

## Alan Munton **replies to a review**

in *Art History*

I don't like having my words altered by a reviewer, which is why I am replying to Dr Sarah Victoria Turner's review of an essay by me.

The essay was on Pat Barker's *Life Class*, a novel published in 2007. My discussion was in *London, Modernism, and 1914*, an essay collection edited by Michael Walsh.

Barker's novel, I argued, was a travesty of life at the Slade in 1914, bringing forward the reactionary teaching of Henry Tonks as if it had influenced positively a number of modernist or near-modernist artists: C. R. W. Nevinson, Dora Carrington, Mark Gertler, Paul Nash – all are lightly fictionalised in *Life Class*.

My argument was that Barker's would-be feminist novel privileges these artists when there were actual women artists who were genuinely active in 1914, notably Helen Saunders and Jessica Dismorr. They were associated with Wyndham Lewis's *Blast*, the magazine which was the seismic event of 1914 for young artists, but which Barker somehow forgets to mention at all. I also made the case for Kate Lechmere, who financed Lewis's Rebel Art Centre and was a cubist artist herself.

Faced with this argument, Sarah Victoria Turner decided to have a little feminist fun at my expense. Her review appeared in *Art History* in 2012. Setting aside what I actually said, she pretends to believe that my strategy was "to challenge feminist readings of vorticism and its journal, *Blast*, which, he argues have been 'so reprehensible from a feminist point of view'".

But I didn't say that. I wrote that point as a *question*: "Why then is *Blast* so reprehensible from a feminist point of view?" To alter a question into a statement is an act of deliberate scholarly and critical misrepresentation that is intended to be damaging.

Dr Turner also obscures my actual argument whilst inventing a spurious opposition between myself and the art historian Lisa Tickner. She pretends that I disagree with Professor Tickner *because she is a feminist*. Turner writes:

“Munton’s strategy is to criticize feminist scholars and their work on vorticism, such as Lisa Tickner’s brilliant *Modern Life and Modern Subjects* (2000)”.

But I didn’t do that. I took *one* point from that book, and disagreed with it. I didn’t discuss any other feminist scholars. This was not, as Dr Turner seems to think, a campaign; it was a discussion. I do hope discussion of feminism is permitted, even if the book in question is “brilliant”, and (that implies) beyond criticism. I have always had the highest regard for Lisa Tickner’s work; and I remember being delighted, when I first read it twelve years ago, that in it she cites (favourably) one of my earlier discussions of Vorticism.

Dr Turner’s attempt to set us against each other verges on the personally offensive.

Why, then, did I ask why Lisa Tickner disliked *Blast*? Because I felt that she wanted to argue that there exists something she calls “Vorticist machismo”, and to continue arguing that even in the face of evidence to the contrary – evidence that she herself brings forward. Dr Turner doesn’t (or can’t) say so, but it is Tickner who points out that *Blast* “blasted effeminacy, in women or men”, blessed the Suffragettes, blasted Otto Weininger’s 1903 anti-feminist polemic *Sex and Character*, and – in Tickner’s words again – “departed from Futurism on the question of women”.

My question then was: if this is all true (and it is), why are the Vorticists still described as “strutting masculinists”, and why is Vorticist “machismo” said still to exist?

My conclusion was in the form of a question (again): “How would the movement be viewed if the women Vorticists were properly acknowledged” as part of it? And I ended by saying that Tickner’s need to insist on strutting masculinism “somewhat paradoxically” caused “the diminution or exclusion of the work done by women”. I was, on this particular question, asking Tickner to have more regard for the achievement of women artists than she herself actually argues for.

That is something that Dr Turner cannot accept; so she misrepresents my argument.

There are other, lesser matters. Dr Turner plays an old trick, criticising me for not discussing something that I never set out to deal with in the first place, “the macho rhetoric of much modernist aesthetics in this period”. According to her – in a semi-literate phrase – this is something which “these women artists faced then and which future [?] historians have had to negotiate ever since”. Yes: and what I wrote was part of that negotiation.

Dr Turner repeats one of the most tiresome clichés concerning Wyndham Lewis: she uses his full name, Percy Wyndham Lewis, in an attempt to make him sound ridiculous. (Perhaps an unwise move from somebody who herself uses a three-part name).

Dr Sarah Victoria Turner cannot have seen this name attached to any Lewis artwork, because the Lewis Trustees insist on galleries using the name he really used, Wyndham Lewis. I had always thought that respect for the name by which people choose to call themselves was an aspect of feminist practice. Perhaps I am wrong.

In all this, the only positive thing that I said, my one “valid point”, is that there exists insufficient discussion of the work of the women Vorticists. It was precisely this that my essay attempted to explain. If that was a valid thing to do, why all the denunciation? Why the alteration of a text in support of it? Why the misrepresentation?

It seems that for Dr Sarah Victoria Turner, where women artists and their critics are concerned, men may not speak without being derided.

## **Sources**

Sarah Victoria Turner, “The Edwardians and After”, *Art History* 35, 1 (February 2012), 178-181.

Alan Munton, “Rewriting 1914: the Slade, Tonks, and war in Pat Barker’s *Life Class*”, in *London, Modernism, and 1914*, ed. Michael J. K. Walsh. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 240-271.

Pat Barker, *Life Class*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007. Penguin, 2008.

Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.