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Title: ‘Rebecca West, the Forgotten Vorticist?’

Abstract:

The inclusion of Rebecca West’s short story ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ in the first issue of *BLAST* (1914) has much to tell us about the intellectual debts the Vorticist movement owed to West and to the feminist periodical culture with which she was associated. West composed her story in 1912–13, years when she was highly active as both contributor to and literary editor of Dora Marsden’s *The Freewoman* (1911–12) and *The New Freewoman* (1913). In this article, I examine how the ‘energy’ promoted across *BLAST* aligned with feminist political conceptions of energy in Marsden’s journals, and how these ideas were also shaped by early twentieth-century understandings of the universe, including theories of vortex motion, the ether, electromagnetism and thermodynamics. By paying close attention to the theme and metaphor of energy in ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’, this article traces patterns of influence between West, Marsden, Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis that reveal intersections between avant-guerre feminism and the Vorticist avant-garde.

Keywords: Rebecca West, energy, feminism, Vorticism, *BLAST*, Dora Marsden, Ezra Pound

Rebecca West, the Forgotten Vorticist?

Chris Mourant

The publication of Rebecca West's short story 'Indissoluble Matrimony' in the first issue of *BLAST* (1914) has led some to dub her 'the forgotten Vorticist'.¹ Certainly, 'Indissoluble Matrimony' echoes much of the vocabulary and rehearses many of the tropes used across *BLAST* to define and delineate the Vorticist movement; West even includes the word 'vortex' to describe the climactic moment in her narrative.² However, West wasn't a signatory of the Vorticist manifesto and, in a letter sent to Carrie Townshend in 1915, she observed: 'I have just seen about *Blast* [sic] in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It is described as a Manifesto of the Vorticists. Am I a Vorticist? I am sure it can't be good for Anthony [her son] if I am'.³ Moreover, 'Indissoluble Matrimony' was not composed with the publication contexts of *BLAST* in mind. Victoria Glendinning suggests that the story was written much earlier than its publication in July 1914, having been rejected first by *The English Review* and then *The Blue Review*, a magazine that lasted for only three issues from May to July 1913.⁴ In a letter West sent in 1930, in response to a request for information to be included in an article William Troy was writing for *The Bookman* on 'The Story of the Little Magazines', she recalled that 'Indissoluble Matrimony' had been composed 'to amuse some friends, [as] a pastiche of the stories Austin Harrison was publishing in the *English Review*'.⁵ In the same letter, West also claimed not to have heard of *BLAST* until after its publication and that she did not meet the magazine's editor, Wyndham Lewis, until years later. This was clearly an attempt by West to distance herself from *BLAST* and

Vorticism. In fact, West and Lewis had met in 1912 at South Lodge, the home of Ford Madox Hueffer and Violet Hunt. In her memoir of 1926, Hunt claimed that she had been ‘instrumental in procuring’ West’s story for *BLAST*, and West supported this version of events in her letter to Troy, writing that ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ had been included in the magazine ‘for no other reason than that Wyndham Lewis found the manuscript in the chest of drawers in the spare room of Violet Hunt & Ford Madox Hueffer’s home at Selsey, a week or so after I had left’.⁶ Rather than mentioning her coincidental appearance in *BLAST*, West told Troy, she would much prefer him to reference her role at *The Egoist*, a magazine edited by Dora Marsden that had begun publication in 1911 as *The Freewoman* before the journal’s title was changed in 1913 to *The New Freewoman* and then to *The Egoist* the following year. Marsden’s journals provided a more direct source of influence in the composition of West’s ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ than *BLAST*. In her editorial for the issue published on 4 January 1912, for instance, Marsden defines the ‘new sex-morality’ as countering the ‘psychologically monstrous and morally dangerous’ belief in ‘Indissoluble-Monogamy’.⁷ West echoes this idea in an article published the following year when she writes of ‘indissoluble marriage’.⁸ In both its title and thematic emphases, therefore, ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ references these other publication contexts. In an interview conducted in 1971, moreover, West corrected her earlier account of how the story had come to be published in *BLAST* by recalling that Lewis had ‘invited’ her to contribute to the magazine because he ‘had met me at South Lodge and liked some things of mine in *The New Freewoman*’.⁹ Whatever the circumstances by which Lewis procured West’s manuscript, it is nevertheless clear from these conflicting accounts that ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ was likely written in 1912–13 and that Marsden’s journals were the primary shaping influence in the story’s composition.

Vorticism only came into being as an identifiable art movement a matter of days before the publication of the first issue of *BLAST* on 2 July 1914.¹⁰ As Julian Hanna observes, ‘the vortex’ was added to *BLAST* ‘as a governing motif’ on 13 June 1914, when the ‘Manifesto of the Vorticists’ was

published in *The Spectator* in response to F. T. Marinetti's Futurist manifesto.¹¹ Until that time, *BLAST* had been conceived as a magazine that would bring together multiple art movements; as Ezra Pound described it to James Joyce in April 1914, it was going to be 'a new Futurist, Cubist, Imagiste Quarterly'.¹² Only in the last stages of preparation was the magazine subtitled a 'REVIEW OF THE GREAT LONDON VORTEX'. Despite Lewis's later claims to the contrary, as Hanna notes, 'Vorticism was not a top-down organisation: its members did not know quite what they were taking part in, except that it was a modern movement in some way analogous to the continental movements that were Vorticism's acknowledged points of reference'.¹³ This resulted in Lewis receiving a mixed bag of contributions to *BLAST*. As many critics have noted, the impressionism of Ford's 'The Saddest Story' and the broadly realist narrative of 'Indissoluble Matrimony' are at odds with the tenets of Vorticism loudly proclaimed by Lewis across his magazine. Yet this mixed bag can be interpreted more positively as a reflection of the various aesthetic, philosophical and political energies that constituted 'the Great London Vortex' before the summer of 1914. Pound, who was responsible for suggesting the 'vortex' to Lewis as a unifying principle for *BLAST*, noted in 1916:

The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX. And from this necessity came the name 'vorticism' [sic]. *Nomina sunt consequential rerum* [names are the consequence of things], and never was that statement of Aquinas more true than in the case of the vorticist [sic] movement.¹⁴

It is the central claim of this article that viewing West as a 'forgotten Vorticist' is putting the cart before the horse; this is an error Laura Winkiel makes, for example, when she describes West as 'another vorticist [sic] contributor' to *BLAST*.¹⁵ Vorticism did not shape West's story. However, our reading of 'Indissoluble Matrimony' can significantly enhance our understanding of Vorticism by revealing a set of ideas in the 'constantly rushing' vortex of pre-war London that directly influenced

the development of the art movement. Focusing on the influence of Marsden's journals, in particular, complicates and challenges the idea that the so-called 'men of 1914' were the primary originators of aesthetically and politically radical ideas before the war, and the mistaken, corollary notion that female writers and artists merely followed the lead of their male contemporaries. Despite the excellent work of scholars such as Jane Beckett and Deborah Cherry, Michael Hallam, and Miranda Hickman in recuperating women as significant players in the Vorticist movement, all too often these women are positioned as followers of Lewis, Pound and the male clique.¹⁶ Hallam, for instance, writes that 'Vorticism helped catalyse feminism by highlighting the politics of difference, and it was these political ideas that West would recurrently discuss through her long writing career'.¹⁷ West's association with and reading of *BLAST* undoubtedly influenced her later work. As Jane Marcus suggests in her introduction to *The Young Rebecca*, a collection of West's early writings, for instance, West's 1918 novel *The Return of the Soldier* 'reflects the Vorticist aesthetic most strongly'.¹⁸ In this article, however, I want to turn established literary history on its head, instead examining the influence of West's pre-war writings in the development and formation of Vorticism: in taking this approach, I view Vorticism as a 'consequence' rather than cause, and as shaped by rather than shaping West's early work. Where Hallam considers how 'Vorticism helped catalyse feminism', I investigate how feminism helped catalyse Vorticism. Moreover, Hallam's choice of the verb 'catalyse' here is highly suggestive for the argument I develop in the second section of this article, which examines how the scientism of Marsden and Pound's writings in the years 1911–13 shaped the language and ideas of both 'Indissoluble Matrimony' and the Vorticist movement.

Since the publication in 1988 of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *No Man's Land*, which analysed 'Indissoluble Matrimony' as a depiction of early twentieth-century 'sex antagonism', there have been several examinations of West's story from different critical perspectives.¹⁹ In 2007, Carrie Rohman argued that the story highlights 'species anxiety'.²⁰ In 2008, Winkiel examined the racial politics of the story, a subject that was also the focus of Urmila Seshagiri's analysis in 2010.²¹ In the

same year, Deborah Longworth observed how ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ stages an irrational crisis of masculinity, and in 2011 Hallam also examined the story as ‘a study in the problematics of modern gender construction’.²² In 2013, Anne Fernihough read West’s story as a satire of suburbia and as ‘generically unstable, poised uneasily between realism and modernism’.²³ And in 2016, Erich Hertz published an article examining West’s problematic relation to Vorticism.²⁴ The work that my article is in most direct conversation with, though, is the most recent: Kathryn Laing’s contribution to the 2017 essay collection *BLAST at 100: A Modernist Magazine Reconsidered*. Like me, Laing points to the textual and contextual origins of ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’, noting the importance of West’s association with Marsden’s journals in the composition and intellectual formation of the story. In developing her argument, Laing ‘attends to the theme and metaphor of genesis’ in both West’s story and across *BLAST* more widely, interpreting ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ as ‘a parodic rewriting of the Genesis story’ and, in particular, focusing on ‘intersections between Lewis’s artworks and West’s prose’.²⁵ My article builds on and extends Laing’s work in three ways: firstly, I want to make a more forceful case for the significance of Marsden’s journals as a point of origin, not just for West’s story but also in the constitution of Vorticism; secondly, rather than comparing ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ with Lewis’s artworks, I consider parallels with his writings and those of Pound; finally, and most importantly, whereas Laing attends to the theme and metaphor of genesis, I focus on energy.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly directed attention to the ‘centrality of the theme of energy in modernist discourse’, as Bruce Clarke and Linda Henderson observe in their influential 2002 volume *From Energy to Information*.²⁶ If modernism made ‘energy’ one of its central concerns, this was because a much wider discourse around the concept was flourishing in the period. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, as Ian F. A. Bell writes, there developed ‘new languages for questioning the solid materiality of three-dimensional Euclidean geometry and Newtonian mechanics through the more dispersive notions of the fourth dimension and relativity, the languages of the ether, electromagnetism, X-rays, and wireless telegraphy’: ‘At its most comprehensive, this new

language was that of energy, of lines of force'.²⁷ Mark Morrison notes that the period of modernism was one in which people were 'fascinated by invisible energies', and this fascination was 'driven by a mutually reinforcing loop of engineering breakthroughs and scientific interpretations, all shared as part of a rapidly modernizing culture'.²⁸ Edna Duffy also links the science of energy to modernist aesthetics, arguing in a book chapter titled 'High-Energy Modernism' that, 'at the moment of the birth of the new economy of energy', 'modernist art shows people trying to recreate themselves as energetic, and to imagine the material world as energized'.²⁹

Vorticism was premised upon this language of energy and force. As early as September 1913, Pound writes to his fiancé Dorothy Shakespear: 'Energy depends on ones [sic] ability to make a vortex', which we could rephrase as: 'one's ability to make a vortex depends on energy'.³⁰ In the first issue of *BLAST*, Pound's contribution titled 'Vortex' begins: 'The vortex is the point of maximum energy'.³¹ The Vorticist, Pound writes, presents 'the most highly energized statement, the statement that has not yet SPENT itself in expression' and, rather than 'RECEIVING impressions', 'you may think of him as DIRECTING a certain fluid force against circumstance, as CONCEIVING instead of merely observing'.³² Pound continues: 'All experience rushes into this vortex. All the energized past, all the past that is living and worthy to live. All MOMENTUM'.³³ And in an article on Vorticism published in September 1914, Pound describes a 'world of moving energies'.³⁴ Likewise, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska begins his contribution to the first issue of *BLAST* by invoking '[s]culptural energy', tracing fluctuating patterns of 'energy' and 'force' across the history of world art before concluding: 'WE the moderns [...] through the incessant struggle in the complex city, have likewise to spend much energy'.³⁵ In this piece, Gaudier-Brzeska exclaims: 'VORTEX IS ENERGY!'³⁶ Finally, Lewis writes that the 'Vorticist is at his maximum point of energy when stillest' and that 'WE ONLY WANT THE WORLD TO LIVE, and to feel it's crude energy flowing through us'.³⁷

The one example of a ‘Vorticist’ text that Pound cites in his ‘Vortex’ contribution to *BLAST* is H.D.’s poem ‘Oread’, which depicts a whirlpool in the sea; similarly, the climactic moment in West’s story centres on a whirlpool of competing, fluid energies. Thematically, then, ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ aligned with Pound’s conception of Vorticist literature; as this article argues, the story found a welcome place in *BLAST* because of its emphasis on energy, motion and force. The inclusion of this story in the magazine, however, also points to the intellectual debt Pound owed to the feminist periodical culture within which West was deeply embedded when she was writing it. As Pound himself noted in 1910, again employing the language of energy and force, ‘the “influences” in a man’s work which matter are usually pretty well concealed. They are the forces that strike at the thought tone and into the meaning’.³⁸ This article recovers the influence of writers such as Marsden and West in the development of Vorticism by analysing, first, feminist political conceptions of ‘energy’ and then the wider scientific discourse within which such ideas were formulated.

Hurling Thunderbolts: Individualist Feminism

It is no exaggeration to claim that *The Freewoman* gave Rebecca West her identity as a writer. Born Cicely Fairfield on 21 December 1892, West adopted her pseudonym, taken from Ibsen’s play *Rosmersholm* (1886), after the publication of her first ever article in *The Freewoman* on 30 November 1911. When her second article appeared, she memorialised the date in a scrapbook: ‘Rebecca West born February 15, 1912’.³⁹ Over the next two years, West worked at *The Freewoman* in various capacities, first as assistant editor to Marsden and then as literary editor from June 1913, when the periodical underwent a change of direction indicated by its change in title.

In a 1926 article published in the journal *Time and Tide*, West remembered *The Freewoman* from across ‘the intervening years’ as a periodical that had ‘mentioned sex loudly and clearly and repeatedly, and in the worst possible taste’ and ‘by its candour did an immense service to the world

by shattering, as nothing else would, as not the mere cries of intention towards independence had ever done, the romantic conception of women'.⁴⁰ West makes it clear that what is taken for granted in 'the quiet orthodox woman's weekly' of 1926 was, in 1911, radical and required a resolute 'unblushingness'.⁴¹ Topics such as free love, homosexual desire and birth control were discussed openly and frankly. As H. G. Wells quipped, the journal 'existed it seemed chiefly to mention everything a young lady should never dream of mentioning'.⁴² Part of this uncompromising, wide-ranging focus was the journal's opposition to the political movement that has since dominated histories of feminism in this period. As West observes, Marsden founded the periodical 'because she was discontented with the limited scope of the suffragist movement' and 'felt that it was restricting itself too much to the one point of political enfranchisement and was not bothering about the wider issues of Feminism'.⁴³ Having broken from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1911, Marsden established her journal in an attempt to stretch the purview of feminist political activity and discussion beyond the single issue of 'Votes for Women'. Taking her cue from the individualist philosophies of Nietzsche and Max Stirner, author of the 1844 work *Der Einzige und sein Eigenthum (The Ego and Its Own)*, Marsden contrasts the 'Freewoman' with the 'Bondwoman' in her editorial to the first issue: whereas the latter is defined by a slavish 'habit of thought', the former is free because she is an 'individual'.⁴⁴ For Marsden, collective political action would not make women free; rather, freedom must come from within the individual. This focus on female individualism was clearly indicated when *The Freewoman* was re-launched as *The New Freewoman* with the subtitle *An Individualist Review*. Marsden now moved away from the rigid dualisms of 'Freewoman' versus 'Bondwoman'; as Bruce Clarke has discussed, this new phase in Marsden's thinking was defined by the logic that: 'Life is flux; it must move or die. Fixity is morbid'; and, 'The goal of life in any individual manifestation, in any *ego*, is to fend off fixating forces and maintain itself in pure onward motion'.⁴⁵ We can see this logic at work in an article Marsden published in

November 1913. Before the WSPU instituted ‘trumpets, banners and catchwords’, Marsden writes, the ‘Woman Movement’ ‘was “actual” in individual women’:

Then arose ‘leaders’ who reduced it to a ‘cause’, a fixed idea, stationaryness [sic] and consequent stagnation. The streams of living energy and understanding spreading in every direction, each the expression of the individual’s instinctive development, they called ‘running to waste’. They proposed at once to dam it up: make a cause of it: the individual must give her energy to the cause. Propaganda started to teach women what they owed to the ‘Cause’: the ‘duty’ of draining their stream of energy into the dam: to ‘concentrate’ on the idea: to sink individual differences; to do just those things indeed which makes the intelligent stupid. The blight of the ‘leader’ has brought the ‘movement’ to a standstill.⁴⁶

This rhetoric of ‘living energy’ and ‘movement’, in contrast to ‘waste’ and increasing ‘stagnation’, was prevalent across Marsden’s journals. One contributor reviews Karin Michaëlis’s novel *The Dangerous Age* (1910), for example, by describing it as ‘a revelation of the soul of a woman, as that soul has been evolved through the repression of natural instincts and the want of proper fields for the expression of energy’.⁴⁷ Similarly, West celebrates the novels of M. P. Willcocks because they ‘express the passionate deliberations upon life of a wise and energetic personality’.⁴⁸

Like Marsden, West viewed her own life and work as animated by ‘streams of living energy’. In two essays published in February and March 1912 in *The Freewoman* that contrast ‘The Gospel According to Mrs Humphry Ward’ (the arch Victorian moralist) and ‘The Gospel According to Granville-Barker’ (the modern Shavian actor), West juxtaposes the life of ‘sheltered women’ with a modern life of ‘adventure’ and ‘desire’, writing that ‘life ought to be a struggle of desire towards adventures whose nobility will fertilise the soul and lead to the conception of new, glorious things’.⁴⁹ Responding to a critic of her first article in the letters page of the periodical, West states: ‘I write a positively eloquent paean on energy, and hurl my thunderbolts at the woman who will not think’.⁵⁰

This recalls Lewis's later account of his first meeting with West in 1912 at South Lodge, in which West is envisioned as a 'dark young maenad' who 'burst through the dining room door (for she was late) like a thunderbolt'.⁵¹ In her journalism, West hurls her thunderbolts at 'the parasitic women of the upper and middle classes, whose "beautiful thoughts" are the effortless pulp of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, not the fierce struggles towards the light of George Bernard Shaw'; these thunderbolts, she writes, 'might foster the qualities of independence, thrift and firmness of character, so sadly lacking among the upper-class women of today'.⁵² West contrasts this 'firmness of character' with the physical and intellectual laxness of the 'sheltered woman', who is characterised as having 'a smooth brow, that has never known the sweat of labour; the lax mouth, flaccid for want of discipline; eyes that blink because they have never seen anything worth looking at; the fat body of the unexercised waster'.⁵³ Such a woman, West writes in an article criticising the WSPU published in February 1913, is responsible for turning England into 'the sluggish nation'.⁵⁴ When 'women cultivate laxness of mental tissue', she later observed, they 'dissolve into a hot emotional vapour that [...] is an offence not only against women but against the race'.⁵⁵ In another article published in May 1912 in *The Freewoman*, West contrasts 'the cow-like type of woman who will succeed in married life because of her fitness for drudgery' with 'the women unsuited for slavery, made for nobler things', arguing: 'The type that is supreme in motherhood because of its submission to domestic slavery has none of those qualities which we recognise as valuable in all other forms of human activity – quickness, intensity of perception, nervous energy'.⁵⁶ This juxtaposition between the 'effortless', 'parasitic' and 'sluggish' life of the 'sheltered' woman and the 'energy', firm 'discipline' and 'fierce struggles' of the independent, 'adventurous' woman is central to West's developing vision of her modernist aesthetic project at this time: for West, female action and 'energy' will stimulate original thought and intense perception, 'fertilise the soul' and thereby 'lead to the conception of new, glorious things'.

In an essay titled 'A New Woman's Movement' published in December 1912, we see West return to this theme, again denigrating the life of the 'sheltered woman'. In this article, West argues

for 'more riotous living' and female 'adventures' beyond the domestic space: 'While men are rolling round the world having murderous and otherwise sinful adventures of an enjoyable nature', she writes ironically, 'women are to stay at home earning the promotion of the human race to a better world'.⁵⁷ Such confinement is self-imposed, West contends: 'the ugliness of the world is a stupid convention' born out of women's 'enforced asceticism' and 'the sacrifice of personal liberty'.⁵⁸ As Barbara Green has argued, 'West associated "creative power" with a wide range of social practices, eating, dressing, dancing among them'.⁵⁹ In 'A New Woman's Movement', for example, West promotes the enjoyment of beauty and the gratification of 'appetite' as a route towards individual freedom: 'we must make a fuss about our food. "The milk pudding must go" shall be our party cry. I can see in the future militant food raids of the most desperate character'.⁶⁰ She concludes the article by noting: 'It may be that the repression of the animal in woman, with its desires for food and freedom and comfort, accounts for her greater liability to nervous irritability and hysteria'.⁶¹

These ideas are all in evidence in 'Indissoluble Matrimony'. The story is focalised through the eyes of George Silverton, a solicitor's clerk who views his wife Evadne's 'riot of excited loveliness with suspicion' (a line that directly echoes West's call for 'more riotous living' among women).⁶² 'Indissoluble Matrimony' is a satire on contemporary marriage and misogyny, providing a window into 'the jaundiced recesses of [George's] mind'.⁶³ As Gilbert and Gubar have highlighted, the story foregrounds 'the connection between male sexual anxiety and woman's entrance into the public sphere', with George's discovery that his wife is scheduled to speak at a socialist meeting provoking outbursts of hatred and an increasingly hysterical interior monologue.⁶⁴ Transferring a fear of Evadne's intellectual independence onto her 'beautiful joyful body', George views his wife as a 'purely physical', 'over-sexed' and 'voluptuous presence' that disturbs the peace of his home.⁶⁵ Furthermore, George repeatedly describes Evadne in terms of the animalistic, as being 'like the cat about to steal the cream' or a 'grotesquely patterned wild animal', a 'toad squatting on the clean earth' and, when she is swimming in a lake, a 'wet seal-smooth head bobbing nearer on the waters',

‘porpoise-like’.⁶⁶ These descriptions of Evadne’s animalistic physicality connect back to ideas articulated in West’s journalism: what terrifies George is Evadne’s refusal to repress ‘the animal in woman’ and deny her ‘natural instincts’, a refusal which causes his own ‘nervous irritability and hysteria’. Evadne not only asserts her autonomy beyond the home by announcing her desire to speak at the socialist meeting, defying her husband’s ineffectual command, but also her voracious appetite for food frightens George because it signifies her ‘riotous’ freedom: he observes that she smiles ‘at some digested pleasure’, speaks ‘rather greedily’, and eats ‘with an appalling catholicity of taste, with a nice child’s love of sweet foods’.⁶⁷ While George eats an ascetic meal of ‘tongue’, ‘she would be crushing honey on new bread, or stripping a plum of its purple skin’.⁶⁸ The fruit here of course recalls the temptation of Adam by Eve, signifying to George a dangerous form of female knowledge that threatens ‘celibacy’ and ‘all those delicate abstentions from life’.⁶⁹ What’s more, West’s satirical depiction of George’s repulsion echoes Marsden’s argument in a series of essays written for *The Freewoman* titled ‘The New Morality’, in which she heaps scorn on those who might ‘regard it as an indecent exhibition, if they saw a woman looking as though she were very obviously enjoying food, or obviously gratifying any of her senses’.⁷⁰

‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ builds to a climax when Evadne leaves home; suspecting her of adultery, George follows Evadne to a lake, where he finds her alone and swimming confidently: ‘Whirling her arms above her head she trampled down into the water and struck out strongly [...] she swam quickly’.⁷¹ Evadne here figures the independent woman imagined in West’s journalism, the woman who has known ‘the sweat of labour’ and the ‘discipline’ of vigorous exercise. Confronting her, George imagines that he is locked in a ‘stark contest face to face’ with Evadne, fuelled by ‘unmentionable antagonisms’.⁷² A physical ‘battle’ ensues, which churns the lake into a ‘whirl[ing]’ ‘vortex’ of ‘quarrelling waters’.⁷³ When Evadne disappears, George believes he has killed his wife, imagining his victory over her as evidence that he “‘must be a very strong man’”.⁷⁴ Returning home, however, he finds Evadne comfortably asleep in bed, and concludes dejectedly: ‘Bodies like his do

not kill bodies like hers [...] He was beaten'.⁷⁵ Whereas George 'loathe[s] and dread[s]' action, his 'flaccid body' becoming a marker of both physical weakness and spiritual enervation, Evadne persists 'in turmoil, in movement, in action': she performs 'movements [...] full of brisk delight', 'movements which terrified him by their rough energy'.⁷⁶ As such, Evadne figures the female 'energy' and joyful 'movement' promoted across West's contributions to *The Freewoman*, her victory over George symbolising the revitalising power of the independent, 'adventurous woman' who renounces the sheltered life of domesticity and fixed social norms.

On first reading, West's story would appear to be antithetical to the gender politics of *BLAST*, and this is how critics have overwhelmingly interpreted it. Hertz summarises the critical consensus, that 'West's story either does not fit in with Vorticism because it is a woman's realist tale oddly stuck in the radically experimental avant-garde magazine, or it is a clear contestation of Lewis's masculine aesthetic founded on the purity of the male artistic spirit and a rejection of the female body'.⁷⁷ Following T. E. Hulme's prescriptions for the dry, focused, direct style of 'classicism', Lewis and Pound founded Vorticism as 'a hard, unromantic external presentation of kinetic forces, an arrangement of surfaces'.⁷⁸ These firm, vigorous, masculine forces countered what Lewis later attacked in this novel *Tarr*, serialised in *The Egoist* throughout 1916, as the 'jellyfish diffuseness' of the feminine.⁷⁹ In the first issue of *BLAST*, for example, Lewis writes of the 'disease of femininity', blasts the 'effeminate lout' within England, and dismisses those who would bend 'the knee to wild Mother Nature, her feminine contours, Unimaginative insult to MAN'.⁸⁰

Moreover, the first issue of *BLAST* closes with an announcement addressed 'TO SUFFRAGETTES' that offers 'A WORD OF ADVICE'.⁸¹ In reference to the attack in the National Gallery on Velázquez's painting *Rokeby Venus* made by Mary Richardson earlier in the year, and the increasing militancy that was defining the suffrage movement in the summer of 1914, Lewis writes: 'IN DESTRUCTION, AS IN OTHER THINGS stick to what you understand': 'WE ADMIRE YOUR ENERGY. YOU AND ARTISTS ARE THE ONLY THINGS (YOU DON'T MIND BEING

CALLED THINGS?) LEFT IN ENGLAND WITH A LITTLE LIFE IN THEM’, he writes patronisingly, but ‘LEAVE ART ALONE’ in case you ‘DESTROY A GOOD PICTURE BY ACCIDENT’.⁸² This is a derogatory yet semi-serious, ironic address that is in keeping with a magazine issue that deliberately cultivated hybridity and contradictory, aggressive position-taking as a structural principal; it at once identifies Lewis and his magazine with the suffragettes (who are referred to as ‘BRAVE COMRADES!’) and at the same time distances Vorticism from all women (who are dismissed as mere ‘things’ unable to comprehend good art).⁸³ As Janet Lyon has argued, avant-garde aesthetics and militant suffragism are aligned here, and significantly this is an alliance that ‘coheres around common *energy*’, but ‘*BLAST*’s acknowledgment of this commonality is strategic: the Suffragettes are avatars of political energy and therefore are *not* artists [...] the artist-agitator is *not* the political agitator; rather, the artist is the individualist whose cause, Lewis tells us, is “NO-MAN’S”’.⁸⁴ In this interpretation, ‘TO SUFFRAGETTES’ is evidence of the positioning in *BLAST* of male Vorticist aesthetics as autonomous from feminist political discourse.

However, what should now be clear is that *BLAST*’s opposition to the suffrage movement in fact aligned it with the feminism espoused by Marsden, who attacked the notion of sublimating one’s individuality to a ‘Cause’ just as vigorously as Lewis. Admittedly, by 1914 Marsden’s focus had shifted from an individualist feminism to a more wide-ranging and explicitly de-gendered egoism, as signalled in her periodical’s change of title from *The New Freewoman* to *The Egoist* at the beginning of the year; in the last issue of *The New Freewoman*, Marsden published a letter signed by a group of five contributors to the journal, headed by Pound, calling for this change in title. Many of the pronouncements in Lewis’s magazine about the individualism of the artist, however, take their cue from the philosophy outlined in Marsden’s earlier journals. As Lewis writes in ‘Long Live the Vortex!’, for example: ‘Blast [sic] presents an art of Individuals’; ‘We want to make in England not a popular art [...] but an art of individuals’; ‘TO THE INDIVIDUAL’, he shouts.⁸⁵ This position was entirely consistent with the one that had been developed in Marsden’s journals, and had its roots in

the feminist political philosophy of *The Freewoman*. Indeed, *BLAST*'s links to Marsden's journals were announced in the first issue of the magazine, which included an advertisement for *The Egoist*.

Moreover, whilst Lewis condemned the 'disease of femininity', this did not necessarily preclude women from coming into the Vorticist fold. As Lisa Tickner has observed, Vorticism appealed to female writers and artists such as Kate Lechmere, Jessica Dismorr, Helen Saunders and Dorothy Shakespear because the movement offered opportunities 'for a *feminist* repudiation of femininity'.⁸⁶ Whilst West was the only female contributor to the first issue of *BLAST*, it was undoubtedly the 'energy' Lewis observed in both her personal life (bursting through doors 'like a thunderbolt') and her journalism ('positively eloquent paeon[s] on energy') that led him to seek out her contribution to the magazine; this was an energy that was exploding 'the romantic conception of women' as reducible to their 'slavish' roles as merely wife or mother. Like Lewis, West privileges female 'energy' by implicitly attacking the 'jellyfish diffuseness' of women throughout her journalism. As I have examined, the contrast drawn between the 'sheltered woman' and the independent, 'adventurous' woman was born out of West's rage against England as a 'sluggish nation' of 'flaccid' bodies and 'lax' minds: she hurls her thunderbolts at those women in 'want of discipline' who dissipate 'mental tissue' into an 'effortless pulp' and 'dissolve into a hot emotional vapour'; by contrast, the free, independent woman cultivates 'firmness of character' and a rigorous, exacting intellect and an imagination of 'intense perception'. These ideas correlate with Lewis's own rage against England, a nation 'blasted' for its climate of 'flabby sky' and 'lazy air' that generates only 'DOMESTICATED' 'stupidity and sleepiness' among 'VEGETABLE HUMANITY'.⁸⁷

This opposition between the 'vegetable' matter of humanity-in-the-mass and the 'force' and 'motion' of an energised individual, a contrast that is common to the editorial philosophy and rhetoric of both Marsden's journals and *BLAST*, was shaped not just by feminist political discourse but also early twentieth-century scientific understandings of the universe. In the next section, I examine how the scientism of Marsden's journals helped Pound to arrive at ideas by which he

defined and delineated Vorticism, and the ways in which this scientism influenced the vocabulary and structure of 'Indissoluble Matrimony' as well as Lewis's play *Enemy of the Stars*.

Whirling, Dissipating Energy: Scientific Discourse

Einstein's theory of special relativity, published in 1905, famously quantified the equivalence between mass and energy. One impact of this theory was that it put an end to the use of 'ether' as a meaningful scientific concept. Previously, scientists argued that the constituents of matter were surrounded by ether, an ineffable, imponderable medium that was thought to fill all space and serve as the vehicle for the transmission of vibrating electromagnetic waves. Einstein's theory challenged the mechanical underpinnings of that hypothesis; however, as Henderson notes, it 'gained acceptance among scientists only gradually and was not widely popularized until 1919'.⁸⁸ In the first two decades of the twentieth century, therefore, the concept of 'ether' continued to dominate how the majority of scientists, as well as their followers, thought about the universe.

In 1914, Pound adopted a pair of related pseudonyms for six contributions he made to *The Egoist*, 'Bastien' and 'Baptiste von Helmholtz'. These names directly referenced the German scientist who had introduced the idea of the 'vortex' into nineteenth-century physics and, in doing so, established the mathematical principles of physical forces that provided the basis for Lord Kelvin's laws of thermodynamics, Hermann von Helmholtz (1821–94). In a paper of 1847 titled 'On the Conservation of Force', Helmholtz set forth his theory of vortex motion, explaining both the constituents of matter as well as the larger universe itself in terms of 'vortex rings'. Corresponding with Helmholtz about this theory in 1867, Kelvin published an article 'On Vortex Atoms' in the same year, which opened with the assertions that 'Helmholtz's rings are the only true atoms' and 'all bodies are composed of vortex atoms in a perfect homogeneous liquid'.⁸⁹ As Bell points out, this was how the 'ether' was conceived at the time, as fluid in nature; the late nineteenth-century classicist

John Burnet, for example, was to ‘reiterate the pre-Socratic “analogy of eddies in wind or water” in support of vortex theory’.⁹⁰ Likewise, in a popular book first published in 1893 and reissued in 1913, *Pioneers of Science*, Oliver Lodge observed, writing about Descartes’s theory of vortices:

He regarded space as a plenum full of an all-pervading fluid. Certain portions of this fluid were in a state of whirling motion, as in a whirlpool or eddy of water; and each planet had its own eddy, in which it was whirled round and round, as a straw is caught and whirled in a common whirlpool. This idea he works out and elaborates very fully, applying it to the system of the world, and to the explanation of all the motions of the planets.⁹¹

This conception of the ether as ‘fluid’ provided the basis for Helmholtz’s later investigations into hydrodynamics, which in turn prompted others, such as Kelvin, to consider the relationship between the vortex and electromagnetic theory. J. G. McKendrick explains this connection between ‘hydrokinetics and electrokinetics’ in his 1899 biography of Helmholtz:

[A]ll mechanical models that aim at explaining the reciprocal relations of electricity and magnetisms require rotating elements; and vorticity of some kind seems to be an essential feature of electromagnetic action. [...] Lord Kelvin made Helmholtz’s investigation the basis of the splendid hypothesis, that the atoms of matter are composed of minute vortex rings in the ether, and he worked out in detail the analogy between such rotational movements and electromagnetic phenomena. [...] The element, according to this conception, is neither a solid atom, nor a mass of atoms, but a whirl in a fluid ether.⁹²

As the theories of Helmholtz and Kelvin were popularised throughout the late nineteenth century, artists, writers, occultists and theosophists adopted the idea of the ‘ether’ to account for the ineffable, that which is neither a perceptible ‘solid’ nor ‘mass’ but an invisible repository of cosmic and, perhaps, spiritual energy. In their revised edition of *The Unseen Universe* (1876), for example, Balfour Stewart and Peter Guthrie Tait ‘made one of the first published connections between the

ether and the fourth dimension', envisaging the ether 'as a bridge to an imperceptible universe into which the energy dissipated through entropy might be flowing'.⁹³ The first law of thermodynamics states that energy can be transferred from one form to another but not created or destroyed; the second law states that as energy is converted some of it is always lost as wasted heat, often through friction. In 1850, the German physicist Rudolf Clausius gave this dissipation of energy a name, 'entropy', a concept that was formalised in the work of Helmholtz and Kelvin. By the end of the nineteenth century, the implications of entropy had become clear and urgent. As Morrison notes, entropy 'offered up much more horrific possibilities than the inefficient functioning of steam engines': in his article 'On the Age of the Sun's Heat' (1862), for instance, Kelvin set forth ideas that highlighted 'the consequences for life as stars cool and energy dissipates: a seemingly irreversible slide toward entropy creates a cold, exhausted universe, whose energy is incapable of supporting work of any kind'.⁹⁴ By the close of the century, then, theories of vortex motion, the ether, electromagnetism and thermodynamics presented an image of the universe as 'a fluid realm of continuous cohesion and diffusion' that was viewed with alternating fascination and horror.⁹⁵

Pound draws on these scientific ideas consistently in his pre-1914 writings. In *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), he observes: 'We have about us the universe of fluid force'; and, 'in the realm of fluid force, one sort of vibration produces at different intensities, heat and light'.⁹⁶ In 'The Wisdom of Poetry' (1912), Pound directly names this 'fluid force' as the 'ether': 'For the initiated the signs are a door into eternity and into the boundless ether'.⁹⁷ In his essay 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris' (1912), moreover, he describes words as 'great hollow cones of steel [...] charged with a force like electricity'.⁹⁸ And, publishing his essay 'Psychology and Troubadours' (1912) in *Quest*, a magazine devoted to psychic and mystic phenomena, Pound highlights the intersection between science and spiritualism at this time when he explains the 'mysticism' of Provence through metaphors of electromagnetism: '1st, the common electric machine, the glass disc and rotary brushes; 2nd, the wireless telegraph receiver'.⁹⁹ Pound writes of the 'charged surface' of the telegraph 'registering

movement in the invisible aether'.¹⁰⁰ He also envisages a set of contrasts between 'North and South' or 'sun and moon' as the 'positive and negative' poles of electromagnetism, which generate a 'tension' and 'necessary restraint' in Provence that in turn creates the electric current that gives light.¹⁰¹ And in an essay published in January 1913 in *The New Age*, Pound outlines his famous metaphor for the production of form, also drawn from electromagnetism: the 'rose in the steel-dust'.¹⁰² As Bell notes, the 'patterning potential of electromagnetic energy' is used here by Pound 'as an analogy for the wider potential of energy in general': 'energy in all its forms always retained mystical properties for Pound; although quantifiable by science, it retained the signature of the "gods"'.¹⁰³ Pound follows nineteenth-century predecessors such as Stewart and Tait, then, in viewing cosmic energy that passes through 'the boundless ether' as a marker of the ineffable and mystical.

West was familiar with Pound's use of scientific vocabulary and metaphors. Introducing the Imagists to a British audience for the first time in an article published in August 1913 in *The New Freewoman*, in which she quotes selections from Pound's 'A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste', published earlier in the year in the American magazine *Poetry*, West writes: 'Just as Taylor and Gilbreth want to introduce scientific management into industry so the *imagistes* want to discover the most puissant way of whirling the scattered star dust of words into a new star of passion'.¹⁰⁴ This highlights West's understanding of the scientific basis for Imagism in vortex theory. Reviewing *The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language* (1910) in the year of its publication, Pound would have come across the analogy Hudson Maxim makes between poetry and Helmholtz's law of 'conservation of force': 'Poetry obeys the law of conservation of energy. [...] Any surplusage [sic] of word symbols in a line weakens the line by diluting it'.¹⁰⁵ From this, the Imagists committed themselves to maximum efficiency of expression: 'To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation'.¹⁰⁶ There is a direct line of development from the principles of Imagism to those of Vorticism. In the quotation cited at the beginning of this essay, Pound makes clear: 'The image is [...] a VORTEX'. And in his 'Vortex' contribution to the first issue of *BLAST*, he cites a line from 'A Few Don'ts by

an Imagiste' under the heading 'ANCESTRY'. In an essay on Vorticism published in 1915, moreover, Pound returns to his metaphor of 'the rose in the steel-dust' to describe poetic form as 'a confluence of forces': 'if you clasp a strong magnet beneath a plateful of iron filings, the energies of the magnet will proceed to organize form [...] The design in the magnetized iron filings expresses a confluence of energy'.¹⁰⁷ This highlights how Pound's conception of Vorticist 'energy' originated in writings produced earlier than 1914.

On meeting Pound in the summer of 1913 at South Lodge, West encouraged Pound to write to Marsden about the possibility of his delivering literary material to *The New Freewoman*. In the autumn, Pound contributed a series of articles to the journal under the title 'The Serious Artist' drawing parallels between the work of the artist and that of the scientist. This was a fitting contribution to the journal; since the beginning of the previous year, Marsden had been setting out very similar ideas to Pound about energy and electricity. In January 1912, she writes: 'Emotion is the power-house which energises all human action. It is, therefore, pitiable and disastrous that we should know infinitely less of its nature and potentialities than we know of those of electricity'.¹⁰⁸ The following week, she asks: 'What is Joy? Who knows? What each does know is that when he is joyous a pulse beats somewhere which creates and sets free an additional energy':

What more do we know of light than that it is a form of vibration? Or of sound? Of ether, of electricity, or radium? May not life itself be vibrant energy made self-conscious? And may not the instinctive desire for self-abandonment, the impulse to throw off restraint and surrender consciousness to the workings of an outside force, be a driving desire to implicate consciousness in the vibrations which we have become aware of in the physical world?

If this be so, the Elixir of Life must be Joy. So Joy is the Life-Force, [...] the pulsating energy[.]¹⁰⁹

It is this which Pound possibly has in mind when he writes to Dorothy Shakespear in 1914 about ‘the power of receiving an energizing symbol’ by which one may gain ‘a vision [that] has a certain richness & power of energizing joy’.¹¹⁰ And, in July 1912, Marsden connects electricity with the energy of the soul:

The doctrine of Conservation of Energy seems to demand more than meets the eye. Thus, if a body is cremated, one finds a fairly exact equivalent in gases, water, calcined bone, and other materials, but there is no equivalent for all the force we know as human character or volition – often so tense and vivid at the very moment of physical death. The same sort of phenomenon occurs, of course, if a charged electric battery is burnt. The chemical equivalent of the battery itself is there, but there is no trace of the electricity. Centuries hence both the human volition and the electricity may be perceptible by means as yet unknown to us.¹¹¹

During the same period in which Pound was adopting the vocabulary of contemporary science to outline his theories about aesthetics and the role of poetry, therefore, Marsden was developing very similar ideas, using the language of electricity and energy to envisage the ineffable and imperceptible, to define emotion and the human soul.

This implicit reciprocity between Marsden and Pound was actualised when he began contributing ‘The Serious Artist’ to her periodical. As Bruce Clarke has revealed, the private correspondence between the two writers indicates ‘that Pound did not initiate the piece on his own and magnanimously offer it up, or vigorously insert it in’ to the periodical, as has often been claimed, ‘but that it owed its existence to Marsden’s promptings’.¹¹² The first instalment, for instance, begins: ‘It is curious that one should be asked to rewrite Sidney’s “Defence of Poesy” in the year of grace 1913’; and, ‘We are asked to define the relation of the arts to economics, we are asked what position the arts are to hold in the ideal republic’.¹¹³ Similarly, in his private letters to Marsden, Pound notes: ‘You axed me questions’.¹¹⁴ Reading Pound’s essay in its original publication

contexts, moreover, reveals that it emerged through dialogic exchanges with Marsden, responding to her editorials as she prompted him to clarify his thinking. In the first instalment, published in the issue for 15 October 1913, Pound makes a passing reference to ‘molecular energy’ when linking the role of the artist to that of the scientist, but it is Marsden’s editorials in this issue and the next, published on 1 November 1913, that helped Pound arrive at a more definitive statement about energy.¹¹⁵ In the first, Marsden observes that ‘the only thing of which we have first-hand knowledge – is the life within ourselves’:

We call it our soul, meaning thereby an individuated entity thrown out free by the stream of living energy. The soul is not a thought, and has nothing to do with thought. It is a ‘thing’ as electricity running along a wire is a thing, with movements, consciousness, repulsions, attractions making excursions and returning to its shell through the apertures for entry and exit it has made; a thing which forages, feeds, dissipates or grows, by means we can learn if we keep watch.¹¹⁶

Marsden here connects the ideas of electromagnetism (‘repulsions, attractions’) and entropy (‘dissipating’ energy) to the feminist philosophy outlined earlier, to the true individual’s ‘streams of living energy’. The works of a ‘major artist’, Marsden writes, are records of this unique energy: ‘They are the expression of an energy which is either unknown or known only in rare flashes to ordinary men’.¹¹⁷ The second editorial begins with an unmistakable reference to Pound’s article from the previous week, critiquing the ‘coyness’ and ‘vagueness’ of artists when asked to define their business.¹¹⁸ Again, Marsden here returns to her theme of art as the expression of ‘soul energy’ and ‘the force of the emotion’.¹¹⁹ This prompts Pound to write in his contribution to the same issue of the periodical about the ‘voltage of emotional energy’ needed to create poetry, and to declare:

We might come to believe that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radio-activity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying. A

force rather like water when it spurts up through very bright sand and sets it in swift motion.¹²⁰

I do not intend to suggest that Marsden was wholly responsible for originating ideas that Pound then adopted; as outlined previously, Pound was developing similar metaphors and analogies drawn from electromagnetism and the ether hypothesis as early as 1910, before *The Freewoman* even began publication. However, I do want to emphasise that the Vorticist principle of ‘energy’, proclaimed so loudly in *BLAST* in July 1914, owed much to the periodical contexts in which Pound was earlier developing it, and that it was these contexts – rather than those of *BLAST* – that informed the scientism of West’s ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’.

West’s story not only centres on a literal vortex, a whirlpool of water that recalls Helmholtz’s investigations into hydrodynamics and the ‘all-pervading fluid’ of the universal ether, but it also includes references to electromagnetism, such as this metaphor: ‘The strong passion which filled them threatened to disintegrate their souls as a magnetic current decomposes the electrolyte’.¹²¹ Like Marsden, West here imagines the ‘soul’ as electric, animated and disintegrated by magnetic ‘repulsions’ and ‘attractions’. Indeed, the whole story pivots on ‘antagonisms’ and the energy between opposite poles of attraction: George and Evadne embark on a ‘stark contest face to face’ and ‘body to body’ that culminates in the ‘battle’ at the lake.¹²² This creates electricity and climatic energy, as seen in the ‘fiery play of summer lightening’ in the sky as well as the ‘whirling’ vortex in the lake.¹²³ The contest between George and Evadne therefore signifies something much larger than simply the ‘sex antagonism’ between husband and wife identified by Gilbert and Gubar. The ‘quarrel in Sumatra Crescent’, we are told, suggests ‘vast and unmentionable antagonisms’: George ‘saw the universe as the substance and the symbol of their hatred. The stars trembled overhead with wrath’.¹²⁴ Behind the ‘moment’ of ‘this intense event’ trails the past, ‘as the pale hair trails behind the burning comet’.¹²⁵ Similarly, as Evadne swims, ‘[t]he moonlight made her the centre of a little feathery blur of black and silver, with a comet’s tail trailing in her wake’.¹²⁶ This relation between human and

planetary bodies recalls Descartes's writings, as parsed by Lodge, which found parallels between the micro- and macrocosmic: just 'as a straw is caught and whirled in a common whirlpool', so 'each planet [has] its own eddy, in which it [is] whirled round and round'. West directly echoes this idea by having George reflect on 'the untamed substance of the universe, round which he conceived passion and thought to circle as straws caught up by the wind'.¹²⁷ Moreover, George envisages his 'battle' with Evadne as a cosmic conflict between ether and matter. Throughout, he is repulsed by her 'fat flesh' and overt 'sensuality', reflecting on how he 'loathed all matter as the dull wrapping of their flame-like passion. At their wishing matter fell away'.¹²⁸ Believing he has killed Evadne, George thinks: 'the world became nothingness, [a] nothingness which is free from the yeasty nuisance of matter', and he imagines himself becoming 'absorbed into vacuity, the untamed substance of the universe [...] He saw God and lived'.¹²⁹ Just as Pound thinks of the 'invisible aether' as retaining 'the signature of the "gods"', George views his victory over Evadne/matter as his absorption into ether, the imperceptible, ineffable 'nothingness' in which he sees God.

However, the irony of the story is that, in a universe constituted by swirling vortex rings, it comes full circle, returning at the end to the conjugal home in Sumatra Crescent, with Evadne still very much alive and again dominant over the passive, enervated George. Over the course of the story, George has imagined Evadne switching between alternate poles of representation, which creates a 'pulsing' energy between attraction and repulsion: 'she was one of those women who create an illusion alternately of extreme beauty and extreme ugliness [...] her long body seemed pulsing with some exaltation'.¹³⁰ George can imagine his dominance over Evadne so long as he thinks about her sensual eyes as 'dusky with fatigue' or 'the lax fibre of her character', but this can switch in an instant: 'A change passed over her. She became ugly. Her face was heavy with intellect, her lips coarse with power. He was at arms with a Socialist lead. Much he would have preferred the bland sensualist again'.¹³¹ By the close of the narrative, definitively, Evadne is this powerful, intellectual freewoman; she is the character who embodies the cosmic energy of ether, charged with a force like

electricity, whereas George figures only decay and fatigue: ‘He sneezed exhaustingly, and from this physical distress realised how absurd it was ever to have thought that he had killed her’.¹³²

George’s exhaustion at the end of the story calls attention to the spectre of entropy that hangs over the entire narrative. From the beginning, events have been shrouded in darkness: ‘the house was not empty for all its darkness’, we are told, and George ‘lit a match and brought brightness into the little room’.¹³³ As many critics have noted, West is deliberately invoking ‘Conradian resonances’ here.¹³⁴ Just like Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), George locates darkness and ‘the horror’ not in the depths of Africa but in the imperial centre of London. Marlow confronts two women ‘guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall’; similarly, George recalls how he was introduced to Evadne by an elderly widow, Mrs Mary Ellerker, who sat ‘in the black-panelled drawing-room amidst the jungle of shiny mahogany furniture’ and in ‘a mass of darkness’: ‘This horror obsessed him’.¹³⁵ Marlow berates his listeners for their comfortable certainty in European law and order, their unwavering belief in the power of the ‘policeman’, and George is guilty of this hubris: ‘He had never lived more than half-an-hour from a police station, and [...] he had never conceived of any horror with which the police could not deal’.¹³⁶ And, just as Marlow peers through impenetrable fog and tells his tale ‘by the spectral illumination of moonshine’, George watches Evadne swim under ‘undisturbed moonlight’ and returns home with ‘a fog closing on [the] city’.¹³⁷ Laing and Winkiel both note the parallels between Conrad’s text and ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ to highlight the racial politics of West’s story, the construction of Evadne as an exotic ‘other’, and George’s anxieties about imperial decline. What previous critics haven’t noted, though, is how West’s allusions to Conradian ‘darkness’ point to her story’s thematic preoccupation with thermodynamics and entropy. George’s surname of ‘Silverton’, for instance, recalls the character ‘Singleton’ in Conrad’s *The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’* (1897), a man described by Conrad in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham: ‘Nothing can touch him but the curse of decay – the eternal decree that will extinguish the sun, the stars one by one, and in another instant shall spread a frozen

darkness over the whole universe'.¹³⁸ Similarly, the sun's heat death is evoked at the beginning of *Heart of Darkness*: 'the sun sank low, and from glowing white changed to a dull red without rays and without heat, as if about to go out suddenly, stricken to death'.¹³⁹ A quotation from Conrad's novella provides the epigraph to T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men' (1925), which famously closes with the lines: 'This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but with a whimper'.¹⁴⁰ George in 'Indissoluble Matrimony' thinks the same: 'He had always known that this was how the great tragic things of the world had accomplished themselves: quietly'.¹⁴¹ Before the close of the story, moreover, George watches 'a dim figure, who paused at each lamp post and raised a long wand to behead the yellow gas-flowers that were now wilting before the dawn: a ghostly herald preparing the world to be his deathbed'.¹⁴² If the future belongs to an energised Evadne, George's fate is instead the slow decline of entropy towards a cold, exhausted universe of dissipating energy.

In this, West's story parallels Lewis's play *Enemy of the Stars*, printed in the first issue of *BLAST*. Like the conflict between George and Evadne, Lewis's play is also structured around 'unmentionable antagonisms' between two characters, Arghol and Hanp, and builds towards a final confrontation and extended fight-to-the-death. In the 'Advertisement' that prefaces the play, both characters are described as 'full of fiery dust and sinewy energetic air', but Arghol lives his life in denial of this inner energy, passively submitting to Hanp's routine violence.¹⁴³ Assaulted one time too many, however, Arghol responds, accessing 'his underworld of energy and rebellious muscles': 'they hit each other, both with blows about equal in force'.¹⁴⁴ Reflecting on this turn of events, Hanp asks of Arghol: 'WHOSE energy did he use?'¹⁴⁵ In this way, the play responds to the first law of thermodynamics, depicting energy transferred from one form to another but not created or destroyed. As in West's story, this focus on thermodynamics also raises the spectre of entropy: the stars shine 'madly in the archaic blank wilderness of the universe' and, with the sky an 'ice field', the world is shrouded 'in eternal black sunlight'.¹⁴⁶ In his autobiography *Rude Assignment* (1950), Lewis claimed that *Enemy of the Stars* had been written 'to show the way' for literary Vorticism.¹⁴⁷ Given the

marked similarities with the play, however, it is not just plausible but distinctly probable that Lewis himself was first ‘shown the way’ on reading West’s ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’.

Conclusion

West’s 1913 article in *The New Freewoman* on Imagism signals her familiarity with Pound’s use of vortex theory and her appreciation for his attempts to ‘discover the most puissant way of whirling the scattered star dust of words into a new star of passion’. However, it would be a mistake to think of West as merely following Pound and Lewis, or as writing ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ in direct response to Vorticism. Such a view would not only run counter to the chronology of composition and publication, but would also serve to efface the important role played by female writers and editors in the whirlpool of ideas that was the ‘Great London Vortex’ before the summer of 1914. As I have shown in this article, ‘Indissoluble Matrimony’ was shaped by the individualist philosophy and language of science promoted across Marsden’s journals in the years 1911–13, and these were influences that aligned with the principles of Vorticism later set out in *BLAST*. In tracing these connections, I have not tried to accommodate West’s writings to the Vorticist movement and see her as a ‘forgotten Vorticist’; neither has it been my intention to suggest that Marsden and West were solely responsible for originating ideas that Pound and Lewis then adopted in *BLAST*. Rather, the shared vocabularies, metaphors and narrative structures surrounding the concept of ‘energy’ that I have traced in this article suggest patterns of influence between writers that we can model, not as direct borrowings or straight lines of relation between source and agent, but instead as ‘vortex rings’ of words and concepts circulated through and mutually reinforced by a common periodical culture. Such a model allows us to recover the crucial, often ‘forgotten’ role played by Marsden and West in the emergence of Vorticism, at the same time as it enables us to recognise the influence of Pound’s pre-1914 writings in the development of their own work.

Notes

¹ Billy Mills, 'Rebecca West, the forgotten Vorticist', *Guardian* (10 June 2011)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/10/rebecca-west-forgotten-vorticist>> [24 July 2019]

² Rebecca West, 'Indissoluble Matrimony', *BLAST*, 1 (20 June 1914): 98–117 (p. 111).

³ Rebecca West, *Selected Letters of Rebecca West*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 23.

⁴ Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 39.

⁵ West, *Selected Letters*, p. 119.

⁶ Violet Hunt, *I Have This to Say: The Story of My Flurried Years* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), p. 216; West, *Selected Letters*, pp. 119–20.

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