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LONDON, MODERNISM, AND 1914

The outbreak of the First World War coincided with the beginnings of high modernism in literature and the visual arts, making 1914 a pivotal moment in cultural as in national history. Yeats, Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska, Sickert, Epstein and many other avant-garde artists and writers were at work in London during 1914, responding to urgent political as well as aesthetic problems. London was the setting for key exhibitions of high modernist paintings and sculptures, and home to a number of important movements: the Bloomsbury Group, the Whitechapel Boys and the Vorticists among them. These original essays collectively portray a dynamic, remarkable year in the city's art world, whose creative tensions and conflicts were rocked by the declaration of war. A bold, innovative account of the time and place that formed the genesis of modernism, this book suggests new routes through the fields of modernist art and literature.

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Family and friends remain, for me, the most important of those on my thank-you list. A happy home in Kyrenia, another in North Carolina and yet another in Enniskillen offer all the security and stability one could ask for. I therefore thank my parents, John and Ann Walsh; Catherine, Lee, Erin and Alea Wortman; and, of course, Gül, Erdal and Limon. Though it is indirect, and three decades too late, I would also like to thank my grandparents for taking the time to tell me about the Great War and for showing me the memorabilia stored in shoe boxes under beds (see Appendix). Perhaps more than anything else it was this that sparked the interest that culminated, eventually, in this book. Embodied within a few scribbled lines are so many of the dichotomous qualities of humility, certainty, temerity, vulnerability, nationalism, Christianity and, ultimately, loss. And of these, nothing is more evocative of the year 1914 than a surviving photograph of my grandfather's brother, Walter Henry Walsh. To understand something, anything, of what he was thinking when this photograph was taken in 1914, and what led to his death in 1916 at the Somme, has been the objective of this study.

Michael Walsh
Famagusta

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1. Photographic portrait of Walter Henry Walsh.

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For Walter Henry (Harry) Walsh

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Foreword: art and premonition

Is it ever possible for art to be prophetic? The question may seem far-fetched at first, and it would be unwise to saddle any artist with the responsibility of taking on a seer-like role. But during the hectic months leading up to the First World War, a surprising number of impressive young London-based painters and sculptors succeeded in making works that now seem remarkably, almost uncannily, prescient. How conscious were they of performing such a feat?

David Bomberg never indicated his awareness that *The Mud Bath*, the large new painting he executed especially for his first solo exhibition in London (figure 2), offered an eerie anticipation of the conflict ahead. Bomberg attached so much importance to this audacious canvas that he took the surprising decision to hang it outside the Chenil Gallery in Chelsea. There it stayed, for the duration of his show in July 1914, and he later recalled that ‘the horses drawing the 29 bus used to shy at it as they came round the corner of the King’s Road’.¹ The impact of this precocious tour de force was provocative, even startling. And Bomberg, maybe because he wanted to call attention to his exhibition as loudly as possible, ‘garlanded’ the frame of *The Mud Bath* with flags.² On one level, the painting reflected his memories of Schevzik’s Vapour Baths in Brick Lane, a place frequented by the Jewish community in the Whitechapel area where Bomberg grew up. Massage was on offer at Schevzik’s, as well as the recuperative delights of swimming. Yet he made no attempt to recreate this interior. Rather Bomberg used its purgative and recreational delights as a metaphor for his own pursuit, in art, of an ever more stripped, lean and agile energy. *The Mud Bath* is alive with angular, clean-cut dynamism, bearing out his fascinated awareness of machine-age impersonality. But it is harsh and aggressive, too. The mechanised forms hurling themselves round a dark, totem-like column all appear caught up in a never-ending conflict. And the title of the painting sums up, with extraordinary foresight, the gruesome conditions experienced far too often by young soldiers enmeshed in trench combat.

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2. David Bomberg, *The Mud Bath* (1914).

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Foreword: art and premonition

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3. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, *Bird Swallowing a Fish* (c.1913–1914).

Around the same time, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska transformed a struggle between a bird and a fish into an equally accurate prophecy of the warfare to come. An inveterate draughtsman, who always carried sketchbooks on long walks through his adopted city, Gaudier probably based this arresting sculpture on an incident he had witnessed in one of London's parks. By the time he modelled his plaster version of *Bird Swallowing Fish* (figure 3), however, the encounter between predator and victim had undergone a dramatic metamorphosis. Although the bird is far larger than its would-be prey, the struggle appears far from over. The fish has become firmly lodged in the bird's gullet, but nobody can predict the outcome. It could even be imagined that the fish, brandishing a tail shaped like the butt of a weapon, is ramming the bird. Rather than swallowing its prey, the bird could even be choking. But the fish's head seems doomed to stay trapped within the bird's capacious mouth. So the outcome is stalemate. Both combatants are striving hard to survive and win, yet they remain paralysed. Here, in the summer of 1914, Gaudier foresees the essential trauma of a long and frustrating war where decisive military breakthroughs proved so elusive. Nor was he granted the opportunity to discover how *Bird Swallowing Fish*, cast initially in the appropriate medium of gun-metal, foretold the protracted character of the conflict. A few months after volunteering for service in the French army, Gaudier was killed in a charge at Neuville St Vaast on 5 June 1915. He

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was only twenty-three years old, and later in the war his friend Wyndham Lewis described how ‘with a dismal & angry feeling I passed the place ... where Gaudier was killed. The ground was covered with snow, nobody about, and my god, it did look a cheerless place to die in.’³

Lewis had himself managed to predict the onset of hostilities. Executing a monumental work ‘six months before the Great War “broke out”, as we say’,⁴ he painted a series of diagonal, rigidly defined structures bracing themselves for combat. He called this major canvas *Plan of War*, thereby encouraging the viewer to realise that its near-abstract organisation was redolent of the battlefield (figure 4). The painting has since been lost, and the only record of its appearance is a monochrome reproduction in the first issue of *Blast*. But colour played an eloquent part in its impact. One critic who saw the work on display in June 1914 pointed out that ‘the severe emphasis on geometrical forms seems to enhance the intensity of the colour’.⁵ It must have increased *Plan of War*’s ability to foresee the catastrophe which overwhelmed the world a few months after it was painted. For Lewis had focused, here, on the high-strategy power-politics favoured by military authorities across Europe. A. J. P. Taylor argued that the pre-war build-up of armed forces had ‘a decisive and disastrous effect’. He described how ‘every chief of staff had offensive plans, and only offensive plans’.⁶ This is surely *Plan of War*’s fundamental subject, and yet Lewis took no pleasure in realising how accurate it had been. ‘With me war and art have been mixed up from the start,’ he wrote in 1937. ‘It is still. I wish I could get away from war.’⁷

The armed forces’ disastrously muscle-flexing mentality was also explored by Jacob Epstein when he started work, as early as 1913, on his most innovative sculpture to date, *Rock Drill* (see illustrations 5, 6 and 7, pp. 80–2). Sharing the audacity of Marcel Duchamp, who in the same year nominated a bicycle wheel as a work of art, Epstein purchased a real drill mounted on a tripod. The robotic operator he placed on top is visored and sinister, clutching the drill’s handle and flaunting the phallic power of the instrument placed so provocatively between his mighty, arching legs. He epitomises mechanised strength, and a photograph of the work-in-progress shows how much Epstein’s own white plaster figure must have loomed over everyone visiting his studio to see this formidable sculpture. The incorporation of a ready-made machine was truly heretical and opened up dizzying possibilities for the future of art in the twentieth century and beyond. It astounded his friends, for Bomberg never forgot seeing *Rock Drill* when he called on Epstein, ‘about December 1913, at a garage in Lamb’s Conduit Street, which he was using as a workshop’. What dominated Bomberg’s memory of the event, though, was the driller rather than

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4. Wyndham Lewis, *Plan of War* (1913–14)

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his implement: 'a tense figure operating the Drill as if it were a Machine Gun, a Prophetic Symbol, I thought later of the impending war'.⁸ Three years afterwards, Epstein's own horrified response to Gaudier's death and the ever-increasing slaughter elsewhere prompted him to turn the driller into a truncated, apprehensive victim, grievously damaged by conflict and worried about the safety of the foetus lodged inside his metallic rib-cage. But even in the original version of the sculpture, the intact driller astride his machine seems strangely pale. As well as resembling a harbinger of the robotic era, he looks like a ghost. And in that sense, Epstein managed from the start to make his haunting sculpture anticipate the tragic decimation of so many young lives on the killing fields of the western world.

Richard Cork

NOTES

1. Alice Mayes to Richard Cork, 17 July 1973.
2. *Daily Chronicle* (25 June 1914).
3. W. Lewis to Ezra Pound, 1 January 1918, *The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis*, ed. T. Materer (London, 1985), p. 113.
4. W. Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937), p. 4.
5. *New Weekly* (20 June 1914).
6. A. J. P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 20.
7. Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering*, p. 4.
8. D. Bomberg to William Roberts, unsent draft, c.1957.