Criticisms of Bloomsbury

WYNDHAM LEWIS AND ANGELICA GARNETT
Wyndham Lewis (18 November 1882 – 7 March 1957) was an English painter and author. He was a co-founder of the Vorticist movement in art, and edited the literary magazine of the Vorticists, BLAST.

Bloomsbury is “nothing but a kind of backwater” that clings to “a typically Cambridge sort of atmosphere.”
Lewis exhibited three oil painting at the 1912 post-impressionist exhibition organized by Roger Fry.

This brought him closer to the Bloomsbury Group. But he had a falling out with Roger Fry.

Lewis was initially part of the Omega Workshops, which was initiated by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Roger Fry in 1913.
In July 1913 artist and writer Roger Fry opened Omega Workshops Ltd. at 33 Fitzroy Square in Bloomsbury, central London.

Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, and Roger Fry were the directors.

All work was supposed to be anonymous, signed with the Omega symbol (see enlarged photo below).

On the left, a card probably designed by Duncan Grant for the opening exhibition at the Omega Workshops in 1913.
Omega Workshops

- Its aim was to deconstruct the boundary between the decorative and the fine arts.
- The Workshop was meant to subsidize young artists through their work in decorative and applied arts.

Nina Hamnett painted by Roger Fry, 1917, in a dress designed by Vanessa Bell and made at the Omega. The shoes may also be from Omega and the cushion on the chair is covered with 'Maud' linen, also by Bell. (Image from Wikipedia)
“Fry wanted to establish a place where a young artist might earn ten shillings a week, and for this purpose the painting of chairs was more to the point than the painting of pictures” (Quentin Bell, “The Omega Workshops”)

Wyndham Lewis split off from the group taking with him several other participants to start the rival decorative workshop Rebel Art Centre.
“When the time came to pay artists their share of the purchase amounts of pictures sold, Roger insisted upon deducting a higher commission without any explanation or apology to the painters. Most of them meekly accepted what they were given, but Wyndham Lewis, at best of time a bilious and cantankerous man, protested violently, Roger was adamant in ignoring him and his demands; Lewis never forgave Roger, and, as I was a kind of buffer between them, he also never forgave me.” (Leonard Woolf, “The Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition” 148)
Wyndham Lewis’ Rejection of Bloomsbury

- Wyndham Lewis rejects the Bloomsbury group—"the pretentious and snobbish intellectual denizens of a delineated area of London who could make or break an aspiring artist or writer"

- Lewis started the Rebel Art Centre and the Vorticist movement in order to “blow... away dead ideas and worn-out notions.”

- W.H. Auden describes Lewis as “that lonely old volcano of the Right.”

Bloomsbury is “nothing but a kind of backwater” that clings to “a typically Cambridge sort of atmosphere.”
Vorticism is characterized by stark forms, mechanical and impersonal handling, and aggressive ethos. It was a short-lived modernist movement in British art and poetry of the early 20th century. It was partly inspired by Cubism. The movement was announced in 1914 in the first issue of BLAST, which contained its manifesto and the movement's rejection of landscape and nudes in favour of a geometric style tending towards abstraction.

Ten-Minute Documentary on Wyndham Lewis

Pound described the Vortex as “the point of maximum energy.”

Workshop, c. 1914–15 by Wyndham Lewis, in the Tate Collection
Wyndham Lewis’ dream of a mechanical world order.
Notice the dehumanized figures: dehumanization and alienation in the mechanical world.

Lewis frequently depicts humans as automatons/machines. He rejected the masses.
Influence of T.E. Hulme’s Radical Conservatism

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic</th>
<th>Radical Conservatism/Classical</th>
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<td>“Man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities, and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress.”</td>
<td>Man “is intrinsically limited, disciplined by order and tradition to something fairly decent” (Hulme).</td>
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<td>“Man is intrinsically good, spoilt by circumstance” (Hulme)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy: chaos and flux</td>
<td>Aristocracy: order and discipline</td>
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<td>In art, this results in vagueness, blending of foreground and background, fluidity and femininity.</td>
<td>In art, this results in exactitude, clear, strong lines, celebration of masculinity.</td>
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The Wrecking Ball

- "That is what Blast was: the big giant, angry wrecking ball that was let loose on Britain and its cultural conventions."

- Lewis saw "revolutionary" movements as "regressive." Feminist, for example, tried to return to "supposed conditions of the primitive Matriarchate."
Influence of Futurism

- Futurism: an Italian avant-garde movement that flourished approximately from 1909 to 1916. Visually, the futurists were influenced by cubism; however, unlike the cubists, they were more interested in a directly kinetic appeal that conveys the exhilaration of modern urban life, especially the sensations of industry, energy, speed, and light. (*Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*)

The cover of a facsimile reprint of *BLAST 2*, 1915 featuring *Before Antwerp* by Lewis.
Influence of Futurism

Futurist art like Christopher Nevinson's *The Arrival (1913)* emphasized motion.

*Red Duet (1914)* by Wyndham Lewis. Illustration: courtesy of the estate of Mrs. G A Wyndham Lewis.
Influence of Futurism

Futurist art like Christopher Nevinson's The Arrival (1913) emphasized motion.

Red Duet (1914) by Wyndham Lewis. Illustration: courtesy of the estate of Mrs G A Wyndham Lewis

The Vorticists rejected the “Futurist romantic glorification of the machine.”
Influence of Futurism

Although doubtlessly indebted to Futurism, English Vorticism ... presented some original features which could explain its critical position toward Futurism. The idea itself of a vortex (defined by Pound as “the point of maximum energy”) suggested a different conception of movement, where the forces conveying to the focal point of the image and drawing the observer into the picture, revealed a more abstract and logical approach to the theme. Futurism’s sequential depiction of movement was felt, by the Vorticistst, to be a superficial form of experimentalism, focusing exclusively on the surface of the phenomena and showing itself to be too heavily influenced by French Impressionism. Instead, Vorticism combined the Futurist attention to speed and movement with the Cubist use of geometry and structure, thereby suggesting the intention to concentrate more on style than on content. (The Modernist Journals Project)
Wyndham Lewis published his Manifesto in Blast in 1914.
Lewis’ critique of snobbish aestheticism

CURSE WITH EXPLETIVE OF WHIRLWIND
THE BRITANNIC ÆSTHETE
CREAM OF THE SNOBBISH EARTH
ROSE OF SHARON OF GOD-PRIG
OF SIMIAN VANITY
SNEAK AND SWOT OF THE SCHOOL-ROOM
IMBERB (or Berbed when in Belsize) - PEDANT
PRACTICAL JOKER
DANDY CURATE
Wyndham Lewis’ criticism of Picasso: “The bric-à-brac of bits of wallpaper, pieces of cloth, etc. tastefully arranged, wonderfully tastefully arranged, is a dead and unfruitful tendency.”
Workshop, c1914-15 by Wyndham Lewis, in the Tate Collection.

Vanessa Bell, Composition, 1914

Mr Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro, a self-portrait, 1921.

Depiction of humanity: “only connect” vs. “dehumanized, soulless robots”? 
Tyros are fictional characters in Lewis’s writing and painting. Tyro means ‘beginner’ or ‘novice’, and Lewis presents these creatures as “satires, pictures and stories.” The Tyros were a critical response to a post-war society which was ravaged by grief. They used British humour and the ‘stiff upper lip’ attitude as an immature coping strategy, “For how can you indulge in grief with a yard wide grin painted across your face?” The defining characteristic of the Tyro is its artificial and menacing grin, and this is certainly the most striking feature of Lewis’s self-portrait. In Blast, Lewis’s Vorticist magazine, Humour is described as a ‘weapon’, and English Humour is both ‘blasted’ and ‘blessed’. The Tyros personify the sinister side of Humour, which masks deeper concerns, and Lewis likens this Humour to Tragedy, “which can clench its side muscles like hands on its belly, and bring to the surface a laugh like a bomb.” (National Portrait Gallery)

A Reading of Ovid (Tyros) (1920-1)
National Galleries of Scotland
“He described the 'Tyros' series of paintings as a challenge to the 'Arts-for-Arts-sake dilettantism' that he saw in French painting and in the work of the English Bloomsbury group, such as Duncan Grant.” (National Galleries)
Angelica Garnett similarly criticizes the superficiality of Bloomsbury...

“"My parents were painters and though they seemed to care only for my happiness it was only happiness connected with the arts that interested them—skin-deep and superficial—leaving them free to go their own direction" (The Unspoken Truth 72).

“Only Connect” and Angelica Garnett

“She found herself in Maman’s arms where she felt much too big ... Her mind wandered and then returned, sucked into a vortex – she suddenly understood: Jamie was her father and not Howard." And it describes her emotional reaction: "Confusion swallowed her. How could it make no difference? It made all the difference in the world! Maman did not want her to talk about it. That was evident. And yet now she knew who her father was, she was to be thought of as someone else's daughter – there was still a mystery. It bound her as she stared beyond the French windows at the apple tree, the grass and the flint walls. She felt encircled, a hopeless beating of wings on glass.” (The Unspoken Truth, 50-51)
As the title suggests, the Bloomsbury group is not good at telling the truth.

Longing for intimacy: “In later years she occasionally wondered how different her life might have been had she had a sister. She dreamed of intimacies and collusions as well as disagreement, even bitterness and fierce competition” (36).

When she sees her father for the last time, she is unable to connect with him: "[She] sat rather rigidly in the rocking chair, unable, for the wrong reasons, to make small talk. His hand was too frail for her to hold, his appearance too remote for risking a hug. Feeling it was for the last time, she wanted to elicit a response, but could only get as far as realising that her stare was too much like a burden for him."
The Influence of Bloomsbury
Wyndham Lewis rejected his contemporaries’ frivolous aestheticism, but can we recognize modernist characteristics in his work?
Lewis as a Modernist

- Rejection of Victorianism and “Edwardian elite”
- Celebration of Artifice
- Cityscape: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Mrs. Dalloway, Lewis’ art, futurism
- Alienation: T.S. Eliot’s alienation in a polluted city
- Doubling: the Marys in A Room of One’s Own and Lewis’ Tyro