Edward Wadsworth: from Vortex to Royal Academy

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The one-page ‘Select Bibliography’ nestling between the main text and the catalogue raisonné of Edward Wadsworth: The Complete Paintings and Drawings is a reminder of the shortage of existing criticism and scholarship on one of Britain’s most important twentieth-century painters. The bibliography comprises mainly surveys of English modernism and Vorticism, ageing exhibition catalogues of Wadsworth retrospectives, and even a biographical dictionary, making the sparse publications devoted to the visual works of Wyndham Lewis look plentiful by contrast. A search in the Courtauld Institute library for books on Wadsworth confirms this academic failure; the most comprehensive discussion is an MPhil dissertation dating from 1981. It is against this background that credit is due to Jonathan Black for producing an engaging narrative, and a catalogue that brings to the fore numerous issues in Wadsworth’s work that have been overlooked in the past and will, no doubt, respond to further investigation. Black successfully places Wadsworth not only within the context of English modernism but also within European modernism, and persuasively puts forward a case for an overdue revaluation of his work. Wadsworth is revealed as having played a pivotal role in twentieth-century British art alongside figures who may previously have taken too much of the spotlight, such as Wyndham Lewis, Paul Nash and Henry Moore.

Black’s style is animated and highly accessible, at times entertainingly anecdotal, and he provides a witty introduction to Wadsworth’s life and work. The main concern of the catalogue is to establish a chronological narrative, which he does with skill. This catalogue will provide a valuable reference-point for scholars new to the topic who wish to grasp the outline and detail of his career. Wadsworth’s development is meticulously charted, mainly through the interweaving of exhibition reviews with the artist’s personal and professional correspondence, so that the text is principally biographical in nature. Professional developments such as the disbanding of Group X and Unit One are mapped alongside personal changes, such as the untimely death of his nine year old daughter Anne in 1922, and the tragic road accident in which Wadsworth killed a man in 1933. The result is a convincingly human portrayal of a painter who has long been noted for a cold, calculating style and scrupulously-organised compositions. One possible downside to this approach, likely only to affect the art historian, is an absence of visual analysis from time to time; this would have been particularly helpful in the consideration of Wadsworth’s ‘Surrealist’ work. Nevertheless, Black is good at identifying artistic influences, from Fernand Léger to Sienese art, and from Henry Moore to Cennini’s treatise on fresco paintings, Libro de Arte (c.1400).

Black’s interesting contextualisation, and his positioning of Wadsworth within the climate of European modernism, will prove to be essential for the future study of English modernists who are, more often than not, regarded as having taken to modernism thirty years after the rest of Europe. Black presents a fascinating account of Wadsworth’s involvement with a number of artists and movements in the 1930s which devoted themselves primarily to the propagation of abstract, and therefore international, art. In 1930 Wadsworth enthusiastically accepted an
invitation to exhibit with *Art Concret*, the abstract group based in France and founded by the Dutchman Theo van Doesburg, before it evolved into the more successful *Abstraction-Création* in 1931. Wadsworth’s acceptance of a role in the latter grouping shows him open to a variety of styles, and keen to draw inspiration from leaders in abstraction such as Léger. One of the most evident influences of Léger on Wadsworth was the 1932 work *Dix et Comes 1* (*Rebuff*) (cat. 300), with its bold abstracted forms, noticeably mechanical portrayal of content, and its solid use of colour. The acknowledgement of Wadsworth’s important role as an English modernist in the broader international arena has unfortunately been overshadowed by a focus upon such British artists as Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore and Ben Nicholson. Yet Hepworth and Moore did not themselves join *Abstraction-Création* until 1933, two years after Wadsworth. My hope is that Black’s catalogue will prompt scholarship into moving beyond the familiar appraisal of this artist as a painter of purely industrial, national and ‘English’ maritime subjects. Works such as the harbour paintings of 1920s Plymouth and the RMS Queen Mary commission are undoubtedly of central importance to our understanding of Wadsworth. But so too are his abstract works, and these take place in a visual arena far removed from that of maritime England.

One of the most important achievements of the book is the portrayal of Wadsworth as a man in charge of his own style and career. Black notes how in a 1933 letter to Willi Baumeister Wadsworth wrote that, ‘I always find that an exhibition is in life a sort of full-stop and one has afterwards to consider where one stands’. (93) This remark shows a consistently evolving artist aware both of his own talent, and of the abundance of creative possibilities offered by the visual arts. To give only a general overview, Wadsworth started out in the 1900s following the traditional academic path of portraiture, still life and the nude, but by 1913 was producing stark geometric designs for Roger Fry’s Omega workshop, and painting Cezannesque landscapes which showed a keen awareness of developments on the continent. Over the next four decades Wadsworth’s style ranged from Vorticism during the Great War to the more realistic Black Country landscapes of the late teens, and from Surrealism in the 1920s to abstraction in the 1930s, with some of his works becoming completely devoid of any object-referential context in the 1940s.

Black rightly emphasises Wadsworth’s inheritance of nearly one quarter of a million pounds upon the death of his father, Fred, in January 1921, so it is worth considering the extent to which Wadsworth’s new-found fortune played a part in determining, or permitting, his aforementioned stylistic freedom. A case in point is his preference for the time-consuming process of tempera painting. Financial freedom meant that he could take his time in producing tempera works, as opposed to having to produce work for sale at exhibition in order to earn a living. Notoriously, such an unwelcome fate has befallen many an artist, including Wyndham Lewis, who during the 1930s and 1940s devoted a vast amount of his time to portraiture in order to fight off, often unsuccessfully, economic hardship. Wadsworth’s financial position also enabled him to travel extensively, both in Britain and abroad, and allowed him to paint memorable landscapes and scenes, ranging from ‘[a] small fishing village’ of ‘very pleasant appearance’ (56) known as St Tropez (*St Tropez I-VI*, all 1925, cats. 214–9), to the seedy backstreets of Marseilles (*Rue des Gassins, Marseilles* [1924, cat. 118] and *Rue de la Reynarde, Marseilles* [1926, cat. 223]). Perhaps more interestingly, economic freedom meant that Wadsworth could, to an extent, support his contemporaries by purchasing their works, providing them with commissions, or supplying them with a regular income. As Black explains, until 1924 Wadsworth provided part of a stipend for the perpetually penniless Lewis, and bought works by Ossip Zadkine and Henry Moore.

The Wadsworths’ home, The Dairy House at Maresfield, Sussex, was also a central point for meeting and socialising by figures in the art world, giving Wadsworth the opportunity to develop as an influential, and untameable, social and artistic figure in the art scene of the 1920s.
and 1930s. Indeed, the fact that Wadsworth was well connected within the European art scene, most notably with the Purists, attracted Paul Nash to him in the early thirties when Nash was selecting figures to help establish what would become known as Unit One. The question must then be asked in future studies: to what extent did Wadsworth play a role in the dissemination of English modernism in Europe, and vice versa?

These compelling considerations point towards the fact that Black’s catalogue implicitly calls for a fresh and more in-depth exploration of the work of Edward Wadsworth. However, Black’s analysis of Wadsworth’s role in the development of Vorticism as vital and pivotal will serve as a reminder to the fact that revisionist enthusiasm should not dominate to the extent that it produces a contestable argument. It is certainly true that Lewis’s statement in the introduction to his 1956 Tate Gallery retrospective that, ‘Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period’, may be taken as an inflated and self-aggrandising claim. Lewis may here have been referring only to the media representation of his role in Vorticism during 1914 and 1915; nevertheless the quotation highlights a central problem that has plagued the study of Vorticism. Specifically, the origins of the movement are unclear, with figures such as Ezra Pound, Henri Gaudier and Wyndham Lewis at different times taking the credit for the development of the movement and its aesthetic, whilst a more valid claim might be made that Vorticism was an eclectic and, to a certain degree, an accidental movement.

Black is right to explore Wadsworth’s role in the development of Vorticism, but I think that his conclusions should turn less emphatically towards his specific input: he writes that in 1914, ‘Lewis and Wadsworth had been working hard to make their “brainchild”, Vorticism, into a reality by completing Blast’ (sic, and my italics). (19) Lewis did indeed edit Blast, but he did not involve Wadsworth except as a contributor. The group of artists associated with the movement was not firmly fixed and coherent. In the ‘Signatures for Manifesto’ section of the first number of Blast a total of eleven artists, including William Roberts, Jessica Dismorr, Cuthbert Hamilton and Henri Gaudier, placed their names. Yet two non-signatories, the sculptor Jacob Epstein and the painter David Bomberg also exhibited with the group at the Doré Galleries in June 1915. Epstein also played a major part by influencing Gaudier towards an emphasis upon ‘truth to materials’ and non-Western, primitive sculpture. Gaudier’s contribution, the personal manifesto ‘Vortex. Gaudier-Brzeska’ is influenced by this relationship and constitutes one of the most coherent and articulate explanations of the impetus behind a Vorticist sculptural aesthetic.

Wadsworth’s written contribution to the first number of Blast consists of a less significantly definitional article titled ‘Inner Necessity’: Review of Kandinsky’s Book by Edward Wadsworth.’ Most of this article comprises a translation of part of Kandinsky’s The Art of Spiritual Harmony (as Concerning the Spiritual in Art was first translated in 1914), and is only lightly peppered with Wadsworth’s opinions. His visual contribution to the publication is notably greater, with five woodcuts in the first number. This might suggest that Wadsworth played a key role in the development of a Vorticist aesthetic. However, as Black himself remarks, the first proof of a woodcut sent by Wadsworth to Lewis for publication, Harbour of Flushing (undated, uncatalogued), was an earlier work that Wadsworth had begun before Lewis approached him about Blast. This raises the question of the extent to which Wadsworth’s work attempted to adhere to a Vorticist aesthetic. The fact that Wadsworth submitted an already completed work, produced when he was necessarily unaware of what Vorticism would be, suggests that he may not have considered that Vorticism and Blast was about to promote a certain (let alone a stringent) aesthetic ideal. Black quotes Wadsworth writing to Lewis about the woodcut: ‘If you do not think it’s good enough for the magazine proper, it would look well as a shipping advertisement at the end’.

Comical aspects apart, this suggests that Lewis was already taking the more dominant and decisive role with regard to what Vorticism was to be.
This raises the much-debated question of what the Vorticist aesthetic was. Presumably *Harbour of Flushing* was not included in the first number of *Blast* because it did not fit emerging Vorticist practice. Interestingly, Wadsworth’s *Radiation* (1913; cat. 53, original untraced), which did make it into the publication, is reminiscent of the moving, interpenetrating, and often heavily textured picture planes of Italian Futurism, and shows the surface fragmentation associated with the English Futurist C.R.W. Nevinson. Such works compelled Arthur Clutton-Brock of *The Times* to refer to Wadsworth as a Futurist in 1913. Indeed, Lewis himself spoke of Cubo-Futurist forms up until July 1914, approximately a week before ‘Vorticism’ was launched. Clearly, a coherent aesthetic was not presented wholly formed in the first issue of *Blast*. However, other contributors to the first number, such as Frederick Etchells and William Roberts, came closer in the movement’s embryonic days to the aggressive, angular and linear closed forms, free from lines of force, Bergsonian flux and sensual colour, that would later be recognised as idiomatically Vorticist but which would not penetrate Wadsworth’s work until later pieces such as ‘Vorticist Painting’ (1914-5; cat. 73a). Essentially, Black is correct to question whether Lewis was the sole instigator of Vorticism, for clearly he was not. Nevertheless, he should equally be careful not to shift the emphasis from one Vorticist member as leader to another, when the movement is more accurately characterised as an avant-garde collective, its members mutually influencing each other, whilst among them Lewis may be seen as the one who ceaselessly fuelled the energies of the other participants.

Another important section of the catalogue looks at Wadsworth’s interesting relationship with the Royal Academy during the 1940s. It is intriguing that his much-deliberated decision to allow his name to be put forward for election as an Associate Academician came only four years after Wyndham Lewis’s portrait of T. S. Eliot fell victim to an outright rejection from the Royal Academy’s Annual Spring Exhibition in 1938. Wadsworth’s election as an ARA in 1943 stands in stark contrast to the 1938 selection panel’s objection to the abstractly decorated panelling in the background of Lewis’s portrait of Eliot, the feature of the work which officially caused it to be rejected. Had the Royal Academy, a traditional institution steeped in academic rigour, become more open in the 1940s to the inclusion of Modernists? Did it feel that the radical edge of artists such as Wadsworth had softened, so that more contemporary figures deserved a voice in its bureaucratic machinery? Or was it more that Lewis’s radicalism, his aggressive style, and his constant diatribes against the institution (and his portrayal of a somewhat defeated-looking Eliot) would have represented a step too far for the Royal Academy?

Whatever the reason, Wadsworth was appalled, just as Lewis would have been had he not been abroad, at the selection of works made for the Royal Academy’s 1943 Summer Exhibition, causing him to ask Richard Eurich, ‘Is it that they [the Academicians] have to pick the least worst of all the bad that is sent in?’ (129) The following year Wadsworth’s ‘odd’ submissions to the 1944 Summer Exhibition, such as *Pendent* (1942; cat. 420) and *Signals* (1942; cat. 419), drew mixed reviews from fellow Academicians and progressive critics alike. Most importantly, T.W. Earp commented that Wadsworth’s ‘unsensational modernity’ would prevent the decay of the Royal Academy. (129) Could it be that Wadsworth, whose Vorticist works had for Ezra Pound lacked the anger, bite and venom desired by the movement, had eventually triumphed? Had he fulfilled the Modernists’ dream of accepting a position within the confines of the establishment in order to change – by showing eight ‘odd’ paintings – the traditional ways of the Royal Academy? Or was it the case that by the 1940s the failure of Modernism was complete and the movement and its ideals were becoming normalised and accepted within the broader, more traditional, cultural scene? In my view the latter possibility is likely to be the most accurate. The failure of avant-gardism to reshape English culture is regretfully echoed in the way Wadsworth later felt about the
Royal Academy: ‘attending a Private View of the RA makes me sick’ (131) he wrote, implying that he too had failed to make the difference modernists so often dreamed of.

Black’s main text is beautifully illustrated with excellent colour reproductions of Wadsworth’s most important paintings, such as Dazzle-Ships in Drydock at Liverpool (1919; cat. 80), Broadbottom near Glossop/Buxton Village/Derbyshire Village (1922; cat. 170) and North Sea (1928; cat. 253). It would have benefited the book if so many of the paintings had not been reduced to thumbnail size in the catalogue raisonné, a format which fails to convey the depth and richness of some of the more complex images, such as Brigantine Dressed Overall at the Quay (Panel for the Queen Mary) (1935-6; cat. 333) and Lowestoft (1928-9; cat. 251). Despite this practical consideration, the catalogue will provide future Wadsworth enthusiasts and scholars with a reliable collection of indispensable information and a highly enjoyable starting-point for anyone wishing to extend their interest in the painter. Perhaps most importantly, Black highlights central questions regarding Wadsworth’s career which I hope will be taken up by future research in an attempt to remedy the unfortunate absence of scholarship on this great figure.
Contributors

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