

William Orpen,  
an Outsider in France



# William Orpen, an Outsider in France:

*Painting and Writing  
World War One*

By

Caroline Gallois

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Painting and Writing World War One

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In loving memory of Yvonne Gallois (1930-2017).  
To my dearest parents and sister Fanny.  
To my family, friends and colleagues.  
To Pekka and to Maija.



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## PREFACE

This book examines William Orpen's war memoir *An Onlooker in France* in tandem with the canvases he painted during his time as official war artist in France from 1917 till the end of the war and, beyond it, the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference, for which Orpen was also commissioned to paint the meetings. At the same time, as this book shows, Orpen's creativity extended further than the so-called war paintings for which he is largely remembered, just as writers like Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon were far more than "soldier poets".<sup>1</sup> Along with the canvases depicting the war in France, and apart from the society portraits which were his bread and butter, Orpen painted a diverse array of subjects. His self-portraits represent the man as he was: more thoughtful than the face he showed the social whirl he appeared to delight in; uneasy in his own skin; relishing the actor-like opportunity to play other parts than himself, so that several of his self-portraits bear titles that omit the term "self-portrait".

Orpen, a popular society painter, would seem to have been an unlikely choice of war artist. But Orpen was a talented networker and string-puller, not to say self-publicist: hence the newly-formed Department of Information's engaging him for war artist service. Behind his insistence on going to France in 1917 lay the desire to escape the self he knew only too well, and find a new self or at least new facets of the old one: unfamiliar setting, unfamiliar self—or selves. A counterpart to this was his portraits of Yvonne Aupicq, whom he met in 1918 when she was a nurse (according to him), and who remained his mistress until 1928. Orpen first entitled a portrait of Aupicq *The Refugee*, later renaming it *The Spy*—although Aupicq was neither. With his usual inventiveness and taste for jokes, Orpen built up a mythology around this work and its sitter, none of which was true.<sup>2</sup> Orpen's close friend Maurice Baring wrote the artist a

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jon Stallworthy, *Anthem for Doomed Youth: Twelve Soldier Poets of the First World War* (London: Constable and Robinson Ltd., 2002). Sassoon published his first poetry collection, *The Daffodil Murderer*, in 1913. Graves went on to become a novelist, classicist, and biographer, as well as a lyric poet.

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Chapter Three, *passim*, of Brian Foss's *Art, War, State and Identity in Britain 1939-1945* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press,

letter-poem in which he teased Orpen about the Aupicq pictures: “But, on the whole, you’d better not/Paint lady spies before they’re shot”.<sup>1</sup>

During the period in which Orpen wrote *Onlooker*, 1920-1921, Orpen was living in Paris with Aupicq. He was ill, and worked when he could on the Peace Conference paintings the Imperial War Museum had commissioned him to do: *The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors, Versailles, 28th June 1919*, 1919, *A Peace Conference at the Quai d’Orsay*, 1919, and *To the Unknown British Soldier in France*, a work he did not start before 1921 and did not complete until 1927. Unable to paint much in 1920-1921, Orpen concentrated on writing *Onlooker*. In the 1920s he returned to society painting in London; and the critics, to their disappointment, could discern no great stylistic change in his work.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Orpen’s text is its simplicity of tone combined with its mixture of forms and styles. Apart from accounts of travels, encounters and incidents, sometimes told with a sense of irony, the *Onlooker* contains original poems, snatches of songs, painterly descriptions of landscapes, a swift eye for possible human subjects including portraits, and an ear for dialogue. His depiction of men coming out of the trenches is reminiscent of Owen’s suffering soldiers on the march in “Dulce et decorum est”:

Some sick; some with trench feet; some on stretchers; some walking; worn,  
sad and dirty—all stumbling along in the glare. [...] They seemed like men  
in a dream, hardly realising where they were or what they were doing.<sup>2</sup>

Whether it be in painting, or writing, Orpen worked at his best when his ingenuity was engaged. His description of the Great Mine at La Boisselle shows him drawing on his verbal and imaginative resources: “Imagine burrowing all that way down in the belly of the earth, with Hell going on overhead, burrowing and listening till they got right under the German trenches—hundreds and hundreds of yards of burrowing. And here remained the result of their work, on the earth at least, if not on humanity”.<sup>3</sup> Orpen here depicts “Hell” not as a state or place but as an event—like the war itself. “They” refers to the Welsh miners of the 9<sup>th</sup> Cheshire regiment who descended sixteen metres into the earth and placed

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2007). This chapter, despite the book’s title, begins with a consideration of the roles of women in the Great War.

<sup>1</sup> William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France*, Robert Upstone and Angela Weight, eds. (London: Paul Holberton publishing, 2008), 161.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, 120.

27,000 tons of explosives there, which they blew up on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916, marking the beginning of the Battle of the Somme. The “result of their work” was both the “enormous hole” of the mine, and the mound of earth blown out onto the surface by the explosion.

Orpen’s poetic life is well represented in Caroline Gallois’s study: the author pays special attention to Orpen’s poems, most of which are by no means “amateur”, as well as Maurice Baring’s “In Memoriam” which the painter esteemed so highly. The poem is better known for Orpen’s fondness for it than for the text itself. But for Orpen, as quoted in this book, it was “one of the greatest poems ever written, and by far the greatest work of art the war has produced”.<sup>1</sup>

In timely fashion, Caroline Gallois wrote her book in 2017, the centenary of the year in which Orpen was commissioned as an official war artist in France. It is published in the centenary year of the end of the Great War. It contains puns and flashes of wit that are a fitting tribute to an artist addicted to humour and practical jokes. It is the fruit of genuine humanistic and art-historical erudition, combined with a strong sense of the historical and artistic differences and similarities between English- and French-speaking cultures, and an enthusiastically and painstakingly acquired knowledge of theory, philosophy, and literature. Her book is a powerful response to William Orpen as man, artist, and writer. It will enable readers, who may or may not have known Orpen before, to discover the artist, writer and poet from fresh and stimulating new perspectives.

Adrian Grafe

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<sup>1</sup> *Id.*, 84.

## INTRODUCTION: *READY TO START*

According to Philippe Dagen in *Le Silence des peintres*, a new phenomenon appeared as regards ways of representing the war during WWI: photography, which turned the Great War into a “photogenic war”.<sup>1</sup> For one of the first times in history, war could be captured through photographs, and snapshots of war scenes were even published in newspapers. The “age of mechanical reproduction” was born, to borrow Walter Benjamin’s expression.<sup>2</sup> Mechanical images were taken on the spur of the moment by professional photographers, infantrymen and officers alike and were widely distributed in newspapers. They seemed irrefutable: what they represented had necessarily been. Civilians were eager to see these snapshots and to be acquainted *de visu* with the reality of the war waged abroad: photography prevailed, it was the beginning of the consumption of public images—“*la civilisation du spectacle*”, as Philippe Dagen explains.<sup>3</sup> The publication of snapshots was officially censored and controlled in order to prevent the divulgence of information which could help the enemy, but even the most horrendous clichés managed to be published: in spite of the official Press Bureau, or maybe with its agreement, engaged newspapers published horrific and spectacular photographs in order to demonstrate the violence of the enemy and to prove the efficiency of the British troops. The corpse was thus trivialised and even aestheticized, as in the photographs of Ernest Brooks, who, in Orpen’s words, “took the most wonderful official photographs during the war, often at great personal risk” (*OF* 198). Set against the triumph of the photographer, the painter looked defeated. Indeed, why paint war? Why try to manually represent what a mechanical *medium* could capture “truthfully”? Why send artists to the battlefield when a camera could shoot

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<sup>1</sup> Philippe Dagen, *Le Silence des peintres* (Paris: Hazan, 2012), 51-4.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Schocken Books, [1936] 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Dagen, *op. cit.*

the conflict so much more convincingly than a painter with a canvas and brushes?<sup>1</sup>

To the changes in ways of making war corresponded changes in ways of making art: the large scenes in which compositions were carefully programmed and dramatised, and battles depicted with grandiose effects *a posteriori*, when the artists were back in their studios, could no longer be. This romantic vision of war had dominated the British interpretation of Imperial conflict. Scenes involving cavalry were regularly painted, but by 1916 this subject matter was almost entirely obsolete.<sup>2</sup> Alfred Munnings, an outspoken critic of Modernism, to whom Orpen alludes at length by making fun of him (*OF* 150)—for his being against Modernism perhaps—painted *Charge of Flowerdew's Squadron* in 1918, and it is known as “the last great cavalry charge”.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the whole secular tradition of flamboyant battle scene paintings collapsed in the trenches of a war with no *panache*. The heroic realism of earlier works was abandoned in, as Fussell calls it in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “the Troglodyte World”:<sup>4</sup> from epic, the representation of the war became generally anecdotal and traditional military art disappeared with the pre-war world. What was called “the Invisible War” took place underground in the trenches: as a consequence, painters were at a loss as to how to paint the war and what to paint of it. The front only offered empty and devastated landscapes. As Marshall McLuhan famously said, “the medium is the message”<sup>5</sup> and a modern image of the war was to be found. The “war of position” had to find its way into new compositions and the art of war had to find new expressions in war art. Artists attempted to convey a reality that was beyond the scope of most people’s experience by turning to surreal styles: some *avant-garde* artists turned to Cubism in Paris or to Vorticism in London. Some others experimented with Futurism in Italy or with Cubo-Futurism in Russia. The call to arms soon became a call to arts to them: abstraction appeared as a solution to represent the irrepresentable.

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<sup>1</sup> See Frédéric Lacaille, *La Première Guerre vue par les peintres* (Paris: Citédís, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Alex Browne, “The Art of World War I in 52 Paintings”, *Made From History*, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2015, accessed November 1<sup>st</sup> 2016, <http://madefrom.com/history/world-war-one/painting/>.

<sup>3</sup> Colin G. Scanes and Samia Toukhsati, eds., *Animals and Human Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Academic Press, 2017), 213.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1975] 2000), 36-74.

<sup>5</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, [1964] 1994), 7.

Orpen was commissioned into the Army Service Corps as a second lieutenant in March 1916, and worked as a clerk at Kensington Barracks. Under the war artist's scheme, in January 1917, he was released from these duties, given the rank of major, and, in April, arrived in Amiens. Orpen was only the second war artist to be appointed, after Muirhead Bone, and he was employed full time to record the conflict. Other official British war artists included Eric Kennington, Paul Nash, Christopher Nevinson, William Rothenstein, John Lavery, Stanley Spencer and Wyndham Lewis, among many others. But Orpen was the most prolific of the official war artists sent by Great Britain to the Western Front and he donated 138 works to the British government, which are now in the collection of the Imperial War Museum. What is more, his connections to the senior ranks of the British Army allowed him to stay in France longer than any of the other official war artists and he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1918. However, his determination to serve as a war artist cost him his social standing and reputation and he remains to this day a very unstable figure in art history. After his early death at the age of 52, many critics, including other artists and his own nephew John Rothenstein, were dismissive of his work and it was not until the 1980s that it was reappraised and exhibited all over the world. In 1952, Rothenstein, Director of the Tate Gallery, published a sequence of essays on *Modern English Painters*: the chapter on Orpen was vindictive in its criticism. He claimed that Orpen, who was Irish but working in England, had conflicting national loyalties which prevented him putting down roots anywhere, that going to an art school too early in his childhood stunted his intellectual growth and made him value hard work over content. These circumstances, he claimed, created a man “wanting in settled principles or convictions (...) with so little intellectual curiosity and so feeble an intellectual grasp, or with so contemptuous an attitude towards the life of the mind”.<sup>1</sup> It was a personal and deeply wounding attack—Orpen also happened to be married to Grace Knewstub, the sister-in-law of Sir William Rothenstein, John's father, and Orpen had had many love liaisons and scandalous affairs throughout his married life—but the attack is worth mentioning for it influenced opinions of Orpen for some time and generated a recurring tendency to underestimate Orpen's intellectual faculties, a tendency arguably aided by his own self-mocking levity. “Failure to express what he had felt most deeply”, Rothenstein wrote of his war work, “caused him to respond with a growing apathy to the

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<sup>1</sup> John Rothenstein, *Modern English painters, Sickert to Smith* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1974), 221.

unending succession of sitters” in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> That was forgetting that Orpen, like many artists of the First World War, felt unable to cope with the enormity of the conflict’s reality or his own reactions to it. Many men in the 1920s never came to terms with what they had experienced. “His personality was conditioned by its impulses. He was at once complicated and embarrassingly simple. A man who fought shy of vulgar theorizing and who took refuge in a comic persona which he created for himself”,<sup>2</sup> Kenneth McConkey wrote, doing him justice, in his introduction to the catalogue of the exhibition “Orpen and the Edwardian Era”.

Orpen had nonetheless a certainly troubled relationship with his wartime experience. He never engaged in combat and identified himself as an “onlooker” in the war memoirs he entitled *An Onlooker in France*. While carrying out office work after being enlisted, he sent a sketch to Evelyn Saint George depicting an angry colonel asking, “What can you do? What can you do?” to which a mortified Orpen replies, “Nothing, I’m nobody”.<sup>3</sup> He thus defined himself from the start as an “outsider” so to speak, “a person who is isolated from or does not ‘fit’ into conventional society either through choice or on account of some social, intellectual, etc., reason”.<sup>4</sup> “At first sight, the Outsider is a social problem. He is the hole-in-corner man.”<sup>5</sup> According to Angeria Rigamonti di Cuto in “Staging the modernist self: the self-portraits of William Orpen”, “[t]he war provided yet another opportunity for feelings of inadequacy. As a teacher, society portraitist, war artist, and later Royal Academician and KBE, Orpen had courted public status yet all the while feeling an outsider, a tension that also marks his wartime self-portraits”.<sup>6</sup>

The first plate of *An Onlooker in France, Ready to Start, Self-Portrait* (Pl. 1),<sup>7</sup> is no exception: the painting man, for want of being a “fighting

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth McConkey, *Orpen and the Edwardian Era*, catalogue of the exhibition in London, Pym’s Gallery, from Wednesday November 4<sup>th</sup> to Saturday December 5<sup>th</sup> 1987 (Twickenham: Pym’s Gallery, 1987), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Mrs St George, March 1916, ink on paper, 18 x 13.8 cm, GRA 303, Dublin, Graves collection of William Orpen letters, online archives National Gallery of Ireland, retrieved on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://doras.nationalgallery.ie/index.php?a=IndexSearch&i=O&p=1>.

<sup>4</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed October 20<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.oed.com/>.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (New York: Tarcher/ Putnam, [1956] 1982), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Angeria Rigamonti di Cuto, “Staging the modernist self: the self-portraits of William Orpen”, *Visual Culture in Britain*, November 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, Taylor & Francis, 4, accessed September 10<sup>th</sup> 2016, <http://www.tandfonline.com>.

<sup>7</sup> *OF* 59.



man”, shows himself as an outsider indeed, ready to start but with his own arms, his pens and brushes. The painting is programmatic in that it sublimates the fact that Orpen did not fight—and felt guilty he did not. It reveals both his mortification and his feelings of guilt and inadequacy when measured against the heroic demands made on the “fighting man” that underlay much of his way of seeing the war, and his part in it. It also represents the guilt of the living, confronted with the dead, with the shadows lurking in the background of his reflection in the mirror. This self-portrait takes on the appearance of a painting inside the painting, part of the frame of the mirror underscoring the sense of Orpen’s alienation from himself. The dialectical relationship between the outside and the inside is set from the start and enhanced by the idea of the mirror itself, as exemplified by Michel Foucault in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”.

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.<sup>1</sup>

Far from conjuring up, let alone confirming, identity, the mirror underscores the otherness of the self. The uneasy borders between outside and inside, absence and presence, reality and representation, vision and division, are all summoned at the beginning of *An Onlooker in France*, thus placed from the start under the sign of a problematic gaze. “The painter is standing a little back from his canvas”.<sup>2</sup> By representing himself into someone he is not, a “fighting man”, Orpen alienates himself even more from the war effort. The costume he is using here both hides and reveals his imposture: he was promoted from second lieutenant directly to major to ensure his status at General Headquarters in France. It was a rank

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”, *Conférence au cercle d’études architecturales*, March 1967, trans. Jay Miskowiec. *Architecture, mouvement, continuité* n°5, October 1984, 46-9.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things, An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, [1966] 1970), 3.

no other artist in the British Army enjoyed. In this self-portrait, he cuts an absurd figure in a tin hat and piebald bearskin gilet, yet, the fact of wearing a uniform, namely to blend in with the “heap of humanity” (*OF* 57) formed by the soldiers, means erasing one’s identity to be at the service of an entity and to contribute to the war effort. Orpen looks at the viewer as well as at himself, making the viewer identify with him and bear the guilt of not fighting: thus, the figure of the soldier reflects in a metonymic way the whole community of the British nation at home. The self-portrait announces Orpen’s artistic engagement and enrolment: it condenses the fact that he is ready to start painting the war and that he manages to express his guilt while at the same time proclaiming his mission as a painter. As the author of his own image, he has authority over his art and usurpates his identity: paradoxically, by wearing a uniform, Orpen affirms his individuality as a painter capable of imagining himself as he pleases and of painting a sort of manifesto of his art. It will stand both outside and inside the events of the Great War, it will be both vain and powerful. The painting is parodic: Orpen impersonates the role while pointing to, and distancing himself from, the travesty and the disguise. The war waged far from him undergoes a metamorphosis and is metaphorically turned into props for a disguise. Orpen shows the backstage space of the tragedy: the parodic deformation paves the way for the *quid pro quo* at the end of the war when victory will escape the ones who made the war. “The whole thing was finished. Why worry now to honour the representatives of the dead, or the maimed, or the blind, or the living that remained? Why?” (*OF* 224) By getting involved in a war he did not make, Orpen introduces it into its meaningless reality and constructs a fiction which takes the place of the original. The box in the foreground is the Pandora’s box the Great War opened to let out all the evils of the world. Just like in Hesiod’s old myth, only “hope” is kept inside.

“I’m doing my best to brave my time out =<sup>1</sup> but don’t think me a Hero = perhaps a chocolate soldier one =”,<sup>2</sup> Orpen wrote in his correspondence, summing up his presence in France in a sort of syllogistic formula: his self-denigration, guilt and inadequacy (“a chocolate soldier”), but also the affirmation of himself through art (“braving my time out”) coexist with the self-mockery he shows by reversing preconceived ideas (a “chocolate soldier” is also “perhaps” a “Hero”). The self-portrait exemplifies the issues this study will tackle: the tensions between the inside and the outside—between inwardness and appearance, between the “I” of the

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<sup>1</sup> Orpen’s own punctuation.

<sup>2</sup> William Orpen, letter to Mrs St George, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1916, Saint George Collection, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

writer and the eye of the painter, between fragments and wholeness, between the immediacy of experience and the transfer of memory, the unique and the double, between insights and outsights, guilt and self-discovery, the deeply felt and the blatantly flippant, comic and tragic, the politically correct and the out-of-place comments, between the familiar and the strange, the visible and the invisible, between revelations and anti-epiphanies—and how Orpen turns all of them inside out until no resolution is ever achieved and no conclusion ever reached, which contributes to making him an outsider within—an outsider in France.

## ABBREVIATIONS

*OF* William Orpen, *An Onlooker in France, A Critical Edition of the Artist's War Memoirs* by Robert Upstone and Angela Weight. London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2008. Edition mainly used in this study.

The original edition is *An Onlooker in France*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1921.

**PART I:**

**INSIDE,**

**“I FELT MYSELF IN ANOTHER WORLD”**

**(OF 120)**

# CHAPTER ONE

## THE JOURNEY WITHIN

### 1.1. Brush and/Or-pen

For a sergeant major painter, to write “*toile serge*” on the canvas of *Ready to Start* is to highlight the technical device of mixing words and fabric in a Modernist *mise en abyme*: “text” and “tissue” share the same etymology and art points at itself in the self-reflexive way used by Modernist painters interested in the actual process of creating art. With “*LA BATAILLE S’EST ENGAGE [sic]*” (*Guitar, Sheet Music, and Glass*, 1912), Pablo Picasso alluded both to the Balkan Wars and to the beginning of the challenge of collage itself; with “*VIVE LA FRANCE*” (1914-1915), he meant both wishing France to be victorious and celebrating the new pictorial forms found in France. In like manner, the title *Ready to Start* constructs Orpen’s readiness to accomplish his mission in France and also to start experimenting new forms of art. “The readiness is all”.<sup>1</sup> Being in France entails a renewal of vision, a newness of perception.

The sergeant major’s “*toile serge*” is a complex amalgam of painterly matters: colour and pattern are significant—the black and white fur, the red and white tablecloth and the pink and green wallpaper, reminiscent of Edouard Vuillard’s and of Harold Gilman’s use of detailed decorative schemes or of Pierre Bonnard’s 1916 *The Checkered Tablecloth*, make an incongruous background to the khaki uniformed soldier. The flatness of the plane is accentuated in a Post-Impressionist manner: the bands of grey serve as a frame within the image while the everyday objects hover uncertainly between the room and Orpen’s image in the mirror. The composition is a blend of heterogeneous elements, a mixture of archaistic realism and modernist collage-like word-painting. The glass and the bottles are painted in a realistic way; always a drinker, Orpen became heavily addicted in Cassel in 1917 and the need for fortification is here depicted as something real in his daily life. On the other hand, the painted words “*toile serge*”, “France” and his signature in the bottom right-hand

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, V, 2, 205 (London: Dover Publications, 1992), 116.

corner are modernist signs to be read together as a challenge Orpen set out for himself when he first arrived in Cassel. In *Ready to Start*, and in *An Onlooker in France* as a whole, Orpen introduced writing to painting, pencil to brush and *pinceau* to crayon in a work of art which could be defined as graphic art. Two languages are spoken, with differences and common points, repetitions and transpositions, translations and adaptations, modulations and equivalences. And if the word “look” is repeated time and again in *An Onlooker in France*, it is because the painter expresses himself: *déformation professionnelle*. In another of his wartime self-portraits, *The Artist*,<sup>1</sup> Orpen exhibits his mission with pride: holding his pen with an air of *bravado*, he proclaims his authority both as an author and as a painter—since he could be taking notes or sketching the landscape around him. First commissioned to paint in France, Orpen ended up using his illustrations in a narrative in which writing is in turns a parallel, a complementary or a symbiotic activity in relation to painting.

In *The Daily Graphic*'s review of *An Onlooker in France*, Orpen was described as the “Samuel Pepys of the Western Front”<sup>2</sup> but the tradition he belongs to is also certainly that of the writer-painters, painter-poets or artist-writers such as William Blake, William Morris, George Sand, Max Beckmann, Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, Wassily Kandinsky, Guillaume Apollinaire, David Jones, Jean Cocteau and the likes. C.R.W. Nevinson in *Paint and Prejudice* or Wyndham Lewis in *Blasting and Bombardiering* also later wrote about their war experiences, but as part of more wide-ranging autobiographical narratives. Serge Linares explains in *Ecrivains artistes*<sup>3</sup> that bipartition of the media, creative bipolarity, dimorphic inventiveness and dialogue of the arts characterise the works of artist-writers. By abolishing the segregation of the means of expression, they debunk and demystify artistic statuses and promote the transgressive link between the hybridisation of the expressive tools. “Where does the writing begin? Where does the painting begin?” Roland Barthes asks in *Empire of Signs*<sup>4</sup> in which he meditates on Japanese culture, language, art, literature and iconography. For Bruce Arnold,

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<sup>1</sup> *Self-Portrait, The Artist*, 1917, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, London, Imperial War Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Bruce Arnold, *Mirror to an Age* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Serge Linares, *Ecrivains artistes, la tentation plastique, XVIII<sup>e</sup>-XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Citadelles & Mazenod, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, [1970] 1982), 22. When he himself turned to abstraction, he tried to state his reasons for doing so—maybe the dream of being a total artist (“*un artiste complet*”), as some men in the Renaissance were; maybe the desire to exercise the

Orpen as a letter writer is impulsive and intense. Though not particularly literate, and quite cavalier in his attitude to punctuation and spelling, there is a curious eloquence in his dashes, and the extent to which his whole mind is applied to what he is saying makes the majority of his letters compulsive reading. He uses notation in them in just the way one would expect from a painter, whose conditioning, when working towards a composition, requires a brief memorandum approach. And whenever a significant fact is to be recorded or reported, he falls back on the infinitely more reliable drawings.<sup>1</sup>

Just as some writers aspired to a visual language, Orpen may have aspired to forms of written autobiography: with *An Onlooker in France*, he turned, following the etymology that the two words share, his temptation to write into “an attempt” to write (*OF* 56). He confided in one letter to Grace, in his characteristic self-deprecating way: “if I only had the gift of writing—or whatever it is that allows one to put down *impressions* on paper...”<sup>2</sup> (italics added).

In *Ready to Start*, the oilcloth on which Orpen significantly placed his signature is important in that it echoes a passage staging his friend poet and journalist John Masefield:

There is a beautiful valley on the left, as one goes from Amiens to Albert: one looked down into it from the road, a patchwork of greens, browns, greys and yellows. I remember John Masefield said one day it looked to him like a post-impressionist table-cloth; later, white zigzagging lines were cut all through it—trenches. (*OF* 108)

In his essay “The sacrificial victim in David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*”,<sup>3</sup> Roland Bouyssou analyses the painter-poet’s illustrated poem on the Great War and could provide some clues on how to interpret John Masefield’s vision of the landscape as an “impressionist table-cloth”: “looking on” is the underlying principle at work in *An Onlooker in France*, it gives shape

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body and to use a different hand, even if it is always the right one; maybe the necessity to express the impulse (“*pulsion*”) contained in the body; or again the pleasure to feel some sort of amateur comfort (“*confort artisanal*”), in “*Le degré zéro du coloriage*”, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, March 30<sup>th</sup> 1978, quoted in Linares, *op. cit.*, 48.

<sup>1</sup> Arnold, *op. cit.*, 238.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Arnold, *ibid.*, 260.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Bouyssou, “The sacrificial victim in David Jones’s *In Parenthesis*”, in *Ecstasy and understanding, Religious Awareness in English poetry from the late Victorian to the Modern Period*, ed. Adrian Grafe (London: Continuum, 2008), 116.



and meaning to its “realisation” and “construction” as a work of art. These two words are terms borrowed from the Post-Impressionists, and particularly from Cézanne and Matisse. *An Onlooker in France* is “a ‘construct’, as Cézanne would say, which aims at grasping the ‘reality’ of war (...), the ‘inherent truth’, as Matisse says, ‘which must be disengaged from the outward appearance of the object to be represented’.”<sup>1</sup> Orpen does not aim at any imitation of his subject: *An Onlooker in France* is no *mimesis* of war but a re-presentation because “exactitude is not truth”, as Matisse says.<sup>2</sup> The “zigzagging lines” of his signature cut through the Post-Impressionist table-cloth are like so many metaphorical trenches in his art. Bouyssou then invokes the concept of the “objective correlative” defined by T.S. Eliot as “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion”.<sup>3</sup> Its purpose is to express the character’s emotions by showing rather than by describing feelings. By combining the Post-Impressionist method of “construction” and “realisation” with the technique of the “objective correlative”, Orpen has made, not a presentation, but a re-presentation of the war: war is not presented, it is only looked on, and then re-presented; as he announces in his “Preface,” he is a “mere looker on” (*OF* 56) and he theorises his idea of what an “impression” is in an aphoristic passage: “[i]t is difficult at times to realise what is happening. Somehow other things keep one from realisation at the moment, but afterwards these other things diminish in importance and the real impression becomes more clearly defined” (*OF* 170). If we apply this theory to both his writings and his paintings, we get an idea of how *An Onlooker in France* was born and how “things which were felt so much that their impression increases rather than diminishes” (*OF* 170) came to appear in it.

In his research project *Témoins*,<sup>4</sup> Jean Norton Cru explained that the eyewitness accounts of the First World War could only be born in the trenches, that “witnesses” could only be soldiers, and he opposed the “legend of war” to lived experience. He harshly and controversially criticised works that were nothing more than literary exercises in style. “I consider it a sacrilege to use our blood and our anguish merely as the

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1959), 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>3</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Hamlet”, in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 145.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Norton Cru, *War Books: A Study in Historical Criticism*, trans. Jean Norton Cru (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1976).

material for making literature”.<sup>1</sup> Jean Norton Cru said that, when freed from the patina of propaganda literature, the eyewitness accounts “represent a unique manifestation of French thought, and access to collective sincerity, a confession that is both bold and poignant, and an energetic repudiation of millenary pseudo-truths”<sup>2</sup> for indeed, the propaganda of the time, in specifically apocalyptic language, described the Great War—quite falsely as Europeans were shortly to learn—as “the war to end all wars”.

In this context, Orpen’s narrative can be perceived as a modest ethical and moral memory account of the war: “This book must not be considered as a serious work on life in France behind the lines” (*OF* 56). Throughout the book, and embedded in the title, there is the harsh self-accusation that he simply was an observer—nowhere did he apply the word “witness” to himself—and that, in not experiencing combat, “from [his] back, looking-on position” (*OF* 68), he was less worthy than the troops. He thus invented, theorised and instituted a new category of witness, or maybe of anti-witness, in the figure of the “onlooker” humbly remembering his being in France at that time. With no synthetic vision of the conflict nor of the battlefield scenes, Orpen is condemned to a restriction of vision through anecdotes, hence his repetitive use of the words “truth” and “true”: “there were about thirty of us left who would testify to the truth of this tale” (*OF* 184), “[i]t is sad, but very, very true!” (*OF* 191), “[i]t seemed impossible, but it was true” (*OF* 200), “[i]t was true” (*OF* 140) and the concluding “[s]urely that was the truth!” (*OF* 224) Yet incompleteness and the incapacity to render an overall view of the war are no negative signs but tools of expression and proofs of the veracity of what happened. Orpen’s forced short-sightedness is a token of the authenticity of his account. It is less the search for facts than the reality of the re-presentations they call to mind that Orpen is after in his retrospective narrative. This search for truth and immediacy points to the business of representing real life through art and the possibility for reality to be transformed into written and pictorial fiction. By drawing attention to the artifice and limitations of fiction-making, Orpen also recognises the fact that the constitution of meaning goes hand in hand with the aesthetic effect resulting from a reconstruction of experience.

*An Onlooker in France* calls into question the truth value and stability of any narrative, either imagined or remembered, reminding us that, as both memory and storytelling are constructions and creative acts, their

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to his sister Alice, dated January 22nd 1917, in Jean Norton Cru, *Lettres du front et d’Amérique (1914-1919)* (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2007), 240.

<sup>2</sup> Norton Cru, *War Books*, 13.

content is always problematic and open-ended. Orpen repeats the expression “I remember” thirty-eight times, which speaks volumes about the importance of memory. *The Artist* suggests he was in the process of drawing his self-portrait: his pencil is close to his sketch/note book as he frowns at his reflection. This is the moment Derrida refers to when he describes the blindness of drawing, the moment when the artist must look up at his reflection before drawing it, thus relying on memory rather than direct perception. In *Memoirs of the blind*, Derrida aptly observes the distancing effect of the mirror: since we cannot look at our own faces, drawing is blind, an act rooted in memory and anticipation, and the self-portrayed faces a recollection of himself, never a direct recapturing.<sup>1</sup> Even in front of a looking glass, the artist cannot contemporaneously look at himself and draw his own likeness. This phenomenon is found in writing as well, which conjures up a difficult reality to represent through memory since memory is unreliable. The time frames provided in the text are other signs of the connection/distinction between truth and narrative, the narrating I and the narrated I, between *res* and *verba*: “[i]n my mind now” (OF 92), “even now after joint victory” (OF 154), Orpen recalls. “The little Parisian café in which I write” (OF 170) is the place where Orpen acknowledges that countless factors conspire against the composition of narrative truth—the failure of memory, of nerve, the discontinuity between past and present, the alienation of language from experience. He thus posits his literary and pictorial work somewhere between writer, narrator/onlooker and reader.

## 1.2. A “voyage of discovery” (OF 60)

*An Onlooker in France* claims itself as a writing that cannot be summarised in a pattern of cause and effect. The dominant perception is that connections are impossible to make and that Orpen narrates “his story” rather than history. His travel/*travail* is a difficult journey taking him to a *terra incognita* in wartime France. The arrangement of the war memoir into sixteen symbolical chapters points towards the genesis of Orpen’s project: in 1916 Irish painter Sean Keating, leaving Britain before he was conscripted, desperately tried to persuade Orpen to accompany him. But he said: “[e]verything I have I owe to England. I am unknown in Ireland. It was the English who gave me appreciation and money. This is

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1990] 1993), 36, 68.

their war, and I have enlisted. I won't fight, but I'll do what I can".<sup>1</sup> In London, Orpen "was regarded as the heir apparent to the mantle of society portraitist which John Singer Sargent had relinquished (...) Orpen's success and rate of productivity as a portrait painter brought him significant wealth".<sup>2</sup> Yet despite his public and material success, despite being a member of the Royal Academy, Orpen certainly felt as an outsider to his own life in London and wanted to escape the incursions of society and the petty *tedium* of service life in order to go on "a voyage of discovery" (*OF* 60). Orpen saw his war art as an opportunity to break away from the constraints of a career as a portraitist: the conflict was a call to paint serious subject-matter of lasting consequence and importance. Orpen's his-story "is merely an attempt to record some certain little incidents that occurred in [his] own life there" (*OF* 56), in wartime France. The sixteen chapters are in this context sixteen stages leading to the Armistice and finally to the Peace Conference and the "Signing of the Peace" (chapter XVI). With all his comings and goings and to-and-fro movement from one place to another, Orpen carves his own territory and his own literary map. The autobiographical geography of *An Onlooker in France* is intricate and a cartography is almost impossible: it is indeed difficult to reproduce Orpen's journey of the period going from April 1917 (first chapter) to October 1918 (chapter XIII) on a map of the Western Front. For example, Orpen superimposes an old map of the Western Front on the map of the landscape of the Somme he discovers one year later. His spatiality is thus marked by displacement and plays on limits and boundaries.

Never shall I forget my first sight of the Somme in summer-time. I had left it mud, nothing but water, shell-holes and mud—the most gloomy, dreary abomination of desolation the mind could imagine; and now, in the summer of 1917, no words could express the beauty of it. The dreary, dismal mud was baked white and pure—dazzling white. (*OF* 100)

Further down in the narrative, he expresses the borders between the outside and the inside of the war, opposing the "ordinary natural country" to the "vast waste of land" and highlighting the most banal features of a society at a time or in a situation never observed before. This spatial

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<sup>1</sup> Sean Keating, "William Orpen: A tribute", *Ireland Today*, 1937, quoted in Bruce Arnold Orpen, *Mirror to an Age* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 301.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Upstone, *Sex, Death & Politics* (London: Imperial War Museum, Philip Wilson Publishers, 2005), 28.

*assemblage* creates a plane of analysis within which Orpen's outsidership is being charted.

In the spring of 1917 it was strange motoring out from Amiens to Albert. Just beyond this valley everything changed. Suddenly one felt oneself in another world. Before this point one drove through ordinary natural country, with women and children and men working in the fields; cows, pigs, hens and all the usual farm belongings. Then, before one could say "Jack Robinson!" not another civilian, not another crop, nothing but a vast waste of land; no life, except Army life; nothing but devastation, desolation and khaki. (*OF* 108)

The new landscape is characterised by negative traits; "not", "nothing", "no" give rhythm to the description; the Western Front is no longer a place, but an imitation or a *simulacrum* of a place, a copy that no longer has an original, to use Baudrillard's concept.<sup>1</sup> The different mental maps thus obtained form a sort of maze in the reader's mind for Orpen is hard to follow in his labyrinthine journey. This complex meshing and merging of maps is the reflection of his own secret interiority, the image of his quest for identity and the expression of his attempt at stability. Of course, some titles of the chapters are names which resonate to commemorate some of the great battles of the First World War, such as "The Somme" (chapter II, to which he returns chapters V and VI) or "The Ypres Salient" (chapter IV) but on the whole disorientated Orpen often confesses his amazement—etymologically his being lost in a maze: "to my amazement," (*OF* 97) "[i]t amazed me" (*OF* 114), "[w]e all sat and looked on in amazement for a while" (*OF* 186) and "I was amazed on this day" (*OF* 223). Shallowness, darkness, to-ing and fro-ing are the elements which compose the map of Orpen's intimacy inside which initiation and truth are looked for. The idea is to lose oneself in order to find oneself. The onlooker is thus a wanderer and the pattern is one of endless departures and returns: "[o]ne felt it as one wandered over the old battlefields of La Boisselle, Courcelette, Thiepval, Grandcourt, Miraumont, Beaumont-Hamel, Bazentin-le-Grand and Bazentin-le-Petit" (*OF* 68). The maze intertwines emptiness and fullness, traps the outside into the twists and turns of the inside and imprisons the subject into a system that he cannot control.

In this context, the sixteen chapters are chronological but not always logical. The French expression *passer du coq à l'âne* is particularly apt to

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, [1981] 1994).

describe Orpen's abrupt changes of subject since the *coq* is metaphorically present in the title of the first chapter "To France"—the Gallic rooster being the unofficial symbol of France—and the donkey is figuratively depicted as drawing the Kaiser out of France in *The Official Entry of the Kaiser* (Pl. 65).<sup>1</sup> The sudden changes of topic, marked by the idiosyncratic "one day" or "I remember one day" introducing almost each new story in the book, signal Orpen's fragmented and disconnected narrative, sometimes lacking a logical sequence: Orpen tells one story after another, as though the figure of the "onlooker" were there to prove that there is nothing else to do than to look and report, nothing to explain, nothing to understand, nor to make of all that is around him. Orpen finds himself in a world where it seems impossible to come to any sort of conclusion about anything. Creation is an attempt at ordering chaos but the narrative is caught in the "instant" and the "interval", in "intuition", in the "almost-nothing" (*le presque-rien*) and the "I-know-not-what" (*le je-ne-sais-quoi*), to borrow Vladimir Jankélévitch's idioms. "I don't know" (*OF* 211), "as if nothing had happened" (*OF* 186) "and nothing further strange happened" (*OF* 107) are *leitmotifs* in *An Onlooker in France*.

Orpen tells the stories as they come to his mind in a sort of *naïve* and spontaneous writing in which all the people he meets can have a say. He celebrates individuals through a whole cluster of intertwined destinies, regardless of the ideological or political divisions of opinion which could threaten its unity. Orpen celebrates the Tommies, "that gallant company", and "their marvellous kindness to [him]" (*OF* 56), as much as the senior war officers who sat for him, such as Field Marshal Douglas Haig:

Sir Douglas was a strong man, a true Northerner, well inside himself—no pose. It seemed it would be impossible to upset him, impossible to make him show any strong feeling, and yet one felt he understood, knew all, and felt for all his men, and that he truly loved them; and I knew they loved him. Never once, all the time I was in France, did I hear a "Tommy" say one word against "Aig." Whenever it became my honour to be allowed to visit him, I always left feeling happier—feeling more sure that the fighting men being killed were not dying for nothing. One felt he knew, and would never allow them to suffer and die except for final victory.

When I started painting him he said, "Why waste your time painting me? Go and paint the men. They're the fellows who are saving the world, and they're getting killed every day." (*OF* 80)

Yet the passage appears chapter III and reveals Orpen's ambiguous feelings and how he will come to correct his preconceived ideas about

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<sup>1</sup> *OF* 192.