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REPELLENT SHAPES AND BEWILDERING “ILLUSTRATIONS”: STANLEY SPENCER’S ECCENTRIC STYLES

Liliane Louvel

“The mystery and inscrutability of Stanley Spencer’s [‘illustrative’] art”

(Causey 143).

To appropriate something means to make it proper, to make it one’s own and thus to integrate it, to incorporate it, thereby giving it a new life. Because it becomes one’s property, one imparts it with one’s own being: what one knows, what one hates, what one likes, what one chooses, is. Then the appropriated is cut off from its former self and becomes other, transformed, re-created.¹

Stanley Spencer constantly appropriated sacred texts (revealing the impossibility for him to cut off old links, to achieve a “rupture”) and incorporated them in his own world imposing distortions and other unusual plastic treatments to the forms, thereby shocking his contemporaries. One of the consequences of these aesthetic choices is the imposition of the grotesque and the carnivalesque in his renderings of sacred episodes.

I recently realized that the cover of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* displays Stanley Spencer’s *Swan Upping in Cookham* [fig. 1]. There is something of a paradox in choosing, as a representative of Englishness, an artist deemed “an artist of the bizarre.” The choice appears indeed to make an odd statement. But of course Cookham in Berkshire was Stanley Spencer’s own private heaven which he repeatedly painted, and we will have cause to understand the many intriguing and seemingly, to put it mildly, odd facets of this intriguing painter.

Born into a large family in Cookham in 1891, Stanley Spencer was first educated at home and taught by his father, a music master, and then his sister before moving on to Maidenhead and then to

¹ Cf. Derrida’s concept of re-appropriation and the impossibility for one to re-appropriate what is proper to another one, like a signature, only the other one can do so, in *Penser à ne pas voir Ecrits sur les arts du visible*, « Trace et archive, image et art », ed. Ginette Michaud, Joana Maso et Javier Bassas, Paris, *La Différence*, 2013, p. 94.

the Slade School of Art, where he was taught by Henry Tonks. At the Slade School he mingled with David Bomberg, Paul Nash, Lynton Lamb, the Carlines, and C.R.W. Nevinson. Books, music and painting were held in high esteem at home and he was very fond of children's illustrated books, poetry (especially that of John Donne and William Blake), literature, and also of course stories, in particular those bearing on religious subjects: the Bible and the Gospels. His life long, Spencer painted and repainted episodes from sacred books: from his very first pictures – *John Donne Arriving in Heaven* (1911) [fig. 2], *Zacharias and Elizabeth* (1913-14) [fig. 3], *The Centurion's servant* (1914) [fig. 4] – the end and his last unfinished large painting: *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta* (1957) [fig. 5].

Reading and painting were closely linked, with painting inspired by his reading that, as we shall see, he appropriated in his own very particular way. Feeling being absorbed in a painting as well as in a book, he compares the effect on him of both:

Just as a book will absorb you into a world so I hope my paintings do so.... When I read a book.... I want...to be held in the atmosphere of it because then you live in it and there is no jump between you and the affairs of the book. The same absorption is possible in pictures and is a legitimate and proper thing for a painter to aim at...and expect the spectator to enter into...I wish people would 'read' my pictures. (Glew 68)

Even at the Slade, as early as the 1910s, he composed “13 drawings all prompted by biblical or literary themes” (Bell 20): *Moses and the Brazen Calf*, [fig. 6] & (see Bell 15) *Jacob and Esau, Scene in Paradise* [fig. 7].

To this must be added a strong interest in the Pre-Raphaelites' painting, and in particular the English landscape and the art of detail. Ruskin's writings also had a great influence over him, most especially in the 1920s. Ruskin's teaching that “a right response to visible beauty should lead to a religious apprehension of the world and its creation” (Warner and Hough in Bell 18) was of primary importance for the young Stanley Spencer. This was to change in the 1930s when German expressionism comes into play and influences him. Roger Fry too recognized Spencer's taste for the literary, although this did not ingratiate the latter with him. In an often quoted review, he evoked his “rather grotesque imagery,” placed him in the lineage of Brueghel and criticized him for being “an illustrator not an artist in the plastic sense. He was a visionary and not a visualiser” (795). For Fry, Spencer was more dedicated to the story than to the form, not to talk of “the significant form.” We shall see that this was more complicated than Fry made it sound.

A Transfiguration of the Banal

I have already spoken and written at length regarding Spencer’s obsession with the resurrection theme, about death, and a kind of triumph over death, all of it placed in a familiar setting, usually Cookham, which he called his heaven. “Cookham – my paradise” he wrote to his friends the Raverats in 1911, while eager to go back to it (Glew 35). He knew how to operate a “transfiguration of the banal” and the everyday, as in, for instance, *Two Girls & Beehive* [fig. 8] about which he wrote :

It seems so innocent & religious in emotion that it surprises me when I am made aware that it was two daughters of the Butcher with whom I was much in love & about whom I had many happy, & to me, wonderful visions [...] when I saw Dot & Guy & saw them by the wall in our garden, their liking for each other was, to me, like a religious mystery. They like each other I thought & felt the same analogous feeling for that to religion as I felt existed between the ivy-covered tower of Cookham Church & religion.[...] These two are people of the village & people of my life & my life & theirs co-exist & mingle in many ordinary circumstances and associations.[...] this is an auspicious religious realm, a heaven on earth. (Glew 33-34)

Spencer’s insistence on mingling the religious and the everyday, as well as his sense of mystery and Cookham seen as heaven on earth, are salient traits which will endure throughout Stanley Spencer’s life and work – something we can see in his *Resurrection, Cookham* [fig. 8a] which is at the Tate Gallery. According to Causey, “W.G. Hall reported Spencer as saying: that he does not believe, necessarily that the resurrection of the dead is a physical one. To him the resurrection can come to any man at any time, and consists in becoming aware of the real meaning of life and alive to its enormous possibilities” (Hall 10 in Causey 69-70).

But Spencer could work with and away from the Bible appropriating the latter to better advance his own devices. He was quoted as saying “in this life we experience a kind of resurrection when we arrive at a state of awareness, a state of being in love” (Rothenstein 178 in Causey 69-70). Saying so, Causey argues that in *the Resurrection, Cookham* [fig. 8a] “he wants to draw viewers away from the biblical aspects of the resurrection with Christ and God the father present in the porch but less prominent than friends and others – in order to focus on joyful experience in a familiar setting. It is about awakening to love...” (70). We have the same kind of scale in the resurrection of the soldiers with Jesus as a diminutive presence in the background (like Brueghel’s “Christ carrying the Cross” – ill. p 101, Causey).

Christ and the saints are recurring figures in Spencer's work. It is of import to notice the evolution in their representation over time. In particular, his treatment of crucifixions that, dealing with death, might look like the reverse of, or the prelude to, resurrections. Still, *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* [fig. 9] in Burghclere could be seen as a combination of the two while presenting both Christ's suggested crucifixion (with the overwhelming presence of the cross motif) and his resurrection. Stanley Spencer was very particular about his references and his titles, careful to respect the meaning of the Gospel. To his gallery owner's representative, he wrote concerning a list for the Venice International in 1938:

I called & was careful to call the picture named on the list as 'Christ bearing the Cross' 'Christ *Carrying* the Cross'...I said carrying & not bearing because, apart from giving a sense of suffering which was not my intention or wish, I particularly wished to convey the relationship between the carpenters behind him carrying the ladders & Christ in front carrying the cross, each doing their job of work & doing it like workmen...This is in accordance with the religious significance of the Gospel. He was not doing *a* job or *his* job, but *the* job. (Glew 188)

This quotation carries the full force of Spencer's dual involvement: with the profane and the sacred, the domestic and the mystical. His insistence on Christ doing *the* job to hand like the other carpenters shows to what extent he refused a conception of religion far removed from the ordinary people. His commitment was to his fellow workers and not to any kind of aloof high authority. He painted several crucifixions and their composition and meaning evolved throughout his life. They were, as we shall see, following his mood and experiences.

As early as 1921 he painted a striking Crucifixion (now in Aberdeen) in which the figure of Christ is lost in the folds of ravines and mountains while three men are busy nailing him to the cross; the two thieves are positioned on two adjacent rocky hillsides. The view is an elevated one, the treatment of the ridges or mountains being found again in later paintings. Mary and the saints attending the sacrifice are positioned on a nearby ridge, not at the foot of the cross. The fact that the whole scene is seen from afar gives it scope, spectacularity, and also distance concerning the possible pathos such a scene may provoke. But the pointed ridges are close to the angular depicting device of the Gothic Italian rocks in Fra Angelico or Giotto's work or of the Flemish, Rhenian or German schools of painting of the 15th and 16th centuries – such as the Grünewald *Rétable* in the Musée Unterlinden in Colmar or Rogier Van der Weyden's angular folds in his crucifixions.

Spencer's *Deposition and the Rolling Away of the Stone* (1956) [fig. 10] is strikingly different in style, even noting that it is not properly a crucifixion but deals with what happened *after* Jesus's death,

i.e., removing the nails, whereas the 1921 painting depicted the nailing proper. It shows a complete change or reversion of perspective, focussing on the calm face and body of the dead man who comes to the foreground, a formal trait we will find in the 1958 crucifixion. The frame is crowded with people, a feature characteristic of Spencer’s paintings in the late 30s like *The Beatitudes* [figs. 11, a-f]: Mary is supported by one of the holy men; the workmen are all practically naked like Christ himself. Their flesh is treated in shades and nuances. Thus hands, arms, buttocks, torsoes are given pride of place, moving away from the traditional way of representing the site of the sacrifice, Mount Golgotha and Calvary. There is a lot of movement and activity going around Christ’s immobile figure, together with a figure of the *admonitor* in the lower left hand corner, looking at the viewer with a piercing eye. *The Deposition and Rolling Away of the Stone* [fig. 10], a prelude to the resurrection, shows two angels moving the stone away while the guards are asleep and Jesus is seen lying in his grave. One of the angels is lifting the shroud from Jesus’s face, endowed with a beard this time. This painting includes a predella much in the way of the Italian Renaissance altar pieces and in particular of the primitive Italian painters Spencer admired so much.

The 1958 crucifixion is particularly strident and charged with violence. Contrary to the other crucifixions, the 1956 excepted, *The Deposition and the Rolling Away of the Stone* [fig. 10] and the two resurrections I quoted above the Cookham at the Tate [fig. 8a] and the Burghclere *Resurrection of the Soldiers* [fig. 9] in which the divine presence is both discreet and hardly discernible so fully intergrated is he mingled with other people participating in the event. In the 1958 Crucifixion, Christ is largely visible, standing at the forefront even as rendered from the back with three quarters for his face very visible. Unlike the 1956 version, the 1958 crucifixion depicts Christ from behind and gives pride of place to the matter of the wood of the minimal cross (a T shape in keeping with the times). As in the 1956 crucifixion, Christ is wearing a strip of red material tied around his loins, and in the 1958 painting the two thieves are naked. In sharp contrast, soldiers and executioners are fully, even heavily clothed. What is striking is the representation of violence figured by the (Munch like) scream issuing from one of the thieves’s wide open mouth and his windswept (or horror) raised hair while he is being tortured by a man from behind him.

The nails held in the curiously garbed executioners’s mouths are borrowed from carpenters’ ways of holding their own nails at the ready. But the shapes of the men, their strange clothes and tasselled nightcaps, their mask-like faces, are reminiscent of characters from children’s illustrated books representing gnomes, dwarves or ominous figures relishing the violence they are perpetrating. The figure lying prone at the foot of the cross might be Mary Magdalene which is suggested by her long hair. Her dress is carefully strewn with purple flowers. Curious figures reminiscent of the 1921 *Christ’s*

Entry into Jerusalem [fig. 12] are crowded into an upstairs, windows practically falling out of it. Their round faces (again mask like) and their round bodies garbed in very detailed material complete with dots and squares and checkered design make them more akin to illustrations than to attempts at any mimetic realism. This is unmistakably meant as the depiction of a particular episode together with the force of a message denouncing the violence done to individuals. The scene also clearly takes place in Cookham, thus mingling the sacred mystery and everyday life in a quasi *unheimlich* way; one can recognize the houses Spencer also painted for what he called his pot-boilers and which sold so well. The cross is placed on a heap of rubble together with the minute details of coloured small stones and debris, taking note of a time when there were works in town. This change of composition laying emphasis on the figure of Christ painted in the forefront as a delegate of the spectator suggests that Spencer was probably still thinking of himself as the target of attacks and the subject of violence in particular in his own private life. Thus, his art also achieved a kind of catharsis, which is in keeping with what Julia Kristeva wrote when analysing Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ* [fig. 13]. She linked it to the separation process each individual has to take in his/her stride along his/her life to be an autonomous subject. She notes:

Réelles, imaginaires ou symboliques, ces opérations [de séparation] structurent nécessairement notre individuation. Leur inaccomplissement ou forclusion conduit à la confusion psychologique ; leur dramatisation est, au contraire, source d'angoisse exorbitante et destructive. D'avoir mis en scène cette rupture au cœur même du sujet absolu qu'est le Christ ; de l'avoir représentée comme une Passion en envers solidaire de sa Résurrection, de sa gloire et de son éternité, le christianisme conduit à la conscience les drames essentiels internes au devenir de chaque sujet. Il se donne ainsi un immense pouvoir cathartique. (143-144)

This cathartic power may also be found in a less violent and more melancholy inducing series entitled *Christ in the Wilderness* [figs. 14, a-h], another interesting case of the appropriation and distortion of a particular episode borrowed from the Gospel.

The *Christ in the Wilderness* series

Casey acknowledged that “Spencer’s work is impossible to disentangle from his life which he lived, especially in the 1930s, in a very public fashion through his art” (176). In the late 1930s, Stanley Spencer was submitted to a lot of pressure which later led to trauma and compromises. First, in 1935, the Royal Academy refused two of his paintings for the *Summer Exhibition* leading him to resign from the Academy. Married to Hilda Carline and the father of two little girls, he then met

Patricia Preece and fell in love with her. She was living with another woman but seems to have seen the advantage she could derive from a relationship with Spencer. He first thought he might live with Hilda *and* Patricia, but Hilda demurred and asked for a divorce. This done in 1937, he immediately married Patricia Preece. But this was an unhappy move, for Preece properly bled him of the little money he had. In 1938, he had to leave Cookham; he found refuge first at friends,’ then rented a room in North London. His family home had been given to Patricia Preece.

Then, at least, he found some rest. The *Christ in the Wilderness* (1939-1942) [figs. 14, a-h] series offers a visual echo of his own troubles, his depression and his isolation from his two “women.” He found in Mark (Mark 1: 13) the short telling of Christ’s exile in the wilderness, living with the wild beasts. Contrary to the other evangelists, Mark’s gospel does not include the episode of Satan and the temptation. According to Causey: “Only one of the nine subjects, *Christ in the Wilderness: Driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness* (1942) [fig. 14 f], relates to the narrative of Christ’s 40 days while the others are taken from various gospel stories involving animals, birds, insects and flowers” (165). The large whitish figure of Christ is the same in the nine square canvasses (each measuring the same: 56 x 56 cm) chiefly painted in grey-brown hues and nuances. Christ is the main figure looming large in all of them. In *Christ in the Wilderness: Driven by the Spirit into the Wilderness*, Christ is vigorously striding across valleys and climbing up mountains. A dark-haired and bearded figure, he is moving forward while in the other more contemplative paintings, he is either sitting down lost in thought looking at a scorpion or squatting down on his hands and feet (Causey noted this was taken from a picture of Shirin as a little girl looking at flowers). Spencer lifted only one episode from the Gospels, which he treated in only one of the nine canvasses. The others are pure works of fancy, celebrating nature perhaps in the way St Francis did, which is reminiscent of another of his religious-inspired canvases: *Saint Francis and the Birds* where the saint cuts a quaint overwhelming figure.

Another saint also gave birth to a particular interpretation of Spencer’s which is worthy of note and will open up, I conclude, onto another of his “styles.” Whereas, if Spencer seems to have deliberately enjoyed adopting a style based on distortions sometimes verging on the grotesque and the carnivalesque like in the series of the *Beatitudes* [figs. 11], for his “illustrations” of biblical stories or those inspired by the Gospels, he could also draw very good portraits and wonderful English landscapes that sold very well indeed. His nudes also strongly contrast with his other figure production. A link between two of his manners – the distortive and the more realistic (much could be said about this) – can be found in his striking *Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1945) [fig. 15].

***The Temptation of Saint Anthony* (1945) : the missing link between two “styles”**

The *Temptation* was painted after Spencer’s troubles but still retains something of his late 30s nudes, as we shall see. The work seems to be standing in-between the manner of his biblical figures and the illustration of their stories which he liked telling, with the characteristic distortions, in particular in one of his essays, as necessary. To a certain extent, these “curious” pictures announce some of David Hockney’s early paintings, like his parents’ *Portrait* or *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy’s Portrait* (1971) [fig. 16].

The Temptation of Saint Anthony [fig. 15] has an unusual story. In 1945, Spencer’s gallery owner Dudley Tooth asked if Stanley was going to enter some sort of competition for an American film after Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami*, which required a painting of this theme. Five hundred dollars were given to the painters who entered it. Stanley first refused and then he wrote to Charlotte Murray, one of his women friends and a psychiatrist :

The *Bel-Ami* will have to take its chance. If you could send me any information about it and Anthony it would save my time looking up. So far my great brain at present only blossoms forth a bevy of well painted nudes and Anthony cushioned thereby among them. But this I believe is quite incorrect and that there was only one lady.²

It is striking to see how close to the painting the future *ekphrasis* looks like. The “well painted nudes” are very much alike those painted by Michelangelo for the ceiling of the Sixtine chapel, writhing and fully fleshed, with an insistence on muscles, buttocks, torsoes, bosoms and thighs. The twisted nude in the forefront is particularly striking. William Blake’s influence (himself under that of Michelangelo) can also be felt here. The style is more “realistic” than the former treatment of the *Beatitudes* [figs. 11], for instance, where the bodies are bulging in surprising places. Still, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* [fig. 15], although not strictly respectful of the original text, as Spencer himself was perfectly aware, mingles animals, snake, lion, eagles, together with human beings (something reminiscent of his former style and admiration of Indian sculpture) and displays a very peculiar – “unrealistic” and carnivalesque – figure of St Anthony lying in a coffin-like closed space, wearing a red and white garment as well a ruff around his neck, much as clowns are wont to do. The net-like design of his garment also recalls the often turquoise net or mesh ancient Egypt mummies used to wear on top of their shrouds and strips.

² Glew, *op. cit.*, p. 224. Glew adds that Spencer did not get the prize which was awarded to Max Ernst but received the 500 dollars. Ernst very vivid *Temptation* is crowded with black demons attacking Saint Anthony dressed in a red robe.

So *The Temptation* combines a realistic treatment of nudes crowded in a complex picture in which a more stylized and almost caricatured figure is lying prone. Two different styles coexist in the same picture. The muscular flesh of the nudes surrounding Saint Anthony are reminiscent of the very realistic treatment of the portraits and nudes Spencer did of Patricia Preece in the late 30s. There, the quality of the painting can be seen as a precursor of Lucian Freud’s own treatment of the flesh.

The Double Nude Portrait (1937) [fig. 17] and the *Self Portrait with Patricia Preece* (1936) [fig. 18] are relevant in this respect. In the first, a leg of mutton is set in the foreground showing an analogy of both shape and matter between human and animal flesh. It also is reminiscent of Rembrandt’s but also of Soutine’s and other painters’ motif of the “*bœuf écorché*,” hinting at the sacrifice of flesh and body of Christ in the communion. The leg of mutton also referred to Spencer’s first wife and a meeting place of theirs when they went courting at the pub called... “the leg of mutton.” So Hilda is present in the painting as a visual play-on-words, whereas Patricia Preece is overwhelmingly lying prone in front of a stunned and bewildered Stanley figure. The flesh here is present in translucent oyster-like hues, with a subtle network of blue veins. Of note, the detail of the red heating stove in the background.

The Self Portrait with Patricia Preece [fig. 18] shows another thoughtful Stanley looking at a nude of Patricia also lost in her thoughts. In this picture, Stanley occupies the same place as Christ in the 1945 crucifixion; his back is turned to the viewer but standing at the forefront. Seen from the back, his head is half-turned offering a profile portrait of himself. With his glasses on (as in the 1937 picture), Stanley insists on seeing. We note glasses are absent in all his other self-portraits. In this painting Stanley also plays the part of the delegated viewer: interrogation, puzzlement and suspended time impart a puzzling disquiet and ambiguity to the double portrait. The flesh is painted with no aim at beauty: Patricia Preece’s bosoms are pendulous, Stanley’s face is reddish, traces of beard are visible, so this painting aims at a realistic rendering far from his distorted elongated carnivalesque figures as in *The Adoration of Old Men* [fig. 19]. Complex and disturbing, those nudes leave the spectator ill-at-ease. What agitates is not their vulnerable naked bodies; it is their lack of connection, the missing intimacy we are forced to see; it is the want of passion – the heat is only on the stove.

All his life, Stanley Spencer produced a lot of pictures inspired by the sacred texts, the Bible and the Gospels. He often chose the format of the series, tempted by the possibility to tell a story and thus celebrate Italian primitive art he relished so much. Still, the evolution of his style(s) and the way he appropriated the sacred texts follow the way he rendered them in time, while suffering trauma in his own personal life. This probably led him to give pride of place, for instance, to various elements like a suffering Christ. I have tried to show that the style Spencer developed, separate from the distortions

he advocated and defended in his own writings, led him to focus on the flesh in a manner announcing Lucian Freud. This was totally unpredictable as it is so different from his favourite “figures.” His lifelong engagement with the sacred texts is revealed in his work that testifies to an impossible “rupture” from them, *hence his stylistic distortions that may be seen as the result of a relentless rehashing of the same episodes*. On the other hand, his perceptive portraits and lush landscapes which he viewed as pot boilers, although not directly linked to the appropriation of texts, still figure nowadays as the embodiment of a certain idea of Britain, celebrating its flowering countryside, its cosy villages and cottages set in a peaceful landscape, thereby creating new narratives of Britain. A very conservative view too, which helped create an idea of Britain consonant with what can nowadays be seen as a canonical way of celebrating its idealized lost past. Hence, the – at first puzzling – choice of *Swan Upping in Cookham* [fig. 1] for the cover of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (seventh edition volume 2) as a gently innovative kind of painting still close to a British ideal life in a village. Nevertheless, Stanley Spencer retained his own mystery, leaving his spectators often in a thoughtful bewildered state. Thus he also wonderfully displayed the disturbing function of art, which is not one of its lesser qualities.

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