



PALE CARNAGE

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A PROSE KINEMA
Some notes for Pale Carnage

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ONE

The title of these notes is taken from Ezra Pound's poem, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (*Contacts and Life*):

*"The 'age demanded' chiefly a mould in plaster
Made with no loss of time,
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly; alabaster
Or the 'sculpture' of rhyme."*

Written between 1919 and 1920, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* might almost describe a friend, cousin or fellow clerk of T.S. Eliot's 'J. Alfred Prufrock', brought to life in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* just two years earlier, in 1917. The soberly named central characters of both poems seem to inhabit the same city (London); and one imagines them side by side - unknown to one another - in the same cinder smelling carriage of an Underground train, or smoke filled corner of a dank City pub, or pressing through the crowds outside the Haymarket theatres.

To keep to Hugh, for the moment. Why does he seem to face us now, across the width of nearly a century, with such a recognisable face? Partly, I think, because he was created by Pound as a figure within an Axial Age: a time of great transition; of cosmic cynicism; and, dare we say it, an epoch of spiritual restlessness and the search for new gods. Mauberley comes to us, Pound writes, out of total war in "*l'an trentuniesme de son eage*" - just entering that early middle age which Dante identified as the time when one may find oneself quite suddenly lost in a

dark wood. (The Buddha, Karen Armstrong writes, was born into the great Axial Age of 800 - 200 B.C.E. - so called because "it was a time pivotal to humanity.")

So, the young urban man - Mauberley. He is an aesthete, and a connoisseur above all of *style* - "His true Penelope was Flaubert" (Pound slips in a reference to the acknowledged Master of modern literary style); he is exceptionally well versed in quotation; steeped in the founding languages of culture. But he shares with Alfred Prufrock the awareness of being out-of-step with his times - the aesthete flaneur disoriented, finding himself caught in the shifting half light - *l'heure bleue* - between two different civilisations. He is the product of the earlier, and the sacrificial victim of the new age that engulfs him, killed off mostly by ridicule. (Prufrock, likewise, had recognised himself to be, despite his drawing room manners, "Almost, at times, the Fool.")

In personal terms, Pound wrote 'Mauberley' in sepulchral mood as an audit of himself in his thirty-first year; and - so Hugh Kenner, the great interpreter of the Pound Era, from which Modernism (or a large part of it) was born - informs us, as a requiem for the high spirited adventure in the arts undertaken between 1910 and 1914 by Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Eliot and Gaudier-Brzeska (chiefly), and known as the Great London Vortex.

Kenner writes of 'Mauberley' as a farewell to the Vortex: "an art of the Vortex, by and large hopeless here, where energies have failed."; adding: "In mid-1917 Mrs Eliot

reported to Pound that her husband had done no work of the kind that augments vortices, not for weeks. He returned daily from the bank and fell into a leaden slumber until bedtime.”

To summarise: the title of these notes is taken from a poem by Ezra Pound, which describes, at a time of vast transition within the human condition, the fate of a possible kind of intervention, through the arts, into culture and society. The transition in question might be called the infancy of Modernism - a state which, despite our contemporary recognition of a *post-Modern* period, and beyond - has yet to be fully understood, let alone resolved. At the end of his *Cantos*, Pound would later write: “I have brought the great ball of crystal; who can lift it?”

And what do you do? You just *sit* there.

TWO

Wyndham Lewis, in his autobiography for the years 1914 - 1926, titled *Blasting and Bombardiering* describes *his* modernist representative: the character of Canteleman (“this was my character, my *fictional* diarist”, he notes) returning to London for mobilisation at the beginning of World War One.

Canteleman decides to roam the streets of London as the war crowds are endlessly, pointlessly, determinedly marching. He becomes a *flaneur* during war time, just studying the life on the streets, jotting down notes, and deciding to make *An Experiment With A Crowd*. In this Canteleman studies the London crowds, takes soundings, as it were, from its depths. Finally, in a small Italian cafe on Saint Martin’s Lane, he writes up his findings: “I have lain in it for hours together *and received no sensation worth noting.*” Also worthy of note - with a nod back to the ‘prose

kinema’, is that Lewis says of his avatar: “His movements resembled those of a free-lance cinema operator...”

In Lewis, a resolution of cultural contradictions: the avant garde rebel and the military man. Photographs taken within three years of one another show Lewis first as a long haired decadent artist, in white cravat and dinner jacket; then as moustachioed artillery Captain, of the sort upon whom England was depending.

Such seeming double agency is important as an artistic strategy, and contains within it the ‘hilarity’ that Duchamp deemed vital to art. Consider then, this collision between Lewis the military man, and Lewis the avant garde art rebel. The scene is a military parade ground at a bombardier training camp in 1914. Lewis is attempting to drill a platoon, when he is called out to speak with the camp adjutant. Lewis to play:

“‘Or - der UMMS!’ I bellowed.

Down rattled the butts with a discouraging haphazard one-after-the-otherness, anything but trim and all together. Anyone who could have snapshotted me at that moment, my right eye somewhat more open than my left, and flashing with indignation, would have put me down as a deep-dyed martinet.

‘Bombardier!’ called out the sergeant major who accompanied the adjutant - rudely I thought...

‘Bombardier,’ said the adjutant, ‘what is all this Futurism about?’

I blinked, but did not move.

‘Are you serious when you call your picture *Break of Day - Marengo*? Or are you pulling the public’s leg?’

‘No sir,’ I said, ‘Not the public’s leg sir.’”

Lewis would despise the Bloomsbury Group - the men of the Group in particular - for failing to join up to fight. “All are of military age,” he would write, “All would look

well in uniform...” That the young sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska - who had made the mesmeric *Head of Ezra Pound* - had been killed in the trenches, added extra heat to Lewis’s condemnation of the liberal elite of London and Cambridge. For Lewis, the need was to be above all oppositional - the best disguise for which, then as now, most probably, was to emulate Flaubert’s pronouncement: “You must be natural and regular in your habits, like a bourgeois, that you can be violent and original in your work...”

(Note: Some Futurists, by the way, were sympathisers with Fascism; the Vorticists – Lewis in particular – found their love of noise and clamour to be merely ridiculous. Was Pound a Fascist? Thin ice. But by the time of Il Duce (who hadn’t got the faintest idea what this crazy poet was on about, with his talk of Renaissance banking), Pound was looking for a time tunnel out and lost within the present.)

THREE

The emblem of Modernism is the city of straight lines, as opposed to the curves and curlicues of Art Nouveau. (Posters from the Weimar period in Germany, aimed straight at the young German housewife, propose the necessity to exchange the Gothic darkness and aesthetic extravagance of a nineteenth century kitchen-parlour for the ergonomically and scientifically designed benefits of the latest Bauhaus model - straight lines.)

The secular cathedrals of Modernism were of course the cinema, the department store and the hotel. Writing his studies of the Modernist city and society in Berlin during the Weimar Republic, Siegfried Kracauer would analyse Modernism along the same lines as it would be hymned fifty years later

by the music of Kraftwerk. But where ‘die mensch maschine’ identify the sublime within function, Kracauer recognised (for example) in his essay *The Hotel Lobby* (1925) that “the typical characteristics of the hotel lobby, which appears repeatedly in detective novels, indicate that it is conceived as the inverted image of the house of God. It is a negative church, and can be transformed into a church so long as one observes the conditions that govern the different spheres...” From this idea, Kracauer weaves an entire conceit - the hotel lobby as spiritual universe; and this seems to me an entirely Axial rumination: the search for oblique spirituality in the face of a threatening world, or, indeed, nothingness.

In Kracauer’s hotel lobby, however, we might meet Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Cattleman and J. Alfred Prufrock - guests in a Godless world, observing what Thomas Mann described in *Death In Venice* as “a solemn stillness reigned in the room, of the sort that is the pride of all the great hotels...” Their common situation is that of citizen consumers in a volatile modern world, where ‘palaces of distraction’ (to borrow from Kracauer’s name for Berlin’s Art Deco cinemas) declaim their own new order. Their creators were Axial seers - not beyond reproach, but weighed down with an ancient tiredness.

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