

William Rose: Tradition and an Individual Talent.

Edward Chaney

Almost a century ago in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', T.S. Eliot demonstrated that he had no need of a post-modernist mother-hen to remind him that 'the past [is] altered by the present', but gave equal emphasis to the fact that 'the present is directed by the past'. He was indeed acutely conscious that: 'the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.'¹ Not so, the Damiens and Traceys of contemporary 'visual culture', who ride (if they ever read) roughshod over the admonitions of Eliot, Yeats, Pound, Wyndham Lewis and more recently of Ernst Gombrich, Peter Fuller and Roger Scruton.² This culture couldn't even accommodate Kitaj's Leftist compromise with 'the Great Tradition', hailing instead the egregious Martin Creed for his oh-so-challenging, on-and-off light switch or, more recently, his sweaty runners sprinting up and down the traditional art gallery upon which such 'happenings' (as they were once so quaintly known) depend for their trifling conceptualist impact.³ The YBA Turner Prizists and their tax-funded sponsors still fail to understand that new art will always be recognizable as 'contemporary' regardless of their frantic, self-promotional exaggerations of this ingredient.

Writing in the midst of a Great War, which put the artistic 'avant-garde' into an alas only temporary shade, Eliot warned us that although 'the material of art is never quite the same', 'art never improves' and even as it evolves, nothing is ever abandoned en route; the cave paintings, Homer, Shakespeare and Michelangelo are never 'superannuated'. When someone tells the poet that 'the dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did,' he responds: 'Precisely, and they are that which we know.'⁴

Despite his reluctance to denounce avant-gardism in print (though he did so quite forcefully in person), Ernst Gombrich was surely applying Eliot's conservative cultural historiography as well as his friend, the anti-Hegelian

¹ *Selected Essays* (London, 1932), p. 15. This essay is the first in the volume and was published in 1917.

² E. Chaney, 'Wyndham Lewis; The Modernist as pioneering anti-Modernist,' *Modern Painters*, III (September 1990), pp. 106-09. Since the death or withdrawal from the aesthetic battlefield of most of these authors, David Lee fights on in splendid isolation with his samizdat organ: *The Jackdaw*.

³ Chaney, 'Kitaj versus Creed', *London Magazine* (April/May, 2002), 106-10.

⁴ Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Karl Popper's theory of scientific development to his *Story of Art* when he describes as a 'pitfall':

...the naïve misinterpretation of the constant change in art as a continuous progress. It is true that every artist feels that he has surpassed the generation before him and that from his point of view he has made progress beyond anything that was known before [but] each gain or progress in one direction entails a loss in another, and this subjective progress ... does not correspond to an objective increase in artistic value.⁵

Alas, unlike poets and musicians, who cannot get started without acquiring a technical skill or learning at least something of the history of their subject, since the early twentieth century, and evermore so since the advent of the standardized, state-funded art school, the aspiring visual artist has been persuaded that the untrained, 'innocent' eye sees best and that the naïve personality has less restricted and therefore deeper things to say or 'express' than the trained traditionalist. Partly due to ignorance of quite how long the avant-garde project has been operating, students are encouraged to believe that their more or less arbitrary outputs should be of more interest to the public which has already subsidized them than the productions of persons who have learned how to paint and draw after nature and their predecessors, prior to developing their own 'style'. 'Conceptualism' is merely the latest, Duchampian brand of Rousseauistic 'liberation' from classical conformity, which was already under attack in the late eighteenth century, even if the Romantics' attachment to the art object now earns them as much scorn from ignorant celebrity sensationalists as their rule-bound predecessors.

Thus, through the latter half of the twentieth century, up to and including the present day, those who shared Kitaj's belief that painting should remain a major art form have struggled to keep faith. For even within the art of painting, the self-consciously avant-garde, starting with the Dadaists and abstractionists, have dominated the scene, driven onwards and upwards by that 'Demon of Progress in the Arts' denounced by the ex-avant-gardist Wyndham Lewis, who promoted instead contemporary British artists such as John Minton, Keith Vaughan, Colquhoun and McBryde. While three of those he praised in *The Demon of Progress* and his *Listener* reviews, Bacon, Moore and Freud, succeeded internationally, most of the others are still

⁵ *The Story of Art*, 15th edition (London, 1995), p. 9. Gombrich quotes Eliot elsewhere in his writings.

little-known outside Britain and even here remain unrecognized by a public more likely to know the names of those unfortunate to have their names embroidered by with Tracey Emin RA. Tracey's tent: *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, is indeed taken very seriously in the 6th edition of Hugh Honour and John Fleming's *World History of Art*, before it climaxes in her 'Bed'.⁶

It remains to be seen whether future editions of *A World History of Art* will feature such egocentric 'installations' quite so prominently. Meanwhile, the work of less 'sensational' artists is entirely ignored. William Rose's pictures reflect that deeper form of knowledge of the great art of the past, the 'that which we know' commended by Eliot. His admiration and understanding of Piero della Francesca reflects a shared absorption of more ancient idioms, among which hieratic Egyptian painting and sculpture feature at the profoundest level, albeit transmuted through Greek and Roman forms where Piero was concerned. Rose's profiled figures in strange headgear remind one of Piero's frescoes or Pisanello's medals, but have a common source in pre-Homeric art that may ultimately derive from darkest Africa, according to Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*. In any case figurative art dates back far beyond the origins of Egyptian visual culture c.3000BC to more than 30,000 BC and the earliest cave paintings.

There are few countries in which the art and architecture of the past is so manifestly present as in Italy and Rose chooses to live there largely for this reason. His choice of Sansepolcro in particular is clearly in homage to Piero's birthplace but within a few miles one can also absorb the art of the ancient world, as well as the Medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and even Modern masters, all in the landscape that inspired them. Sansepolcro was named in honour of the relics brought back by two pilgrims from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. But during the sixteenth-century a secular version of pilgrimage evolved in which travellers would bring back works of art rather than relics and place them in palaces and country houses rather than churches. Such objects were increasingly adored for aesthetic rather than religious reasons. From being merely part of the Florentine Grand Duke's offices or 'Uffizi' as Vasari designed them, their function as art gallery has been superseding this ever since, the takeover having only recently been completed with the departure of the Archivio di Stato. The first move in this direction was Buontalenti's construction within the Uffizi of the Tribuna,

⁶ Chaney, *The Evolution of English Collecting* (New Haven and London, 2003), pp. 78 and 124.

which was already fully functioning as a shrine dedicated to ancient and modern art when Lord Arundel and Inigo Jones visited it in the early seventeenth century. In imitation of the ancients, in other museums and even in the piazzas of Italy, old and new were displayed side by side, most strikingly those obelisks that the Emperors brought back from Egypt and re-mounted in Rome. In the late sixteenth-century, as part of their Counter-Reformation campaign to make Rome the centre of the civilized world once more, the Popes began to re-erect them, surmounting them with crosses. Bernini designed his vast colonnade in front of St Peter's, symbolizing the arms of the church embracing the faithful gathered around the Vatican obelisk. He also created the *Fountain of the Four Rivers* to accommodate the Obelisk of Domitian in Piazza Navona after Lord Arundel failed to export it to England.

Given how much more survived in Italy than anywhere else it is hardly surprising that the rebirth, or Renaissance, of classical art took place there. Having had such an advantageous start, Italy maintained its lead in matters artistic until the era of the Grand Tour - epitomized by Zoffany's mass-portrait of *milordi* monopolizing the Tribuna - ended with the Napoleonic invasions of the 1790s. Building on what had been left by the Romans, who had in turn based themselves upon the Greeks, from Cimabue to Canova, Italian artists were second to none in quality and quantity. Though most of the works of art appropriated by Napoleon were eventually returned, the quality of art produced in nineteenth-century Italy declined as the nations who had learned from her developed their own native schools. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Italy was following France more obediently than Britain, which preferred to return to pre-Raphaelite art for inspiration. Out of the Macchiaioli and Divisionists, however, emerged the Futurists and Metaphysicals and Italy was once more in the avant-garde. Though the latter did not last long as movements, in terms of their most talented members and followers their legacy lives on today.

For it is indeed among these artists and those successors who worked into the middle of the twentieth century that one finds the most relevant context in which to discuss the work of William Rose, whose his artistic forebears include not merely the internationally-recognized Giorgio de Chirico, Carra and Morandi but the slightly later and less widely known Felice Casorati,

Mario Sironi, Ottone Rosai and Massimo Campigli.⁷ These last provided some of the ingredients that Rose has absorbed whilst developing his own very distinctive style, a style that has thus evolved outside the safer area of his native aesthetic environment. This makes him something of an acquired taste where Anglo-Saxony is concerned. The acquisition of taste implies criteria. The Italian word for taste: 'gusto' is derived from the Latin and is today best known in the expression 'de gustibus non est disputandum,' usually abbreviated as 'de gustibus...', meaning that there is no point in disputing matters of taste since each person will have their own more or less subjective, and by implication, equally valid, response.

We live in a world in which chefs are even bigger 'celebrities' than those self-promoting, celebrity 'artists' associated with the Sensations phenomenon. Though academic adoption of the word 'consumption' has blurred the distinction, 'de gustibus' applies more correctly to what we eat than to aesthetics. Few would dispute a range of more or less measurable criteria in taste where food was concerned; restaurants being awarded stars reflective of qualitative judgement. In matters artistic, however, despite the vast quantities of art history, theory and criticism, value in contemporary art is documented most objectively in the market place, which is itself subject to external forces which have little to do with artistic quality. William Rose has been practising as an artist for longer than any of the YBAs but a mass-produced dot print or scribble by one of the latter attracts a far higher price than one of his beautifully crafted pictures.

Hirst's recent attempts to lend his oeuvre an air of ancient authority (as in his diamond skull or golden calf) fails to rival the integrity evident in any part of one of Rose's pictures. The quality of his paint surfaces makes Rose one of those artists of whom it really can be said that it is essential to see the pictures themselves rather than any form of reproduction. If food does not feature as such in his paintings, restaurants do so by association in the form of his idiosyncratic chefs, who wield meat cleavers which disturb our equanimity more profoundly than the oaths of any TV 'personality'. Rose has in fact achieved something far more impressive than the Hirsts and Emms by demonstrating that something genuinely new can still be created within the traditional idiom of picture-making.

⁷ For a useful survey in English, see the Royal Academy's exhibition catalogue: *Italian Art in the 20th century* (London, 1989).

Restaurants also spring to mind as a location for the display of art. In the 1760s, Piranesi decorated Rome's *Café degli Inglesi* with Egyptian designs that appealed to the Grand Tourists and connoisseurs who congregated there. Two centuries later, Rothko's New York restaurant commission may have triggered the fatal realization that he had crossed Wyndham Lewis's 'limit beyond which there is nothing.' His painting became darker in every sense. More positive was the restaurant sign for *Le Chat de la Mediteranee* by the cosmopolitan Balthus, who had preceded Rose to Sansepolcro in the 1920s. Meanwhile Rex Whistler painted the Tate restaurant as Paula Rego has more recently done at the National Gallery. Where in the latter, Rego proceeds along the more vivid, narrative style suggested by Balthus, Rose seems to have followed the more meditative path. Both look like surviving longer than the medicine cabinets with which Hirst decorated his now defunct Pharmacy restaurant in Notting Hill.

Today, even in the humblest restaurant in a remote Italian village or suburb, one is likely to find a few pictures by local or itinerant artists who may have paid their meal in the way a musician might have done with his music since ancient times. Most of these pictures are not of high quality and some are comically unsophisticated in their attempts to appear 'modern'. Even the latter, however, provide something of interest thanks to being in a figurative tradition that harks back to the Renaissance. The restaurant owner's 'taste' and his or her estimate of the taste of his clientele is reflected in a choice that is popular, but partly for this reason excluded from the venues that count in 'the art world.'

Rose's pictures may initially remind the Anglo-Saxon eye of those pictures in restaurants one sees during whilst touring Italy. The apparent similarity is partly attributable to Rose's emersion in mid-twentieth-century Italian art that is, as has been said, unfamiliar in Anglo-Saxony. But on closer inspection and all the more evident when one has the opportunity of seeing a group of his pictures together as in this exhibition is the accumulative quality of his work. Rare qualities they have in common then strike one afresh when one returns to view each, independent creation. Though there are other British and American artists who have opted to live and work in Italy in order to work self-consciously in the Renaissance tradition, Rose is clearly not one of these essentially derivative painters. He has forged his own style which is now as recognizable as the style of any great master. What might at first strike one as a mannerism becomes something one cannot quite imagine being any other way. Even the hats, quasi-comical but

quasi-pharaonic or Chinese or Balthusian have an inevitability about them. A melancholy that is not, however, depressing pervades the whole surface of the canvas or board. Timeless questions hanging in the air; something is about to be enacted but never quite carried out. The figures and faces have interesting surfaces but are depicted without much detail, leaving the viewer to fill in the missing visual and thus conceptual account.

In many of the pictures some sort of interrogation is going on, reminding one of Kafka's notion that we are always 'before the law' ('vor dem Gestez').⁸ A seated philosopher type is questioning a cook who may or not be answering back. One such cook is walking defiantly away from such interrogation, head-back and meat-cleaver at the ready as if in preparation for war. Apparently crude passages of painting belie the quality of the total composition, whose unity the brushwork supports. The sense of mystery is present whatever the subject matter.

'Tradition', wrote Eliot, 'cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour'. To the literary artist, Eliot recommends the acquisition of the whole of European literature from Homer on:

and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity. No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.⁹

Where the visual arts are concerned, there is temporally more to absorb than in literature for despite the tendency of histories of art to begin likewise with the Greeks, it is obvious to the artist (if not, apparently, to all art historians) that the more than 2000 years of highly evolved Egyptian painting, sculpture and architecture that pre-dated archaic Greek art was its principal inspiration. The visual arts are, however, far more universal than the linguistically sub-divided literary arts, in this and other respects more akin to

⁸ Sean Gaston, 'Trasfigurazione e Tradizione', *Sinfonia de Cappelli* (Sansepolcro, 2007), p. 17.

⁹ *Selected Essays*, pp. 14-15.

music. In that sense therefore, although they have a longer history they are more 'knowable' than those arts dependant on the younger but more diffuse and widespread world of words.

Eliot concluded his essay with a plea for impersonality: 'and the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.' When the Tate Gallery held its Balthus exhibition in 1967 and asked the artist for biographical material he replied: 'No biographical details. Begin: Balthus is a painter of whom nothing is known. Now let us look at the pictures.'

Working in the wake of one of the greatest painters of the last century (Balthus died in 2001), Rose fulfils all Eliot's requirements. He is profoundly rooted in tradition (including a family one), justifiably proud of his 'visual intellect'; he expresses 'significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem [picture] and not in the history of the poet' or painter. He is rooted in the painterly equivalent of Leavis's 'Great Tradition' yet is unmistakably contemporary. Rose is in his 40s. Caravaggio was dead by this age, but Rembrandt's greatest pictures were still to come.

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