Striking visions of the First World War

CRW Nevinson: The Twentieth Century

5 January 2000

An exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London until January 30, 2000, then at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, February 20 to May 7

Christopher Richard Wynne Nevinson (1889-1946) produced some of the most striking paintings of the First World War, yet is almost completely unknown today. A major retrospective offers the chance to see both his brilliant representations of a bloody, muddy war, and his subsequent rapid artistic decline. It enables an assessment to be made of the limitations of vision that produced such good work and its degeneration into such reactionary rubbish.

Nevinson's career is interesting also because of the light it sheds on a period in British art history. A contemporary of Stanley Spencer, Ben Nicholson and Paul Nash at the Slade School of Art, he headed for Paris as soon as his days at the college were over. There he shared a studio with Modigliani and met Picasso, Derain and Matisse. More importantly for his own development, he also met up with the Italian Futurist artists Severini and Boccioni. Nevinson returned to London in June 1914, where he collaborated with the leading theorist of Futurism, Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, on a Futurist Manifesto for the English art world, *Vital English Art*.

The London artistic scene in the period just before the war was a rarefied one indeed. At its head was the fey aesthete Roger Fry, busily introducing London to Parisian Post-Impressionism. The rugged technophilia and aggressive theorising of Futurism offered a complete contrast to what Nevinson regarded as Fry's amateurish dilettantism. Nevinson directed Marinetti's fire against the complacency of the Royal Academy, the revivals of mediaevalism, Morris dancers and Pre-Raphaelites. Instead, the manifesto called for sport as an essential element of art, and welcomed the development of motors and of speed.

At this stage Nevinson embraced everything Futurist, including Marinetti's dictum that war is “the world's only hygiene.” The earliest paintings on display here are by the student artist, struggling painfully with the influence of Monet and Derain. The first time an independent style begins to emerge is when Nevinson attempted to translate the works of the Futurists into an English context. In a painting like *The Strand* (1913), we see the trams against a patchwork background of cigarette adverts.

Perhaps the most successful assimilation was in the frankly imitative design for a cover of *The Chapbook* from the same year, with its portrait of Marinetti. Nevinson had been experimenting with the arcs of colour that would come to characterise some Futurist projects in early non-technological works such as *Le Vieux Pont* (1910). In a piece like *Dance Hall Scene* (1913/14) he broke the sectors of colour into clusters of people in movement. These are not inspiring or interesting pictures, beyond offering a glimpse into the transition towards a style that was to reach its height in Nevinson's war paintings. He eventually arrived at a Futurist-inspired interest in machinery, particularly large ships, as in *The Arrival* (1914). Such dockside scenes reappear later in his work.

Within two months of the English Manifesto being issued, war broke out in Europe. Nevinson's earliest paintings of the war are of the *Searchlights at Charing Cross* (1914). Here is the Futurist appreciation of mechanical efficiency represented in rich dark tones and harsh angular shapes of colour. His later and better picture, *Searchlights* (1916), simplified the details, and made the images more abstract and purer in shape and tone. These are striking depictions of the first experience of war, which later informed his pictures of exploding shells, painted at the front. Here too is the Futurist worship of the technical effect, without any representation of their intended results.

Nevinson was medically unfit to be a soldier, so he took a course in motor engineering and volunteered to drive a Red Cross ambulance. He later transferred to the Royal Army Medical Corps as a nurse, until pneumatic fever forced him home. What he saw during that period had a profound effect on him. Out of his experiences he produced the greatest works of his career.

His pictures from the front are stylistically and technically varied, although the same images are repeated throughout. *Column on the March* (1914), for example, appears in both a drypoint sketch and a chalk and watercolour finished canvas. Here a solid column of close-packed soldiers marches a wet road against a great grey sky, streaked with rays of silvery light. He was to explore the image of marching men more than once, reaching its highest point with the oil painting *On the Road to Ypres* (1916). The cobbled road from the earlier picture, slick and steely with rain, is repeated. Here is the solid mass of soldiery against a wide arc of sky, lit up with jagged angles of cloud and rain. It is a stunning, impressive picture that captures the movement of an army on the march, as well as the brooding conditions they face almost as an active element in the conflict.

Where his paintings of marching soldiers are most effective is in their use of Futurist angles of colour to represent their movement. In both the oil and the drypoint versions of *Returning to the Trenches* (1914), the sweep of more abstract blocks of colour and line serves to give the effect of speed. There is something relentless about the movement of these soldiers. Their bodies are tilted into their marching, while their feet propel them forwards.

Nevinson was not unsympathetic to the soldiers he saw. His portrayals always feature them as masses of men, either moving in columns or lying in exhausted heaps. *French Troops Resting* (1916) is typical of such a portrayal, with its pile of dispirited bodies slumped by the roadside. However such a painting highlights a serious shortcoming in Nevinson's work, which he could not overcome and which became more of a problem as time went on. He is incapable of separating out the individual from the mass. This is fine in a painting like *The Strafing*, where tiny figures in the foreground are huddled into a trench while explosions rage above them. The problem arose when he attempted to express more articulately his outrage at the carnage and destruction. I cannot share Walter Sickert's view of *La Mitrailleuse* (1915), a large painting of machine gunners occupying the body of the canvas, that it was “the most authoritative and concentrated utterance of the war.” When Nevinson is dealing with an

anonymous mass, tired, afraid and being destroyed, his paintings have a power that they signally lack when he focuses on individual figures.

His portraiture is entirely unsuccessful, perhaps because the stylistic qualities he had developed did not allow him to render individual suffering. It is interesting to compare his portrait of a *Motor Ambulance Driver* (1916) in the cab of his ambulance, a painting that says nothing about the driver or his work, with *Night Arrival* from the year before. Here a faceless ambulance crew is lifting stretchers from their vehicles. There is both a sense of activity and a sense of the mounting casualties of the war. It is this nameless number of casualties having to be dealt with that emerges most strongly from this period of his work, and it conveys superbly the jarring, hideous effects of the war.

The most effective of his pictures of destruction is the pastel and chalk *Boesinghe Farm*, which utilises the shapes of Futurist patterns in its dark portrayal of fallen timbers and shattered brick. Again the large canvas *Ypres After the First Bombardment* features only blazing buildings.

When he attempts to focus on the individual, his work disintegrates. *A Taube* (1915), with the single figure of a dead child among the grey rubble, is mawkish and unsuccessful—we know which emotional buttons Nevinson was trying to press and he fails.

His first exhibition was a great success and led to his government appointment as official War Artist in July 1917. He returned to France and painted the works that were to feature in his second, hugely successful, exhibition in London in 1918. Being an official artist led to the intervention of the military censor in the exhibition, but that was to flatter Nevinson's creation. Contemporary critics commented that the second exhibition lacked the “savage self” of his earlier pictures. What is apparent is the self-conscious straining for effect. The military censor succeeded in preventing the display of *Paths of Glory*, which appeared with a “Censored” sticker over it, yet the picture of two corpses face down amidst the mud and barbed wire is not a moving piece. It is too consciously redolent of John Singer Sargent's war paintings, too contrived.

This is not to say that there are no pieces from the second exhibition that are worth seeing. *The Road from Arras to Bayaume* (1917), with its long road stretching out over the desolate shattered landscape, captures brilliantly the emptiness and the bleakness of the war. *After a Push*, with its muddy empty foxholes, speaks to the same bleakness. What has changed is Nevinson's own attitude. No longer recording what he saw with the stylistic tools at his command, Nevinson is now forced to comment. But his comments are ambivalent. What emerges is his lack of an independent voice. He seems to have made himself available for more propagandist pieces, such as the oil painting *Tank* and the series of lithographs *Making Aircraft*. Here is the glorification of technology being put in the service of the government, whose war he had portrayed much more honestly 18 months before.

With the end of the war, Nevinson was one of the artists approached to produce a large canvas for the Imperial War Museum's Hall of Remembrance, alongside Sargent and Stanley Spencer. Sargent's *Gassed*, with its row of blinded soldiers leaning on each other's shoulders, is the best known image from this room, although Spencer's painting of casualties being brought to a field hospital, with his customary religious imagery, deserves to be better known. Nevinson's large canvas *Harvest of Battle* lacks the immediacy of any of the pieces he painted on the spot. There is a sense of his feeling he ought to fill a large canvas and having neither the imagination nor the ability to do so. The only interesting thing about this picture is that he represents British and German soldiers as facing the same horrors of mud and warfare. His are not Sargent's dignified British soldiers bearing up under intolerable conditions, but ordinary people being pounded by the horrors of war.

That theme in his work lasted a very short time, but it produced some interesting pieces. A portrait of a smug, self-satisfied banker bears the Grosz-like title *He Gained a Fortune But Gave a Son*. There is a picture from 1918 of women and children in a food queue. Nevinson clearly recognised that the war had a social effect. His reaction, however, was to abandon such social concerns in favour of a series of almost wholly worthless landscapes, paintings of wind and sea. (The only one of these that is in any way successful, *Ebb Tide at Rye*, works primarily because of its use of techniques he had mastered in painting foxholes).

What becomes clear is that, for Nevinson, the brutalised mass he had painted as tired soldiers was now seen as a threat, and the technology he once lauded, he saw now only as a source of disaster. In *The Workers* (1919), they are a mob that occupies the bottom of the canvas, whose movement is disturbing without being explained. His post-war paintings of New York see technological developments solely in terms of their current use by finance capital. *Soul of a Soulless City* (1920) is a rail track running between skyscrapers. An inability to see technical developments objectively, independent of their current use, drove him further into reaction. His landscapes become fluffier, more twee and pointless. He attempts to revive the pre-war Parisian styles he had reacted against in London, and the result is a dreadful melange of chocolate box paintings.

The last canvases on display here show his attempts to sum up the twentieth century. In *Pan Triumphant*, he returns to the cruise ships he had painted earlier. Here they are a symbol of sybaritic indolence, while a crudely anti-Semitic caricature of Pan rises up as their backdrop. Elsewhere he portrays the whole of human history as an *Unending Cult of Human Sacrifice* (1934), in an ahistorical representation of all society as one long series of wars. The latest picture on display, from 1940, sees him returning to his paintings of searchlights in *Anti-Aircraft Defences*. The urgency has gone from his work, and he is trading on past glories, having nothing to say about what he sees before him.

What this exhibition offers us the chance to see is of how some artists associated with Futurism abandoned that possibility of rebirth, of entering into a new art. Nevinson ended his life a xenophobic, jingoist art historian, denouncing “the geometric mumbo-jumbo of Jews, Persians and Mohammedans.” Though once he had been quite truthful in his representations of the horrors of imperialist war for all those forced to take part, his inability to actually comprehend the causes of the horrors he witnessed led him into despair and reaction. Rather than fighting to forge something new, he sulked about the loss of the old. He reverted to an earlier art form, no longer adequate for representing the world as it now was. But for a very brief period, he sought to use new techniques to show war in an honest way, and those pictures are worth seeing.