‘We live in a world of Art Historians: they do funny things’: Framing ‘Old Vort’

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I found myself given a huge exhibition of my pictures at the Tate. This was the work of Sir John Rothenstein and his youthful assistants, and no one else. Anyone resenting this outburst of my work should blame them, not me. I did not use my malign influence to inspire this miscarriage of justice, and certainly I was not responsible for Mr. X being insufficiently represented at the Tate. I cannot see to read a book or write a letter, and was quite unable to see my own pictures, and certainly am not interested enough to vote for or against Mr. X’s canvasses. Lastly, Vorticism. This name is an invention of Ezra Pound. When he writes me from his prison in Washington he addresses me as “Old Vort”. What does this word mean? I do not know. How anyone can get angry about it, I cannot imagine, but let me say I did not ask for this meaningless word to be revived at the Tate. We live in a world of Art Historians: they do funny things.

Wyndham Lewis (L. 567)

This letter, marked ‘Not sent’, concludes W. K. Rose’s edition of The Letters of Wyndham Lewis (1963). It refers, of course, to the 1956 Tate retrospective Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism and to the early stages of William Roberts’s response to this exhibition. This was one of a series of important moments in which, and through which, Lewis was framed – in many senses of the word. Lewis’s awareness of the pseudo-legal overtones of the controversy – the ‘miscarriage of justice’ supposedly committed both by him and by the wider artistic establishment – is striking, particularly when set in the context of Pound’s actual incarceration in ‘his prison in Washington’. The sense that Lewis, like Pound, was directly or indirectly guilty of something – of fascism, of egotism, of a consistent and unapologetic refusal to be nice – still characterizes his critical reception. But alongside guilt ran a more problematic responsibility. If Lewis and Pound were guilty, they were
also responsible not only for their own careers, but for the development of particular elements of modernism in Britain and elsewhere. The question of how far this responsibility extended became one of the driving issues in the ensuing (one could even say on-going) debate over the identity of Vorticism. This debate has touched upon, and helped to construct, a whole set of considerations beyond the remit of the present article: What do we consider a legitimately avant-garde movement? Are British avant-gardes ever comparable to the continental movements with which they interact? How do we assess the contributions of individuals to the complex dynamics of a group? If anything, these debates have only enhanced the uncertainty Michael Ayrton expressed in his review of the 1956 show: ‘What is to be done with these warrior pictures: where do they fit; where to put them? Must one recognize that Mr Lewis is a great artist or something? Mr Lewis is unavoidably something’.1 Lewis’s frequently unwelcome centrality to histories of modernism in general, and to avant-garde modernism in particular, has raised endless questions about where to ‘put’ him, how to describe the unavoidable ‘something’.

In order to address how, and where, ‘Old Vort’ has been framed, in this piece I will first focus closely on the components of the 1956 exhibition and its legacy, building on the recent work of Dominika Buchowska and Alan Munton. Second, and more speculatively, I would like to begin to consider how these art historical discourses, and their generic inflections, were affected by Lewis’s illness, his death in March of the following year, and by the memorial aspect involved in the recovery of Vorticism more generally. The activity of rebuilding, or recuperating, a legacy frequently carries elegiac overtones, but by 1956 Vorticism was more than usually suggestive. It could be presented as a casualty of the First World War, like Hulme or Gaudier-Brzeska.2 Wadsworth, Dismorr, Nevinson, McKnight Kauffer, and Atkinson had also died by the time the show was mounted. Lewis’s death was followed, five months later, by that of David Bomberg – the role played by the exhibition in his final breakdown being surely the most unfortunate, and least foreseeable, legacy of 1956. Cuthbert Hamilton (d. 1959), Jacob Epstein (d. 1959), Helen Saunders (d. 1963), and Malcolm Arbuthnot (d. 1967) all followed before 1970. A significant element in the writing of modernist history in the mid-twentieth century – a history unusually invested in the idea of discrete groups and distinctive generations – was that this generation was understood to be
rapidly dying out. The *chef d’œuvre* of such modernist memorialization was to be Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era* (1971), the structure of which emphasized the convergence of the present with the passing into history of Lewis’s ‘Men of 1914’. The closing chapters, entitled ‘The Last Vortex’ and ‘Endings’, appeared in the section ‘Toward Now’. ‘Endings’ includes a specific image of ‘Old Vort’ on ‘his final birthday’:

His massive form stooped, his sparse silvery hair curling at the collar he acquiesced in the ritual of shuffling on his wife’s arm to the dinner table […]. Somewhere nearby dust thickened in the locked studio. It was never alluded to.

Kenner’s depiction of Lewis was striking, but Rothenstein’s introduction to the 1956 exhibition catalogue had carried shades of the same strategy. Although Lewis’s illness was no secret, Rothenstein placed an unusual emphasis on his physical condition, describing Lewis as an ‘old blind man’ and re-emphasizing his age and deteriorating health in order to accentuate his ‘singular power’: ‘when a man of over seventy and for a number of years almost blind has still the effect of dividing opinion as sharply as ever before, the presence of a singular power is to be more than suspected’ (*WLV* 5). If his description advertised Lewis as a force to be reckoned with, it also advertised his mortality, placing the exhibition at a specific moment: Lewis’s life’s work was on the cusp of becoming his legacy, the body conceding to the corpus. The insistence that Lewis was first and foremost an artist (a position adopted in the exhibition, with some qualification) accentuated this, excluding mention of the many literary works he had published since the loss of his sight, and calling the ‘locked studio’ to mind (*WLV* 5). Although Lewis was still alive – as Charles Handley-Read had rather anxiously pointed out in his introduction to *The Art of Wyndham Lewis* (1951) – the emphasis of the retrospective was on placing Lewis in biographical and historical perspective, not on presenting him as a contemporary. Such personal, biographical elements created another sort of frame for what was ‘unavoidably something’ about Lewis and his fellow Vorticists, generating further tensions within the supposedly impersonal discourses of criticism and ‘art history’.
Framing ‘Old Vort’

‘Old Vort’

The Trustees of the Tate Gallery have decided to give the public an opportunity of forming a fuller estimate than has been possible hitherto of the painting and drawing of Lewis – for in spite of his impressive achievements in several fields he is first and foremost a painter and a draughtsman – and an indication of the effect of his immediate impact on his contemporaries. An indication, but little more, for Vorticism, product of his thought and action, was overwhelmed by the First World War and the attempts to revive it were unsuccessful. (WLV 5)

One of the most extraordinary elements of Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism and its aftermath was that virtually every element of what had been intended as a representative event, an uncomplicated mirror of Lewis’s artistic career, fractured into magnifying shards of specificity. Many of these fractures were opened up by Roberts’s obsessively forensic attention, but not all. There was an innate tension in the form of the exhibition, which sought to combine the conventions of the solo retrospective with the very different format of the group show. The Burlington Magazine’s review also drew attention to the problems the curators had experienced when trying to locate work:

It is an impressive record of an important phase of British painting, for in addition to Lewis’ own work there are some forty paintings, drawings, and sculptures by thirteen of the artists who collaborated with him between 1913 and 1920. Even after the passing of only thirty years or so, works of the vorticist period by several artists here were only traced with some difficulty. […] Few of Lewis’ early oil paintings have survived.7

Dennis Farr’s assessment was positive overall, but it acknowledged that the historical ‘record’ Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism presented contained gaps on all fronts – not only in the case of the ‘Other Vorticists’ but also in Lewis’s instance. Farr’s inside knowledge (he was not only an assistant curator at the Tate, but a good friend to one of Rothenstein’s ‘youthful assistants’ – Mary Chamot) has been verified by Richard Cork and Dominika Buchowska.8 Buchowska’s research is particularly valuable in its exploration of ‘scrupulous’ and frequently thwarted attempts to trace
suitable pieces. The small number of Vorticist works on display might have appeared to be the result of a lack of interest on the part of the curators, but quite the opposite was true.

The longest and most significant debates sparked by Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism drew attention to another aspect of the exhibition process: the prefatory essays published in the catalogue. The objections that were raised against these two essays – Lewis’s ‘Introduction’ and Rothenstein’s ‘Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism’ – have been discussed at length elsewhere, but are worth rehearsing briefly. Rothenstein’s description of Vorticism as the product of Lewis’s ‘thought and action’, and as ‘a propagation of his own aesthetic, which his friend Ezra Pound christened’ (WLV 7), echoed the ironclad hierarchy of innovation and imitation that Pound had laid out in his ABC of Reading (1934). Rothenstein’s opening remarks similarly framed Lewis in terms of his ‘impact’ upon his contemporaries, suggesting no traffic in the opposite direction. But the killer punch was Lewis’s quotable (and very frequently quoted) claim that ‘Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did and said at a certain period’ (WLV 3). Roberts was not the only one to be infuriated by this statement. It was neither news that Lewis considered himself the leader of the Vorticists, nor that he might be entitled to do so. Nor was it the first time that a major art institution had endorsed his interpretation. James Thrall Soby made more or less the same point in his 1948 critical essay ‘Wyndham Lewis’s Vorticism’, published by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and written after consultation with Lewis. In 1949, when contributing a short overview of his career for the Art News and Review, Roberts himself provided the following description of Vorticism: ‘There had passed from the Omega workshops shortly before my arrival, a bunch of the most turbulent “Apprentices” that ever a Master Craftsman could wish to employ. Its members, including Etchells, Wadsworth, and Hamil[l]ton, under the leadership of one of their number, Wyndham Lewis, had suddenly struck work, presented Fry with a “Manifesto”, and marched off to set up a rival establishment under the title of “Rebel Art Centre”, in the very heart of Bloomsbury’. The differences between these earlier examples and the 1956 exhibition lie in the particular. First, there was the long-established consecrating power of the gallery in question, which had been established as a legitimate target for satire for some years. Roberts’s first ‘Vortex Pamphlet’ carried the title ‘The Resurrection of Vorticism and the Apotheosis of Wyndham Lewis at the Tate’.
This almost exactly mirrored a satire published by Vincent O’Sullivan forty-five years earlier, which had imagined ‘Apotheosis in the Tate Gallery’ for another painter who had hit the big time. Second, there was the precise phrasing of Lewis’s personal claim upon Vorticism. As Aaron Jaffe observes, it appeared both to own, and to dismiss, the work of the group in a single gesture, its apparent off-handedness and arrogance representing everything anti-social about ‘The Enemy’. Alan Munton notes how frequently this phrase was cited in the 2011 Repositioning Vorticism symposium: ‘this remark is still capable of generating a certain amount of heat.’

Why did Lewis make this claim in this particular way? Although it is possible to put this down to illness, or to Lewis’s supposed sense of superiority, it is equally possible to acknowledge its pragmatic effect: it was a memorable assertion that established a position of absolute authority. The reason why this authority might have been seen as necessary is revealed by other, rather less memorable, statements Lewis made in his 1956 ‘Introduction’. These not only tempered the idea that Vorticism was his sole endeavour, but made it quite clear that he was writing in the context of a larger argument concerning ‘Art Historians’: ‘about the Group, directed by myself, and called “Vorticist”, a great deal has been written by what we now call Art Historians. Some of the Art History relating to Vorticism which I have read has been unrecognisable’ (WL/3). He was more specific later in the same piece: ‘Persons today who have become advocates of abstract art, and who have written about Vorticism, are apt to write differently about it from the more objective “historian”’ (WL/4). The timing of Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism, just months after the Tate’s abstraction-heavy Modern Art in the United States, might have provided added incentive. In one of the double manoeuvres that seem to characterize this particular show, Lewis took ownership of a movement that he had already repudiated in order for that repudiation to carry the weight necessary to dislodge it from a dominant narrative. In this situation, ‘Vorticism’ became both his property, and a ‘meaningless word’ unworthy of any kind of debate or upset. Likewise, Lewis took hold of the term, and the practice, of ‘Art History’ in order to redirect it. Lewis explicitly connected this ‘Introduction’ to the arguments laid out in The Demon of Progress in the Arts (1954) – he recommended purchase for those interested in his recent thinking on both abstraction and ‘art history’ more generally (WL/4). This critique collapsed the distinction between ‘art historian’ and ‘art critic’ in the figure of
the utterly unobjective ‘pundit-prophet’ (see DPA 47-50), the ‘word-
manship’ who, as Lewis had also argued in Rude Assignment (1950), does not
think like the visual artist and whose theorizing tends to be limiting or
coercive (see RA 168).21

This instrumentally provocative claim, often extracted from its
context, has too frequently come to stand as Lewis’s final statement on
Vorticism and the summary soundbite of the show as a whole. Given
this critical bias, it can be difficult to view Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism
as anything other than an undermining of Vorticism as a movement,
whatever ideas of what constitutes a ‘movement’ we might hold. Return-
ing to the whole text of Lewis’s ‘Introduction’ lends perspective to this
reading. But there was another aspect of the exhibition that should also
be taken into consideration. These texts did not appear purely in relation
to one another and to the organization of the show; they were framed
by the catalogue and its design, perhaps the most enduring material arte-
fact of the entire event. Returning to these print materials makes Lewis’s
statement look different again. Just as Farr’s review had seen the
number of Vorticist works as ‘impressive’, the striking element of the
composition of the catalogue was not the inconspicuousness of
Vorticism, but its presence. Clearly, ‘Vorticism’ was in the title of the
exhibition, and appeared on its posters. Discussion of Vorticism and
biographical material on the ‘Other Vorticists’ occupied a significant
part of the catalogue.22 Finally, the catalogue’s design seemed to be
attempting the kind of generic hybridity that the format of the
exhibition itself could not quite manage. It reprinted cover images from
The Enemy, with this accompanying text: ‘The “enemy” is the notorious
author, painter, and publicist Mr Wyndham Lewis. He is “the Diogenes
of our day”’ (WLV front cover). This ‘enemy’ frame for Lewis merged
with the visual signatures of BLAST: the bright pink cover and the bold,
sans-serif font used both in the title and headers throughout the text.
The connection between the catalogue and these two magazines would
have been apparent to exhibition-goers, as they were both items on
display.23 It is unclear exactly which pages of the magazines were open
in 1956 (unlike the 2011 show, reproduction copies of BLAST were not
freely available for perusal). All the same, the prominence of BLAST
not only emphasized the position of Vorticism within the exhibition,
but provided a template for the corporate identity of the Vorticists
which both supported Lewis’s centrality and testified to the significance
of others involved.
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The narrative of the 1956 show as an insulting travesty would have a particular impact upon the way in which the group identity of Vorticism, and Lewis’s role within it, came to be understood oppositionally. But before analysing this it is important to observe that this narrative is misleading not because we can confidently agree with Lewis (although we might), but because up close exhibitions, like groups themselves, cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Rather, Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism was a set of simultaneous yet distinct discourses which did not necessarily possess either the same interests or generate the same effects. Recognition that ‘an exhibition’ is a composite event encourages a position in which the conversation across, and within, those discourses might be explored. It also enhances the awareness that while ‘art history’ (or any history) might be able to avoid the bias that so exercised Lewis, whichever ‘historical’ entity is being presented it is an entity made as much by the conditions of its own production, and by the discourses and practices it has inherited, as by the time in which it was first made. Again, the printed material generated by Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism provided a more conspicuous demonstration of this than the selected images. The catalogue, with its evident similarities to two different texts, announced its condition as a product of the Tate’s version of ‘Wyndham Lewis’ plus ‘Vorticism’, a new publication both reminiscent of, but different from, its parent volumes in the glass display cases.24

The question of art-historical discourse, and historical and material reproduction, comes forcibly to the fore when we consider William Roberts’s responses to the show.25 It is well known that Roberts refuted virtually every statement that Rothenstein and Lewis made about Vorticism, and that he took particular exception to characterizations of Lewis noted above – his position as a ‘leader’, and the implication that he was the sole influence upon ‘other Vorticists’. One of Roberts’s favourite rhetorical strategies was an essentially reiterative one: to turn such statements against those who had made them. For instance, his second ‘Vortex Pamphlet’ Cometism and Vorticism: A Tate Gallery Catalogue Revised, stated baldly: ‘Art historians, you have got your history wrong’, and compared it to ‘a picture of the Normans invading England in tanks’.26 This clearly alluded to Lewis’s own comment about ‘Art Historians’ and their ‘unrecognisable’ depictions of Vorticism, although it did not participate in Lewis’s wider arguments concerning either the discipline or abstraction. Unusually, Roberts extended this practice from
the rhetorical into the visual and the material, targeting forms of print production in particular. This second pamphlet used its own similarities to BLAST (bright pink covers, bold black text, reconfigured Vorticist emblem on the back cover) to attack the deliberately Vorticist styling of the Tate’s catalogue and its assertions about the history of Vorticism itself. ‘The authors of this pink publication have intended it to be more than a catalogue’, Roberts wrote. ‘It is a veritable Manifesto, a little Blast, worthy progeny indeed of that corpulent pink old Blast of 1914.’ In this pamphlet Roberts also sketched Lewis, Rothenstein, and Ayrton chatting around a table. The ‘conversation piece’ this image illustrated used texts drawn from the catalogue, and from Ayrton’s review ‘The Stone Guest’:

JOHN: We must include some “Other Vorticists” to give an indication of the effect of your ‘Impact’ upon your contemporaries.

MICHAEL: They will look rather like a lot of sprats that a whale has caught.

WYNDHAM: Gentlemen, Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did and said at a certain period.

By recontextualizing and reconfiguring these quotations, Roberts manipulated history in order to demonstrate how he imagined history had been manipulated by this particular trio. These reiterations can be justifiably called ‘funny’, in that they are both intentionally amusing, and decidedly odd. I would agree with Buchowska, Andrew Gibbon Williams, and Peter Brooker in their assessment of Roberts’s writing as more than just paranoid, petulant, or vengeful. For instance, Roberts’s use of contemporary reviews in The New Age to illuminate the complexity and lability of avant-garde formations at this point, and his emphasis upon the politics of networks, anticipates far more recent ‘new modernist’ readings of the period. But rather than putting the record straight, the manner in which Roberts presented his position only emphasized the plasticity of that record, and the dislocations that could occur during the process of repetition. So, the charge that Roberts made against the catalogue and its self-conscious imitation of BLAST – that it was a ‘manifesto’, rather than ‘art history’ – could very obviously have been applied to his own revision of that catalogue, with its own re-appropriation of the same form. The depiction of Lewis, Rothenstein,
and Ayrton advertised not only their supposed misrepresentation of Vorticism, but the potential for Roberts to misrepresent. This effect was only enhanced by the fact that this image was far more realist, more imitative, than ‘The Vorticist Whale’ that had appeared in the first pamphlet, in which Lewis was represented as a shifty-looking cetacean wielding an artist’s palette.32

The question of how Roberts visually and textually represented and reframed Lewis and Vorticism is particularly important for the *tour de force, The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel, Spring 1915*. Jaffe has described this painting as ‘an image fit for institutionalization and collective edification’, noting that it ‘went almost directly from Roberts’ easel into the Tate in 1962.’33 He could have added that the purchase was made by way of the Chantrey Bequest, the fund set aside for the acquisition of works for a ‘public national collection of British fine art’, which Lewis had excoriated for its lack of imagination.34 As we have seen above, the 1956 show and its aftermath were caught up with just such questions of ‘institutionalization’ and consecration. But neither the essays from the catalogue, nor the Vortex pamphlets, were the most immediate inter-texts for the painting. Rather, this was ‘Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist’, a full-page article Roberts contributed to *The Listener* on the 21st of March 1957, just under a fortnight after Lewis’s death.35 *The Listener* was, of course, the periodical in which Lewis himself had been so prominent in the late 1940s, and from which he had launched his own pointed attacks on the cultural establishment.36 It would be interesting to learn exactly how Roberts got the job, as the Vortex pamphlets provided ample evidence of both his suitability and his absolute unsuitability.37 Whatever the case, he found himself in what must, by then, have been a familiar situation: framing Lewis, in the context of Vorticism, as a way of rewriting the relationship between the two. A similar generic power struggle also seems to be present in *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*. Given Lewis’s recent death, one might have expected something like an obituary – another form, like the retrospective, that privileges the narrative of a single individual, and has a generally consecrating function.38 In his obituary of Wadsworth, Lewis had already pushed the genre a little – *The Listener’s* editor congratulated him, as ‘one gets so bored with the usual obituaries’.39 But Lewis still conformed to certain conventions, noting Wadsworth’s significant dates and presenting a summary of his career.40 In Roberts’s account, both these features were absent. Instead, ‘Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist’
resembled a fragment of memoir, focusing upon the brief personal association between the two men and ending on a ‘passing handshake’ at the Lefevre Gallery in 1935, ‘after which our paths never crossed again.’ The fact of Lewis’s age and ill-health, the use of the past tense generally and in particular this closing sentence, strongly suggested Lewis’s death, but from the outset Roberts made it clear that his portrayal was shaped by the fact that he had never met the older Lewis, the ‘old blind man’ whose frailties Rothenstein had outlined in the catalogue, and whom Roberts himself had drawn in the previous year. Before plunging his readers into the heyday of Vorticism, Roberts paused to remind them that this was ‘a Lewis’, a version to be found at a particular place and time in Roberts’s own memory. The reader was left in little doubt how clearly Lewis’s physicality had been imprinted:

> I always recall, as I pass down Fitzroy Street, where “The Great English Vortex” was once so active, Lewis’ tall form in heavy overcoat and grey sombrero, with scarf flung flamboyantly over one shoulder, striding along, the broad shoulders tilted slightly, like a boxer advancing to meet an opponent. In a sense, acquaintanceship with Wyndham Lewis was like a contest, in which you came out of your corner fighting — and the best man won.  

Roberts’s Vorticists were café-dwelling *bon vives*, featuring this hungry young Lewis and his taste for Gateau St. Honoré:

> In my memory *la cuisine Française* and Vorticism are indissolubly linked. Both Signor Rossi of the Etoile, and M. Rudolph Stulik of the Tour Eiffel should rank in the records of Vorticism as honorary members of the “Group”. Lewis who liked good food, and fine wine to go with it, kept a ringed serviette in each of these restaurants. If, as he claimed, Vorticism was the expression of a new philosophy, then it must be the newness of Rabelais, and of old Omar Khayyam’s “A jug of wine, a loaf of bread and thou beside me singing”. Nor was it developed in the gloom of a studio, but at the Tour Eiffel over a *tourne-dos* and a bottle of Burgundy.
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The Blasting, Cursing, Damning and Blessing of the opening pages of our puce-coloured Manifesto have the gusto of a tavern song.\textsuperscript{44}

The Vorticism depicted was a solidly group endeavour, thereby underlining Roberts’s central argument post-1956. In fact, the group was extended to include Rossi and Stulik. Far from diminishing Lewis himself, however, Roberts produced a description of ‘The Enemy’ at his most potent – swaggering, broad-shouldered, alert, full of ideas and appetite. His recollection that ‘acquaintanceship with Wyndham Lewis was like a contest, in which you came out of your corner fighting – and the best man won’ suggests not only their brief personal acquaintance before the First World War, but the more recent context of Roberts’s ‘contest’ over the history of Vorticism. And this feeling of a present past hung over the piece as a whole, largely due to Roberts’s decision to favour the conventions of memoir – ‘I always recall’ – above the more impersonal tenor of the obituary. One obvious consequence of this decision was that Roberts became more prominent, but there were other effects. It placed Lewis and Vorticism within a historical frame, but also re-animated them – through the vividness of Roberts’s memory, and through the recognizable geography of London that he still traversed. His unusual use of the present tense when describing ‘our puce-coloured manifesto’ accentuated this. It reminded the reader that the pages of BLAST were still directly accessible, in that moment. Indeed, for this text, as for the exhibition, it is the magazine that seems to provide the most immediate indication of how Vorticism might still be located.

The later painting connected with this text in a range of ways. It provided a particular frame for Lewis (and for BLAST), in which the two implications of the phrase ‘Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist’ could be conflated. Here was Lewis during his Vorticist phase, but here was Lewis eternally identified as a Vorticist, centrally but anonymously figured in a larger, collective portrait.\textsuperscript{45} Between the time depicted and the time of depiction – 1915 and 1962 – stood the contested critical history briefly touched upon above. Roberts’s multiple roles within this history were, on the one hand, openly declared (here he was, the painter, representing and represented in that crucial moment from the history of the British avant-garde). On another, they were so quietly articulated that the viewer would be forgiven for missing them entirely. Indeed, the
most significant visual cue that this is a specific, disputed version of that
history comes in the form of an innocuous slice of custard tart, Stulik’s
signature Gateau St. Honoré. This detail appeared in the final version,
linking the portrait directly to its intertext, and thus to Roberts’s battles
to both consecrate and deconsecrate Lewis, and Vorticism itself. In
this sense, the painting stands for a surface reading of ‘institutional-
ization and collective edification’ – the idea of an orderly, agreed
version of Lewis and of Vorticism. But it also stands for its subversive
counterpart – divided, competing discourses refracted through contin-
gent, individual narratives and memories, enacted across unstable gene-
ric boundaries. The context of the Vortex Pamphlets, with their satire,
their extended critiques of ‘Art History’, and their imaginatively distor-
ted images of Lewis, declared the proximity of these counterparts. The
Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel, Spring 1915 seemed, at first, to
conceal them. But perhaps not. After all, here is that moment within
‘Art History’ presented as a created artefact, a history painting. Its
createdness might be said to be all the more conspicuous for the fact
that the medium usually subject to critique (a work of art) had become
part of the critique itself.

Equally important, however, was generic composition of the
piece: obituary cut with memoir. This combination is reflected in the
two assessments of The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel
provided by Jaffe and Gibbon Williams. For Jaffe it is the ‘visual
deployment of modernist memoir’. Gibbon Williams describes it as
‘the most imposing memorial to Vorticism’. Both ‘memoir’ and
‘memorial’ share a sense of historical reflection and recollection, but
their implications are rather different. ‘Memoir’ suggests an individual
narrative linked with the conventions of autobiography. The ‘memorial’,
like the obituary, represents a more impersonal, public act of commemo-
ration. The collision between these two elements coloured the
language with which Lewis and Vorticism were framed, particularly,
although not exclusively, post-1956. More than that, it continued to
have an impact upon the ways in which this period of modernist history
came to be discussed. The reason why Roberts’s ‘memorial’ gesture
might have been deemed necessary can be demonstrated by Robert
Hughes’s review of Roberts’s own Tate retrospective in 1965: ‘The
blustering, roaring, black-hatted presence of Wyndham Lewis has, in the
last fifty years, reduced all his colleagues in the Vorticist group (Roberts,
Etchells, Wadsworth, Hamilton) to ghostly blurs, images bleached out
of an old group photo.\textsuperscript{40} Hughes’s image seemed both to invoke, and to revoke, Robert’s painting of four years before. For Hughes, Wyndham Lewis, ‘the Vorticist’, wearing the same hat (in more ways than one), has eclipsed the ‘Other Vorticists’, leaving them ‘ghostly’ and ‘bleached out’ of the collective record. Hughes was characteristically hard-headed about this, simply noting that the absence of any Vorticist works by Robert made it hard to assess his role in the movement.\textsuperscript{50} But this convenient image, and his comment on missing evidence, united two aspects that had haunted \textit{Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism} from the outset: individuals dead, dying, or otherwise absent; lost works; unmade reputations. Even without Robert’s interventions the exhibition was set in a context reminiscent not only of ‘Resurrection’ or ‘Apotheosis’ but also the different varieties of ghostliness that shadowed both these terms. It is with an investigation of these inflections, in framings of both Vorticism and ‘Old Vort’, that my article will close.

Lewis is famous for his resistance to writing that privileged subjectivity or promoted what might be called ‘sentiment’. Nonetheless his later critical practice engaged closely – and frequently sympathetically – with the careers of his Vorticist contemporaries. His stint on \textit{The Listener} not only saw him praising the work of younger artists – as he would do in \textit{The Demon of Progress in the Arts} – and writing Wadsworth’s obituary, but discussing Robert, Epstein, and Gaudier-Brzeska, and pondering the fate of David Bomberg:

In the Arcade Gallery, Bond Street, the “Borough Group” exhibit, David Bomberg is the leading spirit. What happened to Bomberg after 1920? Was he one of the lost generation that really got lost? Or has he an aversion to exhibition? He ought to be one of the half-dozen most prominent artists in England. When I got there, the gallery had no one in it: it was nothing but a chaos of pictures only half on the walls. Anything with which that fine artist, Bomberg, has to do you cannot afford to neglect.\textsuperscript{51}

In February of the following year, Lewis wrote once again on more or less the same subject: ‘I just have space to refer to Bomberg. He and his group are in the wilderness (“Book Worms”, Newport Court, their lair). Will they successfully \textit{Putsch} the London Group or not? With this dramatic question I close my article.’\textsuperscript{52} Lewis’s use of the term ‘\textit{Putsch}’ as late as 1950 suggests his on-going sense of affiliation with Bomberg,
picking up as it does on his own account of the anti-Futurist activities of 1914, which would also be re-quoted by Rothenstein in Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism. But this affiliation only makes Bomberg’s position more poignant. Although ‘the wilderness’ to which he had been consigned was (actually) only that of Leicester Square, Lewis’s earlier description of the empty Arcade Gallery, under-staffed and apparently uncurated, with a ‘chaos of pictures only half on the walls’, left the reader in little doubt of its actual nature: not only physical displacement but also critical neglect. It is difficult not to recall that Rude Assignment had described ‘the machine-age of the mercantile classes’ as ‘a polar wilderness or a “dark continent”’ for the ‘authentic “intellectual”’ (R-A 111). Lewis’s use of the phrase ‘the lost generation’ is unusual here – perhaps slightly ironic, or just casual, or perhaps suggesting a more open interpretation of the theme of lostness, when referring to the generation to which he and Bomberg both belonged. Lewis plainly had no interest in memorializing himself, certainly not as ‘Old Vort’ – a term that he firmly attributed to Pound – but the powerful, valedictory overtone could not quite be banished. His own ‘unseemly autobiographical outburst’, ‘The Sea-Mists of the Winter’, published in The Listener in May 1951, largely cut against the grain of expectation in its account of what he himself had lost by the time the 1956 exhibition opened, dismissing the end of his artistic career with the following quip: ‘If you ask, “And as an artist what about that?” I should perhaps answer. “Ah, sir, as to the artist in England! I have often thought that it would solve a great many problems if English painters were born blind’.

The brave joke almost held back the unbearable, but not quite. ‘I am like a prisoner condemned to invisibility, although permitted an unrestricted number of visitors’ he wrote, only a couple of sentences before, connecting the loss of the visible world with being lost to it, with becoming ‘ghostly’, unseen, in the manner that Hughes later described in 1965 (quoted above). This was precisely the sense that Kenner emphasized in ‘The Last Vortex’. In his account, Lewis’s ferocious intellect orbited within an Eliotic waste land of corporeal and mechanical collapse, its obliteration only just staved off by personal defiance: ‘Still the most magnetic figure in London’, intoned Kenner, ‘he seemed not to be surrounded by London but by a trackless void.’ Here, the image of the avant-garde modernist, the ‘authentic “intellectual”’ was distinctly valedictory, deploying its memoir-memorial form – in Kenner’s hands a compact of criticism, elegy, and autobiography –
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both to assert and to commemorate an identifiable group that had just passed into history.

Within two years of the publication of The Pound Era in Britain, it was Vorticism’s turn to receive similar treatment. It would come in another exhibition catalogue: the 1974 Hayward Gallery exhibition Vorticism and its Allies, curated by Richard Cork. This was an exhibition that engaged with an art history which included the 1956 show, the deaths of the overwhelming majority of the remaining Vorticists, and with the responses not only of Roberts, but also of Bomberg. It worked hard to decentralize the figure of ‘Old Vort’ although, as we will see, the 1956 exhibition and Lewis’s ‘enemy’ persona were vital to its construction. In their introduction, Norbert Lynton and Robin Campbell, like Rothenstein before them, presented the exhibited items and the curatorial text as two parts of an identical process, through which a crucial aspect of British art history would be narrated. Consciously placing the ‘movement’ before any named contributors this time, they sounded a note familiar from more recent exhibitions, emphasizing the coherence and the significance of Vorticism: ‘This exhibition and this catalogue together attempt to tell the story of an especially vivid and valuable moment in the history of modern British art’; ‘As a public phenomenon, Vorticism has not been matched by anything in British art history since.’56 The text of the ‘story’ to which Lynton and Campbell were referring was, essentially, written by Cork, whose foundational two-volume work on Vorticism was in process, but yet to be published. His ‘Introduction’ opened with a striking assertion: ‘Of all the radical movements which sprang up throughout Europe during the first two decades of this century, Vorticism is perhaps the least able to furnish itself with the identity it deserves.’57 While Rothenstein had glossed over the curatorial difficulties Farr outlined, Cork emphasized them. He drew attention to the ‘roll-call of mislaid or destroyed works’, noting the fact that most of the large paintings from the 1915 Vorticist exhibition were untraced, and that some artists had ‘been left without a single extant canvas’.58 Cork’s Vorticism was essentially still missing in action, its ‘roll-call’ of losses and absences preventing an assessment of the ‘identity it deserves’. This opening phrase was so resonant largely because it combined the (by now familiar) impression of unjustly displaced history with the impression of a sort of unified identity. The idea that history guaranteed Vorticism such an identity – a ‘deserving’ identity at that – asserted a moral as well
as a critical requirement for recuperation, in order for it to be able to ‘furnish itself’ or to tell its own story. Once again, it was a curious but compelling mixture of discourses, combining the demand for what Lewis had described as ‘objective’ history – a ‘record’ without an agenda – and a rather different form of personal appeal. What might have been viewed as a factor operating against the coherence of the exhibition – it could not be properly representative when so much material could not be found – became, through this phrasing, quite the opposite. A further, important element to this appeal was the role played by the 1956 exhibition. In a later section of the text, Cork invoked the earlier show directly, once again introducing Vorticism’s deservingness:

It should also help to correct the misapprehension, unfortunately fostered by the survey *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism* staged at the Tate Gallery in 1956, that Vorticism was a cooked-up art-political conspiracy which does not deserve to be described as a movement at all, and that Lewis was its only begetter. The Tate show was basically a retrospective examination of Lewis’s entire career; and the tactless addition of a small section entitled “Other Vorticists”, including only a derisive representation of artists as substantial as Bomberg, Gaudier-Brzeska, Roberts and Wadsworth, thoroughly distorted the true historical perspective. They were reduced to the humiliating level of minor camp-followers, and Lewis did his best to exacerbate this injustice by declaring in his introduction to the catalogue that “Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period,” a grossly inflated claim which he must have known would provoke at least two other participants to issue elaborate rebuttals.59

The first sentence can be aligned with Lynton and Campbell’s preface, which asserted the value of Vorticism, its position as a ‘moment’ unparalleled in British art history to date. The question of Vorticism’s status and value was addressed by Cork’s insistence that it was not Lewis’s ‘cooked-up art-political conspiracy’ but a ‘movement’ – a legitimate participant in the wider modernist experiments of the period. But Cork’s interest in the politics of art-historical identity once again seemed to turn back to the question of individual identities. The subtext of the piece was its suggestion of the ‘miscarriage of justice’ Lewis had ironically observed in his final letter on the exhibition, ‘true historical
perspective’ having been sacrificed on the altar of Lewis’s ‘grossly inflated’ ego. Cork advanced the intriguing supposition that Lewis had made his notorious claim in part to ‘provoke at least two other participants to issue elaborate rebuttals’. Roberts and Bomberg were footnoted at this point.

This brief reference, and the fact that Bomberg headed the list of artists misrepresented by the 1956 show, could be read as scholarly versions of Stulik’s slice of cake. That is, they were the only points at which this essay indicated one of its pretexts: Cork’s knowledge of the Vortex Pamphlets, and his developing interest in Bomberg. During the course of his research, Cork had attempted to contact Roberts, and had been rebuffed, although they did correspond, in a sense, via Roberts’s 1974 pamphlet _In Defence of English Cubists_. But he had interviewed Bomberg’s widow Lilan in 1970 and consulted the unpublished materials she had deposited in the Tate. In 1974, although he was a long way from blaming Lewis wholesale, Cork’s outrage resonated in the emotional register of what was in other senses a scrupulously accurate art-historical account, his passionate interest in British art, and in this particular artist, falling seamlessly into line. The inclusion of what Chamot and Rothenstein had evidently hoped would be a restricted but representative slice of work by different artists had become ‘tactless’, ‘humiliating’, and ‘derisive’. Again, it is telling that Cork chose the latter adjective, used to describe a deliberately mocking comment or gesture, over the more appropriate ‘derisory’, which commonly means insultingly negligible. In other words, ‘Vorticism’ had assumed a human, rather than an aesthetic or theoretical, aspect – it had been neglected, wounded, and denied. The impact of this framing narrative was to place emphasis upon Vorticism as something recognizable as an individual might be recognizable, and entitled to representative ‘justice’ in the same sense. The charged, personally inflected discourses that had informed post-1956 narratives had been brought into line with the institutional urge, expressed by Campbell and Lynton, to consecrate ‘Vorticism’ as a cast-iron avant-garde grouping, a whole entity and ‘public phenomenon’. It achieved this, at least in part, by framing Lewis in the more colloquial sense of the word, and by reading the extraordinarily complex material and discursive legacy of 1956 as if it were a simple, dismissive gesture.

Since this 1974 show there have been other exhibitions, which have presented their own versions of Vorticism, the Vorticists, and Lewis himself. None of these can be, or can claim to be, definitive,
despite important attempts at re-presentation and reconstruction mounted by the most recent. And perhaps this is as it should be. I entirely concur with Munton’s assessment of Vorticism as a ‘decentered collective enterprise’, never identical to itself, that both contained and deployed ‘contradictions and convergences’ across its multiple manifestations. All the same, applying the same critical focus to the specific discursive elements of the exhibition process after 1915 and 1917 as has been applied to these ‘original’ presentations of Vorticism can only help to deepen our understanding of its history within academic and cultural institutions. Given Lewis’s chequered critical fortunes, and the role of Vorticism in them, this is a vital exercise for Lewis scholars too. These various institutional profiles of Vorticism, a movement central not only to Lewis’s image, but, ultimately, to the notion of a legitimate modernist British avant-garde, emerged from a crucible of contradictory accounts, through which language inflected by individual recollection and larger feelings of loss found its way into the critical and historical ‘record’. Lewis’s wry, weary comment on ‘Art Historians’ serves as a reminder that this record, the legacy we have inherited, deserves greater attention.

Notes

2 See, for instance, Paul Edwards’s brief description: ‘Vorticism eventually became one of the war casualties’. See WLPW 167.
3 I say ‘understood’ as several tremendously important female modernist figures born in the 1890s – for instance, Djuna Barnes (1892-1982), Jean Rhys (1890-1979), and Rebecca West (1892-1983) – were still very much alive. However, these women were not subject to such canonizing accounts until the 1980s and 1990s.
5 Kenner, The Pound Era, 548-49. Pound’s reference to Lewis’s blindness in Canto CXV is another of Kenner’s frames here.
6 Handley-Read wrote as follows: ‘when I speak of his [Lewis’s] “period” I do not mean that he is either dead or out of date – he is, to a remarkable
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10 Pound divided literature into the ‘following classes of persons’. At the top of the list were ‘Inventors’ and ‘Masters’, followed in descending order by ‘the diluters’, ‘good writers without salient qualities’, ‘writers of belles-lettres’, and ‘the starters of crazes’. See Ezra Pound, ABC of Reading (1934; New York: New Directions, 2010), 39-40.
11 Like Rothenstein, Soby drew both upon BLAST and upon the account Lewis had provided in Wyndham Lewis The Artist – although Soby politely noted ‘slight exaggeration’ on a couple of points in the latter text. See James Thrall Soby, Contemporary Painters (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1948), 115-21.
15 Aaron Jaffe, Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 179.
17 Munton’s examination of this phrase, which also draws upon Lewis’s Vogue interview of 1956, suggests an alternative explanation: that Lewis was thinking mainly of organization and publicity. See Munton, ‘The Vorticists’, 145.

23
18 Lewis could have had several people in mind here, although ‘The Skeleton in the Cupboard Speaks’ makes Herbert Read a strong contender (see WL 3 334-45).
19 Lewis had presented a more complete explanation to Soby, in answer to the question ‘Why has modern English painting not been treated with some perspective?’ First, Lewis blamed younger critics such as Read, who ‘like to suggest that the world is just beginning and they are in at the birth’. Second, he cited the on-going influence of Bloomsbury, detectable even in recent publications such as Kenneth Clark’s series Penguin Modern Painters. Lewis to Soby, 20 September 1947 (L 412).
20 This exhibition opened in January. See Taylor, Art for the Nation, 214.
21 See also Lewis’s remarks in his essay ‘Picasso’, which originally appeared in The Kenyon Review in 1940, where he identifies ‘the “art-expert”’ as one of ‘the worst enemies of painting’ (CHCH 291).
22 The catalogue was divided into several sections: the essays, a timeline, some colour reproductions and an index, and the actual ‘catalogue’ (details of the paintings, their provenance, and so on). Lewis’s paintings and drawings took up sixteen pages of this catalogue, the ‘Other Vorticists’ seven and a half. Lewis was clearly dominant, but the research that had been undertaken on the other artists was also apparent.
24 Robert Hewison highlights the importance of print culture to Vorticism, above and beyond the magazine itself: ‘much Vorticist work is only known because it has survived in reproduction’. See Robert Hewison, BLAST and the Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene (eds) The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World (London: Tate Gallery, 2010): 67-73, 67.
27 This awareness of the importance of forms of print production and dissemination was one of the defining features of Roberts’s campaign. See also his pamphlet A Press View of the Tate Gallery (1956), which reviewed the reviews of Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism, and Vorticism and the Politics of Belles-Lettres-ism (1958). These are now available online, courtesy of the William Roberts Society.
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29 Ibid., frontispiece.
30 Buchowska, ‘Vorticism Denied’, 55, n. 73.
32 William Roberts, *The Resurrection of Vorticism and the Apotheosis of Wyndham Lewis at the Tate* (London: Canale, 1956), unpaginated frontispiece. This was a reference to Michael Ayrton’s review: ‘Rather unfairly, since several of them are men of talent, the other Vorticists look rather like a lot of sprats that a whale has caught.’ See Ayrton, ‘The Stone Guest’, 158.
33 Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity*, 181.
34 Information on acquisition, and on the remit of the Chantrey Bequest, obtained from the Tate Gallery website. See http://tinyurl.com/hpvy5b (accessed 03/11/2012).
35 The Tate’s website quotes the following line: ‘In my memory la cuisine française [French cooking] and Vorticism are indissolubly linked.’ See http://tinyurl.com/ezfc7rr (accessed 03/11/2012).
36 See Alan Munton, ‘Wyndham Lewis, The Listener, and the Institutions’ at http://tinyurl.com/crnn23 (accessed 03/11/2012). Lewis’s articles, cited below, were all accessed by way of this invaluable online resource.
37 Presumably he was invited by J. R. Ackerley, literary editor of The Listener until 1959, who had also commissioned Lewis’s ‘salty’ obituary of Wadsworth. See Jan Cox’s essay ‘Edward Wadsworth: Lewis’s “salty” obituary of an “old comrade”’ at http://tinyurl.com/ckmg59p (accessed 03/11/2012).
38 Bridget Fowler writes: ‘For figures in the arts in particular, the obituary features as a crucial benchmark of later consecration and canonisation.’ See Bridget Fowler, *The Obituary as Collective Memory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 7.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Roberts’s attempt to change the title of this painting, replacing ‘Vorticists’ with ‘English Cubists’, has not stuck.
Robert’s study for this painting is available on the Tate website, along with several studies for the Vortex pamphlet images. The study shows Stulik in the same position, minus cake. See http://tinyurl.com/cydafbf (accessed 03/11/2012).


Robert Hughes, ‘William Roberts’, *The London Magazine* (February 1966): 71-74, 72. Hughes – who was unimpressed by the show overall – described Lewis as ‘incomparably the most gifted painter of the group’ (73). He did not, of course, include either Gaudier-Brzeska, or Bomberg, in his list. At the close of *Cometism and Vorticism*, Roberts wrote, of the version of Vorticism the 1956 exhibition presented: ‘to let it survive would not be just to the memory of such artists as Wadsworth, Gaudier-Brzeska, Atkinson and Nevinson, who, had they been living today, would have arranged this Catalogue differently.’ See Roberts, *Cometism and Vorticism*, unpagedinated.

Hughes, ‘William Roberts’, 73.


Thus Rothenstein: ‘Lewis “counter-putsched”, leading a determined band of anti-Futurists’ (IFLV 7).


Ibid.

Ibid.


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By 1985, when he curated his Bomberg retrospective at the Fischer Gallery, and 1987, when he published his monograph on Bomberg, Cork knew that Lewis had had far less to do with the organization of the 1956 show than the Vortex pamphlets, or Bomberg’s own writings, had suggested. In order to remain respectful towards Bomberg’s understanding of events, while taking this new information into account, Cork drew upon an array of narrative strategies. For example, see the following description of Bomberg’s response to \textit{Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism}. ‘To be traduced in such a shameless manner confirmed all his gravest fears about the art establishment’s apparent determination to minimize and scorn his achievement’. See Cork, \textit{David Bomberg}, 310. This technique left the reader uncertain whether or not such extreme sentiments belonged to narrator (Cork), to character (Bomberg), or to both. The word ‘apparent’ also hovered between two implications: ‘apparent’ as in obvious or evident to all, or ‘apparent’ as in seeming or appearing so. These meanings didn’t exclude one another, but nor did they imply one another automatically, allowing Cork to navigate the charged territory between impersonal and personal record, history, and life-writing.

Munton, \textit{‘The Vorticists’}, 153.