Powell's *Afternoon Men* epitomise this age derided by Huxley – drifting, purposeless and promiscuous young bohemians, their clipped and inane conversation echoes the shallow absurdities of Hollywood films referred to in passing throughout the novel.¹⁰⁵

"Where is it all going to lead? I ask you that Atwater."

¹⁰² Ross McKibbin (2000) *Classes & Cultures: England 1918-1951*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.155; Martin Pugh notes that 'by the 1930s cinemas were offering reduced prices for the unemployed, eighty per cent of whom attended every week' [Martin Pugh (2009) *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars*. London: Vintage. p.229].

¹⁰³ Wright, 2000, p.32

¹⁰⁴ Pugh, 2009, p.231; Peter Miles & Malcolm Smith (1987) *Cinema, Literature and Society: Élite and Mass Culture in Interwar Britain*. Beckenham: Croom Helm. p.110.

¹⁰⁵ Barlow casually refers to an evening at the cinema at intervals: 'Are you coming to a cinema with Sophy and me tonight?'; 'Sophy and I are going to the cinema at half past six'; 'Well, Sophy and I are going to our cinema' [Anthony Powell (1973) *Afternoon Men*. London: Fontana. pp.51-56].

"I don't know."

"No. You don't know. I don't know. None of us know. We just go on and on and on and on and on."

"We do."¹⁰⁶

The mechanical aspect of Roberts's figures is another trait he shares with Lewis – a signal of their shared participation in Vorticism, a movement characterised by machine-age forms and angular, geometric lines. In *Athletes Exercising in a Gymnasium*, the emphasis is linear, the forms composed almost entirely of straight lines and arcs, much like the Tyros, making their limbs appear tubular. However, the heads of the athletes are just one more truncated tube, roughly hewn with set, inexpressive features, like the top of a totem pole; the Tyros' faces, with their sharp, bright, dynamic features and violent grins, eyes engaging the spectator unnervingly, are far more alive with character.

In poking lighthearted fun at everyday manifestations of modernity, and at the idiosyncrasies of the middle and working classes at leisure, Roberts might be more satisfactorily compared to Edward Burra. The mildly satirical depiction of society's quirks and foibles was taken up by the latter in the mid to late 1920s. Burra belonged to a younger generation, uniquely separated from the previous one by not having participated in the war, and therefore his connection to Lewis and Roberts through their shared use of satire to document, criticise, and in some ways come to terms with, social changes despite their very different experiences and backgrounds, suggests that satire was an enduring and peculiarly British response to the difficult circumstances of the decade. All three can be, and have been, compared to the 'Old Masters' of British satire such as Hogarth, Rowlandson and Gillray. Paul Nash compared Burra to a 'modern Hogarth', and Mark Glazebrook writes in similar terms of William Roberts, who 'despite being a recluse, represented London life with an almost Hogarthian curiosity', depicting ordinary people as

¹⁰⁶ Powell, 1973, p.58.

'types' within modern urban society.¹⁰⁷ In contrast to Lewis's Juvenalian brand of satire, Roberts and Burra tend towards a more Horatian version, maintaining a playful, light-hearted humour, mildly and self-deprecatingly critical of social folly in its exaggerations.¹⁰⁸

They are also linked by an interest in jazz music and dancing. An early example of the appearance of jazz in painting is William Roberts's *The Dance Club* (or *The Jazz Party*). Painted in 1923, this appears a rather tame evocation of the new, wild and hedonistic dance craze – especially in comparison to *The Toe Dancer* (1913) of almost a decade earlier. Most of the couples are dancing in a traditional embrace, but one lone figure stands out in the gap between the body of dancers and those watching, and his stance, hands raised above his head and back arched, clearly denotes the rhythms rooted in African tribal culture. What seems strange is that all the figures are white. Roberts appears to have no problem with the music *per se*, but does not include the ubiquitous black performer; perhaps this is simply an indication that the protagonists in the painting are middle class – able to afford a gramophone but not of the wealthy and sophisticated social circle frequented by Evelyn Waugh.¹⁰⁹ Burra's drawings such as *Dance Hall* and *Jazz Fans* also depict groups of fashionable white socialites listening to jazz on the gramophone, a pastime which Burra himself particularly enjoyed, as his letters make clear.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Jane Stevenson (2008) *Edward Burra: Twentieth-Century Eye*. London: Pimlico. p.99; Mark Glazebrook (1989) Introduction to *William Roberts R.A.: Paintings, Drawings and Watercolours 1910-1978* [exh. cat.] London: Albemarle Gallery. p.1.

¹⁰⁸ Wagner, 1957, pp.212-14.

¹⁰⁹ As Waugh records in his diary on 28 February 1927: 'We went later to the Blackbirds [a cabaret act] and called on Florence Mills and other niggers and negresses in their dressing-rooms. Then to a nightclub called Victor's to see another nigger – Leslie Hutchinson [pianist and singer]' [Michael Davie (Ed.) (2009) *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*. London: Phoenix. p.297].

¹¹⁰ 'If you want to get a glorious record get Doing the new Lowdown and Digga Digga Doo by Duke Ellingtons wonder orch; on the Parlophone Ive never heard anything so lovely...' Letter from Burra to Billy Chappell [August 1929]. In

But more often than not, Roberts's paintings depicted the new leisure pursuits of middle and working class holidaymakers, the embryonic Butlin's crowd, on the beach, in the park, or enjoying the new 'vogue for healthy athleticism and love of the countryside' which 'encouraged enthusiastic bands of ramblers, hikers and cyclists'.¹¹¹ On the contrary, for Burra, 'foreign travel – in terms of people encountered rather than places in themselves – was at the core of [his] art in the twenties and thirties'; his work of the late 1920s is typified by a preoccupation with the low-life of foreign ports, specifically the sailors and prostitutes of Marseilles, which not only offered a rich subject matter, but 'an escape also from social conventions and taboo.'¹¹² This more sordid and exotic cast of characters clearly distinguishes Burra's work from Roberts's innocent and morally upright British cast.

In terms of the comparisons that can be drawn between his work and that of both Lewis and Burra, William Roberts acts as a useful link in the satirical chain that stretches across the 1920s. He learns from the radical modernism of Lewis, and feeds into the mocking, caricatural depictions of modern society that characterise Burra's early work. However, ultimately Roberts is not a truly satirical artist; his paintings do not have that sharp edge of cruelty or bitterness, they do not attack or criticise their subject matter, at most laughing gently at the simple everyday pleasures of the British people. Not that this diminishes the role of Roberts in the study of satirical painting in the 1920s; positioning him as a non-satirical figurative artist with a similar interest in social behaviour and contemporary pursuits in fact helps in the task of deciphering what it is exactly that makes the work of Lewis and Burra stand out as satirical in comparison. Despite the similarities in their

William Chappell (Ed.) (1985) *Well Dearie! The Letters of Edward Burra*. London: Gordon Fraser. p.71.

¹¹¹ Pugh, 2009, p.237.

¹¹² Causey (1985) *Edward Burra: Complete Catalogue*. Oxford: Phaidon. p.13; Chris Stephens (Ed.) (2008) *The History of British Art 1870-Now*. London: Tate Publishing. p.102.

experience of war and in their artistic influences – both Lewis and Roberts having embraced modern techniques and classical subjects immediately prior to 1914 – they chose divergent paths after the war, a contrast which works to highlight the power of Lewis’s re-branding of satire. Looking at the similarities and contrasts in their respective artistic reactions during this period prepares the ground for a further exploration of how and why satire developed in the twenties, branching out as a distinct and oppositionary mode within British art despite its roots within the same pre-war avant-garde circles.

Chapter 2: The Sitwells

i. The Generational Divide:

The Sitwells are widely recognised for their important role not only as writers and poets themselves, but for the impetus that their patronage and encouragement gave to British modernism in many forms. However, this privileged and yet unusual position was to some extent dependent on complex generational relations that helped to define the siblings as post-war modernists. Wyndham Lewis states the case succinctly as he traces the fundamental problems in post-war society to the breakup of the family unit – the lack of understanding and embittered relations between the pre-war generation and their offspring:

It is round the question of *the family* that all the other questions of politics and social life are gathered. The break-up of the family unit to-day is the central fact of our life: it is from its central disintegration, both in fact and in our minds – the consequent readjustments of our psychology – that all the other revolutionary phases of our new society radiate. The relations of men to women, of the child to the parent, of friendship and citizenship to the new ideals of the state, are all controlled by it.¹

This disintegration, Lewis asserts, had effectively changed people's attitudes to every aspect of daily life and caused massive psychological upheaval in the effort to define those moral norms that had previously been set in stone. This is an effect echoed repeatedly in the literature of the period. Aldous Huxley, through the mouthpiece of Mr. Porteous in *Antic Hay* [1923], expresses the incomprehension caused by this generation gap:

“When I think of my own children, for example ... they don't seem to be interested in anything but behaving like little apes – not very anthropoid ones either, for that matter. At my eldest boy's age I used

¹ Wyndham Lewis (1926) *The Art of Being Ruled*. London: Chatto and Windus. p.189.

to sit up most of the night reading Latin texts. He sits up – or rather stands, reels, trots up – dancing and drinking.”²

Acknowledging the fact that this is an excerpt from a satiric novel, and therefore both fictional and, no doubt, exaggerated for comic effect, nevertheless this dialogue points to the fact that the older generation found it difficult to accept the increased freedom and – as they perceived it – immoral behaviour of their children. However, in Huxley’s following novel, *Those Barren Leaves* [1925], Mr Cardan reminds the assembled company that behaviour was equally bad in the late nineteenth century of his youth:

“what frolics we had! ... I seem to remember a quite phenomenal number of bachelor dinner parties at which ravishing young creatures used to come popping out of giant pies and dance pas seuls among the crockery on the table.”³

But, in contrast, this was always carried out ‘discreetly, of course. For in those days we couldn’t do things quite as openly as you do now’; like the sudden appearance of women’s legs, the decadent conduct of the younger generation was much more visible and harder to ignore.⁴

The issue of girls being free to go drinking and dancing, unchaperoned, must have been particularly difficult to accept for the older generation. Nancy Cunard’s famous rift with her mother stands as a paradigm for the new freedom embraced by women of the twenties. As she later acknowledged, Cunard married Sydney Fairbairn in 1916 in a bid for freedom from her parents and home; in her biography Anne Chisholm concludes that ‘marriage was the simplest way for her to achieve a measure of independence.’⁵ When the marriage collapsed she took the opportunity to forge her own way in the world. Frowned upon by many for her dangerously decadent and openly promiscuous lifestyle, she nevertheless achieved a great deal, promoting

² Aldous Huxley (1965) *Antic Hay*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.21.

³ Aldous Huxley (1955) *Those Barren Leaves*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.36.

⁴ Ibid., p.36.

⁵ Anne Chisholm (1981) *Nancy Cunard: A Biography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.60.

modernist poetry and art through the Hours Press, and working tirelessly for causes close to her heart – most famously Negro culture and the Spanish Republican cause. Cunard has become an enduring symbol of the twenties, both through her unique style and mesmerising personality, which captured the imagination of the decade's writers (namely Michael Arlen and Aldous Huxley – and also Evelyn Waugh), and her unconventional behaviour, asserting her rights as a female to her own life and opinions.

Evelyn Waugh and his contemporaries were a few years younger than Lewis, Huxley, and Nancy Cunard; but those few years made a crucial difference. They had been still at school during the dark years of the First World War, and though well aware of what was going on, were not directly involved, literally or vicariously through friends or lovers.

During the last few years, a new generation has grown up; between them and the young men of 1912 lies the great gulf of the war. What will they stand for and what are they going to do?⁶

As Humphrey Carpenter comments, what they stood for was rather vague; in place of the revolutionary language that Lewis employs in his polemical writing of the 1920s, Waugh admits that his contemporaries, on the cusp of adulthood, 'will not be revolutionaries,' but rather find themselves puzzled observers, with no fixed values to guide them:

It is a queer world which the old men have left them and they will have few ideals and illusions to console them when they 'get to feeling old'. They will not be a happy generation.⁷

George Orwell, in contrast, describes a wave of 'revolutionary feeling' among the young:

⁶ Evelyn Waugh (1983) 'The Youngest Generation' [editorial for *Lancing College Magazine*, December 1921]. In Donat Gallagher (Ed.) *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*. London: Methuen. p.11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

Those years, during and just after the war, were a queer time to be at school, for England was nearer revolution than she has been since or had been for a century earlier ... Essentially, though of course one could not then see it in perspective, it was a revolt of youth against age, resulting directly from the war ... And of course the revolutionary mood extended to those who had been too young to fight, even to public schoolboys. At that time we all thought of ourselves as enlightened creatures of a new age, casting off the orthodoxy that had been forced upon us by those detested "old men".⁸

Martin Green defines the Waugh generation as the *Sonnenkind*, who establish a cult of decadent dandyism and aesthetic values; he emphasises the rebellion against the 'fathers' (in this case meaning not only literal fathers but also fathers in institutional and cultural terms) as the driving force behind this cultural realignment. 'The Great War, he argues, 'brought *public* disillusionment with the ideals of maturity previously cherished' and the sacrifice of the 'golden lads' by 'the old men', 'the generals', and 'the hard-faced men who did well out of the war' was a betrayal to the younger generation.⁹

The Sitwells could be seen as epitomising this trend: they at once represented the unbreachable gulf between father and children, and the 'brilliant modernism, sophistication and dandyism' that this reaction characteristically came to entail in the twenties.¹⁰ They were role models to the 'Brideshead generation', as Cyril Connolly recalls in *The Evening Colonnade*:

In the Twenties they represented the rush towards pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment characteristic of the intelligent young who had

⁸ George Orwell (1967) *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. pp.120-1.

⁹ Martin Green (1976) *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of Decadence in England After 1918*. New York: Basic Books. pp.42-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.174.

come through the war; they were the natural allies of Cocteau and the Ecole de Paris, dandies, irreproachably dressed and fed, who indicated to young men down from Oxford and even Cambridge that it was possible to reconcile art and fashion, as an alternative to Bloomsbury.¹¹

The Great War was key in defining this breach, associating the 'father' figure with the generals who sent the gilded youth to their deaths. John Pearson, writing of Osbert Sitwell's experience of the war, draws attention to this perceived parallel between the generals and his father, Sir George Sitwell:

The same brand of optimistic yet fallacious logic, the same way of bravely staying safely in the rear, the same glib reliance on the young to do the fighting – and the same ultimate catastrophe ... Loos was an unforgettable example of ... the terrible disasters which ensued from these powerful elders who were so certain they knew best.¹²

Yet even those who had no experience of 'old men's exhortations to the young for duty and self-denial' on the battlefield were now distinctly at odds with their parents' generation. This was perhaps an inherited hostility, something adopted on behalf of those brothers, cousins or schoolfriends who had never returned from the trenches. Or it could be viewed as a stance – a rebellious pose even – that was popularised, along with modernism in the arts, by cliques such as the Sitwells's. What is odd is that the Sitwells were a good deal older than the 'Brideshead Generation' of Waugh – indeed Osbert had fought in the war. And yet they claimed their position as leaders of the 'youth movement' in opposition to many (the Georgian poets for example) who were of a similar age. This issue of young versus old, of generational difference, is

¹¹ Cyril Connolly (1973) *The Evening Colonnade*. London: David Bruce & Watson. p.300.

¹² John Pearson (1980) *Facades: Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell*. London: Fontana. p.101.

voiced by Herbert Read in his diary for October 1918, while deliberating whether to sell the journal he had co-founded, *Art and Letters*, to the Sitwells:

... they are my generation whereas Lewis's is the generation before and it is with the Sitwells that I must throw in my lot to a large extent.¹³

Lewis shared many of the same ideas as the Sitwells and saw much of them in the immediate post-war years; however, he had doubts about their 'special brand of rich-man's gilded bolshevism' (as he put it cuttingly in his satirical *tour de force*, *The Apes of God*) and this was the aspect of the Sitwell legend that perhaps appealed most to the younger generation: the heady mixture of aristocratic snobbery and style, allied with a rebellious bohemianism and dedication to the arts. If one compares the viewpoints of Lewis and Waugh, for instance, they seem almost at polar opposites in terms of their background, beliefs and moral precepts. Nevertheless, they do seem to converge in some sense through their use of satire. Waugh envisages the cynical approach of his generation in his Lancing editorial [1922]:

The youngest generation are going to be very hard and analytical and unsympathetic ... They are going to aim at things as they are and they will not call their aim 'Truth' ...¹⁴

And they will be reticent too, the youngest generation ... But they will have – and this is their justification – a very full sense of humour ... They will watch themselves with ... a cynical smile and often with a laugh.¹⁵

¹³ Herbert Read (1963) *The Contrary Experience: Autobiographies*. London: Faber and Faber. p.141.

¹⁴ Humphrey Carpenter (1990) *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh & His Friends*. London: Faber & Faber. p.60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.60.

This description conjures up images of the Lewis's tyros, who 'lay bare their teeth in a valedictory, inviting, or merely substantial laugh'¹⁶ and whose polished, angular forms are the very epitome of 'hard and analytical.' At the end of the decade, Oswald Mosley defined 'modern man' in similar terms, as 'a hard, realistic type, hammered into existence on the anvil of great ordeal ... For this age is dynamic, and the pre-war age was static.'¹⁷

Lewis defined his art as the 'science of the outside of things' and claimed that 'the only thing that interests me is *the shell*' – Paul Edwards and Richard Humphreys quote Tarr, the eponymous protagonist of Lewis's 1915 novel, who 'explains that works of art have no "inside", no "restless ego" living in their interior, having instead a kind of "dead" version of living through their forms and surfaces alone.'¹⁸ Art Deco, too, was characterised by the same steely carapace, its popularity testifying to the accuracy of Waugh's prediction.¹⁹ Tamara de Lempicka's images of glamorous but robotic figures who seem to merge with the mechanism of the speeding car that bears them dizzily towards an unknown destination mirror some of Lewis's angular portraits, such as *Praxitella* (1920-21) with her faceted face of blue steel. But though her paintings partly derive from the same modernist moment as Lewis occupies, and bear witness to a new attitude that had arisen in response to certain aspects of modernity, they are not satirical. Lewis's portrait of Edith Sitwell (1923-35), very similar in style to *Praxitella* – or Gluck's *The Three Nifty Nats* (1926), as typically Art Deco in style and content as any de Lempicka – can, however, arguably be classified as satire. They are distinguished from de Lempicka's simple, though powerful, evocations of modernity by the addition of a critical, rather than purely celebratory,

¹⁶ Wyndham Lewis, 'Notes on Tyros', in Lewis (1970) *The Tyro: A Review of the Arts of Painting, Sculpture and Design*, no.1 [1921]. London: Frank Cass. p.2.

¹⁷ Oswald Mosley, writing in *The Sunday Express* [1930], for which I have been unable to find the original source. Cited in Green, 1976, p.44.

¹⁸ Paul Edwards & Richard Humphreys (2008) 'Burying Euclid Deep in the Living Flesh: Wyndham Lewis and Portraiture'. In Paul Edwards & Richard Humphreys (Eds.) *Wyndham Lewis: Portraits* [exh. cat.] London: National Portrait Gallery. p.14.

¹⁹ Andrew Causey (1985) *Edward Burra: Complete Catalogue*. Oxford: Phaidon. p.23.

attitude. The criticism may be of the most subtle nature – Edith Sitwell’s missing hands, for instance – but the result is in some way subversive, mocking, provoking amusement at the expense of the object depicted. And very often the object of this satire was generational difference – not simply the elder generation *per se*, as the antics of the younger were equally subject to ridicule, but the disparity and lack of understanding between the two.

This complex relationship between the generations is well illustrated by the novels of the late twenties. Nancy Mitford’s *A Highland Fling* [1931] reads as a naïve celebration of the light-hearted rebelliousness of her contemporaries in the face of staid disapproval from their elders. However, there is an interesting altercation at the dinner table that sees Albert, who epitomises the callousness of youth towards age, castigated by Mr. Buggins:

I think you have no right to speak as you did of the men who fought in the war, sneering at them and hoping they enjoyed it, and so on ... that sort of thing does no good and only creates more bitterness between our two generations, as though enough did not exist already. I know that many of us seem to you narrow-minded, stupid and unproductive. But if you would look a little bit below the surface you might realise that there is a reason for this. Some of us spent four of what should have been our best years in the trenches.²⁰

This unexpectedly poignant speech shows that Mitford was by no means unaware of what the previous generation had gone through during the war, and that she sympathised with them. Deftly outlining the positions of the conflicting generations, she exaggerates their faults – the dogmatism of the old admiral, continually expounding on a moribund subject; in contrast with Albert’s champagne at breakfast in silk pyjamas – but these are all apparently forgiven at the comic climax to the Scottish jaunt, presaging a truce between the old and young.

²⁰ Nancy Mitford (2010) *Highland Fling*. London: Capuchin Classics. p.100.

Edward Burra seems to adopt a similar attitude to Mitford; like her, he had no great falling out with his family in the Cunardian style, and found amusement rather than rancour in the generational divide. In a letter to Billy Chappell, he wrote of their shocked reaction to youthful antics and modern fashion:

Such merry times have been going on at Thornsedale what with
dashing nude into the river and Brenda Dean Paul walking about in
Lido trowsers the whole village is in an uproar...²¹

His drawings and paintings of the late 1920s chronicle these fashionable clothes and modern activities with a keen sense of humour that is mischievous but never cruel. Burra, and many of his circle like him, bore no essential grudge against their parents' generation; they could therefore exploit their outdated values for amusement's sake. Essentially there remains much the same attitude today, the difference being that the disparity seemed so much greater in this decade of rapid modernisation that the war had separated so decisively from the Edwardian way of life – and consequently the element of incongruity, a vital ingredient of satire, was exacerbated. This was exploited for its comic value by many of Burra's generation, notably Evelyn Waugh in his contrasting descriptions of the parties of old and young in *Vile Bodies*, and Cecil Beaton in his youthful diaries with their entertaining anecdotes of parents attempting (and failing) to acclimatise themselves to modern music and fashion.

ii. The Sitwell Influence: Satire and Art in the 1920s

The Sitwells, in Martin Green's view, were 'the major preceptors of the post-war generation' and 'the impresarios of the avant-garde in all the arts in England,' representing all that was brilliantly modern and sophisticated.²² John Pearson, in his biography of the trio, offers a qualified concurrence -

²¹ Letter from Burra to Billy Chappell [dated 1929; original in a private collection]. Cited in Stevenson, 2008, p.72.

²² Green, 1976, p.78; *ibid.*, p.140.

‘they were certainly precursors, particularly over taste’ – and he acknowledges that for the post-war ‘dandy-aesthetes’ emerging from Eton and Oxford, ‘the Sitwells possessed an irresistible allure,’ corroborating this statement by citing numerous first-hand accounts of the Sitwell influence.²³ Cyril Connolly, for example, ‘saw the Sitwells as social and artistic paragons, embodying an attitude, a total way of life which ... appealed to him’; much later in life he described them thus:

For all their faults ... the Sitwells were a dazzling monument to the English scene. They absolutely enhanced life for us during the twenties, and had they not been there a whole area of art and life would have been missing.²⁴

Cecil Beaton, adopted as a protégé by the Sitwells, confirms the strong attraction of these aristocratic aesthetes:

The Sitwell brothers ... had established a mode of aesthetic existence that completely satisfied my own taste. No detail of their way of life was ugly or humdrum. They managed to give a patina of glamour to a visit to an oculist, a bootshop, or a concert.²⁵

It was wonderful to find people so liberated from accepted thought and values – particularly from those of Bloomsbury, and the domination of Roger Fry and all that muddy-coloured pseudo-classicism.²⁶

In establishing a new form of modernist satire, the Sitwells played as essential a role as Wyndham Lewis – though by very different means. Their adoption

²³ Pearson, 1980, p.190.

²⁴ Ibid., p.190; Cyril Connolly, private information quoted in Pearson, 1980, p.190.

²⁵ Cecil Beaton (1961) *The Wandering Years. Diaries: 1922-1939*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson. p.163.

²⁶ Kenneth Clark, private information quoted in Pearson, 1980, pp.190-191.

of the mode arose from the same context; though personal circumstances differed greatly, they were thrown into the same disorienting position of post-war readjustment and by the early twenties had, like Lewis, chosen satire as their weapon of choice. They also epitomise the psychological situation of the 'war generation' – those who fought in the war, as opposed to the 'old men' and the 'post-war generation.'²⁷ Osbert Sitwell writes in the third volume of his autobiography: 'we belonged to a doomed generation.'²⁸ His satire was born directly from his experience of the Great War; his initial poems are biting critiques of 'Georgian' style poetry that attempted to 'prettify' the ghastly situation, and his bitterness at the waste and futility of war are clear in works such as 'Babel' (1916) and 'Corpse Day' (1919). He went on to attack specific figures of authority – such as Winston Churchill, in a series of satirical poems published in the *Daily Herald* and brought together in 'The Winstonburg Line' – as well as rivals or 'enemies', and 'social ladies whose fault was only that they were over-zealous in entertaining the latest lion in any art or craft.'²⁹ Following the armistice in 1918, two poems express Sitwell's cynical and pessimistic attitude: 'How Shall we Rise to Greet the Dawn?' and 'The Next War'. David Daiches, writing in 1940, describes Sitwell's work as 'a type of satire where the emotion comes first and then seeks a victim on which to vent it.'³⁰

²⁷ Samuel Hynes gives an account of the complex generational divides that emerged in England after the First World War in these terms; he defines the surviving 'war generation' (or 'lost generation') as 'disoriented, wandering, directionless' – in Paul Nash's words, they were 'war artists without a war' and struggling to adjust to the post-war cultural world [Samuel Hynes (1990) *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Bodley Head. pp.384-390].

²⁸ Osbert Sitwell (1948) *Great Morning*. London: Macmillan & Co. p.260.

²⁹ Frank Swinnerton (1938) *The Georgian Literary Scene*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons. pp.249-50.

³⁰ David Daiches (1940) *Poetry and the Modern World: A Study of Poetry in England between 1900 and 1939*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. p.88; for example, *Wheels Cycle Five* [1919] sees Sitwell's satiric anger directed at Christianity in 'Church Parade' and 'Sunday Afternoon', and at the bourgeoisie in 'In the House of Mrs Kinfoot', while *Who Killed Cock Robin?* [1921] attacks Georgian poetry.

One of the defining characteristics of the 'war generation' was its difficult relationship with the 'old men', and on a personal level, Osbert Sitwell's relationship with his father is a perfect case study of generational misunderstanding and fractured values which, looking beyond Sir George's individual eccentricities, exemplifies such a breakdown on a wider scale. Such a change in social relations was crucial to the way that society developed – and was criticised and parodied – in the 1920s. This aspect of generational rebellion clearly exemplifies the influence that the Sitwells and their contemporaries exerted on the 'post-war generation'; explicit rebellion against the father-figure was a characteristic of the literature of the younger generation. Evelyn Waugh, for instance, visited Renishaw in 1928, and observed that Sir George 'suited all the requirements of a dandy's father – he was tyrannical, obsessive, philistine, crazy, and clever enough to be a good enemy.'³¹ This father-figure becomes a stock character in the satire of the late twenties, appearing in many of Waugh's subsequent novels – as Martin Green notes, in *Brideshead Revisited* there is a 'clear cultural image of bumbling and outdated and preposterous paternity'.³² Nancy Mitford's early novels also paint a satirical portrait of her father as violently philistine and chauvinist – her anti-paternal jokes, like Osbert Sitwell's, 'seem to derive from a baffling mixture of genuine outrage and "clever" gossip,' a fluctuation 'between brilliant frivolity and old-fashioned piety.'³³ The war had roused great anger against the fathers, as well as guilt among them, and great pathos and love for the fallen sons, and the new dandies were able to appeal to those feelings in support of their cult of youth. They refused to grow up into men of responsibility, fathers of families and of the state, soldiers.³⁴

Osbert Sitwell's war poetry – published in *Wheels*, the modernist literary journal founded by Edith, from 1916, and collected in his first anthology, *Argonaut and Juggernaut* (1919) – clearly illustrates the bitterness that the

³¹ Green, 1976, p.224.

³² Ibid., p.62.

³³ Ibid., pp.219-20.

³⁴ Ibid., p.120.

disillusioned young soldier felt towards those 'old men' who had led the country into war, or who had profited by it. 'The Modern Abraham' expresses the callous and nationalistic righteousness of a fictional arms manufacturer:

Consider me and all that I have done
I've fought for Britain with my might and main;
I make explosives and I gave a son.³⁵

This was characteristic of the 'war generation'; poems by contemporaries such as Wilfred Owen are directly comparable, here again summoning the figure of Abraham in a biblical allegory for murder as a duty – the premise turned on its head in the final stanza:

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,
And half the seed of Europe, one by one.³⁶

However, more than simply articulating the psychological impact of warfare in a stark and unromanticised fashion – a new development in itself – Sitwell's poems of 1916-19 clearly reveal a new and cynical vein of satire. Samuel Hynes locates the emergence of the new satire firmly in the experience of war, asserting that 'the war was the soil out of which both wartime and post-war satire grew. And it was in satire that post-war culture found its particular bitter voice.'³⁷ Hynes bases his statement on the evidence of contemporary reviews, which accepted such poems as satires – Robert Lynd in the *Nation* (Dec 6th 1919) referred to Osbert Sitwell and Sassoon as 'The Young Satirists', and Edmund Gosse in 'Some Soldier Poets' (*Edinburgh Review*, October 1917) called Siegfried Sassoon 'essentially a satirist.'³⁸ Furthermore, a review of *Before the Bombardment* argues – eight years after

³⁵ Osbert Sitwell (1919) 'The Modern Abraham' [1917]. In *Argonaut and Juggernaut*. London: Chatto & Windus. p.106.

³⁶ Wilfred Owen (1963) 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young'. In *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*. London: Chatto & Windus. p.42.

³⁷ Hynes, 1990, p.242.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.242.

the Armistice, in 1926 – that the experience of war must be taken into account in judging a work of literature by Sitwell's generation:

We must remember, when we shiver under this savage irony, that the author and others like him are recently come from Calvary, and that the vinegar they proffer there is surely this vision of life as a bleak irony, a cruel and obscene jest...³⁹

It is telling that this critic, writing in the *Bookman*, uses phrases such as 'savage irony' and 'obscene jest' as if these traits are the natural corollaries of the experience of war and widely accepted as its cultural legacy, with literature – and, it seems justifiable to infer, art too – therefore considered inseparable from it.

The satire on warmongers and profiteers is evident in the caricatural pen portraits, exaggerated and grotesque: the modern Abraham has 'plump, mottled fingers, with a ring or two', while the profiteer in 'Judas and the Profiteer' is 'fat and rubicund and well.'⁴⁰ The language, focusing on external features and distorting them for satirical purpose, is a direct precursor of that employed by Lewis in *The Apes of God* [1930], or by Waugh in early novels such as *Decline and Fall* [1928]. However, the post-war generation of satirists that Waugh belonged to had no direct experience of war; so between 1926 and 1928, did attitudes such as Mary Webb's have to suddenly adjust? There is a clear continuity in the satirical approach of Huxley, Sitwell, Lewis and the younger generation that refuses the notion of treating them as separate, yet psychologically their positions vis-à-vis the Great War were significantly different, and demand a subtly altered approach. A decade after the war had ended, was it still viable to judge all writing and art with the shadow of that

³⁹ Mary Webb (1926) 'One Coming From Calvary' [review of Osbert Sitwell's *Before the Bombardment*, published in December 1926]. In *The Bookman*. 71 (423). London: Hodder & Stoughton. p.178.

⁴⁰ Osbert Sitwell, 'The Modern Abraham' and 'Judas and the Profiteer'. In O.Sitwell, 1919, p.106; *ibid.*, p.101.

conflict looming ominously over it? Perhaps those critics who had lived through the war were as unable to forget its impact as the writers or artists they reviewed – in which case this attitude corroborates the view that the Great War was a crucial, perhaps the most crucial, factor in the reappearance of satire in the 1920s. And it continued to be so for the younger generation, who inherited the disillusionment and cynicism of the post-war era from the ghosts and veterans who were their brothers and peers at school.

In terms of painting, the figure of the profiteer was unequivocally depicted by C.R.W. Nevinson in his painting *He Gained a Fortune but he Gave a Son* (1918) [fig.6], the title echoing the words of 'The Modern Abraham'. It seems very likely that the painting was directly influenced by Sitwell's verse, appearing soon after the publication of *Argonaut and Juggernaut*, and the sitter being none other than Henry Moat, the Sitwells's butler. But is this painting an early example of the satirical approach that would come to be associated with the 1920s? It does not initially appear so (although Hynes describes it as satirical without question).⁴¹ The figure's expression is hard to read, neither greedy and self-satisfied, despite the marble fireplace and gilt frames, nor melancholy and repentant, though the photograph on the mantelpiece indicates his absent son in uniform. Indeed, without the aid of the title to suggest the background narrative, the painting would not be interpreted as a satire at all. However, Osbert Sitwell, in his introduction to Nevinson's work, writes: 'often ... there is to be detected a sub-flavour of satire, though never, we think, of caricature ...'⁴² This is a revealing perspective; following the war, caricature appeared too bawdy and jolly a mode to address the pain and anger experienced. Satire, on the other hand, though related to humour, could also express an underlying bitterness and a serious intent – and it was subtle enough to escape the notice of the uninformed, and of the censors. Sitwell goes on to reveal his views regarding the necessity for satire in art when addressing modern, 'abstract' warfare, thus automatically linking, like the

⁴¹ Hynes, 1990, p.247.

⁴² Osbert Sitwell (1925) introduction to *C.R.W. Nevinson*. London: Ernest Benn. p.14.

critic of the *Bookman*, the re-emergence of satire and the specific experience of the recent Great War:

Death became ever more abstract, until now it is aimed at a microscopically small unit from a vast distance. War thus became, too, an ever more difficult subject for the painter: one, perhaps, with which no artist could be successful who lacked a subtle sense of pictorial satire.⁴³

The 1890s had also been a period of rebellion against the father figure, and so it is not surprising that the Sitwells, and in turn their younger disciples, turned to some of the most flamboyant personalities of this period such as Robbie Ross, former lover of Oscar Wilde.⁴⁴ As Martin Green observes, 'the style of the nineties was transmitted to the later dandies through various survivors such as Reggie Turner, Reggie Temple and the painter Charles Ricketts,' who became a friend of the young Harold Acton.⁴⁵ Osbert himself was compared to Comte Robert de Montesquiou, the Parisian dandy who reputedly inspired Proust's Baron de Charlus, and in *The Apes of God* Wyndham Lewis invests Lord Osmund (a scarcely veiled parody of Osbert Sitwell) with 'every correct minor mania of the post-Ninety aestheticism of the Chelsea English.'⁴⁶ In this way, the perceived generational divide was clearly not absolute; within a certain section of society (aesthetic, intellectual – and homosexual?) there was a continuity of values and an innate sympathy

⁴³ O. Sitwell, 1925, p.26.

⁴⁴In his autobiography, Osbert Sitwell acknowledges his professional debt to Ross, who had 'been responsible for submitting [to H.W. Massingham, Editor of the *Nation*] the first of my series of satires, signed *Miles*, which subsequently appeared in his columns' [Osbert Sitwell (1950) *Laughter in the Next Room*. London: The Reprint Society. p.108]; through his pre-war affair with the artist Philip Streatfield, Noel Coward was introduced to Ross by Siegfried Sassoon, who later became the lover of Stephen Tennant, testifying to the inheritance of a certain 'decadent' lifestyle from one generation to the next (this fact was brought to my attention by Philip Hoare, in a lecture at the Last Tuesday Society, 15th June 2011)

⁴⁵ Green, 1976, pp.76-77.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.190; Wyndham Lewis (n.d.) *The Apes of God*. London: Nash & Grayson. p.350.

and understanding that overcame the impact of the war years. That a man such as Ross, born in 1869, stood outside the post-war divisions of 'old men' or 'Edwardians' and could continue to influence the rebellious youth of the twenties bears witness to a certain respect for an aesthetic heritage (though Ross died in 1918, he had by the twenties become a legendary figure). However, the relationship of the twenties modernists with the decadents of the nineties was never straightforward. Though these infamous characters became role models of effete dandyism, they also proved a fruitful source of satirical subject matter. This satire, though amusing, was nevertheless somewhat cruel – youth poking fun at the dated wit of a worn-out generation. Harry Melvill, the once-legendary Edwardian raconteur, was parodied both in Aldous Huxley's 'The Tillotson Banquet' and Osbert Sitwell's 'The Machine Breaks Down' (though the latter was more of a dig at Huxley in retaliation for the former).

The engagement with nineties aestheticism thus complicates the satire of the Sitwells, and their contemporaries such as Huxley. While Lewis struggled with the notion of being at once critically detached from, and inevitably a part of, that society which he mocked, the Sitwells saw themselves at the very hub of a literary and artistic circle. They had no wish to detach themselves, or to implicate themselves in a self-reflexive critique; yet Osbert Sitwell's simultaneous veneration and parody of the Wildean decadents points up the reciprocity that defines his satire, and helps to explain the similarly paradoxical response of the younger generation. This connection to figures already highly renowned could be perceived as a form of cultural vampirism; the Sitwells' close relationships with various famous figures from the 'nineties', and their overt courting of avant-garde impresarios such as Diaghilev, may (at least partially) have been a conscious attempt to further their own careers through the cultural cachet appropriated from such advantageous acquaintances. And in the same way, once the Sitwells were established as literary and artistic paragons, those of the younger generation seeking to establish themselves took advantage of them in their turn.

While looking up to the Sitwells as emblematic of all that was culturally and aesthetically modern – Brian Howard and Harold Acton sent their initial literary efforts from Eton to Edith for her approval – once surer of themselves this younger generation didn't hesitate to poke fun. Noel Coward's 'Swiss Family Whittlebot' in *London Calling!* was a prime example – it was immediately obvious to anyone who knew of the trio that this was a savage parody of them (as in Lewis's similarly overt caricature of them in *The Apes of God*, the names were chosen both to make clear the connection and to wound).⁴⁷ The Sitwells received in turn what they had dealt to others, but their seriousness of intent was such that this was taken in very bad part. This again distinguishes them from the 'post-war generation' who, perhaps as a result of their lack of experience of the trenches, did not perceive satire as a moral weapon for criticising society but rather as a standard means of addressing life, which appeared to them as a huge joke, albeit a rather cruel one.

Despite their outwardly rebellious and youth-oriented attitude, there was a wistful yearning for order and values, and a grudging respect for these qualities in the older generation, tellingly revealed by Evelyn Waugh in his description of their decorous party at Anchorage House in contrast to the bacchanalian exploits of the Bright Young People:

... a great concourse of pious and honourable people ... people who had represented their country in foreign places and sent their sons to die for her in battle, people of decent and temperate life, uncultured, unaffected, unembarrassed, unassuming, unambitious people, of

⁴⁷ Beverley Nichols understood the motive behind this piece of impudence, writing in his reminiscences of the twenties: 'If I had been sitting next to the Sitwells on this historic occasion I should have had this to say to them: "Yes, Noel should be slapped; but darlings, if you ask for it in *la vie de Boheme* you get it, and you *have* asked for it ... with the same delightfully arrogant assurance as Oscar, in the nineties, when he announced that he was 'trying to live up to his blue china'. Oscar had the impudence of genius and so have you ..." [Beverley Nichols (1958) *The Sweet and Twenties*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. p.53].

independent judgement and marked eccentricities ... that fine phalanx of the passing order ...⁴⁸

But mixed up among the praise and inseparable from it, is the eternal reproach: this generation had willingly sacrificed their sons in the futile and inglorious mud of the trenches. That Waugh and his contemporaries had not fought but had somehow inherited this attitude makes its manifestation in their art and literature all the more complex and difficult to explain. The notion of these elderly figures as the 'passing order' makes disparaging reference to their loss of power, but the phrase 'fine phalanx' also signals a certain admiration for standards upheld against the odds. In the same section of the novel, Waugh makes clear that however out of touch these people are with modernity, their influence is still considerable; he cynically describes how two guests at the party debate the Censorship Bill as:

... a statesmanlike and much-needed measure which empowered a committee of five atheists to destroy all books, pictures and films they considered undesirable, without any nonsense about defence or appeal.⁴⁹

The Sitwells, in their tireless promotion of modernism in art and literature, would have applauded this subtle satirical condemnation of such reactionary legislation. Osbert Sitwell, however, would more likely have been seen at Anchorage House than a party in a captive dirigible, and showed his admiration for the elder generation more plainly. He frequently associated with them, despite recognising the ludicrous or grotesque aspects of his hostesses and patronesses in his satirical verse.⁵⁰ And Sitwell made use of his

⁴⁸ Evelyn Waugh (2000) *Vile Bodies*. London: Penguin. p.107.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p.106.

⁵⁰ For example, Osbert Sitwell's *At the House of Mrs Kinfoot* [1921] is recognised as a satire of Sibyl Colefax, and poems such as 'War Horses' describe 'septuagenarian butterflies' and 'les vieilles dames sans merci', referring to the hostesses returning to society after the war [Osbert Sitwell (1931) *The Collected Satires and Poems of Osbert Sitwell*. London: Duckworth. pp.45-6].

powerful connections during the general strike of 1926.⁵¹ This position was subsequently satirised by Lewis in *The Apes of God*; the whole of the latter section of the novel is devoted to Lord Osmund's Lenten Party, which takes place as the General Strike reaches a climax – the bourgeois 'apes' continue their childish games as the country grinds to a halt.

This gathering, meant to be a Lenten festivity, develops through the ineludable bent of the hosts and satellites into a *soggetto*, arranged for the showing off of their favourite characters – it is their private theatre, this is Osmund's dramatic troupe...

The lady [Lord Osmund's reigning pet] belonged to a distant generation. She supplied him with tit-bits of Gossip arranged with his favourite sauces, the old yellow sauces of the Naughty Nineties ... flavoured with the recipes she had learnt in a former age from the lips of the great men of that wicked, perverse, most clever epoch – from Wildes, Beardsleys and Whistlers.⁵²

Besides their espousal of nineties dandyism, the Sitwells represented many other tenets of taste that attracted the younger generation: they rejected Bloomsbury intellectualism, and looked with contempt upon the 'plodding, homespun virtues of the Squirearchy.'⁵³ The Sitwells symbolised the polar opposite of 'plodding, homespun virtues': in his biography, John Pearson asserts that they 'had made themselves epitomise the myth of a legendary romantic and artistic aristocracy.'⁵⁴ Here was another apparent paradox; like

⁵¹ Osbert Sitwell leaves a rather self-important account of the part he played in bringing the strike to an end, devoting a chapter to an account of the negotiations he instigated in *Laughter in the Next Room* [O. Sitwell, 1950, pp.195-238].

⁵² Lewis, [*The Apes of God*, n.d.], pp.352-3.

⁵³ Green, 1976, p.190; the 'Squirearchy' was a term coined to refer to Jack Squire, literary editor of the *New Statesman*, critic-in-chief of the *Observer*, and from 1919 founder and editor of the *London Mercury*, and those who, like him, symbolised 'the English common man' and espoused traditionalist Georgian poetry, forming a powerful conservative force in the literary establishment (see Pearson, 1980, pp.146-149).

⁵⁴ Pearson, 1980, pp.191-2.

Lewis's espousal of classicism as a means of opposing romantic tendencies in art and culture, the Sitwells looked to traditional sources in order to establish a new and opposing form of modernism. Despite an increased political and social equality – as women gained the vote in 1918 and experience working in factories during the war – the changed conditions of life led to a heightened importance being given to social status. The post-war generation longed for exclusivity, and the mark of their success was made clear in the gossip columns that provided a career of sorts for their friends, another trait parodied by Waugh in *Vile Bodies*.

But what impression did the Sitwells make on the art world, and did the satire that Osbert Sitwell employed to acclaim in his early poetry translate into the visual arts? None of the Sitwell siblings painted themselves, but they keenly appreciated all forms of art, and were anxious to promote the work of their contemporaries. Osbert and Sacheverell collaborated with Modigliani's dealer, Léopold Zborowski, to put on an exhibition of avant-garde art at the Mansard Gallery in 1918 with the help of Nina Hamnett and Tommy Earp. This included paintings by Modigliani, Soutine, Kisling, Derain, Vlaminck, Matisse, Utrillo, Pascin, Picasso, Dufy, Zadkine, and Archipenko, among others. Roger Fry hailed it as 'the most representative show of modern French art seen in London for many years,' though it was met with indifference by the general public:

The vitality of English art during the twenties, the creative activity and exploring zeal of the younger men ... met with a cold response, if not active, even violent hostility, from the art-hating British public and the more philistine of the "national" newspapers.⁵⁵

The exhibition did, however, help to establish the Sitwells as 'protagonists and sponsors of the Modern Movement.'⁵⁶ This patronage continued with their enthusiastic support of many young artists who were commissioned to paint their portraits and given crucial backing in staging debut exhibitions

⁵⁵ Pearson, 1980, p.139; Goldring, 1945, p.93.

⁵⁶ Pearson, 1980, p.139.

(Frank Dobson, Maurice Lambert, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Cecil Beaton for example). But the Sitwells really made their mark in staging *Façade* (first performed in January 1922), a ‘pioneering English modernist *gesamtkunstwerk*’ combining poetry, music and the visual arts.⁵⁷ Tim Barringer underlines the satirical elements of this production, likening Edith’s text – such as ‘Says King Pompey’ with its ‘parody of the diction of absurd figures of the Establishment’ – to the ‘scathingly anti-Victorian rhetoric’ of Lewis’s journal *Blast*; her use of fragments of Victorian culture, ‘shorn of context and meaning ... in unexpected juxtapositions’, imbuing the form of the verse itself with a satirical absurdity.⁵⁸ He goes on to suggest that William Walton’s score similarly introduced a subtle satire in its references to ‘fragments of Victorian music hall songs’ and ‘witty, rhythmic allusions’ to, for instance, ‘Rule Britannia’ in the ‘Hornpipe’, that echo the composer’s interest in the English satirical tradition at this time.⁵⁹ In artistic terms, no less than three ‘front-cloths’ were commissioned, behind which the performers were hidden – the first from Frank Dobson in 1922, and later from Gino Severini (1928) and John Piper (1942). Thus, the Sitwells went some way towards breaking the divide between artist and patron, as these painted cloths were judged on an equal basis with Edith’s own poetry, both equally fundamental to the overall effect of the performance. Dobson’s primitivist curtain effectively set the scene in 1922, substantiating Edith’s view of herself as a modernist poet, its African mask-like faces echoing the ‘language of Primitivist exoticism which ... permeates Sitwell’s texts.’⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Tim Barringer (2010) ‘Façades for *Façade*: William Walton, Visual Culture and English Modernism in the Sitwell Circle’. In Matthew Riley (Ed.) *British Music and Modernism 1895-1960*. Farnham: Ashgate. p.125.

⁵⁸ Barringer, 2010, p.130

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp.134-40; this interest, perhaps sparked by the Sitwells’ art historical research, would inspire Walton to compose musical compositions based on Rowlandson’s illustrations to *The Journey of Dr. Syntax* (1920-1) and later on his etching, *Portsmouth Point* (1925); by the time of Walton and Lambert’s 1942 re-configuration of *Façade*, Barringer asserts that it had become ‘a kind of anti-*Pierrot* [Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire*, 1912], a teasing mirror image of Schoenberg’s raging intensity’ [Barringer, 2010, p.144].

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.133.

In turn, the striking features of the trio gave rise to caricatures, such as Max Beerbohm's of Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell (1923-25), or Siegfried Sassoon's 'Sitwelliana', begun in 1925.⁶¹ In this way, through courting publicity, partly on the back of their satirical output, the Sitwells called upon themselves a satirical rejoinder, the inevitable result of fame and renown. Wyndham Lewis, too, made a drawing of the brothers in Venice in 1922, which shows them elongated and suave. Considering Lewis's later attack on the brothers in *The Apes of God* (though published in 1930, this was probably conceived in the mid-twenties, when Lewis turned his attention from painting to writing), it is worth pausing to look further at this drawing in order to consider Lewis's relationship with the Sitwells. This is particularly interesting as it fuses the two most immediate proponents of modernist satire; the attentions of both parties fluctuated between mediums, artistic and literary, while their friendship veered into antagonism, inspiring more vituperative satire in its turn, and thus propelling the development of the mode. The drawing suggests that in the early post-war years, there was a certain mutual respect, combined with friendly mockery; the clear attention that the brothers have paid to their appearance is emphasised, positing them as dandies and aesthetes but not to excess – it is a gentle humour, and barely qualifies as satire at all. However, though it is unclear what exactly sparked the rift between Lewis and the Sitwells, the antagonism that followed clearly accounts for the very different, crueller and more bitter, attitude in which the Sitwells are depicted by Lewis's pen at the end of the decade, and therefore must be considered an important element in the development of satire in the twenties.

Lewis's *Portrait of Edith Sitwell* [fig.7] appears to be the turning point in this complex relationship, and introduces a new and subtle satire into painted portraiture – one which Lewis had previously only experimented with on

⁶¹ Osbert and Sacheverell first met Beerbohm in Rapallo in 1922; four caricatures of the brothers by him are known, with one exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in June 1923 [Robin Gibson (1995) catalogue note to image illustrated in *The Sitwells and the Arts of the 1920s and 1930s* (exh. cat.). London: National Portrait Gallery, p.90].

himself, and using the fictional 'tyros'. Edith herself accounts for the rupture in their relations thus:

When I sat, many years ago, to Mr Wyndham Lewis, he was, unfortunately, seized with a kind of *schwärmerei* for me. I did not respond. It did not get very far, but was a nuisance as he *would* follow me about, staring in a most trying manner and telling our acquaintances about the *schwärmerei*. So, eventually, I stopped sitting to him (the reason why the portrait has no hands).⁶²

The absence of Edith's hands, Richard Cork suggests, was a deliberate act of malice on Lewis' part, as his sitter was particularly proud of this feature; the omission gives the sitter 'the quality of a marionette, suggesting that she would be incapable of lifting her arms without the aid of puppeteer's strings'.⁶³ David Wragg interprets the portrait as a satire of both the genre and the subject, an extension of the approach established by the Tyro paintings: Edith's 'physical body [is] ridiculed because her social body is corrupted by the values of inauthentic culture.'⁶⁴ However, at first glance the painting is not immediately satirical, and only appears as such if one knows of the strained relationship that developed between artist and model during the twelve years it took finally to complete the portrait.⁶⁵ It is perhaps more readily interpreted as satire in the light of Lewis's novel, *The Apes of God* [1930], in which the Finnian Shaw siblings are easily recognisable as cruel

⁶² Edith Sitwell, in a private letter to Elizabeth Salter, which Salter cites in her memoir of Edith [Elizabeth Salter (1967) *The Last Years of a Rebel: A Memoir of Edith Sitwell*. London: The Bodley Head. p.61].

⁶³ Richard Cork (1984) catalogue introduction to *Wyndham Lewis: The Twenties*. London: Anthony D'Offay. p.18.

⁶⁴ David Wragg (2005) *Wyndham Lewis and the Philosophy of Art in Early Modernist Britain: Creating a Political Aesthetic*. Lampeter: Edwin Mellen. p.231.

⁶⁵ How the initial friendship between Lewis and Edith turned to antagonism is a subject of speculation – in the early 1920s Lewis wrote from Renishaw Hall, the Sitwell seat in Derbyshire, 'They are altogether a very agreeable family, and live in an agreeable house. The weather is hellish and I dislike England' [letter to Violet Schiff (n.d. – possibly 1922). Schiff papers, British Library. Add. Mss. 52919, ff.30]; however, he later describes Edith as 'one of my most hoary, tried and reliable enemies. We are two good old enemies, Edith and I...' [Wyndham Lewis (1982) *Blasting and Bombardiering*. London: John Calder. p.91].

caricatures of the Sitwells. The key elements of satire are combined in this written parody: the Sitwells provide an object of attack and a clear element of the ridiculous and the grotesque. But it was not only this specific personal antipathy that motivated Lewis: figures from the Bloomsbury group and their wider artistic circle are also lampooned, as are the patrons whom Osbert Sitwell himself took as his targets. Despite – or perhaps as a result of – the enmity that flourished between Lewis and the Sitwells, they were seen by their contemporaries as equally distinguished proponents of the genre. Yeats praises both Lewis and Edith Sitwell simultaneously for the revival of literary satire:

Somebody tells me that you have satirized Edith Sitwell ... When I read her *Gold Coast Customs* a year ago, I felt, as on first reading *The Apes of God*, that something absent from all literature for a generation was back again, and in a form rare in the literature of all generations, passion ennobled by intensity, by endurance, by wisdom.⁶⁶

Yeats refers to Swift as an ideal, and in his letter suggests that the ‘fierce indignation’ that the latter attributes to himself in his epitaph is a virtuous trait, and one necessary for the betterment of public life and morals. He applauds the ‘passion’ and single-mindedness with which both Lewis and Sitwell attack the failings of modern society – in direct contrast to the attitude of indifference and wanton hedonism assumed by the Bright Young partygoers of the twenties, and to the escapist tendencies of many artists who reverted to idealised landscapes and still lives.

These attacks on the moral degeneracy of modern society show a serious desire to remedy such failings, even if no cure is suggested or even believed to exist. In this aspect both Lewis and Edith Sitwell manifest an adherence to a traditional function of satire, and in doing so position themselves with a marginally older generation – Waugh, Burra and their contemporaries exhibit a more frivolous mockery, where criticism is glossed to the extent that it

⁶⁶ W.B. Yeats to Lewis [n.d. – c.1930?]. Cited in Richard Greene (2011) *Edith Sitwell: Avant-Garde Poet, English Genius*. London: Virago. p.213.

becomes almost submerged in cynical entertainment. Edith Sitwell's *Gold Coast Customs*, despite its modernist technique, relies on nineteenth-century or imperialist values that are already becoming swiftly out of date, and on the cultural capital of nineteenth-century philosophers such as Hegel.⁶⁷ The same employment of academic sources from the past for intellectual validation is seen in Lewis's socio-political treatises of the twenties, and in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to which *Gold Coast Customs* bears close comparison in both theme and technique. This suggests that the 'war generation' found it hard to jettison some of the nineteenth century or imperialist values that they had grown up with, however avant-garde they were otherwise, and the trope of Africa in Sitwell's poem brings this facet of generational dissociation into sharp focus. While *The Waste Land* was published in 1922, *Gold Coast Customs* was published in 1929, a year when Burra was painting *Dockside Café, Marseilles* in which white and black figures seem to co-exist on easy terms. This exemplifies the contrasting attitude of the Bright Young People towards black people – in Bohemian circles they were to an extent assimilated (even if only in a conscious effort to rebel against the prejudices of their elders) – and proves that, in the matter of race at least, it was the generational attitudes that forced the development of satire, rather than the passage of time.⁶⁸ From a moral viewpoint Edith Sitwell's satire had not developed over the course of the decade; indeed, the poem has been linked to 'the comic tradition of the minstrel show', a 'conflation of African with American popular culture typical of early-twentieth-century literature,' which

⁶⁷ Gyllian Phillips points to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and notions of Western superiority in Sitwell's poem which are underscored by her quotations from Hegel's *Philosophy of History* in the accompanying notes [Gyllian Phillips (2010) *Imaginary Africa and London's Urban Wasteland in Edith Sitwell's "Gold Coast Customs"*. *Twentieth Century Literature*. 56 (1). pp.71-93].

⁶⁸ Andrew Causey has described Burra's multicultural painted crowds as demonstrating a 'Whitmanesque brotherhood of races and types' (Causey, 1985, p.14); moreover, at this time black jazz musicians were earning a certain celebrity, and several had very public relationships with wealthy young (white) socialites such as Nancy Cunard.

had been popularised before the Great War.⁶⁹ What had developed in Sitwell's satire was her modernist formal innovation in terms of technique, which is key to the successful communication of her powerful criticism of modern society, and thus to the success of the poem as a satire. She employs the strong beat of the tom-tom and of ritual chanting, which metamorphose into the syncopated beats of modern jazz music, reinforcing the visual amalgamation of Africa with the London slums, and succinctly illustrating her point that civilisation is slipping back to its savage, primitive roots. John Ower identifies the poem as:

A microcosm of its era ... [It] belongs to the Twenties, to the literature of malaise which arose from a gnawing sense of the ultimate emptiness of modern civilisation.⁷⁰

This statement, rather than linking Sitwell's satire to earlier modernist examples, groups it firmly together with the disillusioned literature of Waugh's generation who in hindsight embody the zeitgeist of the twenties. Yet paradoxically, in the character of Lady Bambergher, queen of the London party set, Sitwell condemns those at the very heart of this Bright Young generation; this 'modern woman' is posited as the 'source of modern urban decay', engaging in 'metaphoric cannibalism of the poor.'⁷¹ However, this does not obstruct her association with Waugh et al, as Waugh's *Black Mischief* likewise contains a scene of literal cannibalism as a satirical trope intended to make comment on Western decadence.⁷² (It is interesting to note in this

⁶⁹ This assertion was made by Susan Gubar who refers to Vachel Lindsay's *The Congo* (1914) and T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* poems as examples of this tradition of racial stereotype and the excessive language of parody [see Phillips, 2010, pp.71-73].

⁷⁰ John Ower, cited by Phillips, 2010, p.81.

⁷¹ Phillips, 2010, pp.78-9.

⁷² Jonathan Greenberg, analysing this episode in the novel, paraphrases Freud in concluding that the 'cannibal "other" turns out to be the Western self', and cites Maggie Kilgour's assertion that 'the figure of the cannibal was created to support the cultural cannibalism of colonialism through the projection of Western imperialist appetites onto the cultures they then subsumed' [Jonathan Greenberg (2006) *Cannibals and Catholics: Reading the Reading of Evelyn Waugh's Black Mischief. Modernist Cultures*. 2 (2). p.129].

context Lewis's claim that satirists 'must possess an appetite for what you regard as "the horrors" that we "perpetrate"' – the use of the word 'appetite' here seeming to posit the satirist as a cannibal, devouring the dark depths of human behaviour).⁷³ And Sitwell's imagery of those who lurk on the margins of humanity also seems to echo Burra's Marseilles paintings of the late 1920s:

At the foot of the steps
Like the navy-blue ghost
Of a coiling negro
In dock slums lost

(The ghost haunting steamers
And cocktail bars,
Card-sharpers, schemers
And Pullman cars).⁷⁴

Osbert Sitwell's satirical poetry was published in the *Spectator* and in the *Nation* from 1917. The novelty, not of Sitwell's anger and disillusionment after three years of war, but of his means of articulating them in such a way that they reached a nationwide audience, is underlined by Thomas Balston in his introduction to *Sitwelliana*, a bibliographical volume published in 1928. He writes:

During 1917 and 1918, at a time when few papers dared to print anything which ran counter to the pretence of national optimism or self-praise which was inculcated by the Government, the 'Nation' opened its columns to a series of satirical poems by Osbert Sitwell, above the signature MILES, which were the first expression of the

⁷³ Greenberg, 2006, p.129.

⁷⁴ Edith Sitwell (1929) *Gold Coast Customs*. London: Duckworth. p.20.

growing distrust of ostrich habits as a means of winning or ending the war.⁷⁵

Balston's statement is evidence firstly of the general acceptance of Sitwell's work as satire, a reputation which appears well established by 1928, and secondly of the fact that this mode allowed the publication of criticism that would otherwise have been censored. This vital fact supports the theory that satire re-emerged in the later stages of the war out of necessity, the only outlet available to a soldier to publicly vent his frustration, and that circumstances gave to the mode its new and cynical form, replete with veiled references. But it is noteworthy that a decade had passed between 1918 and 1928, and that Balston's neat summing up of Sitwell's radical contribution to poetry and satire was made in hindsight, the publisher now safe in the knowledge of the latter's literary success (or at least notoriety) – and free, ten years after the armistice, from fear of attracting the censor's gaze. Were these initial poems in the *Nation* really the first successful attempt to publicise a widely acknowledged disillusionment in the later years of the war? Other war poets conveyed the same spirit of bitterness and futility in addressing the war at this time, though their poetry was not printed in international journals such as the *Nation*; and those whose poetry was printed – such as Rupert Brooke's sonnets, 'The Dead' and 'The Soldier' in *The Times Literary Supplement* in March 1915 – were patriotic and sentimental, making no satiric or critical swipe at the establishment. It may have been the case that the lighter, subtle tone of Sitwell's poems, which allowed them to be printed, caused scorn rather than admiration among his fellow poets; they lack the emotional power of Rupert Brooke, appearing in contrast openly commercial. However, the commercial success of the poems says much about the cynical yet resolute attitude of the early post-war generation that would gather around the nucleus of the Sitwells, an attitude reflected in the substance of the poetry itself and the use of the satirical mode to convey it. Balston also seems to proclaim Sitwell as a pioneer of this strategy of public criticism by

⁷⁵ Thomas Balston (1928) Introduction to *Sitwelliana*. London: Duckworth. p.viii.

satire; he may have been so in this particular form, but there was no lack of criticism of the handling of the war by those in power, and this was intensified in the years after the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Hynes reproduces a tailors' advertisement from the *Cambridge Magazine*, dated November 2nd 1918 that is an openly cynical diatribe against the 'old men' who 'preached patriotism, self-sacrifice, and self-denial – to others.'⁷⁶ The bitterness and sarcasm that saturate every line echo Sitwell's sentiments closely and prove that he was by no means alone in his determination to publicise such views, even before the war had ended.

John Pearson concludes that Sitwell's early satire was his way of venting 'his rage and despair and contempt for those who would not see...' and of attacking those who 'always wanted poets to prettify the dreadful facts of war.'⁷⁷ The perennial motive behind satire is the desire to criticise a certain foible or failing in one's fellow human beings, whether aimed at a particular person or an entire section of society; this desire is usually accompanied by a wish to remedy the perceived fault. In Sitwell's case, the fault was the blindness of the ruling classes and their fatal misjudgements in terms of military strategy; but unlike most traditional satirists, he was himself, as a soldier in the trenches, deeply implicated in this state of affairs, at the same time feeling as impotent as the millions of other men who were effectively pawns in the game of a small group of elder statesmen. So on an emotional level, Pearson's contention is surely correct – as Wordsworth so succinctly put it, 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.'⁷⁸ But Sitwell added to the instinctual response of the poet an astute and pragmatic approach to advertising the errors of the 'old men'. The 'rage and despair and contempt' were contained and used to practical effect in the published satires – practical both in an altruistic sense, the satirist using his talents to highlight misconduct and hopefully inspire its correction, and in a selfish sense too, as

⁷⁶ Hynes, 1990, p.307.

⁷⁷ Pearson, 1980, p.127; *ibid.*, p.115.

⁷⁸ William Wordsworth & Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1802) *Lyrical Ballads*. 2nd edition. London: Longman.

Sitwell clearly saw a chance to launch himself publicly as a writer and gain entry to the literary high society he so craved.

The second objective of Sitwell's satire highlighted by Pearson, namely his criticism of those who 'prettified' the facts of war, was aimed at the 'Georgian' poets. These writers were grouped together largely through their affiliation with J.C. Squire of the *London Mercury* and their publication in the anthologies of *Georgian Poetry* [1912-1922], and their verse was characterised by a romantic and sentimental style. In the eyes of the modernists this was a wilful refusal to engage with the horrifying experience of war or with modernity itself. Osbert's 1921 polemic *Who Killed Cock Robin?* makes an explicit attack on the 'lark-lovers' – 'the lark has overstayed its welcome, and migrated' – and mocks the popularity of sentimental Victorian poetry as epitomised by Tennyson's 'Enoch Arden'.⁷⁹ The strength of feeling equates to Lewis's for the Bloomsbury painters: both were determined to renew and reinvigorate their cultural mediums, whether writing or painting, in the new post-war era, and to address the impact of the war, albeit indirectly. Their frustration at the blinkered attitude of their contemporaries in this respect – and contemporaries, moreover, who had gained a popular status to their cost, pushed both Osbert Sitwell and Wyndham Lewis towards satire as a means of both retribution and of forcing the public to face the facts of the recent conflict and of modernity – to accept the status quo, unsweetened. Likewise, 'In Bad Taste', a verse preface to the first edition of *Wheels* when it was reprinted in 1917, was an early attempt by Sitwell at poetic satire directed against the 'platitudinous multitude,' 'the mass of the insensitive, complacent public who were expecting the young men to fight for them...'⁸⁰ On a more commercial basis, Edith blamed Squire for the demise of *Wheels*, writing in 1922:

⁷⁹ Osbert Sitwell (1921) *Who Killed Cock Robin? Remarks on poetry, on its criticism, and, as a sad warning, the story of Eunuch Arden*. London: C.W. Daniel. p.11; pp.17-19.

⁸⁰ Pearson, 1980, p.113.

I have been having a terrible time, what with the boycott on the part of the Squire-controlled press ... It is so irritating because I know Squire is no good as a writer; one has only to compare him with the poets whom he imitates. Meanwhile, he is preventing any new work obtaining a hearing in England!⁸¹

It is unsurprising, however, if some of the Sitwells' literary contemporaries – especially those associated with the 'Georgian' poets and the 'Squirearchy' – should have perceived Osbert's satire less as a laudable attack on the ruling classes but as a personal vendetta against those who did not agree with his modernist style of poetry or who impeded his path towards literary success and personal fame. There was undoubtedly an element of self-promotion in the Sitwells' anti-establishment stance.

The Eton aesthetes 'stood for the Sitwells... they stood for Diaghilev and everything associated with him, from Bakst and Stravinsky to Pierrot and Harlequin.'⁸² And the Sitwells were closely associated with Diaghilev; Osbert recalls his excitement at discovering the Ballets Russes while in the Guards in the years before the war, and on Armistice Day was entertaining Diaghilev himself at Swan Walk, while Sacheverell went on to write the *The Triumph of Neptune* which was produced by the impresario, with music by Lord Berners, in 1926. The element of exoticism and fantasy embodied in the Ballets, allied to the thrilling modernity of the music and choreography, was irresistible to a public desperate to escape the bleak memories of war. Noël Coward proved his incisive grasp of the zeitgeist with the controversial *London Calling!* [1923], which included a number called 'Parisian Pierrot', sung by Gertrude Lawrence [fig.10]. Pierrot is reinvented as 'society's hero', as 'divinely forlorn/ with exquisite scorn', a pose very much in vogue in the twenties, the artistic youth cultivating a melancholy aloofness and a penchant for theatrical

⁸¹ Edith Sitwell to Valery Larbaud [10 March 1922]. In Greene, 2011, p.158.

⁸² Green, 1976, p.125.

apparel.⁸³ Thus the age-old figure of Pierrot was used to symbolise, and poke fun at, contemporary ‘dandies’ – especially appropriate considering the link to the decadent imagery of Wilde and Beardsley, which those dandies consciously adopted in an ironic way, emphasising their assumed roles as a pre-emptive stance. This self-awareness did not preclude being the butt of satire in productions such as Coward’s, but rather gave them front-row seats in this parodic performance. Waugh, for instance, could send up the mannerisms and foibles of his own social circle while still joining in their activities and without being ostracised; Cecil Beaton could profit from the overt theatricality and self-promotion of his generation to carve a niche for himself as photographer *du jour*.⁸⁴ It is interesting to note that Beaton photographed himself in the costume of Pierrot [fig.15], a simple and elegant self-portrait in which he looks with frankness at the camera, the ingenuous – perhaps tentative? – stare belying any consciousness of his ludicrous costume. Perhaps Beaton was in fact more interested in the sharp, formal contrasts of light and dark achieved in the composition by means of the dark skull cap and the bright, encircling white ruff. However, the choice of costume must have been influenced by Beaton’s desire to stage manage his exterior persona, a theatrical proclamation of his ‘dandy’ status and his consciously effected affiliation with the world of the Ballets Russes and the Bright Young People. The paradox at the heart of this self-portrait thus reveals itself in the combination of Beaton’s serious pursuit of social status with the self-ridicule that this facet of society seemed to require for entry and acceptance.

⁸³ Philip Hoare quotes these lines from Parisian Pierrot in his biography of Noël Coward, in which he also comments that ‘*London Calling* epitomised the 1920s revue’ and that Gertrude Lawrence herself was kitted out in the ‘fashionable fancy dress of a pierrot ... in acid yellow and green pantaloons and tulle ruff’ [Philip Hoare (1995) *Noël Coward: a Biography*. New York: Simon & Schuster. pp.118-119].

⁸⁴ Beaton regarded ‘Parisian Pierrot’ as ‘the signature tune of the ... 1920s’ [cited in Barry Day (Ed.) (2007) *The Letters of Noël Coward*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. p.179]; he also produced a series of photographic self-portraits as Pierrot, wearing a large white ruff and black skullcap [Christie’s New York. *Photographs* (Auction Catalogue). 4 April, 2000, Lot 309].

That the reappearance of the characters and aesthetics of the *commedia dell'arte* should coincide with that of satire seems appropriate. It was in part due to the influence of the Ballet Russes, whose fantastical and exotic costumes and simple narratives drew on the theatrical heritage of the *commedia*. However, the attraction was also firmly rooted in the same context of violent disruption and disorienting change as that which provoked satire, and the two tendencies become inevitably intertwined. Martin Green and John Swan assert that 'all *commedia* moods are characterised by a ... moral self-doubt – by a sense of the artifice of all emotion' and, moreover, that modern interpretations 'all represent a recoil from our society's dominant respectable values, and attack them by nonserious means.'⁸⁵ The fact that there is 'something nonserious in its intentions, something defiantly frivolous or sullenly crude' distinguishes *commedia* from other forms of protest or radicalism; it is protest masquerading as simple entertainment, and as such is effectively a form of satire. Deborah Tyler Bennett asserts that the figure of Pierrot shifted in the post-war era from being a symbol of nineteenth century decadence to one of 'twentieth century chaos.'⁸⁶ But perhaps it was the transplantation of the *commedia* characters to an English tradition of humour that sowed the seeds of this change; Baudelaire writes of English pantomime, 'the distinctive mark of this type of the comic was *violence* ... The English Pierrot swept upon us like a hurricane, fell down like a sack of coals, and when he laughed his laughter made the auditorium quake.'⁸⁷ At any rate, the English Pierrot, re-located to a post-World War I context became a significant force within modernist culture, the symbolic locus of a renewed comic tradition. And the combination of chaos and frivolity, of cynicism and decadence, contained within the figure of Pierrot made him a peculiarly suitable icon for the twenties, and for the new satire.

⁸⁵ Martin Green & John Swan (1986) *The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell'Arte and the Modern Imagination*. New York: Macmillan. pp.xiii-xvi.

⁸⁶ Deborah Tyler Bennett (1996) *Edith Sitwell: The Forgotten Modernist*. Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University. p.36.

⁸⁷ Charles Baudelaire (1956) 'On the essence of laughter, and, in general, on the Comic in the plastic arts' [first pub. 1855]. In Jonathan Mayne (Ed.) *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books. pp.148-9.

The influence of the *commedia dell'arte* is clearly discernible in Edith's work of around 1919 – collections such as *Clown's Houses* and *Wheels, Third Cycle* shifted, as John Pearson puts it, 'into a world of fantasy and elegance and colour, a world of blackamoors and pantaloons and satyrs, all very much in tune with that decorative *commedia dell'arte* world her brothers loved.'⁸⁸ However, in poems such as 'Sugar for the Birds: I, Singerie' the lightheartedness of the *commedia* figures is undermined, and the figures of Pantaloon and Scaramouche transposed into the 'hell' of the modern day. As Bennett writes, the restoration of order is impossible when all the world is chaos, and can only be blocked out by the putting down of the shutters.⁸⁹ The 'hell' described is that of a consumer society, where 'sharp each bird-tongue shrills and hisses,/ parrot voices shrieking bane', overwhelming the individual with material temptations.⁹⁰ This combining of comedic characters with an underlying criticism of cultural practices imbues the poem with an element of mordant satire. Bennett points to the sharp topicality of Sitwell's poetry in this respect, noting that:

By using recognisable images and themes from both classical and folk cultures, Sitwell creates a social satire for her own times. The savage humour which marks this satire ... comments upon both a perceived twentieth century "bonfire of the vanities" or "vanity fair" and the role of the poet in contemporary, consumer-based culture.⁹¹

Likewise the artist; Edward Burra, for instance, depicts figures attired in the latest fashions and heavily made up so that they look like mannequins, duped by a consumer culture that represents such clothing and possessions as indispensable, a necessary adjunct to one's own sense of identity. In reality,

⁸⁸ Pearson, 1980, p.127.

⁸⁹ Bennett, 1996, p.19.

⁹⁰ Edith Sitwell (1918) Sugar for the Birds: I. Singerie. In *Wheels: Third Cycle*. p.82. [Online]. Brown University: Modernist Journals Project. Available at: <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/pdfs/1188560996984375.pdf> [Accessed: 13 May 2013].

⁹¹ Bennett, 1996, pp.22-23.

and as is apparent through the artist's detached eye, all conversely appear identical in their outré apparel, losing their individuality to conform to an affected eccentricity. *The Two Sisters* (1929) [fig.13] appear clones of one another, and the waitresses in *The Tea Shop* (1929) [fig.29], in a similar state of racy undress, take on the aspect of automatons in thrall to consumerism – both duped and duping, themselves objects on show. The presence of a figure in *commedia* hat and ruff standing behind the two sisters in the former painting only serves to enforce the notion that all are stock characters in a comedy of modern life, all puppets on a stage, their behaviour preconfigured and predictable.

The carnivalesque – whether specifically embodied in the characters of the *commedia dell'arte* or less overtly apparent – is used repeatedly as a trope with which to deal with the existential 'malaise' that lay beneath the frivolity of the twenties. In addition to the numerous examples of direct borrowings from the *commedia* as mentioned above, Burra's scenes of urban life in the late twenties all embody a strong carnivalesque element in their garishly bright colours and the seething mass of humanity whose exaggerated expressions are masklike and theatrical. And ever-present is the underlying knowledge that this bacchanalia of forgetfulness cannot go on indefinitely. This atmosphere is echoed in Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay* and Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* which both use a circular narrative technique so that their prose reflects the pointless whirling of a merry-go-round spinning out of control. In both novels cars race ever faster and artificial lights flash past, momentarily dazzling, the characters demanding ever-greater thrills.⁹² The symbolism of the carnival or the fairground as a means of making a political comment through satire was established during the Great War. Huxley unequivocally linked *Antic Hay* to the experience of the recent war, declaring that it 'is a book written by a member of what I may call the war generation for others of

⁹² See Aldous Huxley's *Antic Hay*, as Gumbriel and Myra begin their climactic taxi ride around London [Huxley, 1965, p.230], and the account of the car race and its repercussions in Agatha's mind, in Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* [Waugh, 2000, pp.136-48; p.161].

his kind.⁹³ Mark Gertler's *Merry-Go-Round* (1916) is a visually powerful and uncanny image that associates militarism and the machine of war with the futile roundabout mechanism of the funfair. At the time this was painted (1916 saw the Battle of the Somme, acknowledged as a major turning point in the conflict), it was already indicative of a fairly widespread disillusionment and cynicism at the way the generals – the 'old men' – were conducting the war, and used satire in the form of caricature and incongruity to transmit this frustration. By the late 1920s, this mode of satire moves on a step further as, to quote the title of Osbert Sitwell's short story, 'The Machine Breaks Down' – or is about to. The revelers in Burra's paintings, the Bohemians in Huxley's and Waugh's novels, are dancing on a precipice, about to be flung off the ride that has run out of control. Andrew Causey sees Gertler's *Merry-Go-Round* as both literally resembling 'a machine of war' and 'at the same time a metaphor for the war as a whole.'⁹⁴ Similarly, John Ferguson sees the 'human beings as puppets in the grip of mechanical forces...carried round and round, endlessly, meaninglessly.'⁹⁵ This latter comment could be applied just as pertinently to the manic taxi ride round and round Mayfair that provides the culmination to *Antic Hay*, or to the ranks of robotic painted faces that people Burra's sleazy cafes and dance halls.

Is the 'carnavalesque' as a satirical mode akin to the 'grotesque'? Perhaps it can be understood as an updated concept of the latter mode, which overlapped ambiguously with the notions of parody, caricature and satire

⁹³ Huxley, writing to his father from Florence on the occasion of the publication of *Antic Hay* in autumn 1923. Cited in Sybille Bedford (1973) *Aldous Huxley: A Biography*. Volume 1: 1894-1939. London: Chatto & Windus. p142.

⁹⁴ Andrew Causey (1986) 'Formalism and the Figurative Tradition in British Painting'. In Sue Compton (Ed.) *British Art in the Twentieth Century: The Modern Movement*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag & London: Royal Academy. p.19; though the critics did not (or chose not to) notice the allusions to the war when Gertler's painting was initially exhibited with the London Group in April 1917, there is evidence that his artistic contemporaries did in letters written by D.H. Lawrence and Lytton Strachey [excerpts are quoted in John Woodeson (1972) *Mark Gertler: Biography of a Painter 1891-1939*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson. p.226].

⁹⁵ John Ferguson (1980) *The Arts in Britain in World War I*. Southampton: The Camelot Press. p.73.

from their heyday in eighteenth-century Britain. As I have endeavoured to illustrate briefly in the introduction, these terms are notoriously slippery to define. However, if one traces the inspiration for Burra's early scenes of dancers in cafés back to the pen drawings and watercolours of Georg Grosz, then the grotesque aspect is immediately heightened, the grins becomes leers, the nudity becomes debauched in association. But the young Burra still maintains an optimism in human nature, and an amused, if cynical and detached, viewpoint which the term 'carnavalesque' seems to better encompass.

Osbert Sitwell's poem, 'Pierrot Old', published in *Argonaut and Juggernaut* [1919], presents the titular character in a modern guise as a survivor of the recent war, grieving for his dead friends – the 'golden youth' are equated with a *commedia dell'arte* troupe – and for the carefree life they led before the war:

But Pierrot now is tired and sad
- Remembers all the evenings mad
He spent with that fantastic band
So gaily wand'ring o'er the land.
They are all dead – and at an end,
And he is left without a friend.⁹⁶

This continues the 'end of the carnival' theme that appears in 'Twentieth Century Harlequinade' [March 1916] – 'the pantomime of life is near its close' – and in 'Rhapsode' [September 1917] in which Flanders is a 'circus'.⁹⁷ Over twenty years later, as Europe once again became a battlefield, Burra painted *Soldiers at Rye* [1940] in which the resting troops wear the hook-nosed masks of Punchinello. It is telling that Burra also chose a *commedia* character to

⁹⁶ Osbert Sitwell, 'Pierrot Old'. In O. Sitwell, 1919, p.59.

⁹⁷ Osbert Sitwell, 'Twentieth Century Harlequinade' and 'Rhapsode', *ibid.*, p.94; p.102.

make a satirical statement about war, though by this time the trope has become absorbed into the public's understanding to the extent that the masks alone are required to trigger recognition, rather than the character in full, transposed to the modern context. Punchinello was the foil to Pierrot – mean, vicious and crafty, with a propensity to violence, his physique distorted and ugly – and therefore one could interpret the painting as an indictment of the aggressive behaviour of the soldiers. In this sense their covered faces serve to deny them their individual identities, and to insist on their transformation as soldiers into purely physical beings, machines for killing. But at the same time the addition of colourful masks lightens the tone of the painting – both literally as the bold scarlet and yellow punctuates the dull khaki, and, in recalling the *commedia*, adding a theatrical element that banishes the seriousness of the soldiers' role, making them appear suddenly ridiculous. That Burra adopted the attributes of the *commedia* for a satirical purpose attests to the importance of the Sitwells' role – though not solely responsible for reviving interest in the *commedia* by any means, they did play a large part in disseminating the imagery, both in their own written work and in the art that they commissioned or championed.

Of these commissions, the most extensive and important were perhaps the frescoes executed by Gino Severini in 1921-2 at the Sitwells' Italian castle, Montegufoni. Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell was almost certainly responsible for the choice of subject matter, and the brothers appear as Harlequin and Beppe Nappa on the south wall of the 'Sala delle Maschere' [fig.8], accompanied by Severini himself as Tartaglia, recognisable in bottle-top glasses and felt hat. The willingness of the Sitwell brothers to appear in so ridiculous a guise testifies to an element of self-satire on their part – which Edith also shared. Deborah Tyler Bennett points to her poem 'Small Talk' [1920], in which Edith refers to herself in caricatural terms:

Miss Sitwell, cross and white as chalk,
Was indisposed for the small talk.⁹⁸

If one also takes into account Wyndham Lewis's satirical self-portrait of 1920-1, the tendency warrants consideration as a significant element of the new satire. Yet, though in both Lewis's and the Sitwells's case the satirist is not afraid to focus his incisive talents and to call laughter upon himself, yet all were extremely sensitive to any mockery which was not initiated – and therefore controlled – by themselves. The duality inherent in this approach – the artist or writer at once satirist and satirised – testifies to the peculiarly complex relationship of the artist with his self-image, and his questioning of his own identity and place within contemporary society at this time. The almost simultaneous appearance of such self-reflexive satire by the key proponents of the mode in the early twenties is therefore interesting and merits further exploration. Again, the phenomenon, as with the new satire itself, is rooted in the experience of war. Both Wyndham Lewis and Osbert Sitwell had fought and subsequently felt the need to reassess their lives and careers – to scrutinise themselves, as individuals and as units within society, from a detached and objective viewpoint.

But how does this self-analytic approach fit within the satirical tradition and does it correspond to an accepted definition of the term? In effect, it served to redefine satire in a world that had absorbed the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and the philosophies of Bergson and behaviourism, a world newly fascinated with notions of the self and the ego. It extended the traditional definition of satire – as an attack on the vices and follies of mankind – to overtly depict the satirist him/herself within that corrupt society, rather than standing detached from it as was previously implied. The purpose of traditional satire is also brought into question more decisively in this case: if the satirist posits him/herself as a part of the society being critiqued, then how do they propose to remedy the situation? They themselves should surely

⁹⁸ Edith Sitwell (1920) 'Small Talk'. In *The Wooden Pegasus*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. p.67.

be taking the first step to correcting the behaviour they ridicule, and yet instead it is merely displayed for others' amusement. If not moralistic or didactic, what purpose does this self-parody fulfil – or is it simply parody-for-parody's-sake? Certainly in the case of Lewis, and perhaps with the Sitwells too, it appears to be a case of questioning one's own identity, of working out one's place in a society transformed by war and by rapid modernisation. The concept of searching for identity through self-portraiture definitely owed something to the development and popularity of psychoanalysis; however, the mockery of this introspective tendency refutes the reading of self-satires as psychological insights. Nevertheless, they must surely testify to a certain self-doubt, a consciousness of a moral vacuum and consequent anxiety to create a set of values for the new era.

Walter Michel points to a self-portrait by Lewis painted in 1931 that was published as *A Self Caricature by Wyndham Lewis in Time and Tide* [14 February 1931].⁹⁹ This title is far more suggestive of a detached, ironic approach, undermining any serious, Freudian interpretation and leaving the nagging feeling that the whole enterprise is an elaborate joke, and that we, the viewer, are the butt of it as we are taken in. However it is *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [Fig.2] which appears the ultimate self-satire: all the masks Lewis adopts are donned at once, all the character traits he discerns in himself are exaggerated, so that the resulting figure is no longer a real person but a cipher of Lewis, concentrated and distilled through a cynical eye. Edith Sitwell, writing of Lewis in her autobiography some forty years later, describes his multiple personality, his 'habit of appearing in various roles':

His outward personality, his shield against the world, changed from day to day – one might almost say from hour to hour. When he grinned, one felt as if one were looking at a lantern slide ... a click, a

⁹⁹ Walter Michel (1971) *Wyndham Lewis: Paintings and Drawings*. London: Thames & Hudson. p.95 (plate 99, no.725).

fade-out, and another slide, totally unconnected with it, and equally unreal, had taken its place.¹⁰⁰

It is particularly interesting that Edith mentions Lewis's grin, which is a key element in the persona of his painted Tyros, as this underlines the close link between Lewis the man and his painted alter ego in *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig.2]. Edith Sitwell, until the sudden cessation of her portrait sittings, had ample time as a friend and model to observe the character of the painter. Though at times understandably cruel in her descriptions, she is perceptive; and though subjective, her views seem fair and considered, as the passage of time would have done much to heal the rift that grew up between them in 1924. She discerns a loneliness and paranoia lurking beneath his need for constant disguise, as well as a desire to impress – both others and himself. The grin is representative of this desire, of the gallant and masculine 'Spanish' role, which Edith undermines with a few carefully chosen words:

He would ... draw his stick along the railings, with what he hoped was a flash of teeth. But always, just as the teeth were about to flash, the sun went in, so that the phenomenon was not observable ... His life was full of little disappointments of this kind.¹⁰¹

In *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig.2], however, the teeth flash permanently, recording and reifying the persona Lewis strove for – confident, assured, a little bit arrogant and roguish. Perhaps this self-portrait was a means for Lewis of pinning down that elusive part of his personality, the part that he desired to dominate the rest. In real life, Edith believed, there was 'a strong vein of sentimentality' in Lewis's character, a longing to be loved and understood.¹⁰² Through his Tyro persona, however, Lewis seems wilfully to distance himself from the perceived weakness of sentiment and emotion, and the flashing teeth are the hard enamel mask that he puts up to counteract all suggestions to the contrary. His awareness of this masking effect, his

¹⁰⁰ Edith Sitwell (1965) *Taken Care Of: An Autobiography*. London: Hutchinson. pp. 100-101.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.101.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.103.

conscious desire to project what he clearly knew was a false (or, at most, only partially true) image, confirms the amused cynicism with which he approached the painting of his self-portrait. Lewis also employs a pre-emptive mockery to guard against any criticism – satire as a first line of defence. His complex relationship with Edith Sitwell (which despite lengthy accounts from both parties still remains unclear) is therefore crucial in revealing the volatility of his character and, by extension, the possible motives behind such an ambiguous self-reflexive satire.

The relationship worked both ways; Edith's dry wit and sharply observant humour, often aimed at others, was at times turned on herself to analogous purpose. The reaction of all three Sitwells, but of Edith especially, to the critical disparagement of the first public performance of *Façade* in 1923 leaves little doubt as to her artistic sensitivity.¹⁰³ The use of self-parody in her writing must therefore be read as, at least partially, a pre-emptive measure. She herself took her poetry, or more precisely her poetic technique, extremely seriously, but is unusually keen to emphasise the fact that 'the audience is meant to laugh'.¹⁰⁴ Like Lewis, her outward appearance was eccentric, almost intentionally ridiculous, reflecting a desire to draw attention to herself (resulting perhaps from a loneliness and paranoia akin to that which she attributes to Lewis), while outwardly proclaiming disinterest in how society perceived her. An element of surrealism emerges in the use of such titles as 'Solo for Ear Trumpet' and 'Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone' – these present themselves as self-consciously silly and seem almost to poke fun at the modernist lyrical poetry that Edith had made her own.

Indeed, the Sitwells's satire is quite often distinctly surrealist in tone, a fact that is largely dependent on the fantasy lent by the *commedia* cast. This slippage between the theatrical and the surreal, between a post-cubist

¹⁰³ As Tim Barringer argues, *Façade* was itself a satire on Schoenberg's avant-garde music, and besides being derided by critics was subsequently satirised in its turn by Noel Coward in *London Calling!* [Barringer, 2010, pp.144-5].

¹⁰⁴ This line is used as the title of an entire chapter in Edith Sitwell's autobiography, *Taken Care Of*, which deals with the poetry of *Façade*.

abstraction and a neo-classical figuration is one that characterises the work of many artists of the era. Severini, as has been noted, adopted *commedia* figures as alter egos in a parallel world on the walls of the ‘Sala delle Maschere’ at Montegufoni [fig.8]; Giorgio de Chirico was already renowned by the twenties for his haunting, theatrical street scenes replete with unexplained objects; and Burra’s ‘bird people’, who began to dominate his paintings from the late 1920s, were a hybrid of Ernstian anthropomorphic surrealism and *commedia* artifice. As has been noted, the Sitwells, through their keen friendship with and patronage of such artists as Severini and Diaghilev, played a key part in the revival of the *commedia dell’arte*, which in turn came to be a key component in the satire of the 1920s. While Severini’s depictions of *commedia* characters were fairly traditional, despite their transferral to the present day and the incorporation of real life persons into the character roles, other artists used elements of this tradition in a more surreal way, thus enhancing the satirical effect by means of incongruity. Burra’s use of Punchinello’s long, hooked nose in *Soldiers at Rye* or his tall coned hat for the debauched character picking fruit behind *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] both serve to add an additional element of fantasy and unexpectedness into an already stylised and dreamlike scenario. More than this, however, the surrealist/*commedia* element denies any serious undercurrents within the painting – whether comments on troops preparing for war or the invidious dissoluteness of modern life – and creates a tension in the composition between the sinister and the ridiculous. The viewer is left uncertain and discomfited by the mixed messages relayed by such bizarre attributes; the traditional meaning has been lost, while the modern meaning is undermined by its intrusion.

The success of Burra’s assimilation of such satirical tropes as the *commedia* characters testifies to the importance of the Sitwells’s influence and to how far the use of satire (or elements of satire) had developed over the decade. Although the literary work of the Sitwells themselves holds an important position in any study of modernist satire, the focus here is on the development of satire in painting, and in this area their importance is

secondary – though no less crucial for that. It was by means of their patronage and leadership, and their authoritative influence on cultural taste throughout the twenties, that they introduced and popularised some of the key tropes of modernist satire in painting and thus changed the course that this genre would take. Without their influence Lewis might well have created the Tyros nonetheless, but they would very likely have been isolated and eccentric curiosities, rather than the starting point in an – admittedly short-lived – revival of a genre that came to characterise the twenties. Without their encouragement, their younger protégés might not have had the rebellious example, or indeed the object of ridicule that they discovered in their mentors, needed to carry the vein of satire through to its late stage. This chapter could therefore be viewed as an intermission, a broadening out of the discussion concerning the conditions and characters propitious to the reappearance and development of satire in the twenties. Or perhaps a better analogy would be, like that applied to William Roberts, a link in the chain that constitutes the arc of satire over the course of the decade – though the Sitwells must represent at least two links, if not some sort of lynchpin to or from which all the protagonists are connected.

Chapter 3: Edward Burra

The influence of both Wyndham Lewis and the Sitwells in terms of modernising the satirical tradition is clear in the work of Edward Burra. Burra's figures are identified by Andrew Causey as 'the society amateurs who swamped artistic life in the twenties and were christened Champagne Bohemia by Wyndham Lewis.'¹ Moreover, Lewis's emphasis on the '*external approach*', outlined in *Satire and Fiction* – his preference for 'the shield of the tortoise, or the rigid stylistic articulations of the grasshopper', as opposed to 'the jelly-fish that floats in the centre of the subterranean stream of the 'dark' Unconscious' – could be also be applied to Burra.² Andrew Stephenson notes that Burra owned a copy of *Satire and Fiction*, which he connects with the 'English literary tradition of moral satire', and argues that this had an important influence on his work.³ This assertion is endorsed by Causey's description of Burra's drawings as 'full of motifs that quickly identify ... somebody by means of clothes'; Burra, he concludes, was 'concerned with the surfaces of things rather than their workings,' an appropriate approach to his chosen subject matter: 'smart-set society with its stress on appearances, style, fashion and make-up.'⁴ Lewis had established an ambiguous relationship with the satirical tradition at the beginning of the decade; his *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] make clear the debt to classical literature, initiating a dialogue with past practitioners of the genre. However, they also aggressively assert their modernity, distancing themselves from the past and presenting a new form of satire adapted to the post-war world. This is taken up by Burra and developed from an antagonistic stance to one that is more accepting of the changed circumstances of the twenties, more in tune with the elements of modernity that had seemed so threatening and disorientating only ten years

¹ Andrew Causey (1985) *Edward Burra: Complete Catalogue*. Oxford: Phaidon. p.22.

² Wyndham Lewis (1930) *Enemy Pamphlets No.1: Satire and Fiction. Preceded by The History of a Rejected Review by Roy Campbell*. London: The Arthur Press. p.52; p.47.

³ Andrew Stephenson (1988) *The Work of Edward Burra 1919-1936: Context and Imagery*. PhD thesis. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh. p.94.

⁴ Causey, 1985, pp.22-23.

before. Bearing in mind this gentler aspect to Burra's humour, perhaps his paintings might be better defined as caricature or parody, terms that are often confused with satire. However, there remains in Burra's work an engagement with humanity's follies and vices, even if these are not judged or condemned, and also a clear, topical engagement with modernity – both of which are key elements in a definition of satire. In addition, there are many aspects of it that can be defined as satirical if one uses Lewis's writings on the subject as a benchmark. Burra rarely talked about his work, and it is therefore difficult to know if he himself regarded his output as satirical, but for the reasons outlined above, Burra is posited here as a satirist.

Burra, like Lewis, uses the 'grin' as a form of satirical commentary – as Jane Stevenson points out, the women in *The Snack Bar* (1930) and *Les Folies de Belleville* (1928) [fig.26] have 'masklike faces' and 'rictus-like lipsticked grins'; here is 'sin flaunting with a painted grin.'⁵ Lewis, Richard Humphreys asserts, 'saw the grin as an expression of a deep infantilism' which was a consequence of the trauma experienced in the wake of the Great War; the fixed grin of the Tyro figure is, in the artist's own words, the 'stoic smile typified by the British "Tommy",' which he is now unable to alter.⁶ Both Burra and Lewis, it is suggested, depict a false gaiety, adopted in an attempt to conceal or ignore the true state of affairs. These underlying issues are something that both care about deeply – witnessed by Lewis's lengthy political-philosophical works of the latter half of the decade and Burra's later reaction to the Spanish Civil War – and it is precisely for this reason that they poke fun at those elements of society that are symptomatic of this self-denial and delusion. As Christopher Isherwood maintains: 'you can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it, you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what is basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and

⁵ Jane Stevenson (2008) *Edward Burra: Twentieth Century Eye*. London: Pimlico. p.96.

⁶ Richard Humphreys (2004) *Wyndham Lewis*. London: Tate Publishing. p.43.

elegance.⁷ Burra's detachment (a result, Stevenson suggests, of his asexuality and apoliticism) is therefore crucial to his satirical approach.⁸

But though his satire stems from the same context as that of Lewis, Burra takes a different approach to the genre's heritage, inviting comparisons with the 'golden age of English satire'. It is noteworthy that Burra's friend and artistic mentor, Paul Nash, dubbed the younger artist 'the modern Hogarth,' implying a continuity with, or inheritance of, the English satirical tradition.⁹ However, Burra's 'absurd, often flippant humour frequently overrides the more rigorous moral aspects of Hogarthian satire' leading Andrew Stephenson to draw parallels with the more idiosyncratic and caricatural approach of Dickens.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it was not only Nash who noted the connections with eighteenth century satire; reviewers of Burra's first solo exhibition in April 1929 placed Burra's work in a 'graphic tradition exemplified by Hogarth and Cruikshank's satires on the social scene', the *Vogue* critic remarking that 'this young artist uses the artistic idiom of modern Paris to record Hogarthian observation and satire.'¹¹ Burra depicts exaggerated social types, in a style permeated with bawdy humour and witty detail, yet his early paintings are so definitely placed in the contemporary world of the late twenties that any comparison to Hogarth is based on such generic qualities only. His satire is indisputably modernist in its ambiguities, unexplained symbolism and doubtful narrative, and in its rejection of any moral judgement.

⁷ Stevenson, 2008, p.93.

⁸ Ibid., p.96.

⁹ Ibid., p.99.

¹⁰ Stephenson, 1988, p.35-40.

¹¹ Ibid., p.85; *Vogue* [April 17, 1929], 73 (8). London Condé Nast Publications. p.38.

i. Edward Burra's *The Two Sisters*: doubling, decadence and dystopia

In editing Burra's letters, William Chappell gives a pungent insight into the childhood imagination of the artist, the propensity for humour and fantasy that remained – indeed flourished, not least in his paintings – as he matured:

Gladys and Phyllis Dilly! The notorious, the infamous Dilly Sisters!
Louche, low-class, liberated women; mafia mobsters who ruled and
dominated a city organised and planned by the brooding presence of
Edward himself in association with his henchman, cousin Lawrence.¹²

The two sisters in the painting [fig.13] are generally believed to be modelled on the Dolly Sisters [see fig.12], identical twin entertainers who gained a notoriety comparable to Josephine Baker or Mistinguette in the 1910s and 1920s. Edward Burra, with his love of popular entertainment, would without doubt have known of and been captivated by the Dolly Sisters, and this is proved by a postcard of them which he sent to his art-school friend Barbara Ker-Seymer in 1929, inscribed: 'Here's a bit of sauce for you Miss Jennie and Rosie caught playing blind mans buff with their eyes open.'¹³ His interest in the sisters dates back even earlier than this; Jane Stevenson, in her biography of Burra, writes of the game he played with his cousin when both were aged around twelve, involving the building of a fantasy town: 'Crucial to this game was a pair of small, nude china dolls ... They were the Dilly Sisters.'¹⁴ The recollection quoted above by Burra's close friend, Billy Chappell, corroborates the existence of these imaginary sisters. Letters survive between the cousins in which they address each other as Gladys and Phyllis Dilly respectively, literally becoming the Dilly Sisters in their imaginations – and as Stevenson

¹² William Chappell (Ed.) (1985) *Well Dearie! The Letters of Edward Burra*. London: Gordon Fraser. p.12.

¹³ A French postcard of the Dolly Sisters from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer, postmarked Rye, 4 March 1929. Reproduced in Hayward Gallery (1985) *Edward Burra* [exh. cat.]. London: Arts Council. p.85, fig. xxi.

¹⁴ Stevenson, 2008, p.35.

notes, on Burra's part these characters 'became permanent denizens of his imagination.'¹⁵

The Dolly Sisters, known as Rosie and Jennie, were Hungarian-born, American entertainers who made a hit on Broadway in 1912; in 1918 they starred in a film written especially for them by the French director Leonce Perret, entitled *The Million Dollar Dollies* [fig.11].¹⁶ The film appeared in London in spring 1920; whether Burra saw it is not recorded – this was just before he moved to London to attend art school in 1921 – but it is known that already he was an avid fan of the cinema and read periodicals filled with celebrity gossip from the world of film.¹⁷ The Dolly Sisters themselves decamped to London at around this time, and made their debut in *Jigsaw* on 16th June 1920 at the London Hippodrome, before being taken under the wing of the producer Charles B. Cochran the following year.¹⁸ They continued to enliven the gossip columns periodically throughout the twenties, most notably when one of the sisters was linked to the Prince of Wales in 1924.¹⁹ In 1929, when Burra painted *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], the lives of the real sisters had become more difficult, Jennie suffering from chronic appendicitis, and Rosie going through divorce proceedings for the second time; however, it was also the year 1929

¹⁵ Stevenson, 2008, pp.36-37.

¹⁶ This was reported in *Photoplay* (November 1918) and *Motion Picture World* (27 April 1918) – see Gary Chapman (2006) *The Delectable Dollies: The Dolly Sisters, Icons of the Jazz Age*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing. pp.74-75.

¹⁷ The London release was reported in *Bioscope* (27 May 1920) [Chapman, 2006, p.75]; Burra and his sister Anne attended the children's matinees at Rye cinema, and by the time he reached London, Jane Stevenson writes, 'Burra was an addict', and also 'a great reader of *Photoplay*, one of the first celebrity magazines, devoted to filmstar lifestyles and gossip' [Stevenson, 2008, p.33; p.44].

¹⁸ Chapman, 2006, pp.82-84.

¹⁹ Philip Ziegler, in his biography of King Edward VIII, records that on a trip to New York in 1924 gossip spread that: 'he [the Prince] had insulted one eminent hostess by asking that the Dolly Sisters – "notorious little Jewish actresses who have never been received anywhere" – should be invited to a ball given in his honour' [Philip Ziegler (1990) *King Edward VIII: The Official Biography*. London: Collins. p.151]; details such as this make it clear that the Dolly Sisters were also the inspiration for Angela Carter's Nora and Dora Chance in *Wise Children* [1991], a bawdy fictional account of twin showgirls whose careers take off spectacularly in the 1920s.

that saw Rosie return to the stage after an eight-year absence to perform with Noël Coward at Mrs Cochran's charity matinée for the Invalid Children's Aid Association at the London Pavilion.²⁰ Either event may have brought the sisters to the forefront of Burra's attention at this time – he was on the French Riviera, at Toulon, in September 1928, then in Paris from October to December, while the Dolly Sisters were also variously at Cannes, Cap d'Antibes, and Paris that autumn; Rosie, like Burra, was back in London by early 1929. Burra was always alert to celebrity gossip and must have seen pictures of the sisters in the illustrated papers over the course of these months.²¹ Another image of identical sisters, by the avant-garde photographer Man Ray, was published in British *Vogue* in July 1926, suggesting that twin showgirls were perceived to be a successful and popular marketing gimmick in this period [fig.14]. The photograph in fact shows Felia Doubrovskia and Lubov Tchernicheva, two dancers from the Ballets Russes starring in *Jack-in-a-Box* at His Majesty's Theatre, but they are dressed for effect in identical black and white costumes and wigs. Burra's interest in set and costume design and his contact with the world of the theatre through friends such as Billy Chappell and Frederick Ashton make his knowledge of such fashionable theatrical tropes fairly certain.

Advertising imagery for the Dolly Sisters reinforces the case for them as the inspiration for *The Two Sisters* [fig.13]. The cover image of the sheet music for 'Tell Me Why', from their US tour, *Oh Look!*, in 1918-19 shows the sisters in identical wide-brimmed hats (though adorned with pink roses rather than yellow bows) with their dark bobbed hair neatly framing their faces beneath. Almost every image trades on their novelty value as identical twins, and shows them posed either in sync or mirroring each other's movements, as the sisters of the painting do with their legs crossed and teacups held in exactly the same manner – though one has her hand raised to stir her tea. One advertising card for the film *Million Dollar Dollies* [fig.11], illustrated in Gary

²⁰ Chapman, 2006, p.213.

²¹ The charity performance, for instance, was reported in *The Bystander* [May 29, 1929]. 102 (1328). London: Illustrated Newspapers. p.453.

Chapman's biography of the sisters, appears to be a film still, hand-coloured in ink wash; the red tint applied to the sisters' cheeks gives them a feverish aspect which resonates with the strong patches of red pigment below their eyes in Burra's painting. The film was a 'romantic fantasy' involving maharajahs, but its priority was to showcase the Dolly Sisters 'varying in behaviour from pouty and pert to coquettish and kittenish.'²² The heightened blush of the sisters in the advert conforms to the cinematic trope of this period that is best displayed in films such as *The Sheikh* (1921) – that of innocent Western girls being abducted or ravished by a mysterious but attractive foreign potentate; nothing untoward was shown, but the sexual connotations were never far below the surface.²³ Burra seems to depict the consequences of a decade of such liaisons – even if only fictional. The sisters in his painting are no longer the innocent maidens in white cotton dresses who appear in the 1918 advertisement; now they appear ravaged, their skin drained of colour, almost grey apart from the scarlet shadows beneath their eyes, suggestive of tiredness and dissipation. By 1929, of course, the sisters were thirty-six and had been performing for almost twenty years; such a lifestyle was bound to take its toll.

Though the Dolly Sisters frequently donned the risqué costumes associated with revue dancers, there are no images of them in such a dishevelled state as the two sisters in the painting – indeed, they were known for their impeccable (and expensive) fashion sense. Their extravagant jewels, another recognised feature of the pair, are evident in the painting, with matching earrings, necklace and rings on display. But if, as seems evident, the two sisters are based on the Dolly Sisters, why does Burra depict them in such an unsympathetic manner? His other major work depicting a film star, *Mae West* (1934-5), though exaggerated to the extent of parody, does not demean the

²² *Chicago Herald* [20 May 1918]. Quoted in Chapman, 2006, p.75.

²³ Elinor Glyn, whose books provided Edwardian teens with clandestine reading matter (Nancy Cunard for one – see Anne Chisholm's biography, 1981, p.37), also used this trope in her novels: *His Hour* (1910) begins with a late night encounter in the Egyptian desert between Tamara, an English girl from 'such a nice family' and a mysterious, 'slightly Oriental' stranger.

subject in the same way that *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] does. However, the fact that the painting is not entitled 'The Dolly Sisters' suggests that it was not supposed to be interpreted as a portrait, despite the reference surely being obvious to anyone in touch with popular culture in the twenties. The figures are firmly placed in a fantastical landscape with bizarrely dressed figures attendant on them, rather than in the expected context of the theatre as Mae West is, with conventionally dressed punters in the background. *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] is therefore clearly proffered as an allegory, the odd, inexplicable elements such as the bared breasts and the carnivalesque figures as symbolic. But the simplification necessary to configure these elements as symbols simultaneously makes them ridiculous, and so the allegorical summary that Burra makes of the society in which he finds himself becomes satirical.

Simon Martin, in his recent monograph on Burra, draws attention to a marked revival of interest in eighteenth-century 'conversation pieces' in the 1920s, and asserts that works such as *Balcony, Toulon* [fig.20] and *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] are modern equivalents of this traditional genre.²⁴ The 'formal respectability' of the eighteenth-century paintings is, however, undermined by Burra.²⁵ Is this a satire on traditional modes of portraiture? If so, then it is more complex than merely poking fun at the formal composition and the contrived set-pieces of a past age, for Hogarth is cited as a key example of the mode, and yet his paintings, like Burra's, were frequently satires on contemporary society. Burra's *Mariage à la Mode* (1928-9) is his most direct borrowing from Hogarth, its component parts matching up to the latter's *The Wedding of Stephen Beckingham and Mary Cox* (1729). But while Burra's title references Hogarth's famous satire of the same name, the wedding portrait on which he bases his composition is in no way satirical. *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] could be just as easily compared to Hogarth's *Conversation Piece (Portrait of*

²⁴ Simon Martin (2011) *Edward Burra* [exh. cat.: Pallant House Gallery]. Farnham: Lund Humphries. p.40.

²⁵ Martin, 2011, p.40.

Sir Andrew Fountaine with other Men and Women) [fig.18]: two women sit side by side in an idyllic outdoor setting with a still life of fruits and a glass on the table before them, while male characters stand conversing among themselves. The composition and generic concept again suggest a direct borrowing, yet at the back of Burra's mind clearly lurked the overly made up whores of *The Rake's Progress* (1733-35), their corsets falling open to reveal bare breasts like those of the two sisters. Why does Burra choose the non-satiric output of such a renowned satirist as Hogarth to reference in his own satire? It appears a wilfully perverse act, a desire to subvert both a traditional genre and at the same time his own debt to the forefather of English satire. Or perhaps a work like *The Rake's Progress* already appeared to Burra as such a perfect example of satire in its early incarnation that he was loath to sully it by imitation or direct borrowing.

Is Burra perhaps presenting in his paintings a morality tale for the twentieth century equivalent to *The Rakes Progress*? It certainly seems so, the drained faces of the sisters warning against a life lived in the fast lane, though unlike Hogarth there is no narrative in the painting to tell the story of their fall from grace. Depicting the Dolly Sisters out in the countryside drinking dainty cups of tea is a bizarre context for entertainers who would be generally seen at night, in the urban environment of the theatre, music hall, jazz bar or casino, and this unlikely choice of location and activity therefore supports the theory that the eighteenth-century 'conversation piece' is an influence here. As Mark Hallett writes, a painting such as *Conversation Piece (Portrait of Sir Andrew Fountaine with other Men and Women)* [fig.18]:

... would have corresponded in an unusually explicit way with its environment, providing an idealised pictorial version of the activities and conversations – the tea parties and the card games, the repartee and the gossip – that took place around the painted image on an everyday basis.²⁶

²⁶ Mark Hallett (2000) *Hogarth*. London: Phaidon Press. p.62.

In which case, where did Burra intend his picture to hang – did he envisage its purchase by *demi-mondaines*, by celebrated chorus girls, to be hung on the wall of a boudoir and admired over a cocktail or two? Hogarth's painting fulfils a dual function, both depicting and stimulating genteel discussion – as Hallett concludes, in analysing the painting on display the spectators 'found themselves acting out and enjoying those conversational rituals so idealised within the canvases themselves.'²⁷ If such a reaction was foreseen by Burra, or at the very least if Burra was aware, as he must have been, of the function of such genre painting in Hogarth's day, it must confirm his painting as a satire. For the painting displays not witty and intelligent conversation but mute dissipation; consequently one imagines the viewers, minds equally empty, turning away to refill their martini glasses and touch up their faces to hide the dark circles. If such was Burra's train of thought then *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] becomes a sharp indictment of the state of contemporary culture and intellect – yet one not angry, just curious and amused.

But the question remains what relationship, in terms of satire, exists between Burra and Hogarth. It is not a simple case of contrast between the genteel conversation piece of one, and the subversion of it by the other; Hogarth himself parodied the genre in, for instance, *A Midnight Modern Conversation* [fig.19] in which tea and manners have descended into drunkenness and farce. This complicates the position still further, as one is forced to ask (as Mark Hallett does) if this was done in a spirit of satire or as a 'kind of pictorial anti-conversation', a moral warning to those who refuse to heed the rules of polite society.²⁸ Whatever elements Burra borrows from Hogarth, the parts are not mimetic; it is by no means a straightforward parody. He may be wagging a disapproving finger at the lax morals of his own age, but at the same time he is grabbing a drink himself and revelling in the outrageous behaviour he should be condemning. As satire, does Burra's painting 'laugh at' or 'laugh with' Hogarth? It might be considered to parody the traditional tropes used by him, undermining the formality of the 'conversation piece' and

²⁷ Hallett, 2000, p.63.

²⁸ Ibid., p.64.

complicating the simple moral narrative with an ambiguous symbolism. On the other hand it may equally well be seen to use Hogarth's pithy and didactic satires as a pertinent model around which to structure a social criticism of Burra's own age. Looking at *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] alongside a work such as Hogarth's etching, *The Bad Taste of the Town* [fig.17], suggests the latter interpretation. Here the artist ridicules the latest foreign fashions, and condemns the descent of theatre into 'pantomime' – the English version of the *commedia dell'arte*. Italianate architecture joins this catalogue of foreign imports held up to attack. Burra's target is more ambiguous; yet it is striking that the main features of *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] are the sisters' ridiculous and revealing costumes, and their accompaniment by characters loosely associated with the *commedia*. In the background, moreover, there is an Italianate architectural structure, with a simplified classical, pedimented façade and a campanile, partly hidden behind trees and the shoulder of the servant figure. Britain in the twenties was hardly threatened, culturally, by 'foreign imports', yet Paris still remained the centre of avant-garde fashion and art so perhaps it is not unrealistic to compare Burra and Hogarth in this way. Burra, too, discerns a deterioration in British culture, pointing up the absurd costumes of the performers; the brazen semi-nudity inspired by the cabarets and music halls of Paris is made clearer in other works such as *The Tea Shop* [fig.29] and *Les Folies de Belleville* [fig.26], the former showing an overt reference to the notorious banana skirt of Josephine Baker [figs.30 & 31].²⁹ The Dolly Sisters, if one accepts them as the models for Burra's sisters, were themselves an American import, along with many other aspects of modern life that became ubiquitous over the course of the decade such as brash make-up and the fashion for cocktails.

The presence of the *commedia* figures and the Italianate setting suggests a direct attack on the Sitwells who had done much to popularise these art forms through their position as cultural patrons and literary figures. Despite their

²⁹ Simon Martin illustrates this direct reference to Josephine Baker, noting that Baker's arrival in Paris had coincided with Burra's first visit to the city in autumn 1925, and that the banana skirt was worn in the Folies-Bergère production of *Un Vent de Folie* in 1927 [Martin, 2011, p.53].

successful self-definition as arbiters of taste and mentors to younger artists, writers and composers, they had always been subject to ridicule – perhaps an inevitable accompaniment to the publicity they courted. From the early post-war years, the bright young generation, notably Harold Acton and Brian Howard, while still at school sent their poems to Edith Sitwell for approval – yet simultaneously ridiculed her in private correspondence. For Edith did cut a bizarre figure, combining her ‘Plantagenet’ looks with Renaissance-style brocade dresses and heavy jewellery – an image best defined by later portraits such as those by Pavel Tchelitchew, Rex Whistler and Stella Bowen. Burra’s painted sisters, however, cannot be considered as parodies of Edith’s distinctive style; she was resolutely demure in her dress, and was generally believed to be a virgin and spinster – hardly likely to bare her breasts as they do! Nevertheless, the balustraded terrace with the Italianate church in the distance does recall Osbert’s descriptions of Montegufoni, the Sitwells’ castle in the Tuscan countryside.³⁰ Montegufoni was also the location of Severini’s frescoes depicting the Sitwell brothers as *commedia* figures, and thus the combination of these elements in Burra’s painting strongly suggests that the Sitwells were in his mind, if only obliquely. Burra did not know the Sitwell siblings, though he may easily have come across them fleetingly in London’s artistic circles, but he certainly knew *of* them and was clearly considerably influenced – as were many of his generation – both by their personal reputations and their literary output. Sacheverell’s *The Hundred and One Harlequins* (1922), Edith’s *Clowns’ Houses* (1919) and Osbert’s *Argonaut and Juggernaut* (1919) all used the imagery of the *commedia dell’arte*, and this aesthetic seeped into the consciousness of young artistic sensibilities such as Burra’s. How else to explain the exotic fantasies of foreign ports that Burra

³⁰ In his autobiography, *Left Hand, Right Hand*, Osbert Sitwell relates his initial impressions of Montegufoni in the autumn: ‘[the chapel] contrasted with the vegetable excesses of the garden’ and the village church ‘lay just under the prow of the Cardinal’s Garden’ [Osbert Sitwell (1948) *Great Morning*. London: Macmillan. pp.172-3]; ‘the peasants move slowly everywhere among the leafage of the vines, picking the fruit ... the walls of the Castle have been baked through for months by the Italian sun’ [Osbert Sitwell (1950) *Laughter in the Next Room*. London: The Reprint Society. p.290].

conjured up in paint before having ventured farther than London? Added to his wide reading and study of past masters, contemporary artistic trends must have made an impact. Later, Burra's paintings of Spain and Mexico in the 1930s would be equally indebted to his reading of Sacheverell Sitwell's *Southern Baroque Art*, which was published in 1924 to great acclaim; Jane Stevenson writes that this book 'introduced him to the intensely dramatic architecture and sculpture of the Jesuit baroque churches of Mexico.'³¹ More immediately in the context of *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], Constant Lambert, a Sitwell protégé, composed a jazz-influenced piece, *Rio Grande* (1927), inspired by Sacheverell Sitwell's poem of the same name, included in his anthology *The Thirteenth Caesar* (1924). This was broadcast on the radio in 1928 and performed on stage in 1929, receiving rapturous reviews. Burra's enthusiasm for jazz is well known, and evidenced repeatedly in his letters; bearing this in mind, these performances cannot have escaped his attention. The Oxford University Press biography of Lambert relates that he was influenced by Duke Ellington, and Florence Mills of the revue *Blackbirds* [see fig.21], of which Barbara Ker-Seymer writes ecstatically to Burra in 1927:

Oh Eddie, BLACKBIRDS!!!!!! I went to the 2nd Edition last night, and they did the cabaret out of Nigger Heaven, my dear I nearly died of joy ... it really was a triumph in costumes, when she lifted her skirt she kept on revealing black satin directories and very frilly pink garters ...³²

Could the description of frilly pink garters have stuck in Burra's mind? The collars and hems of *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] bear more than a passing resemblance, and the decadent overtones in the painting are closely allied to the risqué set-pieces of the *Blackbirds*' cabarets related by Barbara. In 1932,

³¹ Stevenson notes that Tom Driberg was one of those who praised *Southern Baroque Art* 'to the skies', and that it was 'consequently much read in the circles within which Burra moved in London' [Stevenson, 2008, p.235]; *ibid.*, p.182.

³² Oxford University Press (2013) 'Constant Lambert'. [Online]. Available at: <http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/category/music/composers/lambert.do> [Accessed 13 May 2013]; letter from Barbara Ker-Seymer to Edward Burra, dated c. January 14th 1927. Tate Gallery Archives (TGA 974.2.1.11).

Rio Grande was produced as a ballet by the Camargo Society with choreography by Frederick Ashton, who in turn asked Burra to design the set and costumes. Between them they transformed the original poem into 'a dockside scene of sailors, tarts, stokers and riff-raff', Burra's opening scenery causing quite a scandal as:

... the curtain rose on the front cloth of *Rio Grande*, showing a row of houses in the brothel quarter of a southern sea port; the shutters open, to reveal in every window the most wonderfully outrageous tarts.³³

Such a combination of louche characters and southern setting was, however, typical of Burra's output at this early stage in his career; even if there was a Sitwell influence at work behind these designs it is absorbed within this overriding aesthetic.

But Burra was not blinkered by the hypnotic extravagance of the cabaret and the modern music hall, however bewitching their feathers and sequins and bright lights. He was also captivated by the art of the past, and particularly by the Spanish baroque. Besides Sacheverell's book, *Southern Baroque Art* (1924), the Sitwell brothers also promoted this interest by setting up the Magnasco Society in 1923, which focused on seventeenth and eighteenth century Italian painting specifically, but late baroque art in general, thus taking a pronounced stance against Victorian taste. Burra's identity as a 'baroque' artist only really emerged in the thirties after he had visited the Prado, with his paintings inspired by the Spanish Civil War, in which the inheritance of Goya, El Greco, Salvator Rosa and Magnasco is clearly discernible in the undercurrents of violence and menace, the sinister hooded figures, skeletons, gypsies and beggars. However, the crowded compositions of his early works, the bold colours, and his sympathy for those on the margins of society – far from the high-minded moralism of Victorian art – all

³³ Stevenson, 2008, p.179; Frederick Ashton (1982) "Such brilliant things...". In William Chappell (Ed.) *Edward Burra: A Painter Remembered by His Friends*. London: André Deutsch. p.61.

testify to a 'baroque' sensibility, capturing the passion, intensity and grittiness of 'real life'.

In addition, baroque as a decorative style had gained 'definably queer overtones' by the thirties due, in Jane Stevenson's opinion, to its supporters who included men such as Tom Driberg and Harold Acton.³⁴ This aspect of the style is clearly expressed in Burra's painting, and reflects a wider concern with issues of gender and sexuality in the twenties. To start with, the gender of the figure in yellow in *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] is indeterminate. The flat chest and straight lines of the torso, as well as the muscular arms and legs and the short haircut, obviously suggest this as a male figure; yet 'he' wears a sort of double tunic that drapes prettily at the hem, soft matching slippers, and fairly heavy make-up. He may be a cross-dressing character of the kind that Burra had seen on the stage, or had come across among the bohemian nightlife that he habituated (though more often vicariously through his art school friends). Or it may be that this figure was intended as a comment on modern fashions: the shortened hemlines and 'Eton crops' worn by flappers in the twenties had caused extreme disapproval among the older generation – those used to far more modest Victorian modes of dress – and this trend towards androgyny had resulted in the marketing of 'unisex' clothing, notably jumpers and sportswear. And behaviour mirrored these changes, with women now brazenly drinking, smoking and making assignations in public. Is *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] meant to offer a cynical portrayal of the decline of modern fashion and decorum, in the manner of Hogarth's *The Bad Taste of the Town* [fig.17]? Or perhaps it is better interpreted as a celebration of a more liberal attitude to dress and sexuality, taking a generational stance in response to the criticisms of the 'old men'.

Douglas Goldring, writing of the period 1927-29 as 'the heyday of the Bright Young People, the Wild Party's crescendo', asserts that the real interest these years hold for social historians is in their 'debunking, particularly in regard to

³⁴ Stevenson, 2008, p.255.

sex matters', bringing into the open 'tendencies in human behaviour which had previously been politely ignored.'³⁵ Indeed, Burra seems to parade the seedy characters usually confined to disreputable nightclubs, music halls, or even brothels, bringing them out into the open both in the sense of placing the sisters in a sunlit outdoor setting (which they are evidently unused to) and in the sense of placing them before the public in a gallery setting. The painting thus provides a specific example of a more general tendency observed by Goldring. Again, the Great War seems to have been the underlying catalyst for such changes in behaviour. Goldring goes on to suggest that one result of the conflict was that many upper class men were 'either sexually indifferent or ostentatiously homosexual', and that in response women 'flattened their chests and cropped their hair in the effort to compete with "pansies" and "tapettes."' ³⁶ It is just as likely that the 'flapper' look resulted from the new craze for sports, and the consequent need for ease of movement and appropriate apparel, or in many cases from a simple slavery to fashion (Chanel being the obvious example) that the increasing number of women's consumer magazines fuelled. Goldring's is certainly a subjective, and male, viewpoint; but so is Burra's, and yet his sisters do not conform to the 'flapper' stereotype, which was well established by 1929. The long dresses work to emphasise and frame their naked breasts, while the clinging fabric accentuates their very feminine figures. If anything, Burra seems once again to have subverted the accepted, patriarchal position in this regard; the male figure in the yellow tunic appears to imitate the women, whose stronger – because doubled – presence dominates the composition. Is this another instance of Burra's mischievous desire to challenge the social and cultural status quo by feminising the only possible 'patriarchal' figure and depicting 'him' as enslaved to the women enthroned on gilt chairs? The idea that Burra might be celebrating the position of power held by the women in this painting is somewhat undermined by his depiction of them as worn-out floozies who to all appearances continue to rely on their physical assets to retain their hold

³⁵ Douglas Goldring (1945) *The Nineteen Twenties: A General Survey and Some Personal Memories*. London: Nicholson & Watson. p.225.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.226.

over men. From the evidence of Burra's correspondence at this time, there is little reason to believe that politics interested him in the slightest – and in social terms he belonged to an artistic milieu in which men and women were on a relatively equal footing.

Another effect of the post-war shortage of men, combined with a more relaxed attitude (in practice, though not in law) to sexuality, was the increased openness with which women 'of a more or less Lesbian character' cohabited.³⁷ The sisters themselves could be interpreted as a lesbian couple; this seems even more probable when one considers that Radclyffe Hall, who gained notoriety for her novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), lived near the Burra family in Rye with her lover, Una Troubridge.³⁸ In a small town such as this the gossip was rife, and such scandal nourished Burra's extremely fertile imagination.

The antiente town is getting a regular Montparnasse I am thinking of opening a branch of the fétiche [a lesbian nightclub in Paris] ...³⁹

Hall and Troubridge were on visiting terms with Paul and Margaret Nash, who in the late twenties were to take Burra under their wing; therefore, as Stevenson asserts, Burra would have had ample opportunities to meet the pair socially.⁴⁰ Another notable female partnership was that of the artists Ethel Sands and Nan Hudson, who were linked to the Bloomsbury and Camden Town circles. Burra was also friendly with many other homosexuals, both male and female – some of his closest friends, Billy Chappell, for instance, and Barbara Ker-Seymer who was seduced by the society

³⁷ Goldring, 1945, p.228.

³⁸ Beverley Nichols recalls that 'it was James Douglas who launched the attack on *The Well of Loneliness*, writing: "I would rather give a healthy boy or girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel." And yet the only line to offer a hint of subversion was: "And that night they were not divided."' [Beverley Nichols (1958) *The Sweet and Twenties*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. pp.106-7].

³⁹ Letter written by Burra [1928]. In Chappell, 1985, p.74.

⁴⁰ Stevenson, 2008, p.28.

photographer Olivia Wyndham.⁴¹ Indeed, pictures of Billy Chappell in costume for the ballet bear comparison with the figure holding the tray of wine and fruit; his short dark hair, full lips, muscular arms and graceful but ambivalent pose all tally with the androgyny of Burra's painted servant. There are many other examples among the artist's contemporaries who could be cited as inspiration – Cecil Beaton, Rex Whistler, and Stephen Tennant to name but a few – especially during the mid to late twenties when the fancy-dress party was at the peak of its popularity and the costumes depicted in Burra's painting would hardly have looked out of place.

Though homosexuality was still illegal in the 1920s, it was beginning to gain general usage as a term, as Beverley Nichols recalls:

The word "homosexual", in the twenties, was unknown by the man-in-the-street ... in the twenties it was taboo, and I think it is correct to say that the first time it began to come into general circulation was during the case of *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyffe Hall.⁴²

Burra's own letters to his friends reveal, through their gossipy innuendo, how far such behaviour was accepted – almost expected – by the young and bohemian. As William Chappell comments in his edited selection of Burra's letters, 'sexual ambiguity was the rule. Sexual promiscuity and sexual aberration the mode...'⁴³ The Bright Young People of Burra's generation seemed to delight in androgynous dress and ambiguous sexuality as a weapon with which to rile and affront their parents' generation. As Martin Green writes, there was 'a flaunting of effeminacy' among the bright young Oxford undergraduates of the twenties, and 'the press made much of the effeminacy of young men and the boyishness of young girls'; their hairstyles – women's bobbed hair, men close shaved with hair brushed into a sleek Pierrot skullcap

⁴¹ Olivia Wyndham was notorious for her volatile relationships with women such as Ruth Baldwin and Marty Mann, and her studio at 19 King's Road was known by 1929 as a meeting place for her lesbian friends, as well as artists and dancers such as Burr and Ker-Seymer from the nearby Chelsea Art School.

⁴² Nichols, 1958, p.104.

⁴³ Chappell, 1985, p.27.

– ‘expressed the change in sexual role-playing towards similarity and interchangeability.’⁴⁴

Another notable literary figure in this context was Ronald Firbank. His novels came as close to openly gay literature as would have been possible at such a time of censorship, though all references to homosexuality or related ‘vices’ are heavily veiled in fantasy and innuendo. There is evidence that Burra was aware of and had read many of Firbank’s works; as Simon Martin relates, Burra read *Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli* [1926] in December and Stevenson refers to an illustration Burra produced for this novel at around the same time.⁴⁵ Despite the knowing tones they adopted in their letters, as (one imagines) in their conversation, the relative innocence of Burra and his immediate circle of friends was such that many of the more subtle references in Firbank’s novels baffled them – as this missive from Barbara Ker-Seymer shows:

Valmouth is quite mad full of remarks like this, “it was as fraught with meaning as a sultans [*sic*] handkerchief”?? Now what does this mean??? & “I once looked under a bishops apron” “and what did you see?” “I saw..... I saw..... the dear Bishop!” & “one day St Automona di Meris seeing a young novice yawning suddenly spat into her mouth, without malice or thought of mischief 90 hours later she gave birth to St Elisabeth Bathilde, who, by dint of skipping changed her sex at the age of 40 & became a man”! Really he is quite mad I’m sure.⁴⁶

In their allusive and symbolic qualities, Burra’s paintings could be said to parallel Firbank’s works of fiction. Both are rich in bizarre details, testament

⁴⁴ Green, 1976, pp.166-8; it is interesting that this concept became central to feminist psychoanalytic writing with Joan Rivière’s seminal work ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’, published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (vol. 10) in 1929.

⁴⁵ Martin, 2011, p.43; Stevenson, 2008, pp.130-131.

⁴⁶ Letter from Barbara Ker-Seymer to Edward Burra, dated Friday [17 Feb 1928]. Tate Gallery Archives (TGA 974.2.1.25).

perhaps to an overactive imagination fed by regular periods of enforced convalescence.⁴⁷ Firbank's idiosyncratic style is characterised by fragmentation, a 'series of interrelated conversations' and 'animated tableaux'.⁴⁸ This is partly in order to conceal the references to homosexuality, by formulating a sort of poetic code. But as his biographer, Jocelyn Brooke, writes, 'he possessed ... a profound faculty for self-mockery, and was quite capable of laughing at his own preciousness [*sic*].'⁴⁹ Burra likewise pokes fun at his own world, the artists and socialites of the late 1920s, creating a visual equivalent of Firbank's bizarre and exotic tableaux – conversation pieces of the jazz age, full of gossip, and 'sly innuendo'.⁵⁰ It is Hogarth updated, with the context and the argot so changed as to be hardly identifiable as such, but like Hogarth's, the images were readily interpreted by those for whom they were intended.

William Chappell refers to another author, Rachilde (the nom-de-plume of Marguerite Vallette Eymery), whose novels captivated the decadent streak in Burra's imagination.⁵¹ *Monsieur Vénus*, her most well-known work, and one of the few translated in to English, addresses themes of unconventional sexuality with a frankness that caused its censorship on publication in 1884 and still aroused disgust in the early twentieth century. Other novels included depictions of gender inversion, androgyny and homoeroticism,

⁴⁷ As Jane Stevenson writes, Burra was 'severely disabled by a combination of chronic arthritis and a blood condition that left him almost without energy and subject to episodes of total collapse' [Jane Stevenson (2011) 'Inculps and Aspersums: Burra's Life and Letters'. In Martin, 2011, p.19]; Firbank suffered from childhood from delicate health, and from 'an extreme shyness' – he eventually died from suspected alcoholism and general debility [Jocelyn Brooke (1951) *Ronald Firbank*. London: Arthur Barker. p.24; p.35].

⁴⁸ Corinne E. Blackmer (2002) 'Ronald Firbank'. In Claude J. Summers (Ed.) *An Encyclopaedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Culture*. [Online]. Available at: http://www.glbtq.com/literature/firbank_r.html [Accessed: 13 May 2013].

⁴⁹ Jocelyn Brooke (n.d.) I. History. *Ronald Firbank*. [Online]. Available at: <http://ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/shop/brookej/firbank/chap1.htm> [Accessed: 13 May 2013].

⁵⁰ Brooke, 1951, p.52.

⁵¹ Chappell, 1985, p.74.

subjects which aroused a vicarious and illicit thrill in the young, inexperienced artist. Many of the characters in Burra's early works display an ambiguous sexuality, and the paintings are full of sideways glances, imbued with suggestions of depraved activities. As Burra himself remained an outsider in this regard, such novels would have provided one of his main sources of information on the sexual desires of others, an area which seemed to spark his imagination – and his amusement.

Besides their androgyny, Martin Green emphasises the theatricality of post-war fashions. He points out that make-up was brighter and more ostentatiously applied, 'the effect often that of *commedia dell'arte*, artificial to the point of fantasy', while the development of plastic surgery in response to shrapnel wounds during the war contributed to a 'popular sense of the face as a mask.'⁵² As discussed in relation to the Sitwells's influence on the arts in the twenties, the *commedia dell'arte* became a significant and highly recognisable trope in the 1920s – though its reappearance in visual art was due more to an amalgam of factors converging at a certain moment in the national or international psyche, rather than to any personal influence. Burra's excitement at the costumes and antics of circus performers is related in a letter of 1927:

We have been to the circus which was heaven oh the acrobates [*sic*] & the Fratelinis were so twee...⁵³

This enthusiasm is echoed by Edith Sitwell, who in a letter to John Freeman writes:

I've just seen the most marvellous clowns in the world, the brothers Fratellini; ... they are the clowns whom Cocteau engaged to play in

⁵² Green, 1976, p.168.

⁵³ Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer, from the Hotel Paris et New York, Paris, dated 20th January 1927. In Chappell, 1985, p.33.

Shakespeare, and great French painters are always painting and drawing them. One is very beautiful to look at, like a Watteau clown, and with the most marvellous clothes; one is like Mr. Trevor Bigham, (one of the chiefs at Scotland Yard) and has the same sober, rather sad dignity; the third is like a very fantastic fish. They are extraordinary, and I saw them in a lovely shooting scene like something out of Stravinsky's "Chansons Plainsantes."⁵⁴

The Fratellinis [fig.22] comprised three brothers, employed after the war by the Cirque Medrano in Paris, who sparked a resurgence of interest in the circus and soon became celebrities and darlings of the Paris intellectuals in the early twenties. It is easy to see how the costumes and exaggerated, painted faces of these performers infiltrated Burra's imagination and appeared in his art.

Among artistic contemporaries, Albert Rutherston's dreamlike scenes of c.1910 must have played a part in the revival of interest in the *commedia*. As Rutherston's biographer, R.M.Y. Gleadowe, writes, the year 1910 saw the appearance of 'those spritely, elfin but yet "gamin" types which were later to reflect the spirit of an age, or at least create a vogue.'⁵⁵ In literary terms, Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* [1913] reflects this spirit; the tragedy of his death – and the deaths of so many millions of other 'golden youths' – subsequently acted to make the image of carefree outdoor pleasures particularly poignant. And after the war it is striking how markedly elfin and "gamin" the fashions became; slim, androgynous figures on fashion plates echoed the ethereal characters of Rutherston's painted pantomimes, while a clean-shaven Pierrot 'skullcap' look was sought after by young dandies of the 1920s. Rutherston's images seem to perfectly capture the fantasy landscapes of an idyllic childhood – a childhood seemingly lost forever in the trenches – variously in Italianate or English country house landscapes with limpid blue skies. This eternal summer reified the nostalgic visions of many who found

⁵⁴ Letter from Edith Sitwell to John Freeman. In Richard Greene (Ed.) (1997) *Selected Letters of Edith Sitwell*. London: Virago. p.41.

⁵⁵ R.M.Y. Gleadowe (1925) *Albert Rutherston*. London: Ernest Benn. p.20.

themselves thrown into the horror of war, and for a long time afterwards must have served as a reminder of what had been lost. The medium, watercolour on silk, works to emphasise the fragility of life and the dreamlike and ethereal quality of these fantastical figures. In *Decorative Panel for a Mirror* (1910), a masked harlequin brandishes a sword, while a motley selection of chequered pantaloons, cockaded hats, ruffs and tutus bedeck the cast in *Souvenir of a Slade Dance* (1912). Allan Gwynne-Jones also worked in watercolour on silk, influenced by Rutherston – for example *The Picnic Party* (1914). A fan-shaped design of Rutherston's dated 1921 makes explicit the connection to the centuries-old theatrical origins of these vignettes; entitled *Commedia dell'Arte*, a central cartouche depicting *commedia* characters on stage is framed by figures in a leafy setting. The chequerboard pattern of the terrace in *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], and the swathe of a heavy red curtain on the left hand behind the two figures identifiable as *commedia* characters, bears a close similarity to a stage set such as that portrayed by Rutherston in *A Comedy of Manners, London* [fig.9]. Burra, too, locates this stage in a landscape setting, so that its status is ambiguous, halfway between interior and exterior. However, while Rutherston's figures either act or spectate; Burra's are part of the performance without seeming to be aware of it. Burra is not simply providing a visual entertainment for the viewer, but extending it to the viewer who finds himself, too, on the edge of the chequerboard stage. Burra had some knowledge of the world of the theatre, and an entrée into it by way of his friends Billy Chappell and Frederick Ashton – as Simon Martin writes, Chappell's links to various ballet companies in the late 1920s and early thirties 'must have helped Burra to understand the perspective of the performer as well as spectator.'⁵⁶ Rutherston also wrote *Decoration in the Art of the Theatre* [1919] which Burra may easily have referred to bearing in mind his deep interest in and connections with the ballet, and his later designs for the theatre.

Charles Shannon's *The Education of Bacchus* (1919) and *The Golden Age* (1921-22) are both idyllic scenes on a traditional *fête champêtre* theme, with

⁵⁶ Martin, 2011, p.109.

figures, some nude, some in classical tunics, reaching to pick bunches of grapes or reclining on the grass. Burra's *commedia* characters in *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] mirror these actions, reaching up to pick what appear to be plums from the branches above their heads, while the tray carried by the central figure of the servant bears a carafe of wine, suggesting, like Shannon's Bacchanalian scenes, the organic process of viticulture, as well as the temptations of the product and the effects of overindulgence in it. However, if Burra was conscious of the long artistic tradition of Bacchanalian scenes while painting *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], then – like his cynical nod to the 'conversation piece' – he subverts it. Though the landscape conforms to the requisite pattern of a Mediterranean arcadia, his wine-loving protagonists do not lie satiated in a classical vision of nature's processes, but, clothed in fussy and fashionable attire, insist on the vulgarity of materialist, capitalist, modern urban life, polluting and undermining their surroundings.

The *fête champêtre*, like the *commedia dell'arte* – and presumably merged with it in the 1920s imagination – was a fashionable theme among the Bright Young People. Cecil Beaton's predilection for posing as Pierrot, witnessed by his photographic self-portrait in costume [fig.15], is extended to tableaux scenes that are best described as *fêtes champêtres*. The image *Cecil Beaton and a Group of Bright Young People on a Bridge* (c.1928), which, thanks to its publication in various books on the period, has come to epitomise the spirit of the Bright Young People, is described by Andrew Stephenson in his doctoral thesis as an example of 'acting out *fêtes champêtres* in fancy dress' and as a 'modern form of *fête champêtre* in which élite group culture is displayed'; he goes on to reiterate the 'current fashion for *fêtes champêtres*' as part of a trend that also included a taste for 'fancy dress, twins, and popular performers.'⁵⁷ This positions *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], who combine these elements, as the product of a young and modern mind, not imitative or catering to a momentary fad, but receptive to a new and exciting cultural movement.

⁵⁷ Stephenson, 1988, p.96; p.75; p.104.

In his unremitting enthusiasm for popular culture as a source of inspiration for his art Burra can, and has been, compared to Jean Cocteau. Jane Stevenson lists the similarities of the two artists, both 'delicate and precocious children who never really left home', both of 'wealthy, haut-bourgeois' families, and both 'intensely interested in popular arts such as the music-hall and the circus, and involved with integrating popular and high art.'⁵⁸ Causey also notes a definite aesthetic similarity in the linear drawing style that both shared, and in an 'elusive and decadent' quality to their work of the late 1920s.⁵⁹ Andrew Stephenson likewise emphasises the importance of Cocteau to Burra's painting in the late twenties. He explicitly relates the concepts expressed in *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] to the 'theoretical context' provided by Cocteau's *Le Rappel à l'Ordre* [1926] and *Les Enfants Terribles* [1929], which centred on a 'critical analysis of "style" in contemporary society and its translation into artistic form':

"to have style rather than to have a style" was an *a priori* requirement of modern art. The main distinguishing mark of "style" was an ability to exhibit and manipulate intellectual references in a discriminatory way.⁶⁰

Lydia Crowson asserts that all Cocteau's work was characterised by a 'theatrical pattern of a surface virtuosity coupled with a hidden portrait', and that 'the form unifying Cocteau's work is that of the double (of the transvestite, for example), of illusion, of a reality that must be deciphered.'⁶¹ *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] in this sense provide a very literal example of Cocteau's possible influence on Burra. Their double act represents a key element of the image which, behind its farcical surface theatricality, hides

⁵⁸ Stevenson, 2008, p.119.

⁵⁹ Andrew Causey (1985) *Edward Burra* [exh. cat.: Hayward Gallery]. London: Arts Council. p.37.

⁶⁰ Stephenson, 1988, pp.104-5.

⁶¹ Lydia Crowson (1978) *The Esthetic of Jean Cocteau*. Hanover, NH: The University Press of New England. p.116; *ibid.*, p.27.

more a significant commentary on contemporary society. The fact that such a myriad of references can be discerned – the *commedia dell'arte*, the conversation piece, the C18th satiric print, the *fête champêtre*, the silent movies – testifies to Burra's ability to 'exhibit and manipulate intellectual references.' His attraction to fantasy worlds, to playing with the perception of the viewer through subtle multi-layered compositions that appear simple but merit deeper interpretation, all these traits mirror those advocated by Cocteau. And although Crowson states that this style was 'designed not for irony but for "divertissement" and protection [from reality]', this does not preclude a reading of Burra's work as satire, characterised by its combining of fantasy and topical analysis – indeed it is this binary element, the astute commentary veiled by the comic or ridiculous that both defines satire and places Burra within the Coctalian aesthetic.

It is necessary to ask here where Burra would have come across Cocteau in order to be so heavily influenced by him. He must have been aware of his work by 1924, when the Ballets Russes production of *Le Train Bleu* premiered in London – the plot was provided by Cocteau, and Burra writes excitedly the following summer of his first-hand experience of the eponymous train bleu, which did not live up to his glamorous expectations.⁶² More pertinently, Burra's first trip to Paris in the autumn of 1925 coincided with the arrival of the *Revue Nègre* starring Josephine Baker; this attracted the full panoply of Parisian *beau monde* including Cocteau. In 1926 the Ballets Russes production, *Parade* [1917], a collaboration between Picasso and Cocteau, was revived; as Andrew Causey asserts, Burra admired the latter for 'his modernity and ability to give an original and elegant gloss to many aspects of

⁶² Burra wrote to Billy Chappell (who had developed a crush on Anton Dolin, the principal dancer in *Le Train Bleu*) in 1925: 'we came back from Bawdi in the Blue train which is *sposed* to be ever so mondaine but all I saw was ancient invalids and a couple with a baby...' [letter from Edward Burra to William Chappell, Springfield, 1925. In Chappell, 1985, p.16].

modern life; his eclectic stylishness ... and his incisive, aphoristic expression.'⁶³

In September 1928 Burra went with a group of art school friends to Toulon, where they stayed in the Hôtel du Port. Here they encountered Cocteau, though veiled in a haze of opium.⁶⁴ His reputation was already well established and such decadent behaviour would only have served to enhance his glamour. Burra frequented the Café de la Rade and Raymond's Bar, where Cocteau and his circle were often to be found, drawn to the notoriety and exoticism of such French 'intellectuals'. This appeal is manifest in many of his paintings of the late twenties, which merge a sun-drenched Mediterranean context with a louche, bohemian atmosphere, teetering on the edge of glamour and seediness. Whatever influence Cocteau had on Burra, he was not the object of direct painterly idolisation; he was an additional draw towards a location which stimulated Burra's imagination, which had for several years already exerted an strong attraction – perhaps this ambiance of relaxed morals and diverse characters was what attracted the artist in Cocteau too.

Cocteau holds a position of key importance in relation to Burra's oeuvre for another reason – his use of, perhaps even dependence on, myth as a means of dealing with reality. Crowson states that myth 'emerges as the only vehicle that can accommodate the intricate relationship between the artist and the real' and represented Cocteau's 'most far-reaching attempt to come to terms with the world as he perceived it.'⁶⁵ Though Cocteau does not employ mythical elements primarily for satiric purposes, it is clear how these can very successfully be applied in satire's service when one looks at Burra's work. *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] again provides a suitable example. It condenses a multitude of complex commentaries and diverse influences into a

⁶³ Andrew Causey, 1985, p.19.

⁶⁴ Barbara Ker-Seymer recalls this encounter in an interview for the BBC documentary 'Five Women Photographers' (British Library sound archive, V3092 C1, 1986).

⁶⁵ Crowson, 1978, pp.126-7.

simple, if ambiguous, narrative. Indeed, the symbolism is so simple as to be ridiculous, adding to the immediate satiric effect. The combination of such contradictory characters as the *commedia* clowns, the toga-clad young man and the two sisters in a state of undress adds an incongruity that is essential to this satire. When one tries to interpret them, such combinations seem illogical, a joke on the part of the artist. However, if the function of myth is to explain the present state of the world, reflecting the dialectical nature of reality, which combines 'history (fact) and imagination or desire', then Burra's work is a very competent example of myth in a modernist, visual context. At a basic level it addresses themes of modern culture, society, artistic practice, and their place within an historical continuum; at the same time the surreal setting and comic inhabitants of this painted world reflect a deep need to maintain distance from these realities – as Cocteau put it, there was 'une soif d'irréalité.'⁶⁶ The two-dimensionality of the trees and balustrade suggests the flatness of theatrical scenery, all an elaborate illusion concealing an endless expanse of nothingness behind. This underscores the image as an act within a play, a fictional episode that is momentarily diverting. And this configures with Cocteau's definition of myth as 'fulfilling a human need for diversion', as well as 'overcoming fragmentation' by masking the dizzying void of uncertainty with defined appearances.⁶⁷ In doing this, Burra synthesises art and life, transforming reality into make-believe, or vice versa, much like the performers and socialites who formed his subject matter in their decadent costumes and assumed, amorphous identities.

The use of myth in modernist satire has already been discussed in an earlier chapter in relation to Wyndham Lewis and his 'Tyro' paintings of the early 1920s. Thus it is interesting that it still remains pertinent, if not key, to satire in the later years of the decade. Is myth then a fundamental ingredient in the

⁶⁶ Jean Cocteau (1953) *Journal d'un inconnu*. Paris: Bernard Grasset. p.15.

⁶⁷ Crowson, 1978, p.151; Crowson also refers to Nietzsche in relation to Cocteau's art, and the former's views on the Apollonian and the Dionysian combining in Greek art in a synthesis of opposites 'which had developed to fill and hide a lack: creation that masked nothingness behind appearances'; this seems especially applicable to modernist art, characterised by an inherent duality or conflict [Crowson, 1978, p.123].

satire of the 1920s, enduring through the decade as more superficial elements (and psychological states) subtly alter? Its persistence is not difficult to understand if one considers that in coming to terms with an event as horrific as the First World War a decade is not a long time. Myth offered a buffer against stark reality, translating it to symbols and metaphors, and this role continued to be important until new anxieties emerged to politicise art once again in the thirties. At the same time myth provided a reminder of the incomprehensible sweep of time that would come to make the anxieties of the present seem trivial and essentially unimportant. But myth as a 'sacred narrative', as it has been generally defined, seems even less plausible in relation to *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] than to the Tyros, so determinedly nonserious does the painting appear. Perhaps it was the very lack of faith and religiosity in the world of the Bright Young People that made myth, with its implied 'sacred narrative', a refuge – or, alternatively, underlined it as an incongruent element that added to the satiric effect.

Evelyn Waugh encapsulates the Bright Young Peoples' attitude to religion in his first novel, *Decline and Fall* [1928]. This begins with Paul Pennyfeather, who is reading for the Church, being sent down for misconduct due to a run-in with the Bollinger Club; later in the narrative, a madman smitten by religious mania murders the prison chaplain, Prendergast. The arbitrary nature of these events, and the ludicrous – if cruel – images they conjure, testify to Waugh's flippant and casual approach to religion as subject matter. However, amidst the ceaseless satire, a line emerges steeped in an angst that seems only too genuine: Prendergast, expatiating on his 'doubts' as a clergyman, says: 'I couldn't understand why God had made the world at all.'⁶⁸ It becomes clear that the mockery extended to religion hid, for the party-loving youth of the twenties, an emptiness beneath the polished and sneering veneer, an essential lack of purpose. The sisters epitomise all that the church would be expected to preach against; in this, they also stand as icons of a new creed, a religion of hedonism. It is worth noting the Italianate church that stands in the background, a direct contrast to the sisters' worldly and materialist

⁶⁸ Evelyn Waugh (1955) *Decline and Fall*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.33.

doctrines. Though it is arguable that the church may be interpreted less as a symbol of piety than one of classical sensuality; the purely aesthetic beauty of the architecture can be appreciated without any reference to Christianity, and the nude figures sculpted in relief on the pediment testify to the pleasures of the flesh. In this sense the church as a building, stripped of its religious meaning, complements the new hedonistic creed that the sisters espouse, which extols beauty, sensuality and temporal pleasures above all else. In juxtaposing the ancient and the modern thus, Burra is perhaps suggesting that, though centuries pass, human nature remains the same, ever fallible and unable to transcend the temptations of the temporal world.

Mythical twins or sisters have in general been conceived to represent opposites – day and night, or sun and moon; this serves a different purpose entirely from the concept of identical twins, and therefore would appear to rule out any direct mythical influence in Burra's image of *The Two Sisters* [fig.13]. The sisters are deliberately depicted as mirror images of one another, identical down to their very mannerisms and dress sense. This suggests an interest in the idea of the double or the 'doppelgänger', a concept closely tied to the questioning of identity, which was a preoccupation of many artists and writers in the tumultuous and unsettling post-war years. It provides another point in common with Lewis's Tyros in *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)* [fig.1] – themselves almost as identical as Burra's sisters – and by extension perhaps suggests that there may be a possible link to mythology. Alexander Blok, whose poem 'The Scythians' is rooted in classical allusion – to the ancient tribe described by Ovid and Herodotus, to Oedipus and the riddle of the Sphinx – wrote in 1901: 'I have split in two ... for I involved doubles.'⁶⁹ Whether he refers to the doubling of his own personality, reflected in the dual personality of Russia, both primitive and civilised, or to the opposition of characters such as Pierrot and Harlequin, both meanings would apply to the

⁶⁹ Alexander Blok, cited by Jack Lindsey (1982) Introduction to *The Twelve and the Scythians*. London: The Journeyman Press. p.6.

doubling process that Burra adopts in his painting, and testify to its broad appeal as a cultural trope at this time.

Lewis's 'Mr Zagreus and the Split-Man' was published in the *Criterion* (volume II, no. 6) in February 1924. I have already discussed Lewis's ambiguous and uneasy approach to his own identity as an artist, and the unique manner in which he employed satire as a defence against, and as a means of overcoming, this existential dilemma. The Tyros offer a modernist precursor of the doubled personality, in the form of entertainers aware of, and exploiting, the effects of their likeness. But where Lewis (by positing himself as a Tyro in *Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro* [fig.2]) implicates himself in this charade, Burra distances himself, most obviously by depicting a different gender, so precluding any references to himself within the painting or the title. This is the critical difference between the two artists, and by extension a critical difference between the overlapping generations in their approach to satire. Lewis is introspective, analysing the world through an exploration of his own selfhood; his use of the 'double' testifies to his view of the duality of his own personality, reflected in his career as a writer and an artist, and within his writing the doppelgänger effect of the tyros is constantly reiterated in his discussion of classicism and romanticism and associated philosophical polarisations. Burra leaves no evidence of ever having questioned his own identity; his preoccupation was with other people as abstracts, clichés, in the sense of being used to summarise a society and culture. The doubling of the sisters is not supposed to represent a conflict, either psychological or philosophical, but to give added emphasis as a tool of caricature. This fundamentally different approach – exemplified here through their relative treatment of 'doubles' and replicated identity – hinges on the experience, or lack of experience, of warfare.⁷⁰ It must undoubtedly be the disorientation of

⁷⁰ Paul Edwards writes that 'the First World War was the decisive event that shaped the remainder of Wyndham Lewis's life and art' and that 'Lewis's war experience was ... paradigmatic of this duality in Vorticist aesthetic' – a duality 'involving empathetic immersion in life followed by an aesthetic abstraction from that experience' [Paul Edwards (2000) *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer*. London: Yale University Press. pp.199-201].

returning to 'normal' civilian life after the horror of trench warfare that caused Lewis to explore, at the beginning of the 1920s, the question of an identity that had been – perhaps irreparably – fractured. Though the war had a psychological effect on the younger generation too, as evidenced by Waugh among many others, it was a not one of trauma or disassociation; though they may have found the fabric of their lives changed in the post-war world, they did not have to deal with literal displacement. The occurrence of shellshock is used by Edwards to make this distinction, and is particularly apt in being 'closely related to his [Lewis's] post-war theory of laughter' – this proposes the development of satire as inextricably bound up with the generational experience.⁷¹ Burra's experience of the First World War was insulated by the comfort of his childhood at Springfield, Rye. Despite his disabling illnesses, his world was relatively stable, and thus the idea of questioning his identity as an artist, or his very existence, seems not to have occurred to him. Admittedly, using Lewis and Burra as generic examples on which to base such a broad argument has its drawbacks; for instance, William Roberts, a close contemporary and artistic ally of Lewis's during the Vorticist years, does not show the same tendency to analyse his identity through the concept of a split personality. Though he too experienced life on the Western Front as a gunner in the Royal Artillery, Roberts's mildly satirical paintings of the 1920s seem closer to Burra's treatment of social mores than to Lewis's more aggressive and personal attacks.

The idea of the *doppelgänger* – defined as 'a ghostly double or counterpart of a living person' – assumed an increased cultural presence in the early twentieth century as psychoanalysis gained in popularity and popular understanding.⁷² As Alan Cuthbert writes in his entry for the *Oxford*

⁷¹ Andrzej Gasiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker & Nathan Waddell (Eds.) (2011) Introduction to *Wyndham Lewis and the Cultures of Modernity*. Aldershot: Ashgate. p.12.

⁷² Dictionary.com (2013) 'Doppelganger' [Online]. Available at: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/doppelganger> [Accessed: 13 May 2013]; the term appears to have been coined in the late 18th Century, and was given an initial definition by Jean Paul Richter in a footnote to his novel *Siebenkäs* of 1796.

Companion to the Body, the *doppelgänger* ‘operates against the context of scientific or pseudo-scientific theories of psychological schism’ and ‘sees a resurgence in the early twentieth century as a corollary of psychoanalytic theories of the split ego.’⁷³ Burra would very likely have been aware of current theories of psychoanalysis – and may even have read Freud – but it seems unlikely that this was a direct preoccupation for him as an artist. It seems far more plausible that the underlying ideas of Freudian psychoanalysis in general, and the concept of the *doppelgänger* in particular, reached him through the medium of film, which was one of his most enduring passions. Cuthbert makes this link, commenting that ‘early cinema in the style of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* [1920] offered a particularly apt medium for the projection of double identities, for case-histories on release from the cabinets of Drs Freud and company.’⁷⁴ The sunny setting and colourful, theatrical characters in *The Two Sisters* [fig.13] is a far cry from the jagged, expressionist aesthetic of an early horror film; it is more amusing than unnerving. However, this may be a witness to Burra’s idiosyncratic response to films, even the most serious of which he recounts with sparkling flippancy. His response to a later cinematic appearance by the protagonist of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, Werner Krauss, who became known for the sinister characters he portrayed, is revealed in a letter to Barbara Ker-Seymer of 1927:

I have been to such a piece at the cinema entitled the joyless street featuring Greta Garbage Werner Krauss and Asta Nielson you can imagine nothing more joyless every one starved to death or were lured away into fearful brothels...⁷⁵

One can quite easily picture the sisters of Burra’s painting as painted madams

⁷³ Alan W. Cuthbert (2013) ‘Doppelganger’. In the *Oxford Companion to the Body*. Answers Corp. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.answers.com/topic/doppelganger> [Accessed: 13 May 2013].

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer, dated 7th March 1927. Tate Gallery Archives (TA 974.2.2.16).

of a seedy brothel, or alternatively as automatons of a science-fiction/horror movie, an early premonition of cloning that echoes the anxiety of the time with regard to the uniformity and standardization of society. Lewis's Tyros are similarly discussed in relation to the influence of film in the 1920s; to Lewis, cinema was one means of ideological manipulation in the modern era that presaged 'the standardization of daily existence, the machining of human subjectivity and the politicisation of art ... [an] assault on independent thought.'⁷⁶ But rather than succumb to the anxiety of scientific or political progress which such double images might represent, Burra subverts it by mockery, and in doing so neutralizes the threat; the sisters' similarity renders them ridiculous.

Freud perceives the *doppelgänger* as the embodiment of the uncanny, its haunting presence presaging a return of that which has been repressed, psychologically. In myth and folklore, the *doppelgänger* is a harbinger of death, appearing in the form of a phantom mirror-image to those whose time is up. Such imagery of 'sinister foreboding and impending tragedy' has been adopted by many well-known writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Dostoevsky and Oscar Wilde; being widely read, Burra would certainly have been familiar with such literature, and indeed Andrew Causey makes reference to his delight in 'gothick' novels.⁷⁷ The morbid element, like that of horror, seems entirely absent from *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], however, both of whom appear to be very much present and solid, though they inhabit a fantasy world. But although Burra's sisters refuse any obvious connection with the folkloric *doppelgänger*, Freud's use of the term 'uncanny' in reference to such ghostly visitations is revealing. The 'uncanny', once unharnessed from the

⁷⁶ Gasiorek *et al.*, 2011, p.8.

⁷⁷ Graham F. Reed (2013) 'Doppelganger'. In the *Oxford Companion to the Mind*. Answers Corp. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.answers.com/topic/doppelg-nger> [Accessed: 13 May 2013]; Causey refers to 'the devil-possessed protagonists in the Gothick novels of Mrs Radcliffe, "Monk" Lewis and Charles Mathurin' whom Burra delighted in and who informed 'the Gothick figure of Burra's Beelzebub' of 1937-8 [Causey, 1985, pp.60-61].

supernatural or hallucinatory, forms a key element of satire; it complements the device of incongruous juxtaposition to provoke laughter by means of surprise or discomfort.

A more general concept of the double as a trope, detached from any more specific meanings that pertain to the word *doppelgänger*, has been linked in literature to Dostoevsky to the extent that his name has been used as an adjective in this sense. The most explicit use of this theme in Dostoevsky's oeuvre is his novella, *The Double: A Petersburg Poem* [1846], which narrates the internal psychological struggle of the protagonist following the appearance of a double that attempts to destroy his reputation. Wyndham Lewis openly acknowledges the strong influence that Dostoevsky had on him, writing in *Rude Assignment* that he was, early in his career, 'for some years spiritually a Russian—a character in some Russian novel' – and the trope of the double, literal or metaphorical, is discernible in much of his work of the twenties.⁷⁸ Lewis's self-portrait as a tyro bears witness this; as Thomas Karshan asserts in reference to this painting, 'he never mocked anyone without subjecting himself to some parallel humiliation.'⁷⁹ In the second issue of *Blast* [1915], 'Lewis exhorted the reader to be "a duet in everything," accepting psychological plurality, to "postulate the relation of object and its shadow for your two selves" and "not settle down and snooze on an acquired, easily possessed and mastered, satisfying shape."⁸⁰ These lines suggest that he viewed a 'split personality' as a positive asset, whereas Dostoevsky's *The Double* is rather a poignant and realistic portrayal of a man's descent into schizophrenia and mental degeneration – certainly not a condition to envy. The notion of a double identity is in both cases approached from a

⁷⁸ Wyndham Lewis (1950) *Rude Assignment: A narrative of my career up-to-date*. London: Hutchinson & Co. p.148.

⁷⁹ Thomas Karshan (2009) 'Apes, Tyros and Humans: Wyndham Lewis's Portraits'. *Modernism/Modernity*. 16 (2). p.428.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.428.

psychological perspective, yet Dostoevsky's novella is detached and almost scientific in its descriptions of the symptoms of mental illness, while Lewis in contrast asserts the necessity of psychological 'plurality' to true artistic expression. This view is elaborated in his first full-length novel, *Tarr* (begun in 1909-11, and first published in full in 1918), in which the two central characters embody in simplified terms the two opposing halves of the psyche, that of the intellect and that of the emotions. Lewis's experiments in portraiture in the 1920s continue this exploration of the multiple identities contained in one person, as he depicts himself in a variety of personas, as well as in the previously mentioned incarnation of a tyro.

Thus it is clear that the notion of doubling in Lewis's work pre-dated the 1920s, and also pre-dated his own experience of war. But it was only in 1920-21 that the concept was consciously employed in the service of satire, and it is in this form that a link can be forged with Burra's *The Two Sisters* [fig.13]. It is unknown if Burra had actually read Dostoevsky, as Lewis had, but it is interesting that Nabokov, a contemporary in age, perceived Dostoevsky's *The Double* as a parody of Gogol's *The Overcoat* [1842] – perhaps based on the lines:

“The greatcoat, the greatcoat, the greatcoat, the greatcoat, my friend! The greatcoat of my best friend!” whispered the depraved man, snatching the coat from one of the servants, and by way of a nasty and ungentlemanly joke flinging it straight at Mr. Golyadkin's head.⁸¹

In translation, and disengaged from Russian literary heritage, it is questionable whether Dostoevsky's tale would be immediately perceived as a parody. Yet its predecessor, Gogol's *The Overcoat*, can be cast as satire; the ghost of its protagonist haunting the streets of Petersburg, stealing overcoats, is at once a comical vision and a condemnation of a society that tramples the

⁸¹ Fyodor Dostoevsky (1997) *The Double*. Translated by Constance Garnett. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. p.121.

'little people' underfoot. The parallel image quoted above of Mr. Golyadkin's double throwing his coat at his head provokes unwonted laughter at the humiliation of a suffering man. This offers a far more direct and plausible connection between Lewis and Dostoevsky than their respective psychological investigations. The cruel humour reliant on psychological trauma is a feature that Lewis jumps upon with alacrity, while also tying it to a sustained criticism of contemporary society in the post-war (post-shellshock) years. Burra seems to lack this motive, the dual purpose of ridicule and criticism around which Lewis fashions his tyro paintings, the result of a convoluted mixture of his reading of Russian literature and his experience at the Western Front, as well as his confrontation with modernity. Yet the arbitrary and almost surreal course of events that characterize such Russian short stories correspond to a surprising degree with the temperament of Burra's early paintings; like those of Georg Grosz, for example, they take the unfortunates, the disreputable, the lowest echelons of society, and turn their sordid reality and the pathos of their condition into something at once humorous and cynical.

Burra notoriously refused to discuss his art, and in a documentary about his work produced shortly before his death in 1973, he confounds all the interviewer's attempts to draw him out on this subject. Any analysis of his paintings will therefore always be based largely on their visual characteristics. His extensive correspondence highlights those pastimes – films and jazz music especially – which captured his imagination, records his travels and friendships, and serves to elucidate his character. Yet what makes his work unique is the very lack of mimesis; all influences and stimuli are absorbed and amalgamated to such an extent that to pick them apart and address them separately does not do justice to the art itself, which is far more than the sum of its parts. However, in looking for the possible sources of his peculiar brand of satire, it has proved useful to address some of these influences insofar as they can be compared and contrasted with the preoccupations or motives of Wyndham Lewis in the earlier years of the 1920s. By setting up such a counterpoint (though limited in focus to the work

of just two individuals) an idea of progress or change can be plotted across the decade. The reaction of each artist to the society and culture in which he finds himself is certainly subjective, but in looking beyond personal idiosyncrasies to the expression of a viewpoint that could be termed generational or contextual, the metamorphosis of satire as an accepted, understood and appreciated mode of modern visual communication in the 1920s becomes clearer. Current trends in literature, philosophy and psychology, among other disciplines, help to clarify wider attitudes from which visual satire scavenges and rebounds. Despite these peripheral ingredients, the character of Burra's work is bound up with the character of the artist and this owed much to the time in which he lived – Chappell's comment, made in hindsight, is significant in this respect:

... and woe betide any in the tetranity who dared to show the tiniest sign of taking themselves seriously.⁸²

Flippancy and wit were the rules of society, and even the death of his beloved younger sister, Betsy, in August 1929, is only mentioned in a letter to Chappell amid a flutter of other gossip and in the same detached tones, though the grief must have been overwhelming. As Stevenson writes, 'Burra's prose style and general mode of speech, camp irony, was designed to deflect emotion...', 'he cannot entirely discard his habitual facetiousness but it is a thin veneer over obvious distress.'⁸³

ii. Edward Burra: Cinema and New Objectivity Satire

One of the main difficulties in writing about British art in the 1920s is the apparent lack of unity among artists in Britain, the lack of any definable group with similar ideas and a similar style. Group X failed largely because the artists involved wanted to move in different directions and were loath to be

⁸² Chappell, 1985, p.24.

⁸³ Stevenson, 2008, pp.72-73.

classified as a single entity under the aegis of Wyndham Lewis. The next British-led group to stage a relatively successful exhibition was Unit 1, founded by Paul Nash in 1933. Looking at Burra is a case in point; Burra is ultimately unclassifiable which may account for his exclusion from many general surveys on British art in the twentieth century. His work was included in the Unit One exhibition, a result of his friendship with Paul Nash rather than his aesthetic or ideological proximity to the rest of the group; and he was loosely allied to the British Surrealist movement, exhibiting with them in 1936 but reluctant to be viewed as a Surrealist. Satire, like Burra, seems to be unclassifiable, appearing in the work of artists of very different styles and attitudes, and difficult to pin down. It is never a formal movement, and seems by its nature to be an individualistic mode, rather than lending itself to the formation of a group. Subversive in intent, it is also subversive by nature, mutable enough to ally itself to either realism or surrealism, restricted only by its dependence on contemporaneity and figuration. However, if one broadens one's perspective to view British artists as working within an interlinked European art world, the picture changes. British artists can be more clearly seen as part of a general 'movement' in this context – whether neo-classicist, neo-realist or surrealist. Burra's work, if viewed in a European context, seems to correspond in style, subject matter and socio-analytical purpose with the 'New Objectivity' movement. However, as this term remained confined to the Germany of the Weimar Republic, and no similar group was, either 'organically' or arbitrarily, formed in Britain, it is not realistic to classify him as a 'New Objectivist'. Nevertheless, in the interests of defining Burra's work as satire, it is useful to look at the influence that New Objectivity – in film more than anywhere else – had upon his artistic output, and also the impact that its best-known proponents, Georg Grosz and Otto Dix, had on his work.

The New Objectivity (or *Neue Sachlichkeit*) movement emerged in Weimar Germany, arguably in reaction to the dying Expressionist movement. The term was coined by Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub, director of the Mannheim Kunsthalle, who organised an exhibition of contemporary German art in 1923

(in the event, this was postponed until 1925). Hartlaub wrote to dealers, critics and fellow directors outlining his plans for the exhibition: 'those artists whom I would like to exhibit are the ones who have remained faithful to positive, tangible reality.'⁸⁴ However, not only were there clear links between Expressionism and New Objectivity, with many artists simply adapting from one style to the other, but as Hartlaub himself admitted, the artists chosen to exemplify the new movement were stylistically disparate and any unifying features were necessarily very generalised. *Sachlichkeit* can be defined as both 'objectivity' and 'sobriety', suggesting an anti-metaphysical and anti-romanticist mentality, a matter-of-factness that stood in contrast to the emotionalism and idealism of Expressionist art.⁸⁵ Looking at the movement in a wider context, Peter Vergo links its emergence to the Europe-wide post-war tendency towards a calm, ordered and objective neo-classicism, a 'return to order'; he outlines its general characteristics as 'a certain precision in the recording of natural appearances,' a sharp focus, inexpressive brushwork, unified and undramatic lighting, and often an 'unnaturally close standpoint.'⁸⁶ Linda McGreevy sees *Neue Sachlichkeit* in broader socio-cultural terms as a 'conflicted tendency' rather than a unified style, expressing the 'tensions of the waning decade' and the 'conflicts that characterised the Weimar Republic.'⁸⁷ Richard McCormick corroborates the view that 'New Objectivity was a "sober" and unsentimental embrace of urban modernity, in contrast to Expressionism's horror of technology and belief in "auratic" art, and goes on to describe the movement as unique to the culture of the Weimar Republic in its openness to modernity and mass culture.'⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Peter Vergo (1992) *Twentieth-Century German Painting*. London: Sotheby's Publications. p.15.

⁸⁵ Jaap Goedegebuure (1995) 'New Objectivity, Realism & Avant-Garde'. In Christian Berg, Frank Durieux & Geert Lernout (Eds.) *The Turn of the Century: Modernism & Modernity in Literature and the Arts*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. p.332.

⁸⁶ Vergo, 1992, p.14; p.16.

⁸⁷ Linda F. McGreevy (2001) *Bitter Witness: Otto Dix and the Great War*. New York: Peter Lang. pp.327-328.

⁸⁸ Richard W. McCormick (2001) *Gender and Sexuality in Weimar Modernity: Film, Literature, and "New Objectivity"*. Basingstoke: Palgrave. pp.4-7.

If New Objectivity was, as McCormick and others claim, defined in terms of its openness to modernity, then it seems entirely appropriate that the movement should embrace the new medium of film, and vice versa. Though films of the early twenties, such as *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) use the painted shadows and distorted perspectives of expressionist theatre, this approach is soon abandoned as new cinematic technology develops, allowing real shadows and outdoor filming even by 1922 in *Nosferatu*. As McCormick writes, 'the virtuoso display of cinematic special effects had more to do with New Objectivity's fetishisation of technology than with expressionism.'⁸⁹ In addition to the stylistic and technological transition there was a new interest in social realism, identified in *The Street* (1923) which appeared in the same year that New Objectivity officially came into being, and which developed over the decade into a documentary-style urban realism in films such as *Joyless Street* (1925) and *People on Sunday* (1929). And while the artistic or literary tendencies of the New Objectivity movement influenced film, the reverse was also true; Jaap Goedegebuure notes that proponents of New Objectivity tended to focus on one or two details, like modern journalists and cineastes, and in contrast to the nineteenth-century realists who had depicted the whole social scenery.⁹⁰ In this way, modernity was absorbed into 'high art' and the barriers between art, life and society were broken down, complicating the traditional dichotomy between 'high' and 'low' art and culture.

Thus the output of New Objectivity painters and cineastes combined two critical features of satire. First of all they depicted contemporary social reality and aspects of modernity in a recognisable, figurative style, with an emotionally detached yet often critical – even cynical – approach. Secondly, they showed a certain social commitment in foregrounding social issues and the realities of modern urban life – if not with the explicit intention of

⁸⁹ Richard W. McCormick (2007) 'Modernism from Weimar to Hollywood: Expressionism, New Objectivity/Noir?' In Patrizia C. McBride, Richard W. McCormick & Monika Zagar (Eds.) *Legacies of Modernism: Art and Politics in Northern Europe 1890-1950*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. p.152.

⁹⁰ Goedegebuure, 1995, p.332.

instigating improvement in these areas, as traditional satire demanded, then at least with the aim of bringing such social realities to a wider public audience. The 'new' satire of the post-war decade differentiated itself by this very fact: that there was a social and cultural problem, but no clear solution, and visually therefore the satire appears either bitter with frustration and impotence, as in the early watercolours of Grosz, or detached, almost documentary and non-judgemental. Burra belongs to the latter category; living in relative comfort and often imposed isolation, among the still fairly stable middle-classes of provincial England, he could look upon the dislocations and idiosyncrasies of society with objective interest and amusement.

Burra was certainly aware of the New Objectivity movement, and its main protagonist, Georg Grosz, if only at second-hand through the German art journal *Der Querschnitt*.⁹¹ The eponymous exhibition at the Mannheim Kunsthalle would have received reviews, and an art school student would have had access to international art journalism. New Objectivity came to be defined not only by such leading artists as Grosz, but also through its cinema, and this is a pastime that Burra wrote about recurrently and enthusiastically in his correspondence. If such defining features are explicitly referred to by Burra and his friends in correspondence, it does not seem credible that he remained unaware of New Objectivity as a wider movement. Simon Martin notes that Grosz had illustrated several novellas by Pierre MacOrlan – *Quai des Brumes* (1927) and *Porte d'eaux-mortes* (1926) – which delighted Burra

⁹¹ Jane Stevenson mentions the movement in her biography of Burra in passing: 'Burra himself showed little interest in German art other than that of left-wing contemporaries such as Georg Grosz and other artists covered by the German international art review *Der Querschnitt* ...' [Stevenson, 2008, p.259]; likewise, Simon Martin writes of Burra's images 'recalling the satires of Otto Dix and George Grosz that Burra knew from the German periodical *Der Querschnitt*' [Martin, 2011, p.76]; and Andrew Causey records that volumes of Grosz's work were 'circulated in England in the twenties; his work was shown in London in 1926 at the Tri-National exhibition at the Chenil Galleries, and Burra would have seen it in *Der Querschnitt*, the cultural periodical published by Grosz's Berlin dealer, Alfred Flechtheim, which he is known to have looked at regularly' [Causey, 1985 (*Edward Burra: Complete Catalogue*), pp.25-26].

with their dissolute atmosphere, their themes of smuggling, prostitution, crime and drug addiction, and their dockside locations.⁹² Perhaps this was Burra's first introduction to the art of Grosz. But whether or not it was the descriptions or the illustrations, it is clear from Burra's output in the late 1920s, almost exclusively populated by sailors and prostitutes in Mediterranean dockside streets and bars, that this aspect of social realism had caught his imagination. As Martin goes on to conclude, Burra 'clearly admired [Grosz's] satirical depictions of Weimar society, which often included images of prostitutes displaying their wares to potential clients', in *Before Sunrise* for example, from the series *Ecce Homo* (1922).⁹³ Barbara Ker-Seymer recalls her and Burra's interest in Grosz's work:

We liked the earlier drawings best, particularly the one of bloated plutocrats with cigars in their mouths, gambling at tables covered with money and diamonds being watched by starving children and mutilated war victims. We also loved the terrible brothel scenes. These drawings were very like the German films we went to, for instance 'Joyless Street' in which Greta Garbo was reduced to going to a brothel and becoming a prostitute.⁹⁴

This letter bears witness to the great influence that the cinema had on Burra's life and work. Other than jazz music it was his favourite source of entertainment, and there is barely a single letter he wrote in which there is no reference to the latest film he has been to see. His introduction to and absorption of the values of New Objectivity may easily have been through the medium of German cinema, which, besides Hollywood, was the main centre of film producing in the 1920s. Burra, in typically flippant style, writes to Barbara Ker-Seymer about *Joyless Street* [see figs.24 & 25] in 1927:

I have been to such a piece at the cinema entitled the joyless street featuring Greta Garbage Werner Krauss and Asta Nielson you can

⁹² Martin, 2011, p.47.

⁹³ Ibid., p.47.

⁹⁴ Letter from Barbara Ker-Seymer, 4 July 1982, for which I have been unable to trace the original source. Cited by Martin, 2011, p.48.

imagine nothing more joyless every one starved to death or where lured away into fearful brothels the proprietress of the B was a gem they had private theatricals and she appeared in a tableau of singing angels with an eyeglass and a black tulle bow round her neck she also wore a beaded model and was the living image of Miss Hodgekins gone a bit older and more vicious. She also kept a dress shop and when the simple Garbo bought a priceless old Bonemartin stole, and couldn't pay for it she pressed a bank note into her hand and said if you will come to my next soirée everything will be quite alright dear.⁹⁵

Despite his obvious delight in the film's imagery, Burra's missive also highlights the limits to which he can be associated with the New Objectivity movement, and the difference in his approach compared to Grosz and his German contemporaries. Where Grosz had lived through the hardships of hyper-inflation, revolution and total social and political upheaval in post-war Germany, lending his work an understandable anger and bitterness, Burra was sufficiently detached to view the situation in Germany – as narrated in Pabst's film through the person of Greta Garbo – as a comically melodramatic fiction. This attitude was typical of the 'lost generation' in twenties Britain, prophesied at the beginning of the decade by Evelyn Waugh. Their detachment from real deprivations and propensity to treat serious issues with a camp flippancy resulted in a cynical and mocking attitude to any expressions of tragic emotion. The exaggerated drama of a film like *Joyless Street* would have pulled at the heartstrings of a German viewer who had lived through or alongside such difficult conditions, but Burra and his contemporaries had no such experience, and therefore lacked the empathy that would have given the film meaning, leaving them only empty gestures that thus appeared comic in their futility. Behind this attitude lies a spirit of 'Camp', the essence of which Susan Sontag defines as a 'love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration ... Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of

⁹⁵ Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer, dated 7th March 1927. Tate Gallery Archives (TGA 974.2.2.16).

the world. It incarnates a victory of “style” over “content”, “aesthetics” over “morality”, of irony over tragedy ... Camp proposes a comic vision of the world.’⁹⁶ Interestingly she goes on to use the young Greta Garbo as an example of the sort of ‘haunting, androgynous vacancy’ that epitomises the camp sensibility, which is playful and dandified.⁹⁷

In this way, rather than viewing Burra as a follower of New Objectivity (albeit from a distance), one could position him at a further remove – as satirising the New Objectivity movement itself. And to the traditional methods by which satire undermines seriousness, ‘Camp introduces a new standard: artifice as an ideal, theatricality.’⁹⁸ The Camp element in satire seems especially useful in analysing Burra’s response to the more serious and melodramatic expositions of social realism seen in films such as *Joyless Street* [fig.24]. For where Grosz uses the medium of satire to confront the social injustices by which he was surrounded, Weimar cinema approaches social realism with a more or less serious intent – whether fictional or pseudo-documentary, it is certainly not intended as overtly satirical. However, from the perspective of someone like Burra this serious intent fails; the exaggerated movements and dramatic narrative of such early cinema would have struck him as a parody of what was in reality a dire situation, fulfilling the essentials of ‘pure’ Camp.⁹⁹ Therefore his satire could be in effect a satire on the cinematic tendencies of the period, and how in treating such subjects of modern life they simultaneously undermined the seriousness of these very subjects. Many of Burra’s paintings from the late 1920s use ‘stage-set’ techniques clearly acquired from the cinema; *Café Bar* (1929) and *The Common Stair* (1929) [fig.23] for example both use dramatic lighting and

⁹⁶ Susan Sontag (1987) ‘Notes on “Camp”’. In *Against Interpretation’ and Other Essays*. London: André Deutsch. pp.275-288.

⁹⁷ Sontag goes on to explain that ‘camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness ... consists in going against the grain of one’s sex’ [Ibid., p.279].

⁹⁸ Ibid., p.288.

⁹⁹ ‘In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails ... [but also] which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve’ [Ibid., p.283].

shadows to create an dissolute, sleazy atmosphere in which something unknown but undeniably shady is going on. The modern dress and urban 'low-life' surroundings show his commitment to depicting a form of contemporary social reality, as in New Objectivity films, and his focus on details, frozen momentarily in the course of everyday life, but without explanation, echoes the modern, objective approach of journalists and cineastes – and of the nascent photojournalist technique of the 'decisive moment', in Cartier-Bresson's words. Using this style, which could justifiably be called New Objectivist, he then turns the critique to satire through his detachment; he cares not at all for the situation the characters find themselves in, and not providing this background, they therefore appear comical when arbitrarily placed within a dramatic narrative.

The Common Stair [fig.23] closely echoes the themes and atmosphere of *Joyless Street* [fig.24], depicting the seedy world of brothels and the various characters that frequent them. Every scene of *Joyless Street* is shadowy, either a claustrophobic interior or a dark street lit by oil lamps, a sinister, threatening urban landscape spelling out moral disaster for the tragic heroine. Similarly, Burra uses artificial lighting to great effect to dramatize his painting, creating lugubrious shadows in the recesses of the stairwell, while sharply defining the figures – especially the figure on the left, pegging out the washing – with an unhealthy yellow pallor against the dark bricks. The single gas lamp that lights the eponymous street in the film with an eerie glow, standing out from the wall on the right hand side to delineate the horizontals of paving, steps and tiled roofs, appears again on the left in *The Common Stair* [fig.23]. Here, however, the space is far more restricted, the figures tightly packed together and pushed to the foreground; and rather than rustic, uneven stonework, the stairs, brickwork and balcony are all perfectly straight and razor sharp. This element in itself would suffice to highlight the different objectives of Pabst and Burra. While Pabst uses shadowy lighting effects and a rundown urban setting to convey the difficult circumstances that the inhabitants of the street portrayed face in day-to-day life, Burra feels

bound by no such commitment to social realism, simply revelling in the visual and narrative qualities this subject matter offers. In the same way, while Pabst's street is peopled by almost stereotypical characters whose objectives are revealed in a straightforward, albeit dramatic, manner in order to illuminate the social issues of the time, Burra's characters and their objectives alike are steeped in ambiguity. In *Joyless Street* [figs.24 & 25], we see resignation on the careworn faces of the women queuing for food, despair in the eyes of the retired civil servant who cannot provide for his daughters, greed in the eyes of the speculators and the brothel-keeper; the exaggerated expressions are necessary to tell the story, and therefore disallow any scope for uncertainty – and with only the addition of sporadic subtitles the story is necessarily fairly simple and dramatic. In *The Common Stair* [fig.23], Burra allows the viewer the freedom to construct his or her own narrative. As Simon Martin writes, the painting depicts off-duty prostitutes doing their washing, with their clients in the background making their way up and down the stairway – but more than this is not divulged. The woman on the right smiles lasciviously, her eyes narrowed and a cigarette dangling from her lips; she makes no effort to help with the task, but looks out over the balcony, daydreaming, or perhaps watching men passing on the street below and showing off her cleavage. The figure on the left is even more mysterious, with heavy make-up yet with closely cropped hair and muscular arms, leaving the gender uncertain – is he a male transvestite as Martin suggests? This overtly effeminate yet physically male character appears in a number of works by Burra, *The Two Sisters* for instance, and is in marked contrast to the clear-cut gender roles outlined in Pabst's film. Unlike Garbo's character whose family background we are privy to, allowing us to empathise with her, we know nothing of Burra's characters – who they are, where they come from – nothing but their current occupation, their identity being deliberately obscured and complicated by visual attributes and puns.

In this sense, Burra illustrates more clearly than Pabst another key element within Weimar culture which became linked to the New Objectivity movement, whether by contextual coincidence or because both tendencies

were deeply rooted in the German post-war reaction – the crisis of gender identity and gender ambiguity. Richard McCormick sees this issue as a key to Weimar’s cultural character:

The “shock of modernity” had placed traditional notions of gender in crisis, both male and female ... In addition, things were complicated further by the new public attention in this period to what Magnus Hirschfeld ... called the “third sex”, that is, to homosexuals. Thus it would seem that the binary division between what was clearly “masculine” and what was “feminine” was becoming especially blurred.¹⁰⁰

It was the emergence of the ‘New Woman’ that appears to have sparked this crisis. During or immediately after the war, many women across Europe were granted suffrage, and an improved civil and legal status. In addition, the scale and nature of the war had meant that women were drafted in to work in factories and took over traditionally male work to a far larger extent than ever before; after the war, many were reluctant to give up their new financial independence. This inevitably caused friction as thousands of men returned from active service, and there followed a backlash with governments promoting women’s return to a traditional domestic role; however, modernity had progressed to the extent that there was no hope of returning to the *status quo ante*. As Birgitte Soland remarks, the modern woman was only the most visible and provocative scapegoat for a more general anxiety over ‘social disorder, socioeconomic change, and the collapse of longstanding moral and ideological doctrines.’¹⁰¹ The threat of modernity and of the ‘New Woman’ were therefore conflated to some degree, and both were linked to ‘Americanism’ in Weimar Germany – as Richard McCormick writes, ‘the American ideal of the athletic and emancipated “girl” or “New Woman” was

¹⁰⁰ McCormick, 2001, p.5.

¹⁰¹ Birgitte Soland (2000) *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s*. Oxford: Princeton University Press. p.7.

the cause of the greatest German ambivalence about modernity.’¹⁰² Thus the figure of the ‘New Woman’ held a contested role in social and cultural life, at once symbolic of the modern world that New Objectivity aimed to record, and the nemesis of the men who aimed to rationalise it.

While nothing symbolised the New Objectivity better than the working, sexually emancipated, unsentimental “New Woman”, she also seemed to represent both an excess of modernity and the ultimate crisis of mastery that male intellectuals and artists ... were attempting to overcome and control through “sober”, “rational” documentation.¹⁰³

This contradictory attitude to the ‘New Woman’ was reinforced by her portrayal in films such as Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (1930), in which Marlene Dietrich plays the ‘ultimate *femme fatale*, who “traps” her male prey while relishing her vampish status in the spotlight of the cabaret’ in ‘a parable of the dangers of uninhibited female sexuality.’¹⁰⁴

At the same time, the fashionable interest in psychoanalysis had to some extent legitimised female sexuality – both Ernest Jones and Melanie Klein published papers on the subject in the 1920s – and female identity and gender began to be discussed more widely both in popular fiction and in early feminist tracts such as Joan Rivière’s *Womanliness as a Masquerade* (1929). Rivière proposes that there is a ‘bisexuality inherent in us all’ and that ‘women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and retribution feared from men.’¹⁰⁵ McCormick finds this tendency towards the ‘masquerade’ of gendered identities exaggerated in Weimar

¹⁰² McCormick, 2001, p.2.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁰⁴ Maggie Finch (2011) ‘Metropolis: The Brilliant and Sinister Art of the 1920s’. In Jacqueline Strecker (Ed.) *The Mad Square: Modernity in German Art 1910-37* [exh. cat.] Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales. p.195.

¹⁰⁵ Joan Rivière (1991) ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’ [first pub. 1929]. In Athol Hughes (Ed.) *The Inner World of Joan Rivière: Collected Papers 1920-1958*. London: Karnak Books. pp.90-91.

Germany, and yet still maintained despite – or because of – its exposure as a fraud or performance:

We find in Weimar culture a relatively open discussion of the hollowness – indeed, cynicism – of the masquerade that prescribed roles and identities seemed to demand ... In both types of masquerade [masculine and feminine] one notes an anxious attempt to conceal any deviation from traditional norms for gendered behaviour.¹⁰⁶

Judith Butler introduces the concept of the ‘performativity’ of gender roles, suggesting that gender is constructed, artificial, lacking any underlying essence. She writes that ‘masquerade may be understood as the performative production of a sexual ontology.’¹⁰⁷ Butler then goes on to liken the (specifically female) performance of gender to a ‘parodic (de)construction’, musing on ‘the slippery distinction between “appearing” and “being”’, as ‘a radicalisation of the “comedic” dimension of sexual ontology’ that Lacan has touched upon.¹⁰⁸ It is interesting that Butler uses terms such as ‘parodic’ and ‘comedic’ in terms of the performance of gender roles, as this underlines the importance of the relationship between satire and gender ambiguity. The change in attitude towards gender roles and identity was a central and disconcerting aspect of the often overwhelming modernisation that characterised the 1920s. And as satire in any age relies upon the analysis and subsequent ridicule of contemporary social attitudes, it is not surprising that gender and the performance of gender become established as a trope within the ‘new’ satire. This trope is one of the most obvious unifying features between Burra and the work of New Objectivity painters such as Grosz and Dix.

Helmut Lethen likens the concept of masks to the superficial, ‘documentary’ approach of New Objectivity. In *Cool Conduct* he ‘stresses the “coldness” or “coolness” [of New Objectivity], the concentration on surface as opposed to

¹⁰⁶ McCormick, 2001, p.6.

¹⁰⁷ Judith Butler (1999) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge. p.60.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.60.

depth, and the related importance of facades and masks to conceal identity in opposition to what he considers the cult of emotional authenticity associated with expressionism.¹⁰⁹ Lethen describes the appeal to the avant-garde at this time of simple characters, free from any psychological complexity, characters with “metallised bodies” who ‘hold their own in the “force field of destructive currents.”’¹¹⁰ This recalls Lewis’s insistence on exteriority, likening the body to an armoured shell and man to a ‘mechanical grotesque interacting with the environment in the manner of an absurd mechanistic dance’, an idea which is given visual form in the hard metallic sheen of the Tyros.¹¹¹

The cool persona implies a “masquerade of virulent narcissism.”¹¹²

The decade of new objectivity introduces a figure with his hat pulled down over eyes that, in their expressive dimension, are no longer of interest. The pose of indignation ... becomes antediluvian, an object of parody.¹¹³

True feelings are concealed, disallowed; any expression of feeling is consciously assumed, a performance, and therefore open to mockery. This tendency is one that Burra shares, and which ties him stylistically, and perhaps conceptually, to the New Objectivity movement in painting. (Indeed, it was deeply unfashionable at this time – within Burra’s social circle at least – to reveal one’s true feelings; all communication was strictly on a flippant and superficial level, as his letters testify.)¹¹⁴ The use of masking to conceal emotional identity is clearly illustrated in the mask-like faces of women

¹⁰⁹ McCormick, 2007, p.151.

¹¹⁰ Helmut Lethen (2002) *Cool Conduct: The Culture of Distance in Weimar Germany*. London: University of California Press. p.33.

¹¹¹ Tom Normand (1992) *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.61; see Wyndham Lewis, ‘Inferior Religions’, in which he describes ‘creaking men machines ... involved in a monotonous rhythm from morning till night’ [Wyndham Lewis (2004) *The Wild Body: ‘A Soldier of Humour’ and Other Stories*. London: Penguin. p.49].

¹¹² Helga Geyer-Ryan, cited by Lethen, 2002, p.46.

¹¹³ Helmut Lethen, 2002, p.31.

¹¹⁴ See Stevenson, 2008, pp.72-74 for her analysis of Burra’s letters at the time of his sister Betsy’s death.

‘performing’ an idealised, eroticised femininity in paintings such as *Les Folies de Belleville* [fig.26] and *The Tea Shop* [fig.29]. Burra, however, is never judgemental or moralistic – he depicts such displays purely for their visual pleasure, uninterested in the human emotion of the actresses, and certainly not with the intention of making any political statement with respect to the gender debate. Burra enjoys music-hall and cabaret style entertainment, but is detached and cynical enough to see it for what it is: a performance, the donning of a superficial character defined by accessories such as costume and make-up, the complexities of a real human personality ignored. It is the very element of “coolness” which Lethen identifies in New Objectivity that turns its art into satire: ‘cool temperaments and cool hearts are the active properties of the comedic character, which derives its artistic and reflective senses solely from the brain.’¹¹⁵

Claude Cahun, echoing the mask-like features of the women painted by Burra or Otto Dix, employs masks in her photography as an ‘extension of the notion of performance.’¹¹⁶ Masks are used in the same way as the heavy theatrical make-up of Burra’s characters to create ambivalence by concealing character, yet simultaneously revealing a facet of the modern female psyche – their new sexual liberation, and the attraction of disguise and detachment. Helmut Lethen attempts to explain this paradox, in which ‘the signature of individuality is assimilated to the homogenising conditions of technical reproduction ... icons of an armoured ego go on parade.’¹¹⁷ Mechanical reproduction itself is used as to assert a new identity, particularly for women. As Gen Day notes, the ‘linking of masks, masquerades and women also occurs in mainstream cinema of the period’, taking this idea a step further by creating icons who all conformed in some sense to a manufactured image of femininity.¹¹⁸ This is corroborated by Stephen Heath, who asserts that ‘cinema itself can be seen as a prime statement of the masquerade ... [it] has

¹¹⁵ Ursula Geitner, cited by Lethen, 2002, p.46.

¹¹⁶ Gen Day (2007) *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography*. London: I.B. Tauris. p.45.

¹¹⁷ Lethen, 2002, p.23.

¹¹⁸ Gen Day, 2007, p.41.

played to the maximum the masquerade, the signs of the exchange femininity, has ceaselessly reproduced its – their – social currency ... Cinema works with the masquerade, the inscription of the fantasy of femininity, the identity of the woman.’¹¹⁹ As a keen cinema-goer, Burra would have been well aware of such a manufactured presentation of women, though he may not have analysed it in such formal terms.

The concept of the ‘evil’ woman-as-machine, the elision of woman with technology – both posing a potential threat to masculine power and control – reached an apex in Fritz Lang’s film *Metropolis* (1927). This representation of woman went far beyond the idea of a mask, voluntarily donned in order to project a certain stereotypical image of femininity. The human element here is not merely veiled, but dispatched with entirely. There are two major elements to be discussed in relation to this: firstly the relationship between technology and art – and *Metropolis* stands at a pivotal point in this respect, half-way between expressionist horror and New Objectivist embrace of the machine – and secondly the perception and portrayal of woman as machine. Were these tendencies specific to the Weimar Republic, or were the same anxieties that lay behind them to be found across Europe in the mid to late 1920s? And if they are specific to the German situation, can Burra’s work be compared to the artistic output of Weimar, or is he simply borrowing stylistic elements from New Objectivity art and cinema, stripped of their cultural meaning?

Andreas Huyssen describes how the relationship between art and technology in Germany changed over the course of the twenties:

The expressionist view emphasises technology’s oppressive and destructive potential and is clearly rooted in the experiences and irrepressible memories of the mechanised battlefields of World War I.

¹¹⁹ Stephen Heath (1986) ‘Joan Rivière and the Masquerade’. In Victor Burgin, James Donald & Cora Kaplan (Eds.) *Formations of Fantasy*. London: Methuen. p.57.

During the 1920s and especially during the stabilisation phase of the Weimar Republic this expressionist view was slowly replaced by the technology cult of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and its unbridled confidence in technical progress and social engineering.¹²⁰

He concludes that both views can be discerned in *Metropolis*, but ultimately favours its interpretation as a *Neue Sachlichkeit* film because – going beyond the stylistic and narrative elements of the film – the process of filming itself involved novel cinematic techniques, modern technology thus underpinning the entire work in a positive and practical sense. Burra, too, is at heart New Objectivist in this regard. Though he came from a traditional, provincial family, on whose way of life modern technology would not have made much of an impact, he was fascinated and visually stimulated by both modernity and technology in all their permutations. Both were synonymous with the urban metropolis, and this was the world that Burra depicted. There is no apparent anxiety in his works, or any sense of threat emanating from the technology that is represented – modernity for Burra seems to be either positive, or if not entirely positive then criticised in a detached and mocking way that disempowers it and makes it ridiculous. The review that appeared in *The Times* on 22 March 1927, following the release of *Metropolis* at the Marble Arch Pavilion, endorses the latter interpretation. The critic acknowledges the mastery of machines in *Metropolis* as a ‘contemporary nightmare’, the effect of fear conveyed in ‘the swaying lights, the changing angles, the swift hallucinations of this photography’; yet he goes on to point out its myriad ‘absurdities’, at which, he claims, ‘there is nothing to do but smile.’¹²¹ Ultimately his praise is directed towards the cinematographic technique, and the film’s ‘remarkable pictorial power.’¹²² If this can be read

¹²⁰ Andreas Huyssen (1988) *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. p.67.

¹²¹ ‘Marble Arch Pavilion. “Metropolis”’, review in *The Times*, Tuesday March 22nd 1927, issue 44536, p.12, column B. *The Times Digital Archive* [Online]. Available at: <http://infotrac.galegroup.com> (access required) [Accessed: 13 May 2013].

¹²² Ibid.

as the standard response of the informed British cinema-goer, it gives some insight into how Burra might have received the film; it seems fair to suggest that the 'absurdities' within the narrative would have amused him very much.

The Weimar Republic experienced modernity in a very different way to Britain, however, and this necessarily had an impact on how artists and filmmakers perceived and portrayed it, and also explains how their work may have been seen or interpreted entirely differently by viewers in Britain or elsewhere. The introduction of technology took place in haste following the introduction of the Dawes Plan in 1924, and, added to the political and economic instability of the period, would conceivably have caused disorientation and fear. This was not the case in Britain; though the rapid advance of modernity after the war seemed a shock to many, there was at least relative stability, and though much is made of the decisive break with the past that the war constituted, there was in fact much continuity in daily life, allowing someone like Burra to look on technological progress from the safety and comfort of his unchanging home life. So while the threat of the robot Maria in *Metropolis* [fig.27] might have echoed very real fears in Germany of riot and revolution, to a British viewer they remained fictional, a fantasy of the future bearing no relation to reality. In other words, while the uncertain situation in Germany encouraged a lingering expressionist horror at technology, even while the *Neue Sachlichkeit* presented it in a new and positive light, someone like Burra, without first hand memory of the war and free from present anxieties, would have seen only the positive angle associated with New Objectivity.

The idea of woman as a machine is more complex as it is clearly related to the anxiety engendered by rapid modernisation – the 'New Woman' posing a threat to masculinity as potent as that of new technology – yet it is not a new concept, the figure of woman being used symbolically in this manner for centuries. As Huyssen notes, as far back as the eighteenth century:

... woman, nature, machine had become a mesh of significations which all had one thing in common: otherness; by their very existence they raised fears and threatened male authority and control.¹²³

Therefore the novel factor in the case of Weimar Germany, as Janet Lungstrum points out, was not the use of 'woman as a symbolic projection of the desires of an essentially male mass psyche,' but rather her 'swift "descent" (in moral terms) ... from the pure protectress figure of the nineteenth century, namely Germania or Berolina, to the figure of ... mechanised whore and Babylonian dominatrix.'¹²⁴ This dialectic between woman as protective mother figure, as asexual or virginal, and woman as a sexualised prostitute or vamp, is one that Huyssen sees as central to *Metropolis*, as the narrative hinges on the fate of the innocent Maria, transformed into a robot through a male desire for control. The robot-Maria then runs out of control, 'unleashing its destructive potential on humanity' – she is literally 'a technological artefact upon which a specifically male view of destructive female sexuality has been projected.'¹²⁵ Looking at the representation of women in this way, one can extend the feminist dialogue on masks and masquerade which has been previously considered in this chapter; only in this case, the mask is not adopted by the woman to conceal her true nature beneath, but forced upon her by the male gaze. She is not merely veiled but totally recreated in the image of herself, whether submissive and obedient, in the service of man, or a threat to him. Nietzsche sees woman as 'secondary and so supplementary and so an act: "her great art is the lie, her supreme concern is appearance and beauty"; for him, 'woman is a lie, adornment is her truth.'¹²⁶ Though women could to some extent turn this imposed identity to their advantage; Heath goes on to describe Marlene Dietrich as proffering the masquerade on screen

¹²³ Huyssen, 1988, p.70.

¹²⁴ Janet Lungstrum (1997) 'Metropolis and the Technosexual Woman of German Modernity'. In Katharina von Ankum (Ed.) *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p.129.

¹²⁵ Huyssen, 1988, p.74.

¹²⁶ Heath, in Burgin *et al*, 1986, pp.50-51.

to excess, 'holding and flaunting the male gaze; not a defence against but a derision of masculinity.'¹²⁷

Burra was certainly aware of *Metropolis*, and Weimar cinema more generally, as he writes to Barbara Ker-Seymer in March 1927:

You know now all these German films and all are coming out so much in London I think London is much the best place for the movies. Billy says *Metropolis* is coming to the Marble Arch P however Carmen is upon us at the neighbouring flea run so I have something to look forward to.¹²⁸

He does not talk about the film in any detail, but almost certainly would have seen it, or at least have seen publicity material for it. If Burra was influenced by any one theme in *Metropolis*, it is less likely to be the plight of the workers, trapped underground on their mechanised production line, and much more likely to be the plight of the female protagonist –especially if combined with an element of cabaret or performance. This interest in glamorous actresses playing their parts in seedy or decadent surroundings has already been noted in Burra's response to *Joyless Street*, and certainly filtered through into his paintings at this time. The scene in the film in which the robot-woman performs a strip-tease would almost certainly have appealed to Burra visually – and the revealing costume and bizarre movements performed with a poker face were just the kind of thing that appealed to Burra's sense of humour. As Jane Stevenson writes, Burra's detachment allowed him to see that 'hopping about in a costume the size of a postage stamp is a damn-fool way of making a living.'¹²⁹

The dancers in Burra's *Les Folies de Belleville* [fig.26] bear a close resemblance to the robot Maria as she appears to a room full of the all-male ruling class of *Metropolis* to perform to them [fig.27a-b]. And both the *Folies* and the dance

¹²⁷ Heath, in Burgin *et al*, 1986, p.57.

¹²⁸ Letter from Edward Burra to Barbara Ker-Seymer, dated Tuesday [Mar 1927]. Tate Gallery Archives (TGA 974.2.2.19).

¹²⁹ Stevenson, 2008, p.96.

in *Metropolis* may owe a significant amount to the new dancers and cabaret performers who gained huge popularity – and notoriety – in 1920s Paris and Berlin. As Nancy Nenno argues, the troupes of girls in revues ‘came to represent the precision and mechanisation of the modern city’, their ‘synchronised movements ... moulded them together into a single machinelike mass, in which the overt display of sensuality appeared controlled.’¹³⁰ Both the *Folies* and the robot Maria seem to embody the contradictory notion of woman as both danger and pleasure; they are both creations of the male gaze, commodities controlled and consumed by the modern patriarchy, and yet they also threaten to undermine that control by means of their sensual display, their staring eyes exerting an hypnotic, intoxicating effect similar to a narcotic.¹³¹ This ambivalent psychosexual view of women was summed up and explained – entrenched? – by Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, in which he describes woman as ‘physically and emotionally incapable of participating in the system of social exchanges that constitute civilisation’, and thus she ‘adopts a hostile attitude towards it.’¹³² However, it is difficult to accept that women were non-participants in the system of social exchange; they might undermine or subvert it by their ‘hostility’, but the work of artists and film-makers such as Burra and Lang only underscores the central role that women played in the construction of culture – and therefore, in Matthew Arnold’s terms, civilisation – in the 1920s.¹³³ And it is the pervasive image of the eye in the art of this period that seems to best illustrate how deeply embedded their role was – transferring the psychological to the visual sphere.

¹³⁰ Nancy Nenno (1997) ‘Femininity, the Primitive, and Modern Urban Space: Josephine Baker in Berlin’. In Katharina von Ankum (Ed.), 1997, p.149.

¹³¹ Hans Siemsen, writing in *Die Weltbühne* in 1926, likened the effect of jazz dancing to drugs, which he considered in a positive sense as a ‘healing tonic’, ‘liberating’ participants from memories of the recent past. Cited by Nancy Nenno, 1997, p.154.

¹³² Sigmund Freud, paraphrased by Nancy Nenno, 1997, p.148.

¹³³ In *Culture and Anarchy* [1869] Matthew Arnold defines culture as ‘being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know ... the best which has been thought and said in the world’, identifying this state of perfection with a state of ‘civilisation’, in contrast to the state of anarchy or the state of nature.

In the twenties, women's make-up developed to accentuate the eye (and the lips) as never before. This was partly due to its mass-production and greater availability, but also to the influence of film stars whose features were exaggerated by the use of make-up in order to enhance their expressivity in an age of silent cinema – 'the heavy kohl-rimmed eyes and cupid's bow mouth came directly from the wild crazed-looking actresses of Hollywood ... Film actresses of the 20s looked exotic, symbolised modernity...' ¹³⁴ The eye was also of symbolic importance for the Surrealists, with their interest in psychological and dreamlike imagery and the revelation of the subconscious through automatic practices. Thus it is interesting to note the similar use of the eye as part of a cinematic montage by Man Ray, in his short experimental film *Emak Bakia* [fig.28], produced in 1926, and by Fritz Lang in *Metropolis* a year later [fig.27c]. *Emak Bakia* concludes its semi-abstract sequences – of Charleston-dancing legs and torn collars that 'pirouetted and danced rhythmically' – with the image of Man Ray's muse, Kiki, observed in a 'double awakening'; as Man Ray recalls, 'on her closed eyelids I painted a pair of artificial eyes which I filmed, having her open her own eyes, gradually disclosing them.' ¹³⁵ In *Metropolis*, as the robot Maria's dance reaches a climax, the camera cuts ever more frenetically from her image to the wide eyed spectators and back, until the spectators' faces blur and merge together and become a montage of staring eyes, finally cutting to just one eye in close-up. This sequence seems to echo the Surrealist approach of Man Ray, as both reduce simple imagery of dancing to an abstract essence through rhythmic repetition, and offset this essentially hypnotic movement with the equally mesmerising stillness of the eyes – eyes that should reveal the soul but which in reality deceive, as Kiki's painted eyes ultimately prove a mask. Man Ray was keen to impress on his audience that 'my film was purely optical, made to appeal only to the eyes – there was no story, not even a scenario.' ¹³⁶ This avant-garde approach to film as artwork clearly does not apply to *Metropolis*;

¹³⁴ Kate Mulvey & Melissa Richardson (1998) *Decades of Beauty: The Changing Image of Women 1890s-1990s*. London: Hamlyn. p.74.

¹³⁵ Man Ray (2012) *Self-Portrait*. London: Penguin. p.274; p.272.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.273.

the plot was key to attracting a wide audience. However, in its simplicity, the plot at times seems subordinate to the visual spectacle of the imagery, especially the mechanical elements with which the film begins, the 'stylised machines' whose motions, alternating between circular and back-and-forth, 'are like two themes structuring the montage.'¹³⁷ The same can be said of the contrast between robot-Maria's sensuous, erotic movements and the static quality of the spectators' eyes, the increasingly quick alternation between the two effectively building tension.

The eyes of Burra's *Folies de Belleville* [fig.26] are heavily defined in black kohl, and their lips likewise exaggerated by red lipstick. Burra clearly revelled in the extravagant, camp aspects of 1920s fashion and make-up, and it becomes a characteristic aspect of his paintings. But it is the heavy definition that he gives to the eyes, and their distinctive almond shape, that is particularly noticeable. In *Les Folies*, the kneeling girl on the right looks directly at us, the hypnotic quality of her eyes similar to Kiki's or Maria's in the power of their artifice, exerting a disturbing psychological force through the application of powder and paint. Like the dance sequence in *Metropolis* where the eyes of the spectators are reflected in the glowing circles on the dark stage behind Maria, these girls' eyes merge into the overall decorative scheme, echoing the round glow of the spotlights on the dark backdrop. Women, therefore, are essential to the interplay of seeing and being seen, the gaze defining – yet in fact complicating – the status of subject and object. And this relationship exerted an ever greater fascination in the 1920s, a time when gender identities were undergoing fundamental change, leaving traditional roles ambiguous.

Josephine Baker was perhaps the most celebrated star of the twenties revue, embodying the conflation of the primitive and the modern asserted by Freud. She is famously photographed wearing a banana 'tutu' at the Folies-Bergère in Paris in 1927 [figs.30 & 31], a garment which subsequently makes an

¹³⁷ Alan Williams (1974) 'Structures of Narrativity in Fritz Lang's "Metropolis"'. *Film Quarterly*. 27 (4). p.21.

appearance in Burra's *The Tea Shop* [fig.29]. Burra saw Baker making her debut in the *Revue Nègre* at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in 1925, and became a great fan, collecting postcards and press clippings of her later appearances; her reputation spread throughout Europe, with copycat performances taking place in the nightclubs of London and the cabarets of Berlin. Her distinctively African body shape and style of dancing is imitated in the more generalised, 'primitive' and 'exotic' movements of the robot Maria and by the poses of the *Folies*. Maria begins by belly-dancing – while not specifically African, this dance typifies non-Western traditions, and therefore the 'exotic other', and the costumes in both film and painting nod to this style of dance. Both make use of angular arm positions – Maria holds her arms rigid a little like an Egyptian image; similarly, the standing woman in the painting holds her arms rigidly away from her sides with wrists turned out at right-angles and the kneeling woman on the right holds her arm under her chin, bent at right-angles at the elbow and the wrist.¹³⁸ In both the film sequence and the painting, the women are bare-breasted, or covered by the merest scrap of gauze or glitter, as Baker was, and they wear low-slung diaphanous skirts and headpieces, which combined with their exotic dances render them undeniably 'other', non-European or primitive – and consequently they become sexualised objects of fascination and fear. Anita Berber is another possible model for the sexualised dancer; she became a notorious feature of Berlin nightlife, famed for her naked performances, and painted by Otto Dix in 1925.

In the dance scene, the robot Maria is 'constructed' by the male gaze, emphasised by the camera cutting from the dance to the gripped spectators, and to the montage of staring eyes. Although as Huyssen points out 'almost all traditional narrative cinema treats the female body as a projection of the male gaze', here the construction is more literal and more deliberately

¹³⁸ Picasso described Baker as the 'Nefertiti of now', which might account for the Egyptian references in costume and movement used by Burra and Lang. Cited by Martin, 2011, p.53.

foregrounded.¹³⁹ The male gaze here is ultimately the camera, another machine creating the machine-woman, and the repetitive eye-montage underlines the film's desire to transmit this fact. This is fundamentally at odds with Burra's painting. One could liken the stage-light, growing like electric roses around a pergola, to the floating eyes that surround Maria as she emerges for her dance – and here, too, the suggestion is that you, the viewer, are the (male) audience, 'assembling' the female dancers from the projected desire of your gaze. However, the medium used is traditional pigment (gouache on paper) and the figures retain a modicum of individuality – revealing that their appearance is still just a mask. Burra's dancers remain human however much the visual aspects of Maria's dance were subconsciously absorbed into the artist's imagination. Moreover, Burra deliberately restricts the context; the background does not extend beyond the stage-set scenery of garish coloured light-bulbs and brightly painted backdrop. There is no sign of the audience these dancers are supposedly performing for, and no reference to the real world beyond the stage. Though *Metropolis* is set in a fictional futuristic world, this world provides – like post-war Vienna in *Joyless Street* [fig.24] – a context within which the characters can develop, helping to explain their actions and drive a narrative. So although one can compare Burra's painting with stills of the dance scene if it is detached from its context, the knowledge of this context informs the viewer's interpretation of the image. Burra's scene, in contrast, remains forever an enigma.

But this is where satire comes in to play. For Burra seems to deliberately detach scenes that in a film or in reality are imbued with meaning, narrative or emotion. Standing alone without their usual contextual buttressing, the figures become somehow ridiculous – as Susan Sontag writes, 'time liberates the work of art from moral relevance, delivering it over to the Camp sensibility.'¹⁴⁰ Don Willis comes to the same conclusion with regard to *Metropolis*; judging it in hindsight, out of context, he sees it as a 'mixture of

¹³⁹ Huyssen, 1988, p.75.

¹⁴⁰ Sontag, 1987, p.285.

spectacle and camp ... a gigantic, grotesque curiosity.'¹⁴¹ One assumes Burra's *Les Folies de Belleville* [fig.26] shows a cabaret performance akin to the erotic showpiece of the robot Maria; but while Maria's audience are identified in the film, it is unclear for whom Burra's dancing girls are performing. If it is us, the viewer, their raunchy poses seem incongruous as we stand quietly and politely in a hushed gallery space in broad daylight. This incongruity is the key to the painting's satire. Frozen in absurd positions, it is as if the protagonists have been caught out – indeed, the girls in the background look slightly disconcerted to find themselves naked, trying to cover themselves with their hands. Detaching a scene from its context in this way serves to highlight the ridiculous in all aspects of contemporary life and culture, however mundane; in this way Burra's paintings stand as a critical mirror held up to society.

The ambiguity of Burra's work, however, disallows a simple reading; where his figures can be understood as masquerading as certain 'types', donning superficial identities that either conform to or challenge gender stereotypes, they could also be understood on a more personal level as portraits. Simon Martin identifies self-portraits in a number of Burra's works, suggesting that the figure in drag on the left in *The Common Stair* [fig.23] might be based on the artist. This seems quite probable when one looks at the photographs taken of Burra by Barbara Ker-Seymer in the south of France, posing half naked in a spirit of high camp. But one could just as easily liken this figure to the contemporaneous photograph of Stephen Tennant by Cecil Beaton; here Tennant, too, is half naked, and turns his head in profile, slightly further than that of the painted figure, but with the same arch look, short cropped hair, and delicately chiselled features. The photograph was taken in 1927 and though there is no indication that it was published Tennant was very pleased with the result so may well have shown it off to friends:

¹⁴¹ Don Willis (1979-80) 'Fritz Lang: Only Melodrama'. *Film Quarterly*. 33(2). p.5.

I think about seven or eight, are quite perfect, luscious & dizzy & melting & the bare shoulder ones are like sculptures, too beautiful for words!! ... I can't tell you how beautiful I think the photographs! I just go on looking at them in a dream of bliss, the mackintosh looks so romantic, & the positions are nearly all good, I think – ¹⁴²

Burra's taste for gossip might well have brought the image to his attention, or he would at least have been aware of gossip column descriptions of Tennant in similarly outrageous fancy dress. If, however, the figure in the painting is intended as the artist, then Burra effectively turns the satire on himself, as Lewis did in his self-portrait as a Tyro. He thus acknowledges, again like Lewis, that he is an integral part of the society that he mocks. But, unlike the elder artist, Burra's social circle delighted in dressing-up, constantly reinventing themselves in ridiculous costumes. This must necessarily alter the role and the effect of self-reflexive satire. The artist's intended message is increasingly obscured by his positioning himself as the object of his satire, poking fun at society in the very act of dressing-up. Does this double up and complicate the satire, or does each act cancel the other out, leaving no satire, just an objective picture of the theatrical antics that Burra's generation so enjoyed? While this may be true of Beaton's photographs, which do appear to simply chronicle the dressing-up of his friends in a spirit of fun, Burra's painting is not so clear-cut. Though a character may be recognised as the artist or one of his circle, this character is part of a set-piece in which the other figures belong to the world of the painting. And Burra differs again from Lewis in this regard, as Lewis's self-portrait as a Tyro has no setting or other characters, just a coloured background against which to offset the features of the figure. Burra's possible self-portrait in *The Common Stair* [fig.23] places him within a ready-made drama – and one that he plays a key role in. But this still begs the question of whether he is simply dressing-up or has actually taken on the character of the part that he plays. He seems very much at ease in this unlikely situation, and the other figures continue going

¹⁴² Letter from Stephen Tennant to Cecil Beaton [9], dated Tuesday 30th August [1927]. Beaton Archive. Cambridge: St. John's College Library.

about their business around him. It may be more realistic to see this painting as a projection of fantasy – Burra’s imagination was hooked on the seedy low-life of bustling Mediterranean ports such as Marseilles, as is evidenced by his frequent trips to the south of France and animated letters home. This was a world he could never be part of, the epitome of the exotic to the sickly boy from Rye, and therefore painting himself into such scenes was one of the few ways by which he could vicariously partake in such activities. Satire, in this case, hinges on the incongruity of the artist appearing as a prostitute in a dramatically lit scene that posits him simultaneously as the star in a film still. This is an incongruity that the artist would readily have acknowledged, and therefore, although the image is certainly not a vicious criticism, it does ridicule – in the most light-hearted manner – the artist’s own fantasies.

Chapter 4: Cecil Beaton and his Generation

i. Cecil Beaton's representations of a post-war generation: documentary or satirical?

In his diary entry for New Year's Eve 1926, Cecil Beaton describes a party where an acquaintance of his mother's age performs a contemporary song for the assembled company, one well known to Beaton – perhaps from live recitals in nightclubs or from recordings; she is 'of the last generation & therefore does everything "prettily"'.¹ In any generation, one's parents trying to adopt any aspect of youth culture is essentially embarrassing; in this context there was perhaps a greater gulf than ever before between Edwardian music-hall ditties and the contemporary music of black jazz musicians that had originated in the basement clubs of Harlem. Therefore the image Beaton conjures of a middle-aged, upper-class English woman trying to interpret these popular songs "prettily" is ludicrous. It is a satirical pen portrait *par excellence*, at once witty and cruel, using humour to expose and criticise foolishness. This conforms to the most basic definition of satire, save for the fact that it is mere foolishness that is targeted, rather than actual vice or stupidity, and therefore there is no question of the satire being didactic, encouraging the rectification of the vice in question.² This trait of the 'new' post-war satire has already been discussed; yet the goalposts seem to change again in the later twenties. The idea of rectifying that which is attacked in the satire is not dispensed with because there appears to be no solution – like Lewis's Tyros, a sort of futile satire, laughing simply to avoid despair – but rather because the object of attack does not represent a moral threat in any way. Here, there are no values at stake, and the object of the satire is fundamentally unserious. It is more like simple mockery, and yet its proximity to satire seems to argue a case for the development of the genre

¹ Diary of Cecil Beaton, December 1926-January 1927 & September 1927 [56], entry dated December 31st 1926. Beaton Archives. Cambridge: St. John's College Library.

² *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (10th edition) defines satire as: 'the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's stupidity or vices' [Judy Pearsall (Ed.) (2002) Oxford: Oxford University Press].

that is based on the generational divide precipitated by the war; this reaches an apex in the late twenties when those who reached maturity only after the war take a stand against the outdated value structures of their parents.

Samuel Hynes defines satire as a 'distancing mode' that 'separates the satirist and those he speaks for from those he attacks – the Us from the Them, or from You.'³ If this separation is considered as a separation between the younger and older generations, rather than between classes or political ideologies, then the attitude of detached ridicule and mockery in the writing and photography of Beaton's early career, as well as that of many of his contemporaries, can legitimately be called satire.

Hynes distinguishes five different generations co-existing in the 1920s; Beaton, like Burra, belonged to the youngest, defined as those who came of age after 1918, whose war memories were of school-days, who had no 'normal, ordinary, stable past' to be nostalgic about and who were therefore 'more likely to confront the ruins of history in the spirit of a wrecking crew'.⁴ It is no longer a question of old versus young, or conservative versus avant-garde, as it was before the war, but a more complex agnostic relationship between many subtly different 'generations' whose distinctions rest to a great extent on their role in, or experience of, the Great War. Christopher Isherwood expresses the general malaise of his particular generation: 'we young writers of the middle 'twenties were all suffering, more or less subconsciously, from a feeling of shame that we hadn't been old enough to take part in the European war.'⁵ Evelyn Waugh perceived three distinct generational groupings of which he belonged to the youngest; in an editorial for his school magazine he wrote in 1921: 'a new generation has grown up; between them and the young men of 1912 lies the great gulf of the war. What

³ Samuel Hynes (1990) *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture*. London: Bodley Head. p.243.

⁴ Ibid., pp.390-394.

⁵ Christopher Isherwood (1979) *Lions and Shadows: An Education in the Twenties*. London: Methuen. p.46.

will they stand for and what are they going to do?’⁶ The answer was not very much in Waugh’s opinion, as he writes in 1929:

Every accident of environment contributed to make of this latter generation the indiscriminating and ineffectual people we lament today ... of whom 950 in every thousand are totally lacking in any sense of qualitative value ... There was nothing left for the younger generation to rebel against, except the widest conceptions of mere decency ... The result in many cases is the perverse and aimless dissipation chronicled daily by the gossip-writer of the press.⁷

Waugh’s condemnation of his own generation’s shortcomings is fairly damning. But what is particularly interesting about it is his ability to look at his peers, as they are still living their ‘youth’, and analyse them in such a totally cold, detached manner – the analysis is almost anthropological, as if they were an exotic tribe, or historical, as if he were looking back from decades hence. And there is a sense that in their theatrical antics the young people of the mid to late twenties saw themselves rather like exhibits. Waugh must have been aware that he condemns himself too as he writes this article, even as he attempts to mitigate some of the blame on circumstance and environment; likewise the gossip-columns, written by the same people who participated, dissected these antics almost as they occurred. It seems, then, that the satire of this generation is less a case of Us against Them, young against old, but introverted and self-reflexive, youth making a mockery of its own fate, and playing up to this image.

Hynes goes on to propose satire as an attitude towards the world – ‘a mocking, rejecting, dismissive attitude that is the spirit of the post-war time.’⁸ This view seems particularly pertinent to the satire of the younger generation

⁶ Evelyn Waugh (1983) ‘The Youngest Generation’ [editorial for *Lancing College Magazine*, December 1921]. In Donat Gallagher (Ed.) *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*. London: Methuen. p.11.

⁷ Evelyn Waugh (1983) ‘The War and the Younger Generation’ [first published in *The Spectator*, 13 April 1929]. In Donat Gallagher (Ed.) *The Essays, Articles & Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*. London: Methuen. pp.61-62.

⁸ Hynes, 1990, p.399.

in the late twenties, when disillusionment – of the apathetic, flippant, passive sort, as opposed to the bitter, angry, frustrated sort of ex-soldiers – reigned. Isherwood again provides a fitting example, describing his Oxford history tutor, whose:

... violent abruptness made him seem younger, less sure of himself, than the smooth-voiced sophisticated undergraduates of the post-war generation, who accepted his lurid comments on their work with polite unruffled mock humility and ever so slightly raised eyebrows.⁹

The strict Edwardian social order had been weakened, and many found that the life or career they would have expected to follow was no longer open to them, and therefore found themselves lacking any serious occupation. The satirists themselves stand apart in this respect: those who became highly successful such as Cecil Beaton or Evelyn Waugh were anomalies within a circle that included such notorious ‘failures’ as Bryan Howard and Stephen Tennant. But even if one can describe Beaton’s catty remarks about the older generation in his diary as satire, what of the pictures of his own group of friends? These make up the majority of his early experimental works, and yet lack the generational gap that provides the locus of the satire in his response to his parents’ generation. Without this distance, or dislocation of cultural and ethical norms, it is questionable how effectively Beaton’s photographs of his friends can function as satire. And if they are to be judged as such, it follows that Beaton himself must be implicated in this mockery too. Can these photographs then be seen in some sense as self-reflexive satire – less literal, but still following the precedent of Lewis’s self-portrait as a Tyro, in which the artist acknowledges his own role in the society he critiques? By the end of the twenties, this game of satirist and satirised had become far more complex and involved, as the use of satire itself by this stage became implicated in the extended dialogue between the generations. Satire was associated with the immediate post-war, with an underlying bitterness and seriousness of intention, and its adoption later in the decade – whether heartfelt or overtly

⁹ Isherwood, 1979, p.38.

superficial – was therefore always simultaneously a satiric response to the earlier recourse to this same mode.

Cecil Beaton's photographs and sketches of society figures began to appear in 1927, and the almost immediate success of these with the editors of *Vogue* – then, as now, an arbiter of fashionable taste – bears witness to his astute and nuanced understanding of the cultural climate at this time. But he was equally appreciated for his humorous approach; as Lesley Blanch, features editor of British *Vogue* from 1937-44 recalled, 'he was a barometer, the first to understand new trends, and had a wonderful sense of humour.'¹⁰ From his portraits of society hostesses and debutantes a scene stands out: a group of his friends pose in eighteenth-century costume on a sunny lawn at Wilsford, the family home of Stephen Tennant. The photograph is entitled in a 2009 catalogue *The Bright Young Things at Wilsford – William Walton, Cecil Beaton, Hon Stephen Tennant, Rex Whistler, Georgia Sitwell, Zita Jungman and Teresa Jungman, 1927* [fig.34] and Hugo Vickers substantiates this identification in an article on the Jungman sisters.¹¹ This is a scene of pure enjoyment, not apparently produced for publication, technical experimentation, or any commercial project; and for this reason, the picture seems to say a great deal more about the psychology and motives of Beaton and his circle – at the same time presenting many complex issues, ambiguities and contradictions. Not least of these is Beaton's approach to and use of satire, whether conscious or unconscious. Truman Capote described Beaton as a 'total self-creation', Cocteau as 'Malice in Wonderland'; both capture the artifice and the satirical spirit which Beaton chose to project – and which perhaps took over and

¹⁰ Lesley Blanch interviewed by Polly Devlin in *Vogue* [1966]. Cited by Josephine Ross (2012) *Beaton in Vogue*. London: Thames & Hudson. p.8.

¹¹ Chris Beetles Fine Photographs (2010). [Online]. Available at: <http://www.chrisbeetlesfinephotographs.com/gallery/all-stock/bright-young-things-wilsford-william-walton-cecil-beaton-hon-stephen-tennant-rex-w> [Accessed: 13 May 2013]; Hugo Vickers [n.d.] 'The Jungman Sisters, Part I', *New York Social Diary*. [online]. Available at: <http://www.newyorksocialdiary.com/node/1902624/print> [Accessed: 20 April 2013].

literally became his character. Like Evelyn Waugh, Beaton remained detached from those he described in words or pictures, despite appearing to be at the epicentre of the social circle known to posterity as the 'Bright Young People'.¹² Detachment is a critical element in any form of satire, and perhaps grew more easily during a period when uncertainty ruled, and among a generation who were attempting to define their identities during this time.

"'To live and die before a mirror" Baudelaire says': this was the dandy's slogan.¹³ In the modern age, to live and die before a camera might be equally appropriate. Jean Baudrillard has described dandyism as an aesthetic form of nihilism, and this offers a useful means of interpreting the self-presentation of Beaton and his friends in a picture such as this.¹⁴ A dandy is concerned primarily with physical appearance, and the maintenance of a life of leisure and refinement. This outlook corresponds to a certain benign nihilism that negates traditional values and beliefs. Both these definitions could be applied to Beaton and his contemporaries, whose fondness for frivolous display demonstrated an emphasis on exteriority that hid a lack of moral or ethical substance. The early novels of Waugh, such as *Decline and Fall* [1928] clearly illustrate this in the arbitrary randomness of events, the lack of any rationale of cause and effect, and a sheer delight in destruction. Martin Francis asserts that the 'linkage between individualism, display and narcissism' that dandyism proclaims came to characterise Beaton, as he frequently appears in

¹² Edith Olivier describes him among just such a social circle at Cap Ferrat where Stephen Tennant's mother had taken a house: 'a marble face and voice – hard polished surface, but not unattractive.' [Edith Olivier's MS Journal (no reference). In Laurence Whistler (1987) *The Laughter and the Urn: The Life of Rex Whistler*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. p.99.

¹³ Albert Camus (1970) *Notebooks 1942-1951*. New York: The Modern Library. p.8; Camus took this quote from a longer passage in which Baudelaire describes the defining features of the dandy as a man with 'no other calling than to cultivate the idea of beauty in their persons' and dandyism as 'a kind of cult of the self' and a 'doctrine of elegance and originality' [Charles Baudelaire (1995) *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. London: Phaidon. pp.27-28].

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard (1994) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. p.160.

front of the camera as well as behind it.¹⁵ There are manifold self-portraits by Beaton in his studio archive that show him appropriating diverse characters and identities – from the debonair photographer among his props, to the fun-loving holiday-maker, to his more bizarre manifestations as King Canute or as an Aladdin-type character wearing a tinsel-topped fez. Wyndham Lewis's search for an identity through repeated self-portraits in a schizophrenic range of personas is taken here to a new level. But this was as much due to the cultural zeitgeist as it was to Beaton's rich imagination; such a non-serious approach was typical of Beaton's generation. Lytton Strachey comments on this tendency towards what can only be described as manic dressing-up with the amused cynicism of the detached: 'the night before they had all dressed up as nuns, that morning ... as shepherds and shepherdesses ... Strange creatures – with just a few feathers where brains should be.'¹⁶ However, the apparent lack of brains was all part of the elaborate façade; though others such as Brian Howard may have lived such a life genuinely, Beaton certainly knew what he wanted to achieve as he feigned frivolity. He wanted success, adulation, social status, wealth – and that through capturing the ephemeral glamour and escapist dreams of his contemporaries.

Like Burra, Beaton 'utilized camp theatricality to create a "high style"' which, like that of Noël Coward, might be said to represent a 'sustained homosexual infiltration of mainstream ... culture' in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁷ Both male and female identities are brought into question here; all the protagonists of Beaton's Wilsford photographs are dressed in C18th men's clothes of knee breeches and stockings, shirts and waistcoats, but equally all wear heavy make-up, the lipstick and rouge defining the delicacy of their features, and there is little to tell apart the cropped, waved hair of either sex. Rex Whistler

¹⁵ Martin Francis (2006) 'Cecil Beaton's Romantic Toryism and the Symbolic Economy of Wartime Britain'. *Journal of British Studies*. 45 (1). p.100.

¹⁶ Letter from Lytton Strachey to Roger Senhouse, 27 October 1927. In Michael Holroyd (1968) *Lytton Strachey: A Critical Biography. Volume II: The Years of Achievement (1910-1932)*. London: Heinemann. p.559.

¹⁷ Francis, 2006, p.101; Terry Castle (1996) *Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits*. New York: Columbia University Press. p.2.

remarked of Stephen Tennant that he 'puts on as much [make-up] as a girl.'¹⁸ Such androgyny was a stance of deliberate rebellion at a time when the 'flapper vote' had already polarized opinion regarding equality between the sexes, and its formal presentation in photographic form helped to legitimize this social and cultural development.

The other participants captured on film on this afternoon at Wilsford in 1927 were equally enigmatic; like Beaton their identities seem amorphous, indefinable, changing with the silver gelatin that froze each successive manifestation of 'character.' It is almost as if they treat the very idea of a definitive identity – of ever hoping to pin one down for themselves – as a tragic joke. The Jungman sisters, Zita and Teresa, are described by Beaton as:

A pair of decadent 18th-century angels made of wax, exhibited at Madame Tussaud's before the fire.

And he goes on to describe Zita as being:

... like a medieval page, and with her swinging gait, she looks very gallant, very princely. But she can, if she wishes, easily become a snake-like beauty, with a mysterious smile and a cold glint in her upward slanting eyes, though it is more than likely that she will impersonate to perfection a charming village maiden laughing deliciously up an apple tree. Osbert Sitwell says of her classical, transparent beauty that it takes the spectator back to the realms painted on walls and ceilings of Venetian palaces, where gods and shepherdesses are depicted on clouds.¹⁹

The impression one gets from this description is that of a constantly metamorphosing, surrealistic fairy story, dependent on both the player – in this case Zita Jungman, ceaselessly altering her identity – and the narrator (or

¹⁸ Rex Whistler (no reference). In L. Whistler, 1987, p.101.

¹⁹ Hugo Vickers [n.d.] 'The Jungman Sisters, Part I', *New York Social Diary*.

[online]. Available at:

<http://www.newyorksocialdiary.com/node/1902624/print> [Accessed: 20 April 2013].

producer, perhaps, is a better word for a culture suddenly engaged by film) whose imagination skips onwards at random, his attention no sooner caught by one image than it flits on to the next. Stephen Tennant writes to Beaton in 1926 that he would like to be photographed looking 'drowned and picturesque' and comments on how Beaton's lighting always looks like moonlight.²⁰ The gothic horror scenario, however, fell not to Tennant but to Edith Sitwell, whom Beaton photographed as a corpse lying on a chequerboard tiled floor, holding white lilies to her chest and watched over by two stone putti [fig.38]. Tennant himself is pictured by Beaton as 'Prince Charming' [fig.35], lying in profile with his hands together in the style of a medieval tomb sculpture. These images of 'living corpses' add to the ambiguity surrounding the multiple identities of the personalities involved. They might, like traditional waxwork images or funerary monuments, imply immortality, a desire to preserve perfect youth and beauty for eternity; they may equally represent a subconscious reference to the generation of 'Golden Youth' killed in the First World War, in some way reflecting a survivor's guilt. Or perhaps these images simply represent an aesthetic nostalgia for the sentimental romance of the 'Death of Chatterton' and the Legend of King Arthur as conceived by the Pre-Raphaelites.²¹ The detachment of these scenes from contemporary reality might undermine their interpretation as satire, a mode dependent on its contemporaneity for its critical power; in this case, however, it is the very artificiality with which well-known modernist figures are placed in a pastiche of the past that introduces an element of the

²⁰ Autograph letter signed to Beaton, from Wilsford Manor, Salisbury, dated 1926 [A1/520/8]. Beaton Archive. Cambridge: St. John's College Library.

²¹ Victoriana became fashionable again among Beaton's contemporaries – as a reaction against both nineties aestheticism and the modernism of the Bloomsbury group; when Harold Acton arrived at Oxford he chose rooms in Meadow Buildings, Christ Church, a Ruskin-inspired homage to Venetian Gothic, that in Betjeman's words 'are an honest expression of the gas-enlightened 'sixties', and decorated them with Victorian bric-a-brac. Evelyn Waugh discerned in it also a rebellion against their parents' generation, 'the wish to scandalise parents who had themselves thrown out the wax-flowers and woolwork screens which we now ardently collected' [Humphrey Carpenter (1990) *The Brideshead Generation: Evelyn Waugh & His Friends*. London: Faber & Faber. pp.38-9].

ridiculous. The incongruity, for example, of Edith Sitwell, notorious for her novel approach to combining modernist poetry, music and performance in *Façade*, pictured seated at a harp in flowing floral dress before a Classical *fête champêtre* scene in tapestry [fig.37]. The Sitwells were ideal early patrons for Beaton, epitomising the difficult relationship between continuity and change, tradition and modernity – the children of a baronet, they rebelled against their heritage, patronising emerging modernist poets, musicians and artists. Their established position as arbiters of modernism by 1927 allowed Beaton to depict Edith in such a setting with tongue in cheek, knowing that the incongruity would be recognised by his contemporaries. Edith herself clearly enjoyed the ironic humour of a formal portrait amid the overwhelming magnificence of her family home at Renishaw, from whence, following a miserable childhood, she had worked hard to escape.

But Beaton's photographic aesthetic is as eclectic and protean as his subject matter; Tennant is photographed in a futuristic shiny mackintosh [fig.36] in the same year as he appears in the eighteenth century 'fête galante' at Wilsford, and is also reported by a gossip columnist thus:

The Honourable Stephen Tennant arrived in an electric brougham wearing a football jersey and earrings.²²

There was a genuine desire for escapism among Beaton's contemporaries; having grown up against the backdrop of the First World War, and coming of age in a society subjected to the throes of change – industrial strikes, modernisation, post-war reconstruction – those with the means to do so reacted by retreating to a fantasy realm of wild parties. The trend for dressing up clearly signals a desire to take on different identities, to abandon the moral codes and responsibilities that pertain to one's 'real' self. Beaton's

²² Gossip column in the *Daily Express* [1927]. Cited by Laura Havlin (2010), 'Vintage Style: Stephen Tennant, Bright Young Thing'. *AnOther*. [Online]. Available at: www.anothermag.com/current/view/360/Stephen_Tennant_Bright_Young_Thing [Accessed: 13 May 2013].

attraction to Ashcombe, the house in Wiltshire that he leased from the early 1930s, stems, in his own words, from its otherworldliness:

From that moment a year ago when, after exciting adventures in search of this enchanted spot, I walked under the arch and stood spellbound at the romantic beauty of the place, I was determined that Ashcombe should be mine ... It looks rather like a dwelling to which some royalty has been banished in a fairy story.²³

The photograph at Wilsford has all the theatricality that Beaton became renowned for. In direct contrast to Cartier-Bresson and other early photojournalists who during this period developed the 'decisive moment' approach which aimed to capture reality in motion, Beaton's photographs were openly artificial constructs. From the very beginning of his career Beaton experimented with lighting, backdrops and an ever more inventive use of props to create a fantasy alter ego for his sitters, elegant, poised and timeless. The use of mirrors, torn paper, classical sculpture and cellophane, which surrounded, even engulfed his subjects, has elements of surrealism to it. As Philip Hoare writes in his biography of Stephen Tennant, Beaton's 'unusual techniques – he would put his sitters under a dome, or photograph them from above, perched precariously on stepladders – caught the *zeitgeist* exactly; an experimental, head-over-heels modernism.'²⁴

The experimentation in this sense, while purely aesthetic, visual not technical, might be said to parallel that of Man Ray, who had established a close relationship with the Dada and the nascent Surrealist groups in Paris by the late 1920s. Man Ray's rayographs and solarisations were ultimately technical adaptations, a use of equipment and chemicals to present everyday objects, or the human body, in a completely different guise.²⁵ They are far more abstract

²³ Beaton, in a 1932 article for *Vogue*, for which I have been unable to find the original source. Cited by Ross, 2012, p.10.

²⁴ Philip Hoare (1990) *Serious Pleasure: The Life of Stephen Tennant*. London: Penguin. p.65.

²⁵ Man Ray describes the experiments which led to his invention of the Rayograph process in his autobiography, commenting that 'they looked

than Beaton's photographs, which continued to fulfil the requirements of traditional portraiture, however avant-garde in concept. The rayographs suggest a photographic equivalent to the Surrealists' technique of automatic drawing, using a random selection of objects, subjecting them to the photographic process, and interpreting the results as significant – artistically, if not in psychological meaning. Beaton achieved his effects through similarly haphazard means, experimenting with lighting, camera angles and the reflective qualities of various materials, and the results often verged on the surreal, confusing the imaginary persona with the real one. Man Ray was an important forerunner for Beaton in terms of breaking down accepted conventions of photography; his innovations showed how photography could be used to contradict 'its own assumed role as faithful record or document', questioning the 'truth' of the image.²⁶

Man Ray, however, was far less concerned with portraiture; he became successful as a society photographer in Paris but saw this primarily as a means to earn money, inferior to his experimental work – indeed photography as a medium was initially adopted as a money-making sideline to his painting career.²⁷ To Beaton, in contrast, photography was his primary medium, and in portraiture – whether or not the financial or artistic concerns were uppermost – he found the means to experiment. Indeed, Beaton's experimentation centred on the blurring of the distinction between the sitter as subject, as a distinct personality, and the sitter as object, an element in an elaborate still life. It is the continued centrality of the human subject in Beaton's photographs that might allow them to be seen as satirical, whereas

startlingly new and mysterious ... [Tristan Tzara] spotted my prints on the wall at once, becoming very enthusiastic; they were pure Dada creations, he said' [Man Ray (2012) *Self-Portrait*. London: Penguin. pp.128-129].

²⁶ Dawn Ades (2008) 'Camera Creation'. In Jennifer Mundy (Ed.) *Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia* [exh. cat.] London: Tate. p.92.

²⁷ In summer 1922 Duchamp wrote to Man Ray, remarking 'Vanity Fair is full of portraits by you' [cited by Dawn Ades, 2008, p.99], while in his autobiography Man Ray records how, following the unsuccessful reception of two works at the Salon des Indépendents, he gave up on painting and 'turned all my attention to getting myself organised as a professional photographer ... I was going to make money' [Man Ray, 2012, p.119].

those of Man Ray, focussed on form rather than character, will never be seen as such. For instance, Beaton's images of Edith Sitwell posing as a Renaissance harpist or medieval tomb sculpture depend upon the viewer recognising this distinctive poet and patroness of the arts [see figs.37 & 38]; the incongruity of her insertion into a different context stimulates a satiric response. Even where Man Ray uses a recognisable model such as Kiki de Montparnasse whose recognisable features and strong personality could have been used to similar effect, he treats her merely as an anonymous form; his famous 1926 series was entitled *Noir et Blanche*, emphasising the abstract play of light and dark [fig.32].

One of Man Ray's photographs of two identically dressed dancers, previously referred to in relation to Edward Burra's *The Two Sisters* [fig.13], may have had a more direct effect on Beaton. This picture was unusual in his oeuvre, being a double portrait with an additional element of humour in the formal monochrome effect of their circus-style costumes. It was soon after this image was published in *Vogue* in 1926 that Beaton began experimenting with photography at home, using his sisters as models. One early picture of Nancy and Baba Beaton shows them wearing matching brocade dresses with swags of pearls around their necks; with their similar features and blonde bobs they turn towards the camera with an impassive stare, the mirror image of each other. Even if it was not a conscious borrowing from Man Ray or elsewhere, the image nevertheless testifies to the attraction for Beaton of the 'doubled' showgirl trope that was a key element in the satire of Burra and others, as discussed above. And this may have been one of the photographs that Beaton showed to Diaghilev in Venice, as he recalls in interview:

He [Diaghilev] was very impressed with my photographs of Nancy and Baba; they were taken using very unlike-the-usual photographic models; they were just very photogenic, that's why they were published, but they were really very unlike the sort of things that had

been seen in the manager's office ... but Diaghilev found them very interesting...²⁸

This meeting never came to anything, but the effect of fantasy achieved through artificial theatricality that characterised Beaton's photography must have been partly inspired by the Ballets Russes, the sets and costumes of Diaghilev's troupe, designed by a host of famous artists including Bakst, Picasso and Cocteau. The Ballets Russes first performed in London in summer 1911, and reappeared immediately after the armistice in September 1918, continuing to perform in Britain throughout the twenties. Before and after the war, its productions had a revolutionary effect on fashion and décor, though by the late twenties the initial excitement induced by the colour and exoticism of costumes and sets may have worn off slightly.²⁹ However, in one respect at least Beaton owed much to the Ballets Russes: it effectively prepared the British public for a more spectacular and extravagant mode of display. As Osbert Sitwell recalls:

As a result of the influence of the Russian Ballet, the art of spectacle was again beginning to be understood ... And decoration was in the air ... The currents that showed were mostly foreign, and reached life through the theatre – a new development. Every chair-cover, every lamp-shade, every cushion reflected the Russian Ballet, the Grecian or Oriental visions of Bakst and Benois...³⁰

²⁸ Cecil Beaton, interviewed by Roy Plomley on Desert Island Discs, BBC Radio 4, originally broadcast on Saturday 26 January 1980. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio/player/p009mwlh> [Accessed:12 April 2013].

²⁹ Stephen Calloway writes that artists and designers (most famously Paul Poiret) responded 'most excitedly to the explosion of saturated hues and sumptuous fabrics of the Russian costumes and decors', and quotes Osbert Lancaster's description of this phenomenon as the 'First Russian Ballet Period' in which 'pastel shades ... were replaced by a variety of barbaric hues – jade green, purple, every variety of crimson and scarlet, and, above all, orange' [Stephen Calloway (2010) 'The Wider Influence of the Russian Ballet'. In Jane Pritchard (Ed.) *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909-1929* (exh. cat.) London: V&A. pp.126-127].

³⁰ Osbert Sitwell (1948) *Great Morning*. London: Macmillan. pp.231-235.

The Sitwells were early patrons of Beaton, and so their patronage of and passion for the Ballets Russes may well have been influential in Beaton's playful early portraits of the siblings. By the twenties, the Ballets Russes was known and accepted by a wider viewing public, and counted such important socialites as Emerald Cunard among its supporters; thus theatrical references in Beaton's work might even have been a deliberate allusion to this fashionable, yet still avant-garde, form of entertainment. One feature of the post-war period was a yearning for escapism, which the Ballet Russes with its fantastical set and costumes and unified aesthetic provided more completely than many other shows. It created an alternative, dream-like world – often based on fairy tales and folklore – onto which viewers could project their own fantasies. Beaton likewise used props and costume to create an alternative identity and context for his sitters. It is interesting that Osbert Sitwell saw a contemporary relevance in the ballets, especially *Petrouchka* [see fig.16]:

This ballet was, in its scope as a work of art, universal; it presented the European contemporary generation with a prophetic and dramatised version of the fate reserved for it...³¹

Petrouchka tells the tale of a puppet with feelings who is humiliated and finally killed by the Moor and returns as a ghost in the finale. Looking back, as Sitwell does, to the time of its première in 1911 it could indeed be seen as an eerie premonition of the meaningless deaths by a foreign hand that wiped out so many of the 'contemporary generation'. Did it still have such a powerful relevance in the years after the war? It would appear so, as the theme of puppets persists. Wyndham Lewis describes the actions of the painted Tyro in 1921 as 'that of a puppet worked with deft fingers, with a screaming voice underneath.'³² During the course of the 1920s the puppet trope is modernised, and morphs into the robotic machine-person with the advent of films such as *Metropolis*, an adaptation that was reflected in painting. Burra's showgirls, as described in the previous chapter, conform to this idea of the

³¹ O. Sitwell, 1948, p.241.

³² Wyndham Lewis (1921) Foreword to *Tyros and Portraits* [exh. cat.] London: Leicester Galleries/Ernest Brown & Phillips. p.8.

mechanical puppet. The Ballets Russes prefigured this development too: *Parade*, which appeared in 1917, 'seemed to herald the Machine Age of the Ballets Russes', transforming 'the traditional ballet into an industrial entity, wherein the dancer was no longer the star or the centrepiece, but simply a cog in the theatrical machine, anonymous, automatic and replaceable.'³³ The psychological change implicit in the leap from a puppet imbued with life and emotion to a living person become machine is enormous, and the war must go some way to explaining such a transformation of cultural associations.³⁴ Lewis seems to bridge the gap, describing the Tyros explicitly as 'puppets', yet painting them with sharp angles and a metallic sheen so that they appear mechanical rather than straw-filled dolls. And while they exhibit a will of their own it is that of automatons running out of their creator's control rather than the emotions of love and jealousy, together with a sense of frustrated fatality, that characterise the puppet Petrouchka. In terms of Beaton's early photography, these ballets may not have any direct bearing beyond their decorative qualities, yet the cultural and psychological shift that they reflect is echoed in Beaton's work. His sitters are neither puppets nor automatons, they depict living personalities, yet these personalities are deliberately dissociated from reality, deposited in a superficial realm where displays of emotion are banished, where the costume and props stand in as 'attributes' symbolic of the absent emotion that has been displaced from the body of the sitters themselves.

Photography, and film, held the possibility of literally reproducing reality, while also allowing the artist licence to alter this reality. As cinema had begun to develop from a shadowy expressionism into a 'New Objectivity'

³³ John E. Bowlit (2010) 'Léon Bakst, Natalia Goncharova and Pablo Picasso'. In Pritchard (Ed.), 2010-11, pp.112-114.

³⁴ Firstly, because it introduced mechanical warfare on a vast scale, replacing much previous human contact between opposing armies; secondly, the Golden Youth were cut down in such swathes in the trenches as to become merely statistics yet were remembered as such luminous personalities, while the generation that tried to forget their elder siblings in the twenties rejected emotional responses, to remain frivolous and superficial was an accepted code, and their endless round of parties, jazz dances and motor-cars has something of the mechanical in its repetition.

realism, so photography had left behind the soft-edged Pictorialist approach for a more precise and defined aesthetic. Yet Beaton was not actively trying to document a time or place; like the ballet and the cinema, he was offering a form of escapism, taking his sitters out of the real world into a glittering, glamorous alternative. Conversely, this non-realist approach roots Beaton's early work very much in its time, a time when psychology demanded and technology enabled the photographic subject to reject real life in favour of fantasy. The question here, however, is whether there is any connection to be made between Beaton's photography and the behaviour of the society he photographed, and the tendency towards satire of the kind that can be perceived in the paintings of the same period, such as those of Edward Burra. It is important in this respect to define the period of analysis. Beaton's early career is still marked by a playfulness – he may be serious in his dedication to photography, but he writes about it as if it were all an enormously fun social whirl and a bit of a practical joke; a very different approach indeed from the professional photographer who would go on to document the blitz and immortalise the young Queen Elizabeth and her family. Looking exclusively at the years from 1926 when his career really started to take off, to around 1930, the playful experimentation, the element of fancy-dress fun, is clearly predominant – and this is proven in Beaton's correspondence and diaries. Everything to Beaton seems to be 'amusing' or 'great fun' – and this comes across in his private writings, not only in correspondence, so cannot be dismissed as merely a social façade. He writes in his diary for 1926:

The two Guinness' came in to be photographed after lunch ... they brought very amusing clothes & I was thrilled to take Meraud in her amusing things, ermine tippetts & muffs, black velvet coats with steel buttons ... we had a riot in Nancy & Baba's room, a complete orgy of dressing up & we became excited & hysterically happy...³⁵

Their dresses really were great fun – lovely – what fun if they come out in "the papers" – Nancy in her white & pink bustle with the

³⁵ Diary entry dated December 31st 1926. Beaton Archive.

extraordinary little perky hat, Baba in scarlet & gold looking very sumptuous as Lady Mary Beaton – what fun it all was!³⁶

The language is the same in the correspondence between Beaton and Stephen Tennant, in which Tennant discusses ideas for future projects:

...I'm so glad Dobson wants to do us – what excruciating fun it'll be!! – visiting each other's bust & commenting cattily, - I want to be a voluptuous skeleton, - just cheekbones & a navel really...³⁷

I like the idea of the men's ... tableaux but I personally only want to be an archaic or classical figure – no more P. Charming for me, - I would love to be either in the Dizraeli [*sic*] one or the Boccacian one. You must decide, what fun they will be!!³⁸

... I want to be photographed drowned in picturesque rags, like this [sketch] – or would it be too funny? a sham moon would be such fun!³⁹

What needs to be addressed is how far his manner of discussing his work with friends or in his diary reflects any real satirical or parodic element in the work, and how far this manner of communication was simply the habitual mode of his generation. Does the one equate to the other? It would appear that a satiric approach had become habitual to this generation, and that somewhere in the line of inheritance satire had become fashionable rather than combative, characterised by a sharp wit, accompanied by a mocking and flippant attitude. In the process, the targeted bitterness that had given satire its edge was submerged in whimsical amusements.

The obvious admiration Tennant had for Beaton and his enthusiasm for his work was coupled with Beaton's reciprocated friendship and appreciation of

³⁶ Diary entry dated December 31st 1926. Beaton Archive.

³⁷ Letter from Tennant to Beaton from Wilsford [156], dated Saturday 12th October [1929?]. Beaton Archive.

³⁸ Letter from Tennant to Beaton from Falloden [115], n.d. Beaton Archive.

³⁹ Letter from Tennant to Beaton from Wilsford [8], dated Wednesday 1926. Beaton Archive.

such a willing muse – Beaton records in his diary for December 21st 1926 that he ‘met Stephen Tennant for the first time & liked him enormously.’⁴⁰ This mutual interest in producing striking and imaginative photographs has no element of mockery to it; it seems quite genuine and straightforward.

However, the image that they were promoting of themselves – and more widely of their social circle, even of their whole ‘generation’ – must have been apparent to both men. They must have been aware of the shock value of the fancy-dress outfits they wore and the indolent way of life they promoted, the deliberate androgyny and sexual ambiguity. Beaton had ambition, as his diaries prove, always trying to get his photos into the press; so these pictures, which appear as informal snapshots or portraits of friends, were in fact carefully considered for *Tatler* or the gossip-columns of the London papers (something Tennant was equally keen to effect).⁴¹ This ulterior – or in reality, superior – commercial motive changes the way one looks at the pictures. The sitters seem to act up to a rebellious stereotype of youth that the gossip-columns (written by members of the protagonists’ own circle) had already succeeded in creating, perpetuating the self-fulfilling mythology of disillusioned, doomed youth that Evelyn Waugh had predicted in 1921.

The act of isolating stereotypical elements of a figure that sum up a more general attitude in a critical manner must be viewed as a form of satire. However, Beaton could not have achieved this particular form of satire at any other point in history; it is dependent on a fortuitous coalition of circumstances, historical and psychological, which this generation found themselves subject to. The historical context and the problematic generational dislocations experienced in the post-war period have already been outlined in the introduction; added to this were more specific, yet inevitably related, idiosyncrasies. Firstly the propensity for superficiality,

⁴⁰ Diary entry dated December 21st 1926. Beaton Archive.

⁴¹ Beaton writes in his diary on Boxing Day 1926: ‘I thought it would be such a good plan to send photos to the *Tatler* at Christmas time when other professional photographers would be so busy getting out their orders that they’d never have time to do press prints’; Tennant writes to Beaton in 1927 concerning which prints should be sent to the papers [Beaton Archive].

flippancy, camp exaggeration and a gossip-column mentality focussed on appearance and scandal. Secondly a desire to escape reality and responsibilities through creating alternative realities that yet were deliberately presented as artificial constructs. The attraction to the rococo arcadias of the eighteenth century, to chivalric medieval legend, and to the realm of fairy stories all stemmed from this same contradictory desire.

That the eighteenth century held a particular charm as a locus of the imagination for this generation of artists in the 1920s is corroborated by the work of Rex Whistler. Whistler appears in eighteenth century costume in the Wilsford tableau described above, but by this time was already established as a mural painter of rococo-style landscapes. In 1925, while still a student at the Slade, he had won a commission for the embellishment of the Tate Gallery restaurant; this developed into a narrative cycle entitled 'In Pursuit of Rare Meats', the story elaborated in literary form by Edith Olivier's 'Guide to Epicurania' [fig.39]. It is at first glance an obvious pastiche of the rococo style of Fragonard and Boucher, and the landscapes of Claude, but this impression is subverted by references to the modern day, with girls in plus fours and Eton crops. The characters' names, recorded by Olivier, are cryptic or anagrams of contemporary personalities, with the artist – on a bicycle – taking as pseudonym the Polish version of his name. Osbert Sitwell thought the mural 'deft and light-hearted' in the style of the Russian ballet, and Laurence Whistler endorses this contextualisation, pointing out that 'mockery was in the post-war air' and asserting that Rex was 'adding to the savour.'⁴² The incongruous appearance of contemporary 'types' stranded in an idealised fantasy landscape provokes ridicule and allows this work to be loosely interpreted as satire.⁴³ Contemporary reviewers described the newly

⁴² L. Whistler, 1987, p.96.

⁴³ Laurence Whistler describes the original concept as an 'Arcadian strip cartoon' in his biography, and cites Rex's Slade tutor, Henry Tonks, who remarks that 'he [Rex] has a certain gift of humour' in a letter to Augustus

decorated restaurant as ‘the most amusing room in Europe’, and a recent exhibition catalogue notes that even as a student there was a ‘strong sense of the grotesque and of that love of the comic which would never leave him.’⁴⁴ The Sitwells were an important influence on Whistler, too, and he painted small oil portraits of the siblings – that of Edith, a small precise figure seated on a throne-like chair against a dark background, is whimsical and has a fairy-tale quality to it, already quite distinctive in style. Osbert would later write of Whistler’s art as:

More than historical pastiche ... brilliant and unashamedly figurative and decorative; by turns witty or wistful, humorous or poetic; full of knowing nods to the art of the past, but startling in its invention, Rex Whistler’s work now seems in many ways a quintessential expression of the complex spirit of those in-between times of the 1920s and 1930s in England. Rex had both a traditional sense of poetry and a rather more modern sense of humour. He loved the melancholy of crumbling temples in country house parks, but he also adored sleek, fast cars. In that brilliant, foreboding era with its heady mix of nostalgia for a vanishing civilisation and headlong enthusiasm for frivolous innovation, Rex’s art proclaimed the triumph of fancy.⁴⁵

This description captures the inherent contradictions that define Whistler and Beaton’s generation, and which generated their particular form of satire. Both their relationship with the past, and their acceptance of the present, was complex, and it seems that the only way these artists could find to adequately address these anxieties, to articulate their own position in contemporary society, was through a satire based on fantasy. They actively sought safety in

Daniel [trustee, and from 1929-33 Director, of the National Gallery] just prior to the Tate mural commission [L. Whistler, 1987, pp.91-92].

⁴⁴ J.B. Manson, writing in the *Saturday Review* [17 December 1927]. Cited in Stephen Calloway (2006) *Rex Whistler: The Triumph of Fancy* [exh. cat.] Brighton: Brighton Museum & Art Gallery. p.15; *ibid.* p.14; Laurence Whistler points out that ‘amusing’ and ‘absurd’ were words in vogue in the twenties and bestowed then as high praise [L. Whistler, 1987, p.97].

⁴⁵ Cited in Calloway, 2006, pp.25-26.

the art of the past, either copying or literally using classical and rococo backdrops, while then undermining this tradition by the incongruity of contemporary intrusions and openly parodic portrayals of modern figures. It seems to point to a profound lack of confidence in either the past or the future, ridiculing outdated tropes and the culture that they represented which no longer held any significance in the modern world, while showing up the lack of values in that modern world which led its inhabitants to seek solace in the past. Sitwell's view of the artist emphasises his eclecticism and idiosyncrasy, traits characteristic of his time, which mirror the protean nature of the personalities themselves, transforming themselves almost daily in an ever-changing masquerade.

David North underlines the fact that the desire for escapism permeating art in the twenties was a direct result of the recent horrors of the First World War. Whistler's borrowings from the eighteenth century, he concludes, were 'his big joke, really: to insist that there had been a crueller, funnier time two centuries ago and one could send it up with irresponsible envy' and that in the twenties there developed 'a visual taste for an age when fancy was deliberate and unselfconscious.'⁴⁶ Whistler and his contemporaries found in the eighteenth century an alternative locus onto which to displace their fears and anxieties, thereby detaching them from the present and addressing them objectively. In addition, the eighteenth century was generally acknowledged as the age of traditional British satire and therefore appeared an appropriate point of comparison with their work, and one to which similarities were drawn by many. But, as Laurence Whistler comments, 'Rex's mockery was wistful because, unlike the others, he was half in love with what he mocked.'⁴⁷ He yearned for a pre-industrial age, and this desire of an 'impenitent

⁴⁶ Richard D. North (2006) 'The Artist as Socialite and Soldier: Rex Whistler: *The Triumph of Fancy* at the Brighton Museum and Art Gallery'. *The Social Affairs Unit* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/001045.php> [Accessed: 20 April 2013].

⁴⁷ L. Whistler, 1987, p.97.

romantic' was accentuated by being of a generation who felt separated from a more idyllic past by the chasm of the Great War.⁴⁸

Whistler's later murals, especially that at Plas Newydd for the Marquess of Anglesey, continued to develop his technique of fantasy rococo landscapes pervaded with personal or contemporary references for the amusement of the artist and his patron. In these later murals, however, the element of satire fades to quirky pastiche; there is no longer enough of the contemporary, or any sense of critique to be discerned. However, his double portrait of the Dudley Ward sisters [fig.40] contains quite obviously satirical elements. The sisters have the appearance of waxwork mannequins, standing side by side in identical dresses against a Claudian classical landscape. They seem intruders in this idyllic scene, jarringly modern in appearance where one would expect to see Renaissance lute-players or reclining rococo courtesans. And they appear disconnected from the other elements of the painting, more suited to the surroundings of an art deco cruise ship than an Arcadian picnic. Whistler depicts himself as the satyr spouting water from the Watteau-esque fountain, looking with unashamed desire at the beautiful Penelope Dudley Ward – a mordant self-mockery perhaps of his 'hopeless' passion for Penelope, which is recorded by Laurence Whistler in his biography.⁴⁹ Laying out the food on the steps below is a strange caricature of a black servant in a top hat, his costume of an indefinable era, and similarly out of synch with this mythical realm. He seems to belong, like his counterpart in the Tate mural, to a Firbankian world of fantasy and innuendo. Firbank's novels, like Whistler's murals, are typically set in imaginary kingdoms, though often with a strong resemblance to real locations, such as the Balkans in *The Flower Beneath the Foot* [1923]. Osbert Sitwell recalls that Firbank had a 'marked love and understanding of the stage and its personalities', and this fondness is clearly apparent in his

⁴⁸ L. Whistler, 1987, p.144.

⁴⁹ Laurence Whistler quotes a letter from Rex at the time he was working on the portrait: "almost dying of her loveliness. It makes the painting very difficult" [Letter to Edith Olivier, dated 1 April 1932 (private papers). In L. Whistler, 1987, p.171]; Edith recalls him 'half demented with love' but 'he can't possibly marry – as he has no money' [oral reminiscence. In L. Whistler, 1987, p.182].

descriptions of luxuriant but quite arbitrary scenery, of extravagant costumes and exaggerated characters such as are described in this typical vignette:⁵⁰

The Countess decided on presenting the fallen senator with a pannier of well-grown, early pears, a small “heath” and the Erotic Poems, bound in half calf with tasteful tooling, of a Schoolboy Poet ... Never had summer shown a day more propitiously clement than the afternoon in mid-autumn they prepared to set out ... the Countess had arrayed herself in a winter gown of kingfisher-tinted silk turning to turquoise, and stencilled in purple at the arms and neck with a crisp Greek-key design; while a voluminous violet veil, depending behind her to a point, half concealed a tricorne turquoise toque from which arose a shaded lilac aigrette branching several ways.⁵¹

Whistler’s painted protagonists, though they are refused the prop of Firbank’s witty dialogue, nevertheless display the same theatrical overstatement, their place within the narrative strongly proclaimed, though the narrative itself remains mysterious.⁵² Jocelyn Brooke writes of Firbank as a ‘master of pastiche – his style, indeed, is really a kind of exuberant “dressing –up”, and suggests the pranks of a highly-sophisticated child let loose in the old-clothes chest.’⁵³ And yet Brooke identifies a ‘curious ambivalence in his work, a perpetual conflict between his ninetyish sensibility’ – an influence which usually appears ‘in the guise of parody or conscious pastiche’ – and ‘a cynical self-mockery.’⁵⁴

There are interesting comparisons that can be drawn between Whistler’s double portrait and Edward Burra’s *The Two Sisters* [fig.13]. Burra, unlike Whistler, does not identify his sitters – though it has been asserted that they

⁵⁰ Osbert Sitwell’s reminiscences in Ifan Kyrle Fletcher (1930) *Ronald Firbank: A Memoir*. London: Duckworth. p.128.

⁵¹ Ronald Firbank (1981) ‘The Flower Beneath the Foot’. In *Five Novels*. New York: New Directions. pp.64-65.

⁵² Laurence Whistler specifically mentions Firbank in his biography of Rex as a novelist whom his brother particularly enjoyed [L. Whistler, 1987, p.96].

⁵³ Jocelyn Brooke, 1951, p.12.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

could be the Dolly sisters – and they are far more grotesquely caricatural. Whistler's painting is acknowledged as a portrait and therefore the two must be seen from slightly different viewpoints. However, in both paintings, the sisters are dressed identically and sit or stand in similar poses with similar mannerisms. In both cases their appearance within Italianate landscapes seems incongruous and the circumstances ambiguous. Both artists reference the eighteenth century, Burra in terms of the 'conversation piece', the sisters daintily sipping from tea-cups, while Whistler invokes the 'fêtes galantes' of Watteau, with the black servant and the composition with its classical fountain. In both paintings the sisters look totally out of place, the embodiment of the 1920s in every aspect of their appearance, from their fashionable clothes to their haircuts – though the Dolly sisters are markedly dissipated, overly made up with breasts on show, in contrast to the girlish and innocent beauty of the Dudley Ward sisters. And both feature a servant who proffers ripe fruit and wine – symbols of fertility, decadence, and exoticism. Their allusive value as objects is altered in this Firbankian age from the simple abundance and fertility proclaimed by such harvest in traditional *fête champêtre* scenes. The passage quoted above from *The Flower Beneath the Foot* makes explicit the link between ripe pears and erotic poetry, and this same association might be asserted by the basket stuffed with ripe peaches and grapes in Whistler's painting. The half-deferential, half-coquettish and mischievous expression on the face of the servant who proffers the fruit certainly suggests such undercurrents of lewd intrigue. And Burra's scantily clad, overtly made-up servant, though his gaze is passive, holds his perfectly ripe pears like an attribute denoting his role in this farcical montage. Another passage from *The Flower Beneath the Foot* suggests the tone which predominated within the artists' social set, at once flippant and bawdy, with a camp extravagance to the language:

“Men are my raging disgust,” a florid girl of stupendous beauty declared, saturating with a flacon of *Parfum cruel* her prematurely formed silhouette ... The negress chuckled jauntily.⁵⁵

Simon Martin writes of the ‘Hogarthian sense for humorous detail’ in a painting such as Burra’s, and this could also be said of Whistler’s style. Writing of Rex’s ‘Reversible Faces’ – invented for Shell, and later published in OHO! and AHA – Laurence Whistler recalls that ‘it pleased him [Rex] to reflect on Hogarth doing much the same in Georgian terms.’⁵⁶ However Watteau and Firbank seem better comparisons, with their idyllic imaginary landscape settings, and the ambiguity of their narrative in contrast to the moralistic clarity of Hogarth. Essentially, what narrative there is on Cythera or in Pisuerga seems to be no more than an artificial construct within which to parade fantastically costumed characters and muse on their sensual liaisons. Both artists have a keen eye for detail and an ability to capture the essence of a character, and magpie-like they combine their collected observations within one painting, creating a palimpsest of references. It is the immediacy of these observations, the fragments of contemporary life inserted almost at random, that assert these works as satire. The vapid and frivolous nature of contemporary society is thrown into relief against the background beauty of a timeless nature and its abundant products.

There will forever be speculation about the possible trajectory that Whistler’s career might have followed had he not been killed in action in 1944.

However, excepting his amusing *Allegory: HRH The Prince Regent Awakening the Spirit of Brighton*, painted on the walls of his regiment’s communal living quarters, his output of the later thirties shows a decided move away from the whimsical towards a relatively conventional portraiture – his own self-portrait in army uniform stands out, distinguished in hindsight by a keen poignancy.

⁵⁵ Firbank, 1981, pp.315-316.

⁵⁶ Martin, 2011, p.40; L. Whistler, 1987, p.129.

Beaton, employed as a photographer by the Ministry of Information during the war, went on to have a long and successful career. But though his imaginative style endured, he moved definitively away from the overtly playful, satirical images of the twenties. As his reputation grew he gained more prestigious clients and consequently his personal flamboyance had to be curbed in favour of presenting his subjects as they wanted to appear in their often very public roles. Beaton was first commissioned by the then Queen Elizabeth in 1939, and took his first photographs of Princess Elizabeth in 1942. He continued to use elaborate props to create an idealised Arcadian setting as he had in his early pictures of his sisters. In one image of 1945, the Princess is carefully posed in an elaborately embroidered dress among garlands of fresh carnations [fig.41]. The rococo backdrop of embracing putti in a leafy bower that frames the composition is borrowed from Fragonard's *The Swing* (c.1767). The bleaching out of a 'halo' around the sitter was a common practice of Beaton's, but one which here places the Princess in the role of Fragonard's lady, flirting with her lover who reclines below – though it is unlikely that Beaton meant to make any such analogy, the backdrop more probably chosen simply for its framing effects. The choice is appropriate given the abundance of nature and the use of traditional compositional devices of landscape painting, which echo solid, permanent English values – in contrast to the abstract futurism lent by the use of shimmering cellophane in portraits of his sisters, such as *Miss Nancy Beaton as a Shooting Star* [fig.42]. In the portrait of Princess Elizabeth, the sitter is now more important than the overall theatrical *mise-en-scene*; while Beaton's sisters had to some extent *become*, in their costumes, the nymphs or fairy-queens who dwelt in such idylls, the personality and the symbolic presence of Princess Elizabeth are foremost in her portraits. Nancy and Baba Beaton maintain an air of enigma, looking soulfully just beyond the camera; the Princess, however, looks at the camera and smiles, revealing her humanity and connection to the real world of the spectator. Her importance as a distinct personality is a consequence not only of who she is, or the weight of the institution and history of the monarchy that she represents, but is also necessitated by world events. The outcome of the war was far from certain in 1942, and therefore

Beaton must have been aware of the need to create an image that conveyed a sense of tradition, stability and serene leadership. And, perhaps most importantly, hope; the youth and beauty of the Princess allied to the blossoming of nature all around her insist on an optimistic view of the nation that would emerge from the ashes of the war.

His wartime work for the Ministry of Information showed a similar shift in sensibility, as Martin Francis writes, ‘from playful frivolity to the seriousness of literally life-and-death situations, from artificial glamour to sober realism, and, most critically of all, from a celebration of privilege to a lionization of the courage and sacrifice of ordinary soldiers and civilians.’⁵⁷ Beaton’s contemporary, Peter Quennell, noted ‘how odd and archaic are ... [the] fancy dress parties and High Bohemian jinks and “amusing” furniture, baroque knick-knacks, bead fringes and flowers under glass bells’ and praised him in 1946 for repudiating his earlier these in favour of, in Francis’s words, a ‘commendably direct ... matter-of-fact approach.’⁵⁸ Though, as Martin Francis makes clear, the wartime photographs perhaps overstate the extent to which Beaton’s work changed; the protagonists in most images are heroic and virile, in complete contrast to the debutantes and models he had become known for idealizing, thus implying a major ‘shift from frivolous and fantasized “feminine” fashion photography to serious “masculine” documentary realism.’⁵⁹ However, at a more fundamental level, Beaton’s snobbishness, his effete individualism and stylistic elegance remained intact. Acknowledging this, it is more useful to look at Beaton’s royal portraits, in which his natural penchant for artifice, imagination and fantasy remains, evolving naturally out of his early experiments; all that is missing now is the essence of satire. Despite the fairy-like presentation of Princess Elizabeth ‘there was nothing ironic or disingenuous in Beaton’s fantasia of royal splendour’ – to Beaton, like

⁵⁷ Francis, 2006, p.90.

⁵⁸ Peter Quennell’s commentary in Cecil Beaton & Peter Quennell (1946) *Time Exposure*. London: B.T. Batsford. p.125; Francis, 2006, p.90.

⁵⁹ Francis, 2006, p.91.

most of the population, 'the royal family represented stability and continuity, a reassuringly steadfast presence amid the violent dislocation of total war.'⁶⁰

One finds the same development in his diaries as in his photographs: where waspish comments come naturally to him in the twenties, so he approaches his early career with the same detached sense of mockery – often self-mockery. As he matures, his career, and world events more generally, demand to be taken more seriously, and Beaton leaves satire in his wake. It was casually inherited, ready-made, from the post-war artists and writers who preceded him and, once it had served its purpose, it was as easily cast off.

Ten years ago, even five years ago, the typical literary gent wrote books on baroque architecture and had a soul above politics. But that attitude is becoming difficult and even unfashionable. The times are growing harsher, the issues are clearer, the belief that nothing will ever change ... is less prevalent. The fence on which the literary gent sits, once as comfortable as the plush cushion of a cathedral stall, is now pinching his bottom intolerably; more and more he shows a disposition to drop off on one side or the other. It is interesting to note how many of our leading writers, who a dozen years ago were art for art's saking for all they were worth and would have considered it too vulgar for words even to vote at a general election, are now taking a definite political standpoint...⁶¹

George Orwell adeptly summarises the abrupt change that took place in the 1930s. If one were to pinpoint an event that sparked this change, one might choose the advent of the Spanish Civil War in 1936; however, the signs had appeared earlier than this, and effectively foretold the demise of satire. For the 1930s saw the end of the political apathy and frivolous disregard for

⁶⁰ Francis, 2006, p.99.

⁶¹ George Orwell (1967) *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. p.185.

serious issues that had characterised the latter half of the twenties, and at the same time the previous war was just far enough in the past for the bitterness and disillusion to have dissipated, so that the younger generation, when faced with instances of injustice and despotism jumped on it with righteous outrage. Nancy Cunard set the tone with her petition calling for support for the Republican cause in Spain:

It is clear to many of us throughout the whole world that now, as certainly never before, we are determined, or compelled, to take sides. The equivocal attitude, the Ivory Tower, the paradoxical, the ironic detachment, will no longer do ... Today the struggle is in Spain. Tomorrow it may be in other countries – our own...⁶²

The majority of those she approached did respond – of the 148 answers she received, 126 supported the Republic, while five were for Franco, and sixteen remained sitting on the fence.⁶³ This stands in stark contrast to the reaction of such intellectuals a decade previously when faced with political tensions. Wyndham Lewis's biting condemnation in *The Apes of God* of the infantilisation that spread through fashionable society in the twenties underlines the frustrations felt by an artist and writer with strong political and philosophical views. The General Strike of 1926 is a case in point. Even those artists and writers who later became well-known for their left-wing views unthinkingly acted as strike breakers, without seriously considering the reasons behind the actions of the working classes.⁶⁴ As Christopher Isherwood recalls, the strike was treated by his contemporaries as just one more innovative excuse for revelry:

⁶² Extract from Nancy Cunard's printed questionnaire addressed to 'Writers and Poets of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales' [Anne Chisholm (1981) *Nancy Cunard: A Biography*. Harmondsworth: Penguin p.317].

⁶³ Ibid., p.318.

⁶⁴ 'Most of us didn't even know why the men had struck' Christopher Isherwood confessed in hindsight [Isherwood, 1979, p.110]; Barbara Ker-Seymer wrote of the strike in inimitably flippant style to Burra on 17 May 1926: 'Well, so the strikes over at last, as I suppose you've heard, we all volunteered but nothing came of it...' (TGA 974.2.1.5).

The tremendous upper-middle-class lark began: by lunch-time the Poshocrats were down from Oxford and Cambridge in their hundreds – out for all the fun that was going ... Every bus and underground train was a ragtime family party.⁶⁵

He goes on to remark of his employer's wife, grumbling about the inconvenience of the strike, 'she would have been considerably surprised if she could have seen herself, exactly ten years later, addressing a co-operative women's meeting on the necessity for helping the government in Spain.'⁶⁶ This seriousness of moral purpose with which many people, most notably Orwell and Cunard, took up the cause of Republicanism during the Spanish Civil War, and more broadly stood against fascism as its presence grew during the 1930s, sounded the death knell for satire as a prominent genre in painting. That is to say, satire has never ceased to exist in some form or another, but the particular cultural purchase it had on modern life in the 1920s, as a useful response to the post-war feeling of futility and disillusionment, had evaporated with this change in mood. The events of the Spanish Civil War played a key part in this psychological change; as Burra recalled: 'It was terrifying: constant strikes, churches on fire and pent-up hatred everywhere. Everybody knew that something appalling was about to happen' – in these circumstances, one can well understand David Low's later remark: 'what can a satirist do with Auschwitz?'⁶⁷

Thus, as I hope to have outlined in the course of this thesis, satire can be seen to follow a discernable arc over the course of roughly a decade, from the end of World War One to the early 1930s. It is sparked, in the new and modern form that I have described, primarily as an expression of moral outrage in the immediate post-war years. Such exponents as Wyndham Lewis and Osbert Sitwell had witnessed the horror of trench warfare and perceived the

⁶⁵ Isherwood, 1979, pp.108-9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.110.

⁶⁷ John Rothenstein (1973) *Edward Burra*. London: Tate. p.23; p.32.

incompetence of those “old men” in charge, who were seen as responsible for this wholesale massacre. Satire answered a powerful need to attack, to expose the vice and folly of the perpetrators of war, and to release the pent up psychological trauma resulting from it – even if its expression was ultimately futile rather than didactic. The generation that followed did not have this experience; they stood at a distance from the actual experience of war, and suffered more from the aftershock – the lack of values, of certainties or discipline. The acerbity of the post-war satirical attitude became habitual as the twenties progressed, and was adopted by this younger generation. However, its adoption as a useful, available mode drained it of its original moral outrage and therefore of its power, leaving it as a mixture of parody, wit and whimsy. Thus it was easily discarded as the thirties saw the emergence of open ideological conflict in Europe, giving writers and artists a cause to fight for once again. The arc of satire declined, lost importance, and faded from the work of Beaton, Whistler, and even Burra. Youthful dreams and follies were discarded, along with the temporarily nihilistic and frivolous society of the twenties; reality intervened.

Conclusion:

Writing about satire poses many problems. Or rather, writing about the satire peculiar to the twenties, when there is such a long history to the genre to acknowledge, even before starting to distil a working definition. Equally, writing about just one genre or mode employed among a multiplicity risks overstating its importance, unless such assertions are continually qualified. Therefore this thesis takes on the character of one thematic chapter in the development of British painting in the 1920s, or an episode in a history of satire that covers many centuries. Still, making such allowance for a wider perspective should not detract from the fact that the concatenation of events – historical, social, cultural – following the First World War make of satire a mode of greater importance and interest in this period than has hitherto been acknowledged.

History is never static: the same sequence of small activities may repeat themselves from day to day, and human nature may endure in its same flawed state; nevertheless society continues to evolve and adapt. By the same token, there is never an absolute change, in which the old order is totally swept away. A war as deadly and as all-encompassing as the First World War might *seem* to herald an entirely new world in its wake, but many aspects of life did in fact remain unchanged. However, it was the sense experienced by the artists analysed in this thesis of being thrust into a new and disorientating present that sparked a new response in the form of satire. Despite the many continuities in art and life in general, and the many different responses to the perceived change, my aim here has been to suggest a broader scope for the study of British art in the 1920s using satire as a thematic lynchpin. The revival of satire as a genre with cultural purchase in the years after the First World War registers a turning point in British art. Onto what appeared a clean slate satire rose up to make its mark, the only mode perceived capable of expressing the anger, frustration and disorientation that were experienced by many following years of conflict. Those who had fought saw the impossibility of returning to their previous avant-garde art of utopic

modernism; seeing the flaws and failings of human society writ large, satire's cynical attitude offered a more relevant and immediate means of expression.

The only comprehensive study of satire in this period centres on literature; therefore, without turning attention away from the visual, written satire holds an important role as a sounding-block against which satirical painting can be analysed and defined. It is also important to appreciate the impact of cinema as an art form in this decade, as well as the involvement of artists in designing theatrical sets and costumes – and the effect of both forms of entertainment on these artists' imaginations, as well as their attitude towards modern society and culture. The overlap between these different art forms is difficult, if not detrimental, to ignore – and is important, too, in reflecting a wider European tendency towards the 'total work of art', or *gesamtkunstwerk*. The interrelationship that existed between them is particularly well illustrated by the artists highlighted in this study – Lewis, who switches from painting to writing in the mid-twenties, and Burra, who besides his paintings won acclaim for his designs for the theatre and ballet.

Tracing the arc of satire over roughly a decade allows for an investigation of the manifold external circumstances which impacted on the creation of works of art, looked at from the specific angle that such a thematic approach demands. It is through this particular focus on the satirical, applied to a period that has hitherto been approached in the broad and all-encompassing manner of the survey, that the art of the twenties appears in a new – and more radical – light. It is the satirical artists, underappreciated in surveys because often standing outside easy historiographical groupings, who effectively define British art in the twenties as something distinctive and new. Similarly, the individual artists studied have been widely written on, but never connected to one another thematically; this connection based on satire draws out new aspects of their respective careers that have been overlooked. Such a developmental and interdisciplinary approach to satire and art in the interwar period both enriches current understanding of the twenties and suggests a more emphatic distinction than previously perceived between the

1920s and the 1930s. In this way, the cultural dependence on the First World War – right up until the close of the decade – is reinforced; though this assertion has already been made, it is demonstrated here in a particular way through the focus on satire. Wyndham Lewis's reference to 'the grin upon the Deathshead' adeptly summarises the thesis in this respect, succinctly linking the 'the essence of laughter' to violence and death.¹ The explosive power of satire, it follows, is like 'a realistic firework, reminiscent of war.'² However, this analogy loses its initial pertinence in the later years of the decade; as the younger generation adopt the mode from their predecessors, so it becomes one step removed from direct experience of the war, and the intimate link of cause and effect that Lewis so pungently describes is broken – or at least loosened so that the phrase becomes the mere 'smiling wit' that Lewis takes care to distinguish from true *laughter*.³

Though satire lost its power and purpose in the thirties, circumstances reconfigured to its advantage once again in the 1960s. Historians write of a 'satire boom', triggered in reaction to the previous decade of conservatism and declining national status – underlined by the Suez Crisis in 1956. Although delayed by over a decade, this satirical surge seems once again to have been fundamentally a reaction to World War; as Keith Suter remarks, 'Britain had won two world wars but somehow lost the peace.' People felt frustrated by the lack of progress, and the rise of America at the expense of Britain's world status. That Suter is able to define satire in almost exactly the same terms as those applied to the twenties confirms that the link between these two periods is greater than previously acknowledged – even if the means of expression were very different. He writes:

Satire is a form of comedy that ridicules its subject (individuals, organisations or countries) with a view to encouraging change. It

¹ Wyndham Lewis (2004) *The Wild Body: 'A Soldier of Humour' and Other Stories*. London: Penguin. p.102.

² Ibid., p.102.

³ Ibid., p.102.

seeks to laugh people out of their follies. It ridicules with caricature and exaggeration. Its popularity rises and falls according to the popular tastes of the day.⁴

By the early sixties television had developed to the extent that its mass appeal could be harnessed to the goal of satire; and one could argue that it was partly the mass appeal of this new, modern and utterly up-to-date medium that was responsible for the effectiveness and power of such satire. Though the starting point is located in 1960 with the staging of 'Beyond the Fringe' in Edinburgh, which 'changed the face of British comedy with its irreverence towards much of what was "sacred" in British life', it was the broadcasting of 'That Was the Week That Was' on the BBC in 1962 that, Suter argues, proved the key moment in 'getting the British satirical revolution established in Britain.'⁵ It certainly proved controversial, triggering a memo from the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan to the Post Master General at the BBC:

I hope you will not repeat not take any action about 'That was the week that was' without consulting me.

It is a good thing to be laughed at.

It is better than to be ignored.⁶

The show was cut in 1963, as it was considered that it might prove too influential on voters during the elections of 1964; however, Suter concludes that 'the satirists had done their job and now the UK was set for an era of reforming, modernising zeal' under the auspices of Harold Wilson's new Labour government. The memo quoted above and the eventual decision to

⁴ Keith Suter (2004) 'The British Satirical Revolution'. *Contemporary Review*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+British+satirical+revolution.-a0123957913> [Accessed: 19 April 2013].

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Transcript of memo from Harold Macmillan to the Post Master General at the BBC, December 1962, *National Archives Online*, PREM 11/3668. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/topics/satire.htm> [Accessed: 19 April 2013].

cut the show testify to a far more politically involved role for sixties satire than that of the twenties, which – beyond the perpetual cartoons of Punch and other such publications – had always remained detached from politics. The issue in the twenties was more about coming to terms with broader changes in society sparked by both the war and rapid modernisation; in the sixties, blame for the follies of British society in general was laid firmly at the feet of the governing politicians. Suez was not Britain's misjudgement, it was the Prime Minister's; and a disgust at debauched behaviour became focused on the person of John Profumo. In Edward Heath's view, 'That Was the Week That Was' marked the 'death of deference' and a new scepticism towards the government.⁷ Simultaneously, perceiving the power of satire to influence the electorate, politicians – the objects of ridicule, such as Macmillan, quoted above – had to embrace the mode, and if not use it for their own gain then at least use the publicity it offered to boost their own presence in the public eye. Thus television satire has continued into the present day, but without the initial power it enjoyed in the sixties; like the second generation of satirists in the twenties, it has since been adopted as a useful genre through which to address current affairs and no longer has the cultural and political impact that it enjoyed at its inception.

I have asserted that the outset of the 1930s proved the endpoint of the 'satiric age' which this study addresses, as events conspired to deny any further recourse to this genre. However, this is not to disallow a wider view of satire over the twentieth century. The sixties saw a sudden advance in cultural and social terms akin to the abrupt changes experienced in the twenties, admitting the re-emergence of a similar strain of satire in response. Thus a broader study of satire across the twentieth century, linking these two decades within a wider debate may prove a meaningful narrative for future research. For instance, a deeper investigation of the relationship between

⁷ Edward Heath, quoted by Mark Duguid, 'Political Humour from TW3 to HIGNFY'. *BFI ScreenOnline*. [Online]. Available at: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/tv/id/946719/index.html> [Accessed: 19 April 2013].

satire and technological progress in the twentieth century might help to explain the abrupt rise and fall of the genre, and its rapid adaptation to new mediums such as television. Alternatively, its trajectory could be linked with changing social conventions across a wider time period, connecting the 'golden age' of British satire with the genre's revival in the sixties through their permissiveness relative to the Victorian age or to fifties conservatism. Why does satire flourish when it does and what prohibits its prosperity? Is there any pattern or Hegelian dialectic to explain its uneven development? I have described satire as a protean genre, but perhaps it is more appropriate to extend Leon Guilhamet's concept of satire as parasitic from a literary and theoretical claim to a broader socio-economic one.⁸ As periods of 'romanticism' and 'classicism' alternate, conservatism is disrupted by radicalism, and war gives way to peacetime, so satire's status might be seen to rise and fall as conditions conducive to its growth fluctuate.

⁸ Guilhamet writes that 'satire is essentially a borrower of forms, but as such it is not to be confused with those host structures ...'; the latter 'are, from the very outset, in the process of being subsumed by the emerging form of satire.' [Leon Guilhamet (1987) *Satire and the Transformation of Genre*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. p.165].

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Archives & Other Resources:

British Library Manuscript Collections:

- Harriet Shaw Weaver Papers: Add. MS 57355, ff. 90-98 – press cuttings, etc., for books of individual Egoist Press authors 1914-1931
- Schiff Papers: Add. Mss. 52919, ff. 1-50 – letters of Percy Wyndham Lewis, 1921-1933.

British Library Sound Archive – NLSC: Artist's Lives

- William Chappell: F1896, F1897, F2628, F2630
- Michael Rothenstein: F814, F815
- Photographer's Gallery Recordings – David Mellor: F3902
- BBC: 'Five Women Photographers' – Barbara Ker-Seymer: V3092 C1

Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre Manuscript Collections,

University of Austin, Texas – <http://research.hrc.utexas.edu>

- Sitwell papers
- John Rodker papers

Beaton Archive, St. John's College Library, Cambridge University, Cambridge

Tate Archive:

- Correspondence of Edward Burra (TGA 771)
- Correspondence of Barbara Ker-Seymer (TGA 974)
- Rothenstein on Roberts (TGA 8524/10)

Arts on Film Archive (ACE035), University of Westminster

- Edward Burra, directed by Peter K. Smith (Balfour Films, 1973) - <http://artsonfilm.wmin.ac.uk/films.php>

Illustrations



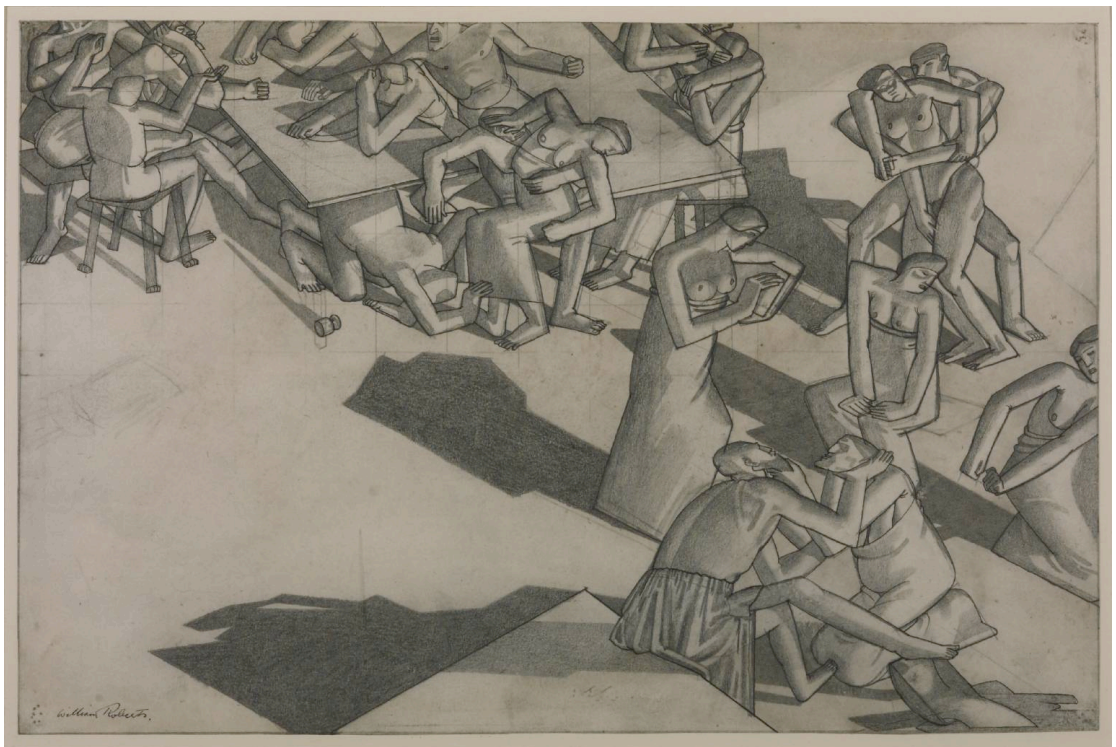
1. Wyndham Lewis, *Tyros (A Reading of Ovid)*, 1920-21, oil on canvas.



2. Wyndham Lewis, *Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro*, 1920-21, oil on canvas.



3. William Roberts, *The Return of Ulysses*, c.1913, oil on canvas.



4. William Roberts, drawing for *The Return of Ulysses*, 1913, ink and chalk on paper.



5. William Roberts, *The Cinema*, 1920, oil on canvas.



6. C.R.W. Nevinson, *He Gained a Fortune but He Gave a Son*, 1918, oil on canvas.



7. Wyndham Lewis, *Portrait of Edith Sitwell*, 1923-35, oil on canvas.



8. Gino Severini, murals in the 'Sala delle Maschere', Montegufoni, Tuscany, 1921-2.



9. Albert Rutherston, *A Comedy of Manners*, London, 1932, Design for a Fan.



10. Gertrude Lawrence performing 'Parisian Pierrot' in Noel Coward's *London Calling!*, 1923.



11. Advertising lobby card for the film *The Million Dollar Dollies*, 1918



12. The Dolly Sisters in Paris, 1923



13. Edward Burra, *The Two Sisters*, 1929, oil on canvas.



14. Man Ray, *Two Dancers from 'Jack-in-a-Box'*, 1926, photograph.



15. Cecil Beaton, *Untitled (Self-Portrait as Pierrot)*, 1920s, Silver Gelatin Print.



16. Dover Street Studios, *Portrait of Vaslav Nijinsky as Petrouchka*, 1910-11, Photographic Print.



17. William Hogarth, *The Bad Taste of the Town*, 1724, Etching.



18. William Hogarth, *Conversation Piece with Sir Andrew Fountaine*, c.1730-35, Oil on Canvas.



19. William Hogarth, *A Modern Midnight Conversation*, c.1732, Oil on Canvas.

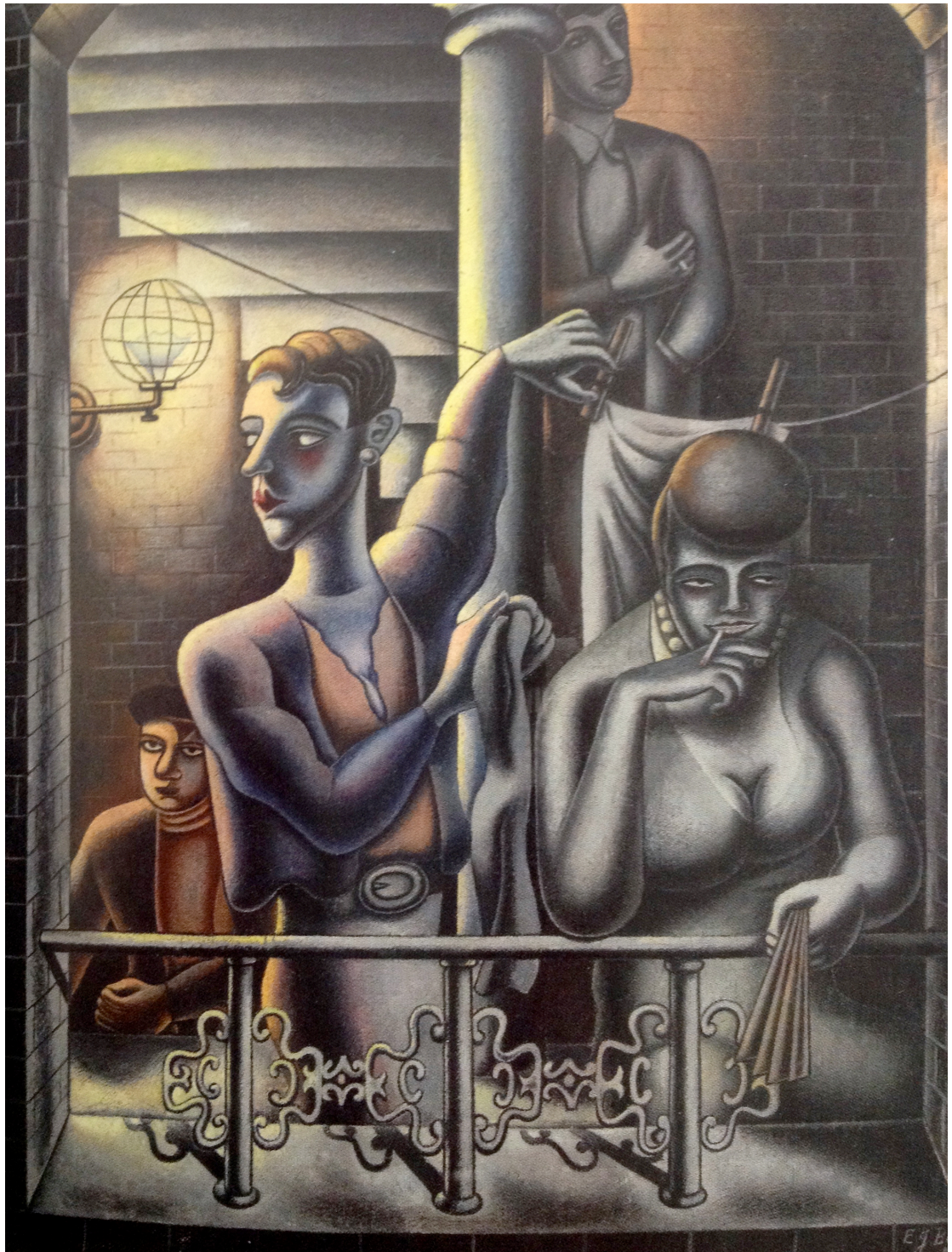


20. Edward Burra, *Balcony Toulon*, 1929, Oil on Canvas.

21. Bassano, *Florence Mills of Blackbirds in Dover Street to Dixie at the London Pavilion, 1923*



22. The Fratellinis



23. Edward Burra, *The Common Stair*, 1929, Oil on Canvas.



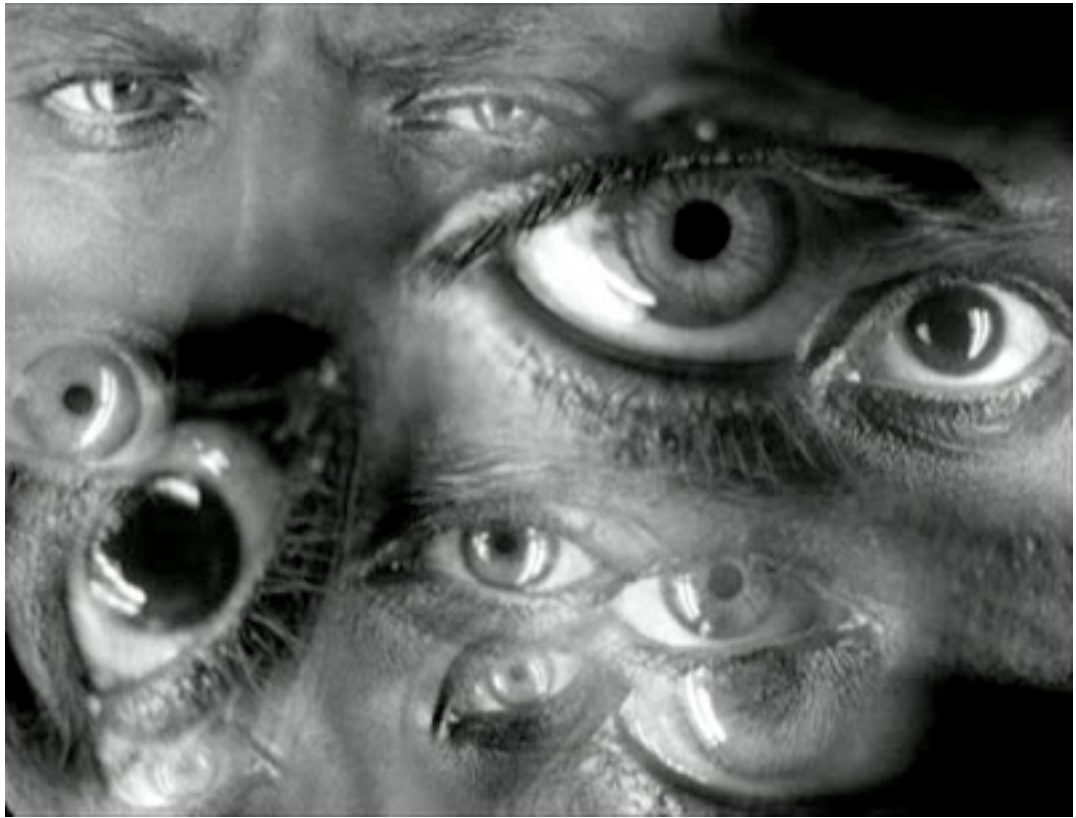
24. & 25. Stills from *Joyless Street*, 1925, directed by G.W. Pabst.



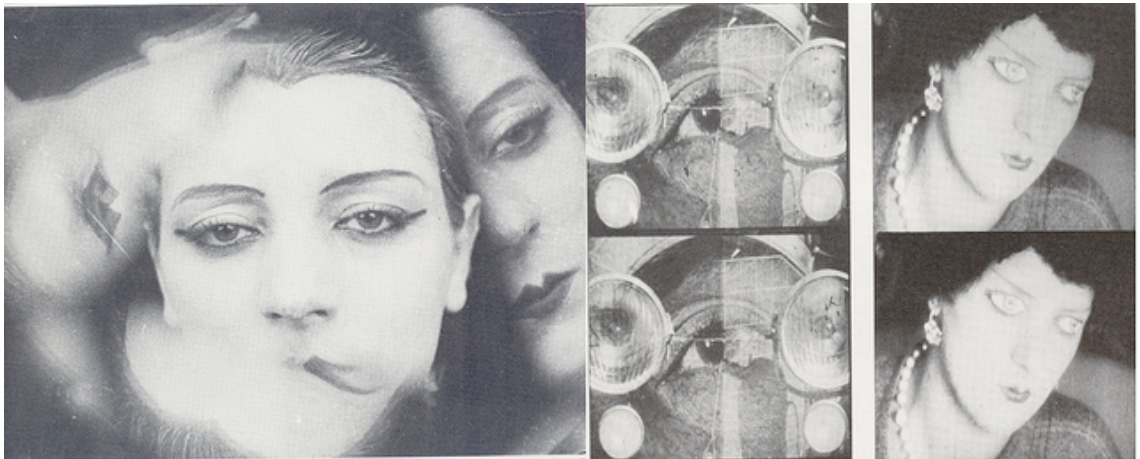
26. Edward Burra, *Les Folies de Belleville*, 1928, Gouache on Paper.



27a-b. Stills from *Metropolis*, 1927, directed by Fritz Lang.



27c. Still from *Metropolis*, 1927, directed by Fritz Lang.



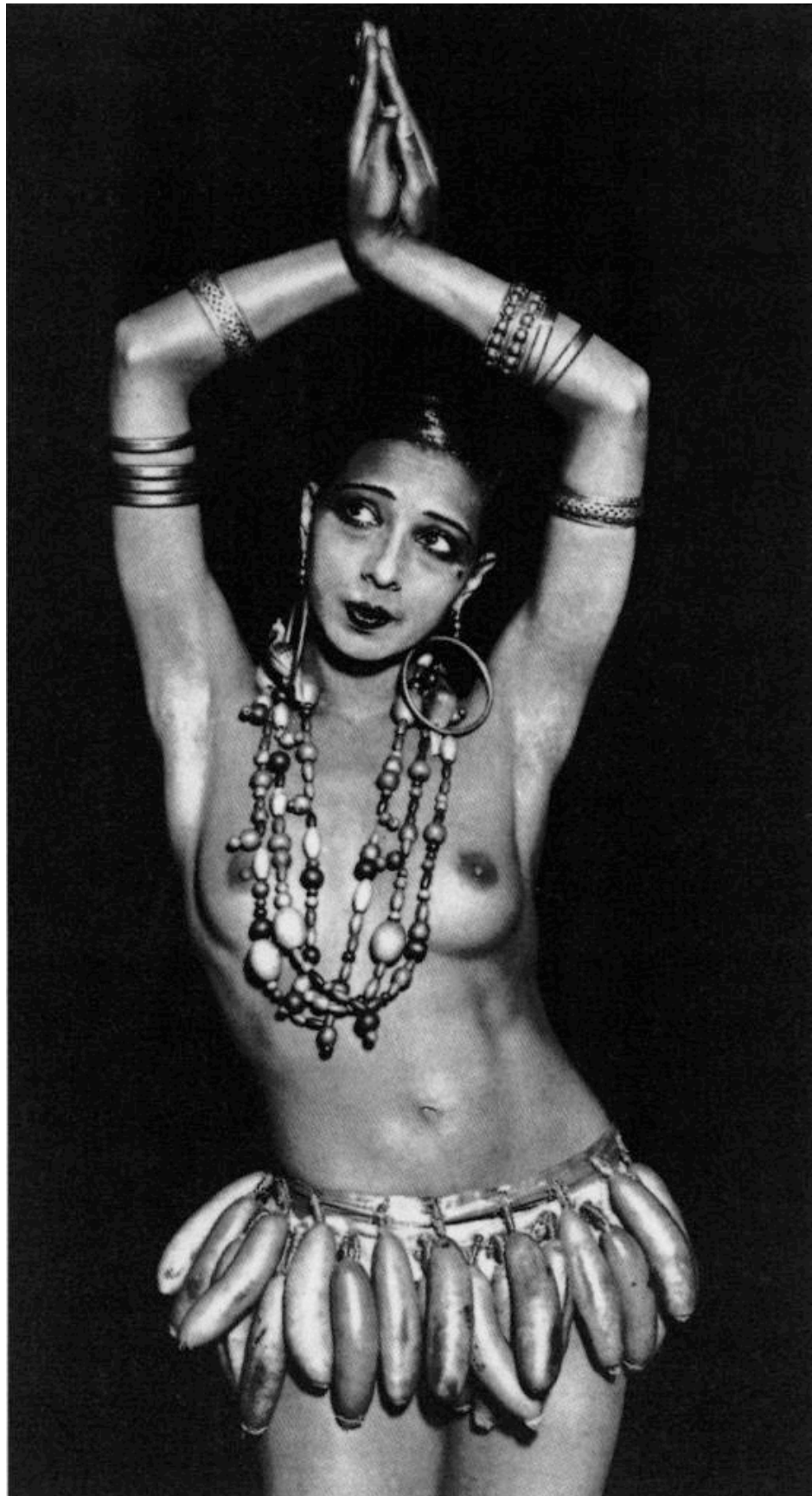
28. Stills from *Emak Bakia*, 1926, a film by Man Ray.



29. Edward Burra, detail from *The Tea Shop*, 1929, Gouache on Paper.



30. Josephine Baker at the Folies-Bergère



31. Josephine Baker



32. Man Ray, *Noir et Blanche*, 1926, Photograph.



33. Cecil Beaton, *The Bright Young Things on a Bridge at Wilsford*, 1927



34. Cecil Beaton, *The Bright Young Things at Wilsford* – William Walton, Cecil Beaton, Hon Stephen Tennant, Rex Whistler, Georgia Sitwell, Zita Jungman and Teresa Jungman, 1927, Modern Silver Gelatin Print.



35. Cecil Beaton, *Stephen Tennant as Prince Charming*, 1927, Bromide Print.



36. Cecil Beaton, *The Hon. Stephen Tennant*, 1927, Gelatin Silver Print.



37. Cecil Beaton, *Dame Edith Sitwell*, 1927, Vintage Bromide Print.



38. Cecil Beaton, *Dame Edith Sitwell*, 1927, Bromide Print.



39. Rex Whistler, *The Tate Gallery*, 1928, Poster.



40. Rex Whistler, Portrait of Angela and Penelope Dudley Ward, 1933, Oil on Canvas.



41. Cecil Beaton, *Princess Elizabeth*, 1945, Gelatin Silver Print.



42. Cecil Beaton, *Miss Nancy Beaton as a Shooting Star*, 1928, Gelatin Silver Print.