

LIFE BEGINS: ART, WAR AND RESURRECTION

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers.¹

THE WASTE LAND, T.S. ELIOT

Once you know the opening of *The Waste Land* it is always there in April. It's there mixed into the loosening soil from which seedlings slowly but insistently push out cotyledons, and into the moment when you realise there is light in the sky at 8 o'clock. For me it is also mixed with a shifting and growing constellation of modern British artworks concerned with revival and re-awakening, works that rose in memory during the preternaturally fine spring of 2020 when we paid our daily hour's obeisance to magnolia buds bursting or chestnuts dripping sap, and again in the second spring of the pandemic, when nature was slower with its stirring, and across the world people were caught between exhaustion and the desperate desire to emerge from winter coverings. These works are responses, like Eliot's poem, to the desolation of war and the strangeness of nature's continuation through the seasonal cycle. Many hold supine and standing figures in precarious balance, wondering what kind of renewed life is possible, pausing in doubt like woken sleepers. But for some artists, Stanley Spencer especially, every day brings resurrection, urgently and irresistibly, and every painting grows with the full force of April. Now, each year, depending on the circumstances of the present, these pictures assert themselves newly, opening different conversations with each other.

FIG.11 Paul Nash, *Spring in the Trenches, Ridge Wood*, 1917, 1918
Oil on canvas
60.9 × 50.8 cm (24 × 20 in)
Imperial War Museum



Paul Nash was at the Ypres Salient from February to May 1917.² There were places just behind the line that were not yet pulverised, and he looked round at what he called the ‘back garden of the trenches’.³ The garden was getting on with its own peaceful business: ‘nearby a lilac is breaking into bloom’.⁴ On the way up to the Front, though, he had come through torn and cratered landscapes where he was taken aback to find signs of spring. Even in shattered woodlands it was there. ‘The most broken trees even had sprouted somewhere and in the midst, from the depth of the wood’s bruised heart poured out the throbbing song of a nightingale.’⁵ Describing the place to his wife, Nash articulated a kind of outrage. ‘Ridiculous, mad incongruity! One can’t think which is the more absurd, the War or Nature.’⁶ What was he to feel about this greening? There could be no simple enjoyment of it, though he might admire nature’s persistence. He painted that aberrant season in *Spring in the Trenches, Ridge Wood, 1917* (1918) (FIG.11). The ground is convulsed, the trees haggard, yet leaves are clearly visible on deformed branches. Birds sail through a blue sky, and the light – it is the light most of all, and the gnomon shadow thrown by a tree – tells of mildness and lengthening days. What we see is the inverse of Poussin’s subject, ‘Et in Arcadia, Ego’.⁷ Death has shown itself in many arcadias, and here is life – spring – creeping into hell. ‘Et in Inferno, Ego’ say the glinting leaves.

All spring and early summer of 1917, soldiers encountered scenes of unexpected natural beauty that possessed and disturbed them. Such incongruities were much attested and discussed. Paul Fussell in his classic study *The Great War and Modern Memory* considers the kinds of irony at work when soldiers reported the year’s first cuckoo calls on the Menin Road or found that stand-to was regularly accompanied by lark song.⁸ William Orpen (1878–1931) returned to the Somme in August after time away and found it transformed. ‘The dreary, dismal mud was baked white and pure – dazzling white’, he wrote in his 1921 memoir *An Onlooker in France*. ‘White daisies, red poppies and a blue flower, great masses of them, stretched for miles and miles.’ The air was ‘thick with white butterflies’.⁹ The chalk of the northern French downlands, exposed and broken, had dried to a white canvas. Among the muddled or eerily lurid or nauseously acidic colouring of Orpen’s war-work,



FIG.12 William Orpen, *The Butte de Warlencourt*, 1917
Oil on canvas
76.2 × 91.4 cm (30 × 36 in)
Imperial War Museum

there appeared visions of impasto whiteness. The topography is almost alpine in *German Wire, Thiepval* (1917). Pale chasms gape in *Mines and the Baupaume Road, La Boisselle* (1917), the colour temperature so disorienting as to evoke ice and burning heat. If the chalk has anything in common with the ‘forgetful snow’ of *The Waste Land*, blanketing over or plastering breakage beneath, it is also the open wound of a raw and exposed place. The chalk mound in *The Butte de Warlencourt* (1917) (FIG.12) was a prehistoric burial site, now knocked and pitted, flayed of its turf skin. Ancient sleepers have been disturbed here, and the whole land is now a grave. Bones lie scoured to whiteness among the white chalk. Orpen’s images of these white places are tense with ambiguity of tone: there is beauty in them, but that is frightening in itself. They record a deathly moon-world that is also alive with protean remaking. His foregrounds are smudged with the greens and pinks of grasses re-colonising the plains.

What will grow here? Orpen posed the question in panoramas of chalk and grass, and in portraits of spectrally emaciated bodies rising un-dead from this landscape as in the nightmare resurrection scene *Blown Up, Mad* (1917). Nash posed it in images of inchoate brown abyss. *We are Making a New World* (1918) shows an expanse of mud that is both

solid, humped into shapes indistinctly suggestive of grave mounds, and a liquid sea whose grotesque waves roll in towards no stable shore. This is the 'new world' man has created, a gunky travesty of the earth and water so crisply and cleanly summoned into existence by the God of the Old Testament (whose rhythmically orderly inventions Nash would contemplate in his crystalline, formally beautiful engravings for the 1924 publication *Genesis from the Bible*).¹⁰ The continuous present tense of Nash's title – *We are Making* – indicates an ongoing process. It asks us to imagine what is about to happen. Here is the swamp before us, and what will we see rising up from it? Or what will we actively make from it? As Eliot knows, nature will start 'breeding', 'mixing', 'stirring'. Forced to continue, human beings will have to step into this dead land and make something from it, painful as that will be.

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In the first spring after the armistice and after leaving the army, Ford Madox Ford (1873–1939) set about restoring a derelict cottage in Sussex and planting a garden productive enough to keep himself and his partner, the artist Stella Bowen (1893–1947), in fruit and vegetables for the rest of the year. He went at his sowing and watering with urgency, as if holding back the toxicity of war that seemed to leach into every river and flood through landscapes. He bred all he could out of the dead land: beans, maize, carrots, lettuces. He had no objection to the stirring of lilac and aimed for an abundance of flowers: he wanted a bower of sweet-peas and roses.

That spring, and for a long time afterwards through the 1920s – the extended, uncertain spring after the war's five-year winter – Ford worked tirelessly at both growing and writing. He and Stella took on a small-holding, they had a baby, they pursued a strenuous kind of household economy which involved connoisseurial cooking, and Ford kept publishing prolifically. But lodged under this life-affirming activity there was a fantasy of simply stopping. He narrated many times over the story of the first evening in Sussex, when he lay in the dark and negotiated with himself over whether to let himself expire.¹¹ Ford's great novel about the immediate postwar period is *Last Post* (1928) and at its centre is a man lying on a bed in a garden. It's not

clear what exactly is wrong with him, physically or mentally. This recumbent figure is the brother of Christopher Tietjens, the Christ-like, burden-bearing soldier-hero of the *Parades End* tetralogy,¹² of which *Last Post* is the peculiar, static, sidelong final part. Ford is suggestively unclear about the relationship between the brothers. Are they, in some symbolic sense, one person, who both lives and dies in the aftermath of the war? Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) understood the upright and prone parallel heroes of her postwar novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) to be connected as a kind of single being with sane and insane selves. In both novels the ill person dies and their counterpart reappears suddenly, very upright, on the final page. Clarissa Dalloway and Christopher Tietjens stand there as sturdy, worldly survivors, and doubtless they'd be solid if anyone touched them. But readers might well catch between the lines a whisper of 'noli me tangere',¹³ as if these iconic characters are also the resurrected forms of those who have gone.

Last Post is a literary work of powerfully contrasting horizontals and verticals: a figure lies supine and the upright move around him. The central presence of the horizontal defines, commands, questions the meaning of, all that is vertical. These are the axes of illness and nursing, also of the dead and the living, or the dead and the resurrected. The arrested scenario of *Last Post* lingers in the mind alongside the half-resisted spring in *The Waste Land*, a poem that registers the desire to lie still, not to care, not to feel, not to stir or breed.

In 1920–1, when Eliot was imagining the morning commuters on London Bridge as walking ghosts and vice versa ('A crowd flowed over London bridge, so many'),¹⁴ tessellating in strange patterns the burial of the dead and the continuation of upright lives, Henry Lamb (1883–1960) was going back in memory to the war in Salonika,¹⁵ working on a large oil painting, *Advance Dressing Station on the Struma in 1916* (1921) (FIG.13), based on sketches he had made while a medical officer on the Macedonian front in 1916. The end of the war had brought no immediate relief or springful renewal for Lamb. He had been in France in late 1918 and suffered in a gas attack just before the armistice. It left him an invalid, and so he remained well into 1920, not knowing how far he would recover. But by May he was well enough to accept a commission from



FIG.13 Henry Lamb, *Advance Dressing Station on the Struma in 1916, 1921*
Oil on canvas
183.6 × 212.3 cm (72 ¼ × 83 ½ in)
Manchester Art Gallery

Manchester City Art Gallery for a major painting relating to his drawings of the medical station.

Advance Dressing Station centres on the blanketed form of a patient on a stretcher. The strikingly formal composition places the stretcher-bed right in front of us so that we approach as if from a church nave to an altar. There are plenty of people standing around, but it's the horizontal axis we must take in first, and the expressive posture of the orderly with his back to us, tending the sick man. Around the bed, in this green-shadowed and grassy clearing in a wood, great-coated soldiers sit hunched on the ground half dozing, or stand in loose groups talking, eating sandwiches, feeding horses, waiting for the arrival of more wounded. It looks to be early morning. Collars up, helmets pulled down, the gathered soldiers are still quiet and hunkered in this woodland dawn before hard work ensues.

The emphatic centrality of the horizontal figure, the large inscrutable presence of the standing soldier above, and the uncertain connection between them, all suggest a modern iconography of loss and living-on that will be at the heart of Ford's scheme in *Last Post* too. Images of the Christian passion and resurrection lie deep in the foundations of both

works. Piero della Francesca was a defining predecessor for many artists of Lamb's generation (his close friend Stanley Spencer included); alarming, unearthly, confronting, Piero's Sansepolcro fresco *The Resurrection* (c.1460) had a way of living in modern painters' minds. It feels close behind Lamb's composition, though one need not argue for direct influence or allusion. The memory of that quattrocento vision points up the drama of Lamb's flat-fronted design, as well as an atmosphere of sanctity, even of revelation, co-existing with the ordinariness of soldiers huddled and waiting. The officer behind the stretcher looks for a moment like a risen version of the covered invalid at his feet. Then the connection fades because there is nothing miraculous in this wooded infirmary – nothing more than men tending to each other, surviving, or not surviving.

Another soldier-artist, David Jones, was certainly thinking about divine resurrection in the first years after the war. In March 1921, after Jones's first visit to Ditchling in Sussex, Eric Gill tried to help him think where to start. 'It is true that it is no more reasonable to begin again with a Byzantine manner of work than with the manner of [Piero della] Francesca. The only sensible thing seems to be to go back to the beginning or whatever seems to be the beginning.'¹⁶ Jones joined Gill's community soon afterwards. The war had taken all his adult life; at 25 he was looking for a home and unsure what kind of beginning would be possible, or desirable, after all he had witnessed and endured and was not, for the time being, saying much about.

In April 1922 an exuberant, troubling, beautiful wood engraving appeared on the cover of *The Game*, the journal produced by St Dominic's Press and the Ditchling community. It was an image for a postwar Easter and among Jones's first works in a form he was just learning. *Noli Me Tangere/Soldiers at the Tomb* (1922) (FIG.14) is a diptych, the panel divided down the not-quite-middle with expressive roughness. On the left, Mary Magdalene kneels before the risen Christ, and on the right is the dark entrance to the tomb from which he has risen. Beside the tomb are soldiers, obviously asleep in the awkward half-upright positions of those meant to be on guard, their distinctive tin hats immediately recognisable as the army-issue helmets of the Great War. The miracle has so far passed them by.

FIG.14 David Jones, *Noli Me Tangere/Soldiers at the Tomb*, 1922
Wood engraving
7.62 × 8.89 cm (3 × 3 ½ in)
Private Collection



They have been sleeping through all the years, these soldiers, through Piero's pale, preternaturally static version of the Resurrection and Mantegna's fire-fringed Christ stepping into his astonished audience, and Tintoretto's weightless dancer launching upward. They sleep on the cover of *The Game* in 1922, not yet 'stirring' in that postwar spring. It's the sign of their dullness and blindness: clay beings who snooze in the presence of Christ. But one feels in David Jones's woodcut that their rest is warranted, that any waking will be complicated, that the two parts of the picture will take time to reconcile. Angels are trumpeting at the soldiers – a divine version of wartime *reveille* – but it might also be kind to let them sleep.

Looking back to Nash's *Spring in the Trenches*, shared elements become clear. Another group of soldiers wait in vigil. These men stand half alert with their weapons, in postures expressive of anxiety, tedium, lack of rest. They wait near the opening to a dug-out which offers shelter but is also a kind of tomb. If there's a resurrection in the garden around them, it's in the trees and in the soil.

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Stanley Spencer was always ready for the stirring of new life. He was in this sense the opposite of Eliot who begins his poem with such apprehension. He saw forms of resurrection all around him and moved straight towards them. He amplified and rejoiced in every hint of a sleeping thing coming to wakefulness. Resurrection is the central subject of his postwar work, and not only a subject but a physical force that animates almost every scene and body. It does not chafe and pain, but imbues his people with confidence and ease of movement.

He spent the late 1920s on what is really one great resurrection series. The memorial chapel he painted at Burghclere, Hampshire, is dominated by *The Resurrection of the Soldiers* (1927–32), filling the wall above the altar and showing young men from the Macedonian campaign awaking happily from a death we do not see, sitting a while in leisure and handing in their white memorial stones to a Christ who is unobtrusively stationed in the middle-ground, heaven's welcoming cloakroom attendant, relieving his guests of the crosses they hold in their arms. Here are the war-dead beginning new

lives of peace, not with sublime trumpeting in a sparkling New Jerusalem but with an ordinary kind of bliss, like the relaxed satisfaction of waking somewhere you want to be.

And where are they? Still in Greece. Still in uniform. Little has changed circumstantially for these soldiers, but they are spiritually peaceful. Their heavenly and earthly lives are continuous with each other so that, amazingly, this picture of the dead resurrecting is also, simultaneously, a picture of living soldiers on a routine day billeted near the walls of Kalinova.¹⁷ Spencer had experienced in that camp the settled, homely feelings that were sacred for him. 'I was not in a hurry to get away from anywhere', he remembered, 'but to establish this joy, this home, here and now in the midst of my immediate surroundings'.¹⁸ It took active effort to 'establish' himself there on the Greek hillside, but to make a home was to make a possible heaven, a place of happy rebirth. As he often reminded himself and others, 'one can't presume that this earth is not heaven'.¹⁹ These are Christian paintings to the core, however unorthodox the theology, but they communicate beyond particularities of faith. They combine anticipation of a future waking with a powerful suggestion that we must not reserve our hopes for another world, a heaven we have not yet seen. It may be here; this may be it.

The whole scheme of the Burghclere paintings insists on there being no dividing line between divine resurrection and the kinds of renewal one might feel or glimpse while cleaning the floor or brushing one's teeth. In the marvellous arched panel called *Reveille* (1929) (FIG.15), three soldiers are dressing under mosquito nets in their bell tent. Another has left his net and is shaving; four heads look in through the tent flap – presumably giving the wake-up call and orders. Each hanging net is reimagined as a chrysalis: translucent, glimmering, a protective skin from which a young man will shortly emerge. Within the nets, lively limbs stretch, each movement given amplified form by the covering, almost an aura or halo.

Army reveille might have been a subject associated with weariness and discomfort. After a cramped night in a hot tent far from home, you're woken early for another day of laborious and dangerous tasks. There is no choice and no privacy about any of it.





FIG.16 Stanley Spencer, *Dug-Out (or Stand-to)*, 1929
Oil on canvas
213.4 × 185.4 cm (84 × 73 in)
National Trust, Sandham Memorial Chapel

You wrestle with stiff shirts and puttees under the clinging net because one bite from the flies droning above you could mean malaria. Spencer had lived all this, had contracted malaria too, and yet painted the soldiers in states of serene transfiguration. 'The idea is again really the Resurrection', Spencer wrote as he worked.²⁰ He emphasised lack of hurry as part of the heavenliness we see here: the men at the door are not shouting or chivvying. Everyone is busy (the grammar of Spencer's art is rich in present participles), but adopting their own pace: 'ever busy, yet ever at rest', in words that Spencer had learned from St Augustine.²¹ The scenes of ordinary and contented busyness throughout the chapel give intimations, without budging from their earthly language of routines and chores, of upward movement into resurgence or flight. The most mundane materials are ready to be wings: metal pails slung over the shoulders are wings, sun-shading capes are wings on men who seem to be airborne though they are also lying on a rock. Rocks themselves are wings when lifted in pairs at Kalinova.

The Resurrection of the Soldiers is neighboured on one side by *Reveille* and on the other by a further scene of army life in Macedonia: the morning stand-to in the trenches (FIG.16). At one stage Spencer planned for this to be part of the *Resurrection* itself. Soldiers come up from underground, rising into the new day. Spencer imagines – or lets these soldiers imagine – emerging to find peace instead of war. Perhaps in the picture this day has come, or perhaps it's the atmosphere of hope that makes the scene so harmonious. The sergeant, who is camouflaged with pinned-on vegetation, looks like one of those figures in Spencer's 1924–7 *The Resurrection, Cookham*, coated with the turf and flowers from their graves and about to shake off their coverings as the men at reveille will shake off their nets.

If the daily experience of these wartime routines included exhaustion, pain, boredom and despair,

Spencer has nudged and moulded them into forms that express pleasure. With his extraordinary capacity to find or make joy in unlikely places, this is what he was continually doing. He described the process in a particularly striking way in his contribution to the 1934 book *Sermons by Artists*. 'Distortion arises from the effort to see something in a way that will enable [an artist] to love it', he writes there.²² The malaria nets are 'distorted' into evanescent chrysalides, the stand-to is distorted to suggest an atmosphere of peace. They are made 'lovable' and in this new form become part of a resurrection that is not elsewhere and posthumous but 'here and now in the midst' of war.²³

Spencer made beginnings where he needed them and not where any obvious pattern of events decreed. 'And so my life begins where I wish it to', he wrote as he set out on a version of his autobiography in the 1930s, 'and my selection of where is of the same order of importance and consequence as what a bird flies to first thing in the morning. I hope I can accomplish that degree of directness and purpose.'²⁴ That must be one of the most remarkable sentences in a vast and deeply original body of writing that we can appreciate more fully now that much of it is appearing in print for the first time. We picture Spencer, incongruously, as the bird darting from nest to hedge or branch with a lightness and freedom that also has 'importance and consequence'.²⁵ There is no working out of what to do, no turning over on the pillow to consider, but a trust in instinct and appetite. The bird might fly each morning to something different, rapid and certain each time. The memorial paintings at Burghclere are more concerned with the character of renewal than with ending. Spencer's people are still waking, still coming to new consciousness, a century after they were first conceived. Life begins here, and here and here, the pictures seem to say, with a directness and purpose that Spencer might compare with the flight of a bird in the morning.