John Rothenstein in the Interwar Years

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Keeping the Fires of Figurative Art Burning

By

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For my parents and nan, with love

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CHAPTER ONE

AN ALTERNATIVE OUTLOOK

In recent years, despite the unrelenting promotion of conceptual and theoretical art by the powers that be, a remarkable change in taste has taken place. Once a term of reproach, figurative art, especially that done in England between 1919 and 1960, is now in vogue. None of the most formidable critics of the period could have envisaged such a marked turn of events. Nor would they have looked upon it with anything less than shock and disdain. Because in their estimation, the painted human figure, like tonality in music, was dead and abstraction its legitimate heir. In this country, the principal propagators of such a view were three: Roger Fry (1866-1934), Clive Bell (1881-1964), and Herbert Read (1893-1968). All exerted tremendous power over the visual arts and used it to turn a generation of younger critics and curators against traditional form.

There was, however, one of them who never hid his enthusiasm for figurative painting. His name was John Rothenstein, and although committed to the modern movement, he did all the things its followers ruled taboo. For a start, he opposed the idea that form was more important than content. Neither did he believe that a modern artist must abide by certain theories or follow certain rules. His books are a testament to his catholicity, as are the 30 years he spent as director of the Tate. Devoid of modern art when he arrived on the eve of war in 1938, works by its greatest masters adorned the gallery by the time he left. Today, his acquisitions would not arouse the slightest hint of controversy or unrest. But in England in 1940, the art establishment regarded everything done after Impressionism with ruthless contempt. Picasso had plunged art into 'bestial darkness.'[1] Matisse was an 'anarchist', and howls of derision greeted shows of works by Rouault, Braque, and Paul Klee.[2] In 1948, Rothenstein's purchase of a Chagall raised

[1] *Illustrated London News* (9 December 1911), p.18.
[2] *Truth* (16 October 1912), p.932.

the tabloid press to fury, and Academicians called for his head.[3] To them, he was, and always remained, a dangerous progressive, and the art he espoused was both coarse and depraved. To the English avant-garde of the time, however, he was insufficiently radical in his ways:

> The representative element in a work of art may or may not be harmful; always it is irrelevant.[4]

Rothenstein would have none of this and demonstrated as much with uninhibited zeal. He was, for example, the most loyal and tenacious advocate of Francis Bacon (1909-1992), Lucian Freud (1922-2011), and Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), and it is impossible not to admire his efforts to win them universal acclaim.[5] The Rothenstein who hustled for Pollocks in New York is the same one who championed the work of Sheila Fell (1931-1979), Elisabeth Frink (1930-1993), Leon Kossoff (1926-2019), Euan Uglow (1932-2000), and Frank Auerbach (1931) back home.[6] More impressive still was the brazen way he rejected as arrant nonsense the popular idea that because

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[3] Frank Brangwyn also disapproved, writing to a friend: 'the Director of the Tate [Rothenstein] has just bought a *picture*? [sic] by Chaggal [sic] the Russian Jew, for £1000. It is disgraceful, that such a work should be bought and shown in a National Gallery — a very bad influence for the public.' The Fine Art Society, *Frank Brangwyn: A Mission to Decorate Life* (London, 2006), p.256. In *The Times,* Frank O. Salisbury denounced Chagall and the Tate's purchase as 'the expression of a perverted imagination developed with a view to achieving a position with the mass-minded public.' '£1000 for a Chagall', *The Daily Telegraph* (3 March 1948). Meanwhile, Norman Wilkinson, President of the Royal Institute of Painters in Watercolours, felt as if 'here is a pygmy playing the fool.' 'Chagall at the Tate', *The Daily Telegraph* (20 February 1948).

[4] *Clive Bell, Art* (London, 1914), p.25.

[5] 'One of the most formidable painters to have emerged anywhere since the war', *The Tatler* recorded Rothenstein saying of Francis Bacon. *The Tatler* (29 August 1962), p.28.

[6] In 1961, Rothenstein saw Uglow's show at the Beaux Arts Gallery and on the strength of what he saw, purchased the painter's *Standing Nude.* Run by Helen Lessore, the Beaux Arts Gallery was a stronghold of realist painting during a time when abstraction was dominant. Lessore wrote a passionate defence of realist painting and sculpture entitled: *A Partial Testament: Essays on Some Moderns in the Great Tradition*. In his capacity as buyer for the Contemporary Art Society in 1964, Rothenstein's purchases included Kossoff's *Riverside Building, no.2 1951* as well as Allen Jones's *Man-Woman,* one of the finest examples of British Pop Art. Indeed, his purchases are a microcosm of his tastes, including Howard Hodgkin's *Husband and wife*, and abstract sculpture such as Takis's *Electro Signals, No 1.* He would also add Keith Vaughan's *Study for Laocoon group* (4).

the work of the majority of British moderns continued to bear a close relation to life, ours was 'a minor school.'[7] Only Rothenstein would have the temerity to rank Spencer greater than Hans Arp and to dismiss a canon of criticism which argued to the contrary as one which took 'inadequate account of the evidence of one's eyes.'[8] While English critics fawned over French Tachists and American minimalists, Rothenstein promoted the work of his compatriots without hesitancy or shame. The epitome of this was his multi-volume *Modern English Painters,* the high point of his long career.[9] Vasarian in breadth, style, and ambition, it was a triumphant celebration of the great diversity of British painting and a severe indictment of an art world that put a premium on progress for its own sake. Add to this his refusal to conform to a vision of modern art centred around 'isms' and 'movements', and one can see why the avant-garde subjected him to years of torment and abuse.

Now the ideas that roused them to do so no longer carry the weight they once did. We have stopped demonising those moderns who, during the last century, remained both true to themselves and faithful to the visible world.[10]

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[7]'No, let us recognise straight away that ours is a minor school. There has been among British artists a lack of spiritual torment, that anxious effort which in the lives of the greatest artists forces them always to wrestle with new problems, to probe more deeply into the possible implications of the visual world.' Roger Fry, *French, Flemish and British Art* (London, 1951), p.138.

[8]John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters – Vol. 1: Sickert to Grant* (London, 1962), p.18.

[9]Published in three volumes and underwent three editions during Rothenstein's lifetime. See Adrian Clark's in-depth analysis of the work in *John Rothenstein: Fighting on All Fronts* (London, 2018).

[10]Numerous entries in Keith Vaughan's *Journals* show just how difficult it was for a painter to avoid abstraction. One entry, dated 1961, finds Vaughan mulling over the following quote from art critic and historian Michel Seuphor: 'thus it has been only logical to take cubism to its natural conclusions, and to cut out the traditional subject and give full expression, in a clear style and in absolute liberty to the values of pure art as they appear to the artists. [….] Nudes, still lifes, landscapes, have all lost their substance, and have nothing essential to offer man today [….] The real subject is painting in itself, and for itself. [….] Art freed from subject implies and enforces the absolute necessity for creativeness [….] The object of art is now more than ever to find a personal and inexhaustible mode of expression, the image of our profound inner being.' In response, Vaughan comments: 'what, one wonders, does M. Seuphor think Giotto, Michelangelo or Piero were trying to do? Keeping in line and illustrating bible stories? [….] But, if one tries to see some sense in the idea that creativeness is a variable necessity in art (which is not at all easy) then one might

Nor do we still vilify those men and women who made it their duty to defend their work, as Kenneth Clark's recent resurgence in popularity shows.[11] Like Clark's, Rothenstein's support was fundamental to the survival of modern depictive painting and inestimable significance to its reassessment today. Yet, anyone who assumes in these enlightened times that Rothenstein has finally received his due should think again. A recent study of his life by Adrian Clark proved to be more of an in-depth history of the Tate rather than the story of one man's revolt against the repressive aesthetic dogmas of his age.[12]

This rebellion, a heroic struggle with the imperious might of what we may call the orthodoxy of the avant-garde, falls into two phases: the first set between 1919 and 1938 and the second between 1939 and 1964. This book concerns itself with the former and not only throws new light on Rothenstein's pioneering patronage of British figurative art but also reveals the full extent of his early attempts to oppose those critics who tried to suppress it.

John Rothenstein was born in London in 1901, the son of William Rothenstein (1872-1945), a leading figurative painter and educator who later received a knighthood for his services to art. His adversaries once described him as the 'academician son of an academician'. [13] But such a description was far from accurate. In reality, in the early years of the last century, his father had been part of a daring brood of artists defying the tired artistic conventions with their shameless depiction of common subjects and real life.[14] For example, Augustus John (1878-1961), an artist of incredible skill and virtuosity, painted vagabonds, tinkers and gypsies, and William Rothenstein portrayed the pious, dishevelled Jews of the Whitechapel Ghetto. William's younger brother, Albert Rutherston (1881-1953), represented the lonely world of housemaids and laundry girls, while London's sordid underbelly of crime, poverty, and prostitution would find its laureate in the work of Walter Sickert. For a time, these artists were at the forefront of English art. They exhibited together at The New English Art Club (hereafter NEAC),

think that is of greater importance in figurative painting.' Keith Vaughan, *Journals 1939-1977*, ed. A. Ross (London, 1989), p.132.

[11]See *Kenneth Clark: Looking for Civilisation*, Chris Stephens ed. (London, 2014) and James Stourton, *Kenneth Clark: Life, Art and Civilisation* (London, 2017).

[12]*John Rothenstein: Fighting on All Fronts* (London, 2018).

[13]John Richardson, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (London, 1999), p.164.

[14]'It is the artist's privilege to see the element of hope and beauty in much that appears sordid and hopeless', William once said.

and their greatest supporter, D.S. MacColl, was a relentless critic of the insipid historical allegories favoured by the Royal Academy.[15] When, however, in 1910, Roger Fry put on a show of the Post-Impressionists, the course of modern painting in England changed. From that moment on, in progressive circles, the representational image became the target of scorn and derision; the Western tradition lost its appeal, and interest in classical skills diminished; wild excitement over the non-naturalistic painting going on in Paris erupted, and soon, free experiments with form and colour became the order of the day. Of course, this had been Fry's intention from the very beginning. He had the utmost contempt for art that expressed itself through literary or illustrative means. He viewed painting as visual music and the Post-Impressionists as liberators who had freed English artists from all their historical restraints.

Yet, if Fry had revolutionized painting in England, reducing reputations to rubble and setting it on the road to total abstraction, there were those outside of aging academics who truculently resisted.[16] Though he admired Van Gogh and Gauguin, Augustus John declined to let the ideas of Fry impact his work.[17]

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[15]In his study of Augustus John, T.W. Earp wrote of the NEAC that 'it stood for experiment and adventure against an academic convention which had ceased to possess any living significance.' T.W. Earp, *Augustus John* (London. 1920), p.22.

[16]Reviewing Walter Shaw Sparrow's *Frank Brangwyn and his Work* (1911), the critic Huntley Carter concluded: 'had he arrived with Mr. Brangwyn several years earlier, at the moment for instance, when his sketches were running round to the nearest-pawn shop, and he was on the point of deserting the studio for the sea, how glad we should have been. Then, like the post savages, Mr. Brangwyn would have given us something to fight over. Then he might have thrown his gage of future greatness at the feet of the hotspurs of critics and there would have been great and glorious doings. But Mr. Sparrow has arrived much too late with his prize. We are still youthful, still thirsting for blood, but we have found other loves, e.g., the post-impressionists: and there are still more waiting to be found.' Huntly Carter, 'Post-Impressionism', *The New Age*, VIII (15 December 1910), p.166.

[17]On 12 January 1911, John wrote to the American collector and patron John Quinn: 'I went to the post-impressionists again yesterday and was more powerfully impressed by them than I was at my first visit. There have been a good many additions made to the show in the meanwhile - and important ones. Several new paintings and drawings by Van Gogh served to convince me that this man was a great artist. My first view of his works disappointed and disagreed with me. I do not think however that one need expect to be at once charmed and captured by a personality so remarkable as his. Indeed 'charm' is the last thing to talk about in regard to Van Gogh. The drawings I saw of his were splendid and there is a stunning portrait of himself [....] As for Matisse, I regard him with the utmost suspicion. He is what the French call a fumiste — a charlatan, but an ingenious one. He has a portrait here of a 'woman

Sickert, too, stood firm, going on to produce in the 1930s such compelling figurative pictures as *The Raising of Lazarus* and the very first paintings anywhere to appropriate images straight from the mass media. But the artist who tried to ensure that representation did not come to an immediate end was Henry Tonks (1862-1937). Like John and Sickert, Tonks was a member of the NEAC, though his importance lies not so much in what he painted as in his achievements at the Slade. Appointed to an assistant professorship in 1892, Tonks was a stern and opinionated teacher whose criticisms were often bitter. But between 1908 and 1914, his devotion to drawing combined with his almost pathological aversion to Roger Fry would trigger an explosion of extraordinary representational painting from his students that Tonks would declare 'a crisis of brilliance.'[18]Among other works, there were the mysterious early landscapes of Paul Nash (1889-1946), giving fresh impetus to the English visionary tradition, and conversely, the imaginative figurative paintings of Stanley Spencer, already combining elements of the celestial with the everyday. Short in stature and as eccentric as he was gifted, Spencer's subject matter revolved around his hometown of Cookham, portrayed as a heaven on earth. His heroes were the Italian primitives, and they would influence the similarly adventurous figurative work of Spencer's fellow students. Foremost among these were Mark Gertler (1891-1939), C.R.W. Nevinson (1889-1946), Adrian Allinson (1890-1959), Dora Carrington (1893-1932), and John Currie (1884-1914), the last of whom was a wild and jealous young man who in 1914 would kill his mistress and then himself in a fit of rage.

It probably was not a surprise to Fry that Tonks, the obsessive draughtsman and firm upholder of Renaissance ideals, should have hated the Post-Impressionists and been so opposed to his ideas. But he was profoundly shocked by the reaction of William Rothenstein. After all, William had studied at the great Académie Julian in Paris, and he had known almost every subversive artist from Rodin and Degas to Whistler and Toulouse-Lautrec. Besides that, he and Fry were old friends.[19] Yet William, who was in India

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with green eyes' which to me is devoid of every genuine quality - a vulgar and spurious work.' Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New: Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art* (New York, 1972), p.155.

[18]For a superb account of Tonks's teaching and the Slade during these years, see: David Boyd Haycock, *A Crisis of Brilliance: Five Young British Artists and the Great War* (London, 2009).

[19]See Peter Stansky, *On or About 1910: Early Bloomsbury and Its Intimate World* (London, 1996), p.187. Also see William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories: Recollections of William Rothenstein 1900-1922* (London, 1934).

when the first Post-Impressionist show opened, refused to endorse it and the ideas of Fry when he returned home. William certainly had no issues with Post-Impressionist painting and had long admired Cézanne. However, he was under no illusion about where the theories of Fry would lead. 'Art and literature which do not combine form with human drama cannot satisfy mankind', William said.[20] That is one of the few paradoxes of William's career. Despite his cosmopolitan background and close association with Whistler, whose disregard for the subject was legendary, he never felt that way. Rather, he had an almost insatiable appetite for art that concerned itself with life, no matter how unpleasant or unsettling it might be. The work of Rembrandt remained a constant source of inspiration, and the *Disasters of War* by Goya moved him so much that he wrote the first book in English on the artist in 1901.[21] Consequently, the urge to purify the art of painting filled him with horror, and he fought it with the same vigour and persistence as Henry Tonks. As an illustration of this, his work assumed a greater naturalism than ever before, and as one of the finest portraitists of the age, he never failed to respond to the emotions aroused by the human face. Still more, from Sickert to Augustus John, he played a crucial role in endorsing and enhancing the careers of older artists, and he was beginning to interest himself in the work of younger painters as well. The pictures of Paul Nash he thought 'enchanting.' [22] Those by Spencer, meanwhile, won his wholehearted admiration, and the talent of both helped fuel his fight for a contemporary painting in which traditional imagery played an essential part:

> The minds of artists are not so limited that they cannot both create form and associate it with those emotions which, attending on man's pilgrimage through life, bring the arts within the orbit of common experience.[23]

This refusal to think of content as a mere adjunct to form not only killed William and Fry's friendship. It also profoundly influenced the mind of William's son, and indeed the feud continued into the next generation. That is because, throughout John Rothenstein's career, he stuck to his father's premise that subject-matter was the cornerstone of art. However, any hope for a

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[20] *Men and Memories 1900-1922*, p.219.
[21] William Rothenstein, *Goya* (London, 1901).
[22] *Men and Memories 1900-1922*, p.185. In his autobiography, Paint and Prejudice, C.R.W. Nevinson would also record the warm encouragement he got from William at this time. Cherishing William's kind remarks about his now famous early self-portrait, Nevinson wrote 'what a kind man Rothenstein was and is to the young; how different from many artists.' C.R.W. Nevinson, *Paint and Prejudice* (London, 1937), p.55.
[23] Ibid., p.219.

wider acceptance of this view seemed doomed when, in 1912, Fry's influence went from strength to strength. In that year, he staged a second Post-Impressionist exhibition. Unlike the first, Fry also allowed a small English contingent to take part. Among them were two painters whose trust in the new approaches was as fanatical and committed as his. Their names were Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) and Duncan Grant (1885-1978), and with Fry and Vanessa's husband, Clive, they became Bloomsbury and exerted dominance over British painting for more than two decades. It is possible that the Camden Town Group, had it survived longer, might have challenged its rule. In line with their mentor, Walter Sickert, its painters believed that art should focus on social realities, developing the emotive brushwork and violent colour typical of the Post-Impressionists towards this end. Alas, two of its finest exponents - Spencer Gore (1978-1914) and Harold Gilman (1876-1919) - died young, and Bloomsbury took full advantage of the group's demise.[24] In 1914, Grant painted the experimental *Abstract Kinetic Collage Painting with Sound*, and Clive Bell published *Art:*

> What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions? What quality is common to Sta. Sophia and the windows at Chartres, Mexican sculpture, a Persian bowl, Chinese carpets, Giotto's frescoes at Padua, and the masterpieces of Poussin, Piero della Francesca, and Cézanne? Only one answer seems possible — significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call 'Significant Form'; and 'Significant Form' is the one quality common to all works of visual art.[25]

As such:

> To appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man's activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation. For a moment we are shut off from human interests; our anticipations and memories are arrested; we are lifted above the stream of life. The pure mathematician rapt in his studies knows a state of mind which I take to be similar, if not identical. He feels an emotion for his speculations which

[24]For more on the group see Wendy Barron, *The Camden Town Group* (London 1979) and her *Perfect Moderns: A history of the Camden Town Group* (Aldershot, 2000).
[25]*Art*, p.8.

> arises from no perceived relation between them and the lives of men, but springs, inhuman or super-human, from the heart of an abstract science.[26]

Thus, Bell dismissed over 45,000 years of figurative painting, which had begun in the darkness of the Lascaux Caves. In the process, he would also express an opinion that became a toxic hallmark of his and Roger Fry's writing on art. Quite simply, this was a belief in the collective mediocrity of British painters and a passionate conviction in the supremacy of the French school. '[Fry] never quite got round to saying that the only way an Englishman could get to be a serious painter was to go to Nice and try to find a studio next to Matisse', John Piper (1903-1992) later said, 'but he gave the impression of thinking so.'[27] And in a miraculously short time, this view became common currency, accepted by almost all the most advanced critics, dealers, and patrons of the age.[28] Unsurprisingly, one of the rare exceptions was William Rothenstein, who opposed it from the start. Indeed, all the elements in English art which Fry decried as weaknesses - its romantic obsessions, its poetic ties to nature and narrative, its eccentric flights of fancy - William considered strengths. He delighted in the work of our greatest masters, simultaneously persuading his son of the unimpeachable genius of Turner, Constable, the Pre-Raphaelites, and William Blake. 'Interest in pure form has never distinguished English painting', William declared, urging English artists to perpetuate the uniqueness of their traditions:

> The English genius expressed itself early through poetry and English painters have usually given to their objective vision a poetical quality. It would be wanton to throw away a natural inheritance. Every artist has something which he and no other can give; yet we have artistic pedants who would forbid the play of unusual minds, and clerico-aesthetes who would impose a single dogma throughout the studios. Not through his own spirit must a man approach his God, but through the intermediary, forsooth, of some Anglo-French confessor.[29]

The allusion here to the malign influence of Fry is unmistakable, and there is no better evidence for it at work than in the meteoric rise of Duncan Grant.

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[26]Ibid., p.25.

[27]Anthony West, *John Piper* (London, 1979), p.56.

[28]While paying a visit to an exhibition of Ivon Hitchens in 1933, Myfanwy Evans recalled the director of the gallery saying 'You don't want to look at that stuff…come up and see my Derains'; Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (London, 1981), p.231.

[29]From William's 1931 lecture *Whither Painting?* Quoted in Michael T. Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (London, 1999), p.58.

By using conventional subjects to express significant form, Fry felt Grant did everything right. He had disowned the native traditions, thrown over his youthful Slade School naturalism and prostrated himself before the French avant-garde. 'He may be the long looked for British genius', Vanessa Bell remarked, and both Fry and Clive Bell promoted him as such.[30] But he wasn't, and if any progressive artist deserved that accolade, it was the painter, novelist, and candid cultural critic who became the arch-nemesis of Bloomsbury, Wyndham Lewis (1882-1957). The son of a bigamist father, he had graduated from the Slade in 1901. Even in his student days, he earned a reputation as a rebel, boozing and womanising with libertines like Augustus John. William Rothenstein was an early and lifelong supporter of the painter and is another proof that he wasn't the cautious conservative that the history books would like us to believe.[31] 'Lewis was striking looking', William later remembered:

> And even then showed signs of a formidable personality. He hesitated between writing and painting, meanwhile he made sensitive studies of the nude; I recall no compositions by Lewis — the imaginative and romantic side of his nature he put into his poems and into his daily life. He liked to shroud himself in mystery. After hiding for weeks he would suddenly reappear, having been, he would declare, in Sweden, or in some remote country; and he would hint at a conquest. His 'conquests' seemed for the most part to be Swedes, Germans, Poles or Russians, shadowy figures whom one

[30]Frances Spalding, *Duncan Grant* (London, 1998), p.131.

[31]Michael T. Saler also refutes this allegation, arguing '[William's] tirades against Roger Fry and the aesthetic of significant form were so bitter, and his praise of representative content in painting so fulsome, he could be easily mistaken as an opponent of visual modernism. This was manifestly not the case, especially when one considers his generous personal support of controversial modernists like Jacob Epstein, Henry Moore, Wyndham Lewis and Paul Nash.' Saler, *The Avant-Garde in interwar England*, p.54. When Epstein arrived in England from New York via Paris in 1905, William was one of his earliest supporters, persuading a Jewish society to assist Epstein financially. This enabled the sculptor to live and work comfortably for a period of two years and it was in 1908 that Epstein carved his 18 large nude figures for The British Medical Association building in the Strand. When unveiled to the public, scandal ensued. The press thought Epstein's gritty depictions of the human body obscene. In the ensuing controversy, William Rothenstein's biographer, Robert Speaight tells us that, 'William did more than anyone to give [Epstein] peace of mind, sending him a monthly cheque out of his own meagre funds.' Robert Speaight, *The Portrait of the Artist in his Time: William Rothenstein* (London, 1962), p.187. However, Epstein was never to acknowledge his debt to William to the extent that in his autobiography, which deals with his development as an artist, William was omitted.

> heard of, but never met. I was never sure whether, indeed, he ever had left England.[32]

But in 1908, he did, immersing himself in the most radical European painting as he went. He absorbed the lessons of Cubism but thought trivial its obsession with still life. He shared the desire of Futurism for art which exalted the rapid change and dynamism of the times but dismissed its glorification of speed and violence as mere hysterical cant. For a time, he worked with Roger Fry, producing abstract designs for the Omega Workshops. Yet he soon tired of his egotism and grew to loathe his servility to the art of France.[33] What Lewis wanted to do was to celebrate the industrial and technological prowess of his homeland, expressing its turbulent energy through the creation of a truly original native style. And in July 1914, he announced the arrival of Vorticism in a magazine that was as revolutionary for the way it looked as for what Lewis wrote inside. He called it *Blast* and stamped the word across its bright pink covers in bold, aggressively upper-case type. Throughout its pages, Lewis Blessed what he loved and Blasted everything he despised. 'BLAST - years 1837-1900' he roared in savagely satirical condemnation of the Victorian era.[34] 'BLESS ENGLAND, industrial island machine', he cheered before blessing its ports, roads, factories, everything in fact, which found reflection in Vorticist art.[35] 'Another thing we want to hammer into people through *Blast',* Lewis told a reviewer in open defiance of Fry:

> Is that there are just as good things in England as anywhere else. France has no monopoly on art. Everything that is good in Paris today is foreign – either Russian or German. England is said to be twenty years behind the times. There is no reason why she should be.[36]

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[32]*Men and Memories 1900-1922*, p.27.
[33]Accounts of their falling-out may be found in the following: Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry* (London, 1940); Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment* (London, 1950), pp.23-24; Quentin Bell and Stephen Chaplin, 'The ideal Home Rumpus', *Apollo*, LXXXII (1965), pp.248-91 and the pro Lewis scholar Walter Michel's rejoinder 'Tyros and Portraits, The Early Twenties and Wyndham Lewis', *Apollo*, LXXXIII (1966), p.75. Equally pro Lewis was Rothenstein's biography of Wyndham Lewis in *Modern English Painters*: *Sickert to Smith* (London, 1952), pp.276-313. For a more recent account see Paul O'Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London, 2000).
[34]*Blast* (London, 1914), p.18.
[35]Ibid., p.23.
[36]*Pall Mall Gazette* (27 June 1914), p.5.

With the creation of Vorticism, she no longer was. In fact, its thunderous blend of geometrical abstraction and mechanised imagery propelled English painting to the very forefront of European art. But, unlike other revolutionary movements it wasn't to last. A second volume of *Blast* appeared in 1915, but by 1917, most of the Vorticists were either fighting for their lives in the trenches or, like its excellent sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska, already dead. In the same year, Clive Bell's vilification of the group as a mere 'puddle of provincialism' helped seal its fate. Only sixteen at the time, John Rothenstein never forgave Bell for that.[37] He always believed that the works produced by the Vorticists in their assault on the sentimentalism and crustiness of the English cultural establishment were modern masterpieces of the first order, and the fact that he, in the summer of 1956, gave the movement its first retrospective was a genuine reflection of how strongly he felt.[38]

He would also feel passionate about the torrent of unforgettable images that emerged out of the murder and mayhem of the Western Front. Thrown into the thick of the action, British artists would respond by producing works of great emotional and psychological power. Despite all the insults they had hurled in its direction, even the most progressive soon realised that representation was the only effective way to express the full horror of how they felt and what they saw. Artists that were once worlds apart now came together, united by their realism and desire to tell the dark truth about the war. In chilling detail, for instance, Henry Tonks recorded the faces of men disfigured by the endless hail of bullets and shrapnel. A sculptor of genius, Charles Jagger (1885-1934), conveyed the savage confusion of close-quarter combat, and Wyndham Lewis depicted the scene from his trench as a sort of industrialised hell.[39] Pathos seeps out of every inch of John Singer Sargeant's epic *Gassed* and from the exhausted troops in *The Kensingtons at Laventie* by Eric Kennington (1888-1960). Pathos is again inherent in Henry Lamb's (1883-1960) startling portrayal of the desperate fight to survive of a platoon of Irish soldiers and in the seated figure in Colin Gill's

[37]Clive Bell, *Pot-Boilers* (London, 1918), p.229.

[38]'This week the Tate is again the temporary show room of a Paris collection. Twenty-nine paintings of the Cubist school have come to London after a Birmingham visit. while the "Musee d'Art Moderne" is shut repairs. They include Picassos, Braque, a Leger and a number of works by lesser-known artists of the movement and making an interesting contrast to the "Wyndham Lewis and Vorticists" exhibition in the neighbouring gallery.' *Bradford Observer* (28 July 1956), p.4.

[39]In *Blasting and Bombardiering,* Lewis remembered happening across: 'two Scottish privates; one was beheaded, and the leg of another lay near him, and this one's arm was gone as well. They had been killed that morning – a direct hit I suppose.' Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London, 1982), p.155.

(1892-1940) *Canadian Observation Post* convulsing from the effects of PTSD. There can be no doubt that Rothenstein, who lost one of his closest friends in the conflict, would have first seen and responded to these extraordinary records of human misery and endurance at the huge show of British war art at the Royal Academy in December 1919. He would have gone there with his father, whose desolate views of the ravaged churches and countryside around Ypres were also displayed. 'Each painter was at his best', William later enthused:

> As though a great subject brought to the surface his sincerest and most personal powers. Aesthetic interest was, for once, perfectly united to a full and dramatic content; could this movement be continued, no Continental art would surpass our own.[40]

Ironically, Wyndham Lewis was the one painter as determined as William to ensure that realism did continue. When Lewis signed up to fight in March 1916, he had been as advanced a painter as anyone could be. *Blast* had railed against all forms of traditional painting, and as he later admitted, his work had been 'dogmatically anti-real.'[41] Yet in the trenches, a great change came over his art. It was as if the brutal dehumanisation of war and harsh, angular shapes of Vorticism became inextricably linked in his mind. 'The Geometrics which had interested me so exclusively before', Lewis later confessed:

> I now felt were bleak and empty. *They wanted filling*. They were still as much present to my mind as ever, but submerged in the coloured vegetation, the flesh and blood of life.[42]

Thus, England's first and most formidable abstractionist became the first to give it up in favour of a new career as a figurative painter. In his writings, he would also emerge as the most vociferous enemy of what he saw as the aesthetic tyranny imposed upon contemporary painting by the apologists of his former style. He spent the next three decades in open revolt against them, painting a series of remarkable portraits and writing a stream of provocative

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[40] *Men and Memories 1900-1922*, p.350.

[41] Walter Michel and C.J. Fox eds, W*yndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1914-1956* (London, 1969), p.452. 'Were I going to relate what it was that decided me to abandon this road', Lewis writes about Vorticism, 'I should involve myself in an attack upon the Abstract in Visual Art, and I am not going to do that. If people wish to know what my view is on the Abstract, and other modes somewhat similar in purpose, I recommend them to buy my not-very-expensive book, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*, in which, expounded in the most elaborate way, are my reasons for objecting to these fashions.'

[42] Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment* (London, 1950), p.129.

essays and pamphlets that culminated in 1954 with the publication of *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*. Lewis conceived this seditious little book as the climactic work in a series of pioneering reviews in *The Listener,* promoting the likes of Francis Bacon, Michael Ayrton (1921-1975), Robert Colquhoun (1914-1962), and John Minton (1917-1957) as 'the finest group of painters that England has ever known.'[43] To an extraordinary degree, it was also his final warning against the dangers of putting faith in what John Rothenstein would call 'the new and the untraditional simply as the new and the untraditional.'[44] 'What I am arguing about in this book', Lewis explained:

> Is that an easily defined limit exists in painting and sculpture, in music, in theatre, in literature, in architecture, and in every other human art. There are daring drivers who enjoy driving along the edge of a cliff, whenever the opportunity offers. All I am saying is that there is such a thing as driving too near the edge of a cliff. There is no sense in shooting over it. It is quite simple; beyond a certain well-defined line – in the arts as in everything else – beyond that limit there is nothing.[45]

Naturally, the consequence of opposing the mandate that modern art should have no other purpose than to innovate was destructive and brought down upon Lewis the vengeance of his peers. Only the strength and support of men like Rothenstein helped to save him and his post-abstract work from ignominious neglect. And at the same time as Lewis had embarked upon his heroic defence of the figurative tradition, Rothenstein's father did the same, not through polemics or with pictures, but through his teaching at the Royal College of Art (henceforth RCA). Chosen for the role of Principal in 1919, William stayed for fifteen years and in that time presided over a generation of artists as gifted as any that passed through the doors of the Slade. They included sculptors Henry Moore (1898-1986) and Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975), as well as painters Eric Ravilious (1903-1943), Barnett Freedman (1901-1958), Charles Mahoney (1903-1968), Percy Horton (1897-1970), Raymond Coxon (1896-1997), Albert Houthuesen (1903-1979), Donald Towner (1903-1985), Robert Austin (1895-1973), Edward Le Bas (1904-1966), Evelyn Dunbar (1906-1960), Alan Sorrell (1904-1974), and A.K.

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[43]Wyndham Lewis, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (London, 1954), p.4; cf. Edward Chaney, 'Wyndham Lewis: The Modernist as Pioneering Anti-Modernist', *Modern Painters*, iii (September 1990), pp.106-9

[44]John Rothenstein, *British Art Since 1900* (London, 1962), p.1.

[45]*The Demon of Progress in the Arts*, p.32.; cf. Edward Chaney's discussion of the book in 'Lewis and the Men of 1938: Graham Bell, Kenneth Clark, Read, Reitlinger, Rothenstein the Mysterious Mr Macleod: A Discursive Tribute to John and Harriet Cullis', *The Journal of the Wyndham Lewis Society*, vol.7 (2016), pp.34-147.

Lawrence (1893-1975).[46] William's independence of mind combined with his emphasis on traditional values was immensely influential, encouraging his pupils to look beyond the boulevards of Paris for inspiration and to turn their backs on the notion of significant form.[47] As a result, a new and exciting era of pictorial representation grew up and flourished within the college, that seems, in retrospect, to mirror the one that in 1919 was unfolding outside its walls.[48] Although never a movement *per se*, the artists involved all shared a distrust of a purist conception of painting, veering away from it in a host of different directions to pursue their own distinct figurative styles. It

[46]William encouraged originality in his students, never 'forcing them to treat a subject as he would have treated it himself' (William Rothenstein *The Portrait of the Artist in his Times* p.313) but he was quick to seize upon a display of pure innovation at the expense of sound draughtsmanship. This is confirmed by Augustus John's statement in *Sir William Rothenstein 1872-1945 A memorial Exhibition Catalogue* that William had 'a passionate respect and love for the older masters, [but] he was always prepared to greet modern manifestations with sympathy provided they have the impression of sincerity and reverence' It is a further testimony to William that Wyndham Lewis would write so appreciating of his teaching: 'Sir William Rothenstein has retained, after fifty years of study, the humility-of the apprentice. That is no doubt why he has proved such an inspiring teacher-why, small and alert, he has moved among the young almost as one of them and has been able to impart to them all his tremendous knowledge, as if it had come from one of themselves. This has been his only trick! Namely to pass himself off, as it were, as a student, so that he could be near to unspoilt minds of his production and insinuate the knowledge and guidance without which the young are apt to lose themselves.' Referring to the state of the college Henry Moore later wrote: 'till Sir William Rothenstein became Principal, in the year I went up as a student, it had been just a training college where teachers taught students to become teachers and teach more students, and so on forever. But Rothenstein brought an entirely new outlook into the college.' Alan Williamson, ed., *Henry Moore Writings and Conversations* (Aldershot, 2002), p.47. Moreover, In a letter to Paul Nash, Gordon Bottomley wrote enthusiastically 'W.R's going to Sth. Kensington is the greatest news for a long time and the advent of a man of European intelligence and achievement there should get the place on the right lines at last.' Another fine appreciation of William's time at the RCA is Alan Powers, 'William Rothenstein and the RCA: The Creation of English Academic Art' *Apollo*, CDXVII (November 1996), p.21-4.

[47]In a review of an exhibition of William's work in 1938, a critic wrote: 'later he became Professor Rothenstein, head of the Royal College of Art, earnest, sententious, the friend of philosophers and Cabinet Ministers, an inspiration to his students, who considered themselves fortunate in having as in their Principal one who had all his life walked hand in hand with Great Art. *The Scotsman* (10 October 1938), p.13.

[48]For more on English art at this time see Frances Spalding, *The Real and the Romantic: English Art Between Two World Wars* (London, 2022).

was the moment when Augustus John began his dazzling portrait of Marchesa Casati and when painting at the Slade reached new heights in the great imaginative work of Rome Scholars Thomas Monnington (1902-1976) and Winifred Knights (1899-1947); when Stanley Spencer set his *Last Supper* in a humble Cookham Malthouse and when Lewis channelled the pointed energy of Vorticism into his drawings of James Joyce and Ezra Pound. It was the moment when, in Italy, Colin Gill began his magnificent *Allegro* and when, in England, a group of painters and sculptors reacted against the extremist experiments of the pre-war years to form an exhibiting society called The Seven and Five. From its inception, its members looked upon nature with fresh, unprejudiced eyes, capturing what they saw with a gentle, naive lyricism that was in complementary contrast to the intense emotion revealed in the paintings of Paul Nash. Like many other survivors of the Great War, Nash suffered terrible guilt and depression, pouring it out in 1919 through a series of bleak and haunting watercolours of the sea along the Dymchurch coast. Almost 300 miles away in Cornwall, another scarred veteran, Matthew Smith (1879-1959), was conveying something of his trauma, setting down the local landscape in a palette of angry purples and screaming pinks. Greatly influenced by the colouristic freedoms of Fauves, Smith would go on to evolve a sumptuous, almost Rubensian, approach to his subjects, that John Rothenstein would later describe as 'reckless and rhetorical hymns of praise to the colour and warmth and ripeness in the world.'[49] Whether or not he had exposure to the work of Smith either before or immediately after the war is not recorded. But thanks to William, he had escaped having the doctrine of significant form drummed into him by its supporters. Moreover, the influence of his father had taught him to be suspicious of aesthetic ideologies that claimed a monopoly on modern painting, and at the age of nineteen, he began to show it. Whilst studying modern history at Oxford between 1920 and 1923, he plastered his rooms with realistic art by his father, Ambrose McEvoy (1887-1927), Augustus John, and that king of the swagger portrait, his uncle-in-law, the masterly William Orpen (1878-1931). He initiated some correspondence with the sculptor Eric Gill (1882-1940), praising the great torrent of religious imagery that had appeared in his work following his conversion to Catholicism in 1913, and which Fry, once a devotee, had regarded as a betrayal of significant form. 'You wanted sculpture to do something else, to tell a story, to express directly and explicitly certain ideas and feelings', the critic later complained.[50]

[49]*Modern English Painters: Sickert to Smith*, p.244.

[50]Ruth Cribb, 'Workshop Practices and the Making of Sculpture: Authorship and Collaboration in the work of Eric Gill 1909 to 1940', University of Brighton, (Brighton, 2013), p.100.

Yet *this* was just what the young Rothenstein found so intriguing about Gill's art. It would also be what enticed him to the work of a painter whom he befriended at All Souls during his regular visits to T.E. Lawrence. That was Eric Kennington, the unflinching realist who had harnessed his war experiences to produce such candid masterpieces as *Gassed and Wounded* and The *Kensingtons at Laventie*. 'I must tell you how very much impressed I was by your [Laventie]', Rothenstein's father had written to congratulate Kennington in 1917:

> I think nothing of late years has given me so much pleasure as the mental vigour and probity your work shows, and as for the particular work in question, it is the first one dealing with the war I have seen where personal passion and a sense of the larger epic qualities which war expresses are combined.[51]

Unsurprisingly, William became one of Kennington's most eager supporters, recommending his pictures to collectors and writing glowing prefaces to the catalogues of his exhibitions. Before his death, he would do the same for countless others, and this noble concern to promote the accomplishments of living painters who wanted to move others through representation was one that he ultimately passed on to his son, inspiring him into a life-long defence of their work that achieved its ultimate expression at the Tate.[52] Where else, or in what other mainstream museums could one have seen the paintings of Thomas Hennell (1903-1945) treated with the same dispassionate reverence as those by Piet Mondrian or Jackson Pollock? 'That revolutionary movements fructify the arts', Rothenstein later wrote, 'is of course beyond question':

> but artists with sufficient personal conviction to oppose or ignore the prevailing tides deserve far more attention and respect than they receive.[53]

Never was this truer than in the early 1920s when, after the bloody interlude of war, Bloomsbury and international modernism reasserted its power. Again, the audience for new art complied with its theories, recently fortified through books like Bell's *Since Cézanne* and Fry's *Vision and Design*. But

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[51] *The Portrait of the Artist in his Time: William Rothenstein,* p.284.

[52] 'In matters of taste and opinion' wrote one newspaper of William, he 'has never budged a hairsbreadth in deference to fads and fancy cults. He is not one of those obsequious elders who make themselves doubly out-of-date by hailing joyfully the latest mental modes of the very young.' *Bradford Observer* (17 January 1940), p.4.

[53] John Rothenstein, *Time's Thievish Progress* (London, 1970), p.178.

in Oxford, Rothenstein would not accede and his maiden foray into art criticism - a positive review of the imaginative and richly anecdotal work of Claud Lovat Fraser (1890-1921) – was an unmistakable sign of resistance.[54] So too was allying himself to Wyndham Lewis and taking the renegade avant-gardist to be his guide and mentor in all matters artistic. The two had met in 1920 in the studio of Rothenstein's father, and since then, Lewis's defiance of Bloomsbury had continued unabated. Containing the awesome force of his *Praxitella,* a picture of his lover Iris Barry, Lewis's 'Tyros and Portraits' held at the Leicester Galleries in April 1921 had also been a rejection of what he had formally advocated. 'Art today needs waking up', Lewis told a member of the attending press:

> I am sick of these so-called modern artists amiably browsing about and playing art for art's sake. What I want is to bring back art into touch with life.[55]

And in paintings featuring figures he called Tyros, Lewis would do just that, conveying the suppressed inner rage and pain felt by a generation of men half-destroyed by war in their awkward grinning faces. Alas, Rothenstein does not refer to his seeing the unveiling of these startling tragi-comic English equivalents to the Neue Sachlichkeit of Otto Dix and George Grosz. But he may well have discussed them with Lewis during one of the conversations they now had together. Though intermittent, these were to prove crucial, as Rothenstein confesses:

> I am under a threefold debt to Lewis. [He]encouraged me, when I was of an age to accept too readily the heroes of the time: Proust, Picasso, Joyce, Diaghileff or whoever they might be, to scrutinize them with a critical eye; and likewise the dominant tendencies in literature and the visual arts. He clarified my vague comprehension that abstract art - however natural and beautiful a means of expression for certain temperaments - was wholly inadequate as a means of expressing the full content of the vision of others. Finally, he encouraged my innate propensity to favour the concrete, the exactly defined, the rational as against what was cloudy, fanciful, and subjective.[56]

At university, Rothenstein read voraciously Lewis's writings on art, including his earliest polemical masterpiece*, The Caliph's Design*. Laced with Lewis's caustic wit, it contained criticisms of Picasso and the rest of the

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[54]TGA 933.3. The review was published in the *Oxford Fortnightly Review* on 27 January 1922.
[55]Quoted in Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (London, 2000), p.256.
[56]*Summer's Lease*, p. 131.

moderns that no writer has since surpassed.[57] Yet the sections that appealed to Rothenstein the most, searing themselves into his memory, were those where Lewis not only eviscerated the bossiness of Bloomsbury but also assailed the patriots of purity who continued to preach against the expression of actual experiences and the representation of natural forms. To insist that contemporary painters must only work in abstract styles was, Lewis now argued, both unsustainable and absurd. Without meaningful content, he cautioned, art risked becoming shallow and manneristic, burning itself out in a 'fireworks of ingenious pseudo-scientific stunts.'[58] This was subversive stuff. For the credo that modern art and abstraction were synonymous was the principal article of faith of the avant-garde. Equally disruptive was his dismissal of the derisive statements made by Fry and Bell about English art. Although the English school 'find no place in this pamphlet', Lewis conceded:

> Nothing but a stupid parochial snobbism could make a half-dozen English names I can think of, seem any less weighty than a half-dozen French.[59]

The fact Rothenstein became the most outspoken advocate of modern British figurative painters was in no small part down to the tremendous impact upon him of this book. It gave him the courage to stand up for his convictions, and the remarkable thing is how soon after he had absorbed its influence, the idea of devoting his life to defending their work began to occupy his thoughts. Of course, it helped that by 1923 Rothenstein was back in London, living with his parents at 13 Airlee Gardens and making almost daily pilgrimages to the RCA. These were the college's vintage years, and the

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[57]Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design* (London, 1919), p.56.

[58]Ibid., p.53. *Since Fifty*, p.73. William Rothenstein praised Lewis's critical faculty and his ability to approach with scepticism the art of the period. He writes: 'yes, to my belief too Lewis has a first-rate brain and is a good artist. He was one of the conceivers of the cubist movement, perhaps the most powerful among them. Moreover, Lewis happens to be a wolf in wolfs clothing, who uses his pen as powerfully as he uses his brush. As a critic he is no doctrinaire, advocating this or that aesthetic [William probably had Roger Fry in mind here] attitude. He says plainly, regarding the present experimental phases: here we have a fresh idiom. Let us use it freely to discover what increase of expression it can give to language, of art or of literature. Not to use it may be to neglect a powerful medium. But he is ruthless, when he sees, with that terrible hard eye, the idiom used to give a modish appearance to a canvas, to cloak a want of thought or of clarity in writing.'

[59]Ibid.

more time Rothenstein spent in its classrooms, the more he saw the quality work undertaken there, the more convinced he became of his true calling.

And the standard of work he saw elsewhere only confirmed it. For the early landscapes of Paul Nash, he had an unbounded admiration, and the artist's powers of expression made him, like his father, a life-long devotee of the painter. In 1912, William had been among the first men to buy one of Nash's works, *Falling Stars*, and the impoverished young romantic never forgot it.[60] Indeed, in contrast to sneering Bloomsbury, the Rothensteins set out to support the best modern English painters who prioritised the subject and human experiences in their art. How committed they were to this, John Rothenstein quickly found out when, around the time of his visits to the RCA, he made a trip to Bradford to see the magnificent array of sculptures, paintings, and drawings acquired by his intrepid uncle, Charles Rutherston.[61] Neither very rich nor artistic like his two younger brothers (although

[60] In his autobiography, Nash left the following touching account: All at once Rothenstein said 'I should like to buy No. 5.' I had a wild impulse to clap him on the back and shake his hand, but he still looked very grave, on the point of tears almost. Suddenly I felt my eyes pricking. I thought we should both burst into tears and frighten Clifton. I told Rothenstein as well as I could how much I appreciated his gesture. Indeed, it was a charming thing to have done. For me at that point in my career it seemed, as if by magic, to change the aspect of my first real venture from something accorded a hesitating acceptance into a distinguished triumph and one that had been recognised by the highest award.

[61] Henry Moore would also visit Rutherston's collection. Describing this trip, his biographer, Roger Berthoud writes: 'in August 1923 Rutherston invited his young protégé to spend four days with him in Bradford. Shortly afterwards he described the experience in a letter from Wighton to his old Leeds friend Jocelyn Horner. In between spells of work, i.e., looking at his host's collection of ancient Chinese, Negro, Scythian, Siberian, Archaic Greek, and Egyptian art, busts by Epstein and Frank Dobson, and paintings and drawings by French and English contemporary artists, they had been for several motor drives through industrial and agricultural Yorkshire.' Roger Berthoud, *The Life of Henry Moore*, p.72. But Moore was only one English artist to be impressed by Rutherston's collection. Studying in Bradford, Richard Eurich remembered: 'One day the instructor, who was looking through my work said, 'Have you been studying Wyndham Lewis?' I had never heard the name but shortly it was to become familiar. Charles Rutherston, the oldest of the three Rothenstein brothers, lived in Bradford and he invited a few of us to go and see his collection. He had a fine self-portrait by Wyndham Lewis and a lot of drawings. This collection was an eye-opener. The early [Augustus} John portraits are now famous, and these were the first I had seen. Early Paul Nash drawings and a Sickert painting of an interior were all new ad a bit strange…There was one painting in Charles Rutherston's collection which impressed me more than the others. I do not mean that

like Albert he also anglicised his surname), Rutherston had begun to collect in around 1890 and was obsessive about it. His most active period, however, fell between the years 1908 and 1921 when trusting no one's instincts but his own, he bought whatever he admired. Subsequently, the works that Rothenstein saw bore witness to his uncle's unbridled enthusiasm for modern figuration of all different kinds. Besides major Paul Nashes, Gaudier-Brzeskas, and Eric Gills, there was Adrian Daintrey's (1902-1988) raffish portrait of Augustus John and the *Head of an Old Woman* by Randolph Schwabe (1885-1948). Rutherston loved the hushed strangeness of Joseph Southall's (1861-1944) seascapes in egg tempera, and it was for Rutherston that Wyndham Lewis always 'left the gate ajar':

> Not only because one naturally likes people who come collecting the works of one's hands, but because he was one of the pleasantest and least affected people of my acquaintance. He thought nothing of buying two or three-dozen designs at a time.[62]

Charles's greatest coup was Lewis's *Portrait of the Artist as the Painter Raphael.* Completed in 1921, its ostensible subject was Lewis at his easel, but its real one cannot have been lost on the perceptive young Rothenstein. As he well knew, this formidable picture marked Lewis's return to what he called the 'great, central, and stable canons of artistic expression.'[63] Alas, Rutherston didn't have the pockets deep enough for more of Lewis's oils, prompting him to concentrate on collecting his drawings instead. He ended up with twenty-three of them and like the self-portrait, they represented some of Lewis's earliest attempts to fashion from the remnants of Vorticism an art in which the human figure retained centre stage.[64] If seeing these great

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I thought it better than any other. No, it was one of those things which sometimes catch one at the receptive moment and then some urge to do likewise seizes me and a start is made. The painting was of a tree almost bare, a few autumn leaves still clinging to the ends of the branches […] The painting was by Charles Rutherston's brother, Will Rothenstein.'; Edward Chaney, 'Richard Eurich: The Complexity of Influence', *The London Magazine* (June/July 2003), p.49. Both the William Rothenstein and Lewis's self-portrait are illustrated in Edward Chaney and Christine Clearkin, *Richard Eurich (1903-1992) Visionary Artist* (London, 2003).

[62]Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London, 1962), p.219. For more on Lewis's and Rutherston's friendship see Jane Farrington, 'Wyndham Lewis and the Prescient Collector', *Apollo*, CXI (January 1980), pp.46-9.

[63]Ibid., p.213.

[64]*Bradford Observer* (11 May 1949), p.4. 'With his great "flair" for good and unusual work', wrote the paper's critic, 'Charles Rutherston recognised Wyndham Lewis's genius from his earliest exhibitions and acquired drawing after drawing. Always picking out those drawings of human figures which were remarkable for their fine

works on paper was not exciting enough, Rutherston's collection was also John Rothenstein's introduction to the melancholy and introspective female portraits of Gwen John (1876-1939), works he soon regarded as some of the finest paintings of 'our time and country.'[65] In fact, the Rothenstein family, along with her devoted brother Augustus and American collector John Quinn, were the most indefatigable champions of Gwen's sensitive and sombre art. In 1908, William sent her a letter of praise that, in her own words, 'took my breath away.'[66] Furthermore, from the start of his curatorial career, his son would do all he could to keep her work in the public eye. In 1940, Rothenstein would acquire no less than six Gwen Johns for the Tate, while her entry in *Modern English Painters* proved crucial as well. Like so many others in that remarkable trilogy, it would become the template for all future biographies and studies.

So Rothenstein headed back to London enthused by what he had seen and hungry for more. Talking with his father, he quickly learned that one of the best places to see work by Britain's finest young realists was in the home of Edward Marsh. Unequivocally and articulately anti-avant-gardist, Marsh, like the Rothensteins, had been perceptive enough to recognise that England possessed a brilliant range of painters who had within them the burning need to make art out of the world in which they lived. In the 1910s and 1920s, he had made it his business to befriend and encourage them and use his considerable inherited wealth to buy the best of what emerged from their studios. Eager to see the fruits of his collecting, Rothenstein dashed off a letter to Marsh sometime in June 1923 that would go unanswered until 24 July:

> I am so ashamed of never having answered your letter which I see is already three weeks old – you said you would like to come and see me and I wanted to suggest some time, but I've been living in what's called a whirl.[67]

Even allowing for his hectic lifestyle, we can deduce from a reference in *Summer's Lease*, the first of Rothenstein's three-volume autobiography, that he did see the collection of Marsh soon after receiving his belated reply.[68] And it is a delicious irony to know that he did so just as Chatto and Windus

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shapes. I think his love of early Chinese work must have influenced his choice. This is evident in "Ezra Pound" with its solid and impressive curves, in the "Mme. E." with its well-shaped mass of figure and chair, in "Girl Standing" and "Seated Girl," all drawn with great style and fine rhythm.'

[65]*Modern English Painters: Sickert to Smith*, p.161.

[66]Sue Roe, *Gwen John: a Painter's Life* (New York, 2001), p.98.

[67]TGA 8726.5.1.

[68]The other two are *Brave Day, Hideous Night,* and *Time's Thievish Progress*.