

The Ashheap of Vanity

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Graham Vivian Sutherland

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A British artist, primarily of landscapes, Graham Sutherland achieved great status in England, France, Italy, and the United States. Beginning his career as a draftsman and then onward to art school, he was enlisted as a war artist during the Second World War. He was fascinated with machinery, mining, and mechanical forms. After a trip to Pembrokeshire, he became entranced with the forms in nature. His “paraphrases” of the natural world had a distinctly modern aesthetic and evolved toward surrealism.

Friendship with the Fauves and a challenge by Somerset Maugham led Sutherland to paint his first portrait of Maugham. Never financially reliant on portrait commissions, he only undertook them if he felt a compelling interest in the

subject; specifically, he was drawn to those who had triumphed over adversity. His aim was to capture something true of the person, if his subject chose to reveal himself, with no interest in traditional hagiography. Having achieved great status with the British public, he was commissioned in 1954 by Parliament to paint a portrait of the greatly admired Winston Churchill.

The portrait depicted Churchill as he was, an aging octogenarian, who’s health was declining steeply, and one who had weathered many storms; however, it also captured his fierce determination in the set of his jaw and the intensity of his gaze. Despite the accuracy and artistry of the finished portrait, Churchill loathed the painting. Wishing to be portrayed triumphantly in his Knights of the Garter robes and elevated on a daïs, the

This essay was inspired by professors Joe Campana and Ted Bale, who introduced my class to the collection of essays by Judith Schalansky, *An Inventory of Losses*, and challenged us to write our own essay of loss.

former Prime Minister was not impressed with the truthfulness of Sutherland's depiction.

The portrait was only publicly displayed for two days during the unveiling; subsequently, it was sent to Chartwell for the Churchills to enjoy until Winston's death, whereupon it was to be hung in the Parliament building. The couple did not enjoy the painting. Its presence lodged in the Statesman's mind as if it were Wilde's infamous

Picture of Dorian Gray and gave him no peace.

It would be twenty years before the portrait's fate would be revealed to the world by Lady Clementine's private secretary, Grace Hamblin, in a confession to Churchill's daughter, Mary Soames. In the twenty years of its supposed seclusion, the painting had not actually existed *at all*, because shortly after receiving the gift, Clementine ordered for it to be destroyed.

As Patient and Watching as a Cat

I will never forget those extraordinary first encounters: the silence, the absolute dead silence, except every now and again a thin tinkling of falling glass—a noise which reminded me of some of the music of Debussy. Swansea was the first sight I had of the possibilities of destruction as a subject. The architecture was florid and Victorian. At first, I made as complete a record as I could of what I saw. I hadn't yet begun to feel any sense of what these remains really looked like. Gradually I could identify the key elements from the desolation; a lift-shaft, for instance, the only thing left from what had obviously been a very tall building, bizarrely collapsed like a wounded tiger in a painting by Delacroix.¹

The child cried in terror as another German bomb exploded overhead, up in the deserted streets, with London's war-worn citizens hunkered below ground, like moles. Nearby a young man observed a mother attempting to console her toddler. The child had shrieked with terror when the blast had hit and the ceiling of

¹ Here and throughout the text, all italicized paragraphs are taken from Rosalind Thullier, *Graham Sutherland: Life, Work, and Ideas* (Cambridge, 2015, Lutterworth Press).



Graham Sutherland's *Devastation, 1941: An East End Street*

the shelter crumbled and fell like hail, filling the cavity with a talcum-like dust, filling each person with something unique to him. Some seemed almost bored, as if the daily blasts had become routine, the way people go about their business when they live near the tracks and trains shake the walls every hour; perhaps, he thought, some soldiers must react this way when subjected to battle. These would be the heroes, the fierce leaders who became stronger when facing constant barrages, unperturbed by blasts, those remarkable ones who drank adrenaline and whiskey and were emboldened by fear. Then there were the others, the vast majority, who felt the terror hit like a wave of nausea and who got a moment's relief after expelling the vile substance, a moment in which they knew they must bolt into action unless they begin shaking uncontrollably and lay down, paralyzed. But there were those who succumbed. They were pitiful, curled into balls and trembling like rabbits, with wide-eyed lunacy. Down here in the shelter, the women choked down their terror to comfort the wide-eyed children and wondered whether there would be a home to return to in the morning. Graham's eyes were drawn to the shape of the shelter with its arching walls. His hand drew the arcs deftly, darkly; the human forms huddled below, he sketched like a heap of boulders. Tomorrow, he would ascend upward along with the rest, but instead of trying to find his home in the rubble his eye and hands would take in the devastation with the scrutiny of the artist he was. He felt it all; excitement for what shapes would arise from the wreckage; the responsibility to "capture war-time activity" as he had been commissioned to do by Clark; heartbreak as he saw people sifting through their shattered lives. The human toll was hard

to bear, so he concentrated on their receptacles, the hives of their human lives, now transformed by the blasts. Their girders like twisted limbs, the scattered piles of bricks lay like corpses on the battlefield, and the shards of glass as jagged as gashes. He would paint it with crimson and ebony, maybe a touch of saffron, to capture the galling waste. “Keep calm and carry on,” indeed. That’s what we are doing, he thought, he and this battalion of women who watched their lives crumble at their feet and gingerly stepped over the lives of others. He would title these works *Devastation*.

At the beginning of the war the forms of destruction moved me tremendously. After that I began to feel drawn towards basic industries such as furnaces, mines and latterly, quarries. These things seemed to symbolise a kind of eternal war; a constant conflict between the forces of man and nature in which man can only just emerge on top — perpetual conflict with intractable material.

That’s how he found himself in the quarry. Was there no end to the natural resources required to feed the war machine? Sutherland was in his element as he stared down into the cavernous pit, with the switch-backed roads ascending to the surface. The roads were like those glassed-in ant farms, so mesmerizing to watch, and the enormous trucks that brought the limestone to the surface were like so many ants. What was it about canyons that bewitched humans? Just imagining himself near to the precipice would cause a weird feeling in the back of his knees, like falling in love. We are terrified of getting too close to the edge of such danger. Falling. Completely without human agency. Had Hitler fallen into madness? Did the Germans follow him like lemmings, falling over the edge? And now they were at war, near the “Pit of Despair,” the “Slough of Despond.” Sutherland’s gaze had fallen inward; no longer was his eye roving or his pencil moving. Caught in his thoughts as if in taffy, he was trapped but he didn’t really wish to be released. The Church was right about the dark side of humanity, he thought, it’s just that most of the time our propriety keeps it from being obvious. “But there is no denying the depths of our sinfulness now,” he mused, “as we reckon with Hitler’s madness.” His gaze came back to the present, and as he looked down into the quarry he muttered: “This cavern could hold a nation of people.”

Certain elements in nature seem to me to have a kind of presence. I won’t go further than that, and say it was a human presence, or what

kind of a certain presence it was; it was a presence. Shadows had a presence; certain conformations of rock seemed to go beyond just being rock; they were emanations of some kind of personality.

After the war, Sutherland visited the coast of Pembrokeshire, where his imagination was sparked by the landscape. He did not see vistas, per se, but rather saw the individual elements of the landscape as distinct subjects. Their forms were uncovered as the wind and rain stripped them to their true forms, the roots of trees unearthed and exposing their secrets. He attempted to present his natural subjects in a way which would arrest those who saw his work and cause them to feel that first frisson of encounter. Most people did not devote time or energy to observing the world or to reacting to its forms, but Sutherland did. These forms often became anthropomorphized when they took shape in his mind. The dendritic shapes which reached skyward and resisted the wind were necessarily shaped by its force. The roots, matching the tree's shape, hidden below ground, clung for dear life as they pushed around rocks and through dense clay to survive. Glorious rock formations were sculpted by water, wind, and sand over eons, replicas of the cliffs from which they had fallen, they lay like toppled statues on the shore. The resilience of these stones and vegetation, taking their forms from the buffeting of the elements, inspired him. In truth, he was most drawn to the unearthed tree roots which kept living, the boulder which found its shape through weathering, the salt-blasted vegetation clinging to the cliff along the shore. His eye noted a gorse bush which had taken root in a hollow of a boulder, clinging against all odds in a teaspoon of sand which had accumulated therein. What produced this determination to live?

I am drawn towards a paraphrase in some degree or other in order to display more vividly the inner life and mystery of the subject. But the human face and body is even more complex and mysterious. One is dealing with a sentient, breathing thing, and in order to obtain a flavour, let alone the essence, I feel—at least for the moment—that I have to be as absorbent as blotting paper and as patient and watching as a cat.

Graham contemplated his new venture. Could he capture the ineffable quality in a human being? Somerset was due to arrive shortly. He had met him in France along with Picasso, Matisse, and Bacon, in those golden-lit vistas. The two men had become friends, and in due course, Somerset had challenged Graham to

paint his portrait. Graham was not a portrait painter, having avoided the trap which ensnared so many of that genre, wherein the portraitist was commissioned to make their subject look beautiful or regal or dignified. Portraiture was rarely interested in capturing the truth, the life beneath the surface, which was the only thing that interested Sutherland. Life pushed against the forces which prevailed upon it, and in the struggle the outward form took shape; but it was the life beneath the outward form that interested Graham. Once an artist became sought after for portraits, “their work usually became formulaic, intent on placing the individual in a time period and setting, identifying his place in society, and by setting him on a pedestal. The subject was *identified* rather than humanized.”²

Unforgettable in the way he comported himself, Maugham was lithe and beautifully attired, his alert mind shining from his eyes and his novelist observation absorbing all details. There was a knock at the door, and the two artists greeted one another as old friends. Sutherland was delighted to see that Maugham had adorned himself with a mink-colored velvet smoking jacket with olive highlights, a red scarf, elegant, cuffed trousers, and loafers—he looked entirely himself. Sutherland found that he had immediately begun to study him as a subject, professionally, and wondered what the writer would reveal to him in the studio. Their conversation was cordial and relaxed from years of acquaintance, but Maugham had a wariness about him, uncomfortable at being scrutinized, the lens with which he normally observed others now turned on himself. Sutherland invited him to adopt a pose which was of personal significance, and Maugham folded his arms and crossed his legs in his customary way. He began to relax as they chatted. The painter waited with feline patience, his trained eyes mesmerized by the landscape of his subject’s face, with the hill of the nose falling into eye-socket valleys. He traversed the facial forms, which he envisioned as a stone which had been weathered by the ages. Maugham’s cheeks draped along either side of his nose and looked like the claws of a crab. The author began to describe a character from a short story on which he was working, and his eyebrows raised as he gazed in his mind’s eye at the scene.

² Thullier.

Sutherland had seen this expression, the playwright at work, and hurried to capture it: the lines on the forehead formed into a rounded W shape to accommodate the raised eyebrows, the generous mouth frowning slightly through the effort of concentration. Later in the studio, Sutherland determined that a field of cadmium orange would propel his subject from the canvas, mink and moss for the jacket, Windsor red for the scarf, charcoal grey and Wedgewood blue for the trousers. Maugham's skin should be a tone of cadmium yellow to capture the warm light which Somerset emitted when he was creating, which cast its glow on those who knew him and those who read his work.

The other basic way of doing a portrait is to render by analysis, or a notion or memory or all three, what you see in front of your eyes, or what you remember. This does not mean you make a copy of what you see. Far from it. But on the whole, it is a matter of accepting rather than imposing. It is also an art of letting the subject gradually reveal himself unconsciously, so that by his voice and gaze as well as by his solid flesh your memory and emotions are stirred and assaulted as with other forms of nature.

When Kathleen awoke that morning, she could feel the grip around her throat. She had begun to correlate this choking feeling with momentous accomplishments, tarnishing them. Churchill was due in a few hours for his first portraiture sitting, a momentous achievement for any artist, but instead of basking in the success of her husband, she awoke thinking of their son. The tiny infant, longed for and prayed for, who had left them after three months. This was an agony which could persuade the human race to stop procreating; it was a pain indescribable. She had thrown herself into promoting Graham, tirelessly in fact, and he had immersed himself into his painting. Her efforts, combined with his talent, had led them to this triumph, a portrait commissioned by Parliament to be given to the historic Statesman on his 80th birthday, and later hung alongside the other PMs in the House of Commons. But on days of achievement, she often remembered their small son, imagining him in short trousers with a splash of freckles across his nose, adorned in whites on the cricket field, wearing the graduating colors from Oxford. Her arms ached. Graham entered the room for his morning coffee, shrouded in silence. Words were not spoken as they moved to the studio to prepare, Kathleen to the camera, and Sutherland his easel, brushes,

palette, and charcoals. He had built the daïs on which to raise Churchill, like a pontiff. Sutherland had preferred to paint him straight on, but the Statesman had prevailed. Additionally, he wanted to be outfitted in the regalia of his Knight of the Garter robes, but members of the House of Commons insisted that he appear how they were used to seeing him: striped trousers, waistcoat, and spotted bow tie. Lately, there had been numerous rumors that the aging statesman was past his prime and needed to retire. His own party and some of his more ardent supporters were calling for him to step down. Rumblings about his declining health circulated, but there was nothing anyone could point to for certain. Uneasily, Graham wondered whether the former prime minister nursed the hope that the portrait would assist in reviving his career.

Drawn to the struggle of boulders or trees against the pressures of nature, Sutherland was interested in human beings who had been pressed by life—not the young, unmarred, and untested. The human face and body were a shape-shifting landscape, with pulsating and mysterious forces coursing below the surface, transforming the features in an instant. This was the difficulty with portraits: unlike boulders and tree roots, humans were vain. With so many mirrors and photographs, people thought they knew how they appeared to the world—but did they? People were very concerned about their public images. He turned to Kathleen and said, “You know, to appreciate a portrait of oneself, one must have at least one of three qualities. Only those totally without physical vanity, educated in painting, or with exceptionally good manners, can disguise their feelings of shock or even revulsion when confronted for the first time with a reasonably truthful painted image of themselves.”

Most of the raw material which I use as a subject out of doors, in the woods and so on, is on the whole unfamiliar to people because they do not naturally look at it. In the case of a portrait everyone knows roughly what a person's face looks like. There are people who require endless studies and, even then, I cannot find the exact equivalent of their look, even though I may know them well and have a perfectly clear idea in my mind as to how they do, in fact, look.

As the camera secured its dominance in our modern life, a plethora of images accompanied this rise. Images served up regularly cause us to think we know what people look like, and we think we know what we, ourselves, look like. But do we? What place does portraiture occupy in this new image-laden landscape?

Graham Sutherland's
1954 portrait of
Winston Churchill.



The human eye sees differently than the camera's eye. While the camera catches a momentary image, the artist may study his subject for months. The best artists allow their subjects to emerge, without forcing an interpretation on the resulting creation, and seek to capture the essence of a person. If 100 cameras were to snap simultaneously to capture an image, most of the images would look identical, but if 100 artists were to paint the same subject, 100 unique renderings would be preserved. Painters see with imagination and experience what we overlook in our hurried distraction. This is the gift of a sensitive portrait, which looks beneath the outer shell, with neither flattery nor denigration, and illuminates the personhood which pulsates beneath.

In the case of a portrait, there are two ways of doing it. One, which I admire enormously, is the real paraphrase such as Picasso does, which to me is marvelous, because the likeness is always preserved. The other is to make a straight attempt at what you see, and that is my course...I am old-fashioned enough to think that it should be "like"...to make as clear a presentation as one's gifts allow of what one sees in front of one's face.

You touched his lips with the gentlest brush stroke, applying the paint so deliberately and I knew you saw us. As the Head, I speak for each member of The Churchill Corporeal Consortium when I say that you seem to have observed what a toll it has taken on us to keep him going all these years, each pulling his weight, so to speak. Each doing his part to keep that great hulk of a man going, and a thankless job it was, I can tell you. He was particularly hard on Brain, whom he ordered around ceaselessly and never listened to a word she had to say. He had her retrieving and re-filing files all day long. Occasionally, she took the initiative and presented him with images from the war of destruction, or terror, or suffering—just to see whether he was listening. But it enraged him. He shackled her, and told her that she no longer had free reign but was now only allowed to give him what he asked for. He threw all of those images into a contempt pie and swallowed it. He drew nourishment from it to strengthen his resolve against Hitler. During the war, Stomach tried everything to scare him—floods of bile upward, quivering, nausea, all of the usual tricks—but he wouldn't be moved. He just ate more steak and drank more Scotch. Did you know that when he went to America during Prohibition, he had Dr. Moran write him a prescription for Scotch to be drunk daily to make Nerves quiet? Lungs also tried, three times shutting down the air sacs so he couldn't get a good deep breath, but he just smoked more cigars, laughed, and coughed. During the war, he sent Feelings to his room and completely ignored the rest of us. With all of that locked up inside him, he still can't manage to sleep without the pills Dr. Moran prescribes for him. He told Backbone, Shoulders, and Neck that they would be expected to uphold the entire nation in the war against the Germans, and he didn't want to hear a peep of complaint. Mutiny we tried. Heart had attacks, Brain tried stroking, Lungs filled with fluid and screamed, but all he did was call Dr. Moran and order him to quell our insurrection. The doctor was assisted by Clementine who hustled us out of view whenever we were weak. She managed to hide us away for weeks from the Queen herself just a few months ago, when Brain stroked again, this time a big one, and knocked him flat. But he can't fool you. You've perceived it all underneath that stiff pose he insisted upon holding for these four weeks, facing you with that squared stance, legs apart, arms on each rest, braced for conflict. He always rebounded from our weakness, through that indomitable will. But *you* see that we have a story to tell—unsung under his surface—of suffering and weathering. Your eye, and brush, see Belly under the

waist coat, and Carotid beneath the bow tie. You notice how Capillaries still color his cheeks to enliven him, and Brow pulls upward to reveal the orbs set therein. You reach for Wedgewood blue and come straight for Eyes, vivifying these pale, blue, flaming beacons which transmit his determination with the same intensity as they always have. You've caught the set of his jaw, despite Skin's drapery. We heard him telling you that they are trying to oust him from Chambers; they're calling for him to resign. If Mouth could speak on her own, she would tell them, "No way is he ever going to give in. He never, never, never gives in!" And as he poses for you, he keeps insisting, "They won't get rid of me. I am a rock." Good thing you're good with rocks. Here he sits, a big old boulder, with two fierce beacons of resolve shining out like Chalwyn lanterns. The slump of the years which Shoulders have appalls him, and he fights the naps which Brain insists upon each afternoon. The stiffened movements of Fingers frustrate him. His war with us is familiar, but despite it all we are in his service, and we are proud of him. We love him. As the Head of the body, on behalf of us all, we'd like to thank you for noticing us, for portraying us with such dignity. You seem to see our sacrifice in a way that he is unable to acknowledge and which appears to unsettle him. After all these years of service, we represent something lost to him instead of a triumph of sacrifice. But you have seen the valor that we have shown, honored us by not averting your gaze, and presented us with clear-eyed admiration.

Epilogue

The finished portrait caused Churchill great distress; "I look like a down-and-out drunk who has been picked out of the gutter in the Strand." Even though Clementine had felt a deep, emotional connection with the work when she had seen it, and had tearfully thanked Graham for its execution, she fell in step with her husband on the matter. They decided to give it to the Judas, because Hans offered to take it off their hands. His wife, Elizabeth, couldn't believe their good fortune, exclaiming "What a boon!" She set to work straight away photographing the piece. But their good fortune would be short-lived, as Churchill requested that the painting be returned after only two days. It was then that Clementine made the promise to her husband: "It will never see the light of day." Confiding in her personal secretary about the distress her husband was in, Clementine enlisted Grace's help.

There was no moon. A blanket of mist shrouded the garden and muffled the night noises. Two figures struggled up the stairs from the cellar with an unwieldy burden. It was a rectangular object, almost five feet by four feet, and the man and woman were further pressured by an apparent need to be silent. “Shh!”, hissed Grace. The other figure, her brother, was used to his sister ordering him about, seeing as she had done so for as long as he could remember. “Easy for you to say,” he retorted, because as near as he could tell, he was doing the majority of the heavy lifting. After managing the tight stairwell, they spilled out into the garden and set their burden down for a brief respite. “It looks just like the old guy,” offered her brother. “Oh, I see, the gardener is now an art expert?” Grace mumbled. Resuming their work, they headed toward the back garden, where a cheerful, orange glow was illuminating the gloomy dark and the surrounding camellia shrubs. The blaze had been kindled by the young man an hour ago, after the Churchills had long fallen asleep, and the flames were licking upward with impressive robustness. Young men are never happier than when given permission to set something afire, and he felt a certain thrill, possibly that of an arsonist, when they heaved the large canvas on top of the blaze. What happened next unsettled them both. The portrait was lit beautifully from beneath, and it almost seemed as if the man himself were atop the pyre, but then the destruction began. A flame pierced through the canvas in the upper corner, throwing additional light onto Churchill’s face, and the two onlookers gasped. They suddenly felt that they were destroying something of great value, definitely irreplaceable, and their consciences ignited along with the painting. But they were not people with power. Their lot in life was to serve, and so with the assurance that they were doing precisely what they had been ordered to do, they watched the image illuminate, briefly come to life, and then turn to ash.