



The Enchantment of Stanley Spencer

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Abstract

In the early 1930s the artist Stanley Spencer committed himself to working on the never-achieved Church-House project. It was intended to reflect his understanding of God and religion as love, and, furthermore, of the sacred being fully integrated in secular times and places. The first painting he finished for the project was *Villagers and Saints* (1933), now in the collection of the University of Hull. This paper uses *Villagers and Saints* as a way into a reading of Spencer's work, drawing on insights from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* to explore how Spencer sacramentalises the material world. The first part of the paper contextualises *Villagers and Saints*, and the second part identifies its vision with what appears to have been a conversion experience, discussed by Spencer in his public writing.

Keywords

Stanley Spencer; *Villagers and Saints*; conversion; sacramentalisation; love

The Enchantment of Stanley Spencer¹

For I saw full assuredly that our Substance is in God, and also I saw that in our sensuality God is: for in the self [-same] point that our Soul is made sensual, in the self [-same] point is the City of God ordained to him from without beginning...

Julian of Norwich

This paper is an attempt to sort out a conversation in my head, a conversation commencing when I first saw Stanley Spencer's painting *Villagers and Saints* in the Hull University Art Collection, and a little later started to read Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age*

¹ This paper could not have been possible without the warm help of John Bernasconi, Louise MacFarlane, Laura Kidner, Kieran Flanagan and, by no means least, Maria Cooke.

(Taylor 2007). Despite their very significant differences in some way Taylor's book seemed to help clarify what I was trying to think about Spencer's painting, and the painting seemed to be illustrating much of what I took Taylor to be struggling to say. The conversation between them was in my head because Taylor never refers to Spencer, and given the low profile of Spencer in North America – Taylor is Canadian and based there – has probably scarcely considered him. Taylor helped me see something in Spencer's painting, but what and how? The answers forming in my mind coalesced around issues of enchantment, conversion, the puzzle of grace and transcendence of the secular. Once the conversation started to emphasise those kinds of issues it stopped being a personal quirk and connected with issues of theological significance. This paper is the result.



The first part of the paper pays attention to *Villagers and Saints*, putting it in the context of Spencer's work and, more importantly, his understanding of the meaning of religion. The second part of the paper uses Charles Taylor's book to help develop a claim about Spencer: he is an artist with an imagination out of its time, a modern artist without a modern sensibility. Specifically, Spencer saw the world as *enchanted* in a way marginalised by the dominant immanent frame of modern secular imagination. This 'timely out of timeliness' is the root of the ambivalence of Spencer's art: 'Universalising yet provincial, whole-hogging and nit-picking by turns, his pictures elude us by refusing to be just one recognisable thing at a time and because the things they are often seem to be in contradiction with each other' (Gervais 1992: 243). In its third and concluding part the paper brings the threads together to reach a conclusion about the importance of

the enchantment of Stanley Spencer: he encourages the attempt to see the unseen by sacramentalising the visible.

The Painting in Context

Villagers and Saints was painted in 1933 and exhibited at Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery in the same year. It entered the University of Hull Art Collection in 1965, where it is kept on permanent display, except when loaned to Spencer exhibitions, such as the 1991 Barbican retrospective (Alison 1991).

The canvas is roughly 89 centimetres high by 159 long. Two-thirds of the way up the left edge appears a brick wall with a window sill and at right angles to it, along the back of the painting, there is the back wall of a house punctuated in turn by a door, a window sill and an open door approximately two-thirds of the way along from the left. Four characters sit with their backs to the long wall. Moving from the viewer's left to right they are a man in a bowler hat holding an open sack, a younger man in a jacket and then two characters follow – one an old man with a beard in the centre, the second a woman who appears to be singing – dressed in white gowns. The central band of the picture has a character in white with their back to the viewer and hands in the air, another in white with black hair who looks a little grumpy, and a boy in a reddish-brown pullover scratching a circle in the ground. He is accompanied by another boy in the foreground in grey, clutching a bag of marbles. On the right hand side of the picture is a character appearing to be separate from the action; slumped against a step he is in grey-white underwear, legs apart and at first glance fast asleep.

The narrative of the picture flows from the viewer's left to right and two lines, one from the bottom left and another from the top left, converge on the grey figure on the right, described by Gilbert Spencer as 'down to his socks, pants and vest – a wonderful figure' and as 'half-way to a saint' (G. Spencer 1961: 184). The man in grey underwear is 'half-way to a saint' in a number of ways. In terms of the formal structure of the painting he is the point towards which the two narrative thrusts of villagers (the bottom line) and saints (the top) lead. Second, he is clothed but stripped of the outer garments of the everyday villagers and without the white sheets of the saints. He is in a state of *becoming*, of moving from the grey middle. Third his face expresses a kind of sleepy ecstasy half-way between drunkenness and reverie, half-way between villager and saint. Like all of Spencer's paintings involving religious themes – except the centre section of 1947s *The Resurrection and the Raising of Jairus's Daughter* in Southampton – the action is outdoors, in a more or less public space. This makes it possible for the

picture to include the man on the far left with the sack who is based on an old Maidenhead rag and bone man (G. Spencer 1961: 184), and the character who appears to be listening to the saint with the beard².

The figures in white are taken quite reasonably by Gilbert Spencer to be the saints of the painting's title, the old man with the beard who looks a little like a comic book Old Testament prophet being the most important (G. Spencer 1961: 184). The boys in grey and red pullovers are the Spencer brothers playing marbles although they are being covered by carpets thrown out of the door to the viewer's right of the saint with long hair. Nobody is paying the boys much attention, except perhaps for the saint in the middle who seems to be pushing the boy in red out of the way, as if to make space. The female saint immediately above the boy in the red pullover shows Stanley Spencer's debts to Flemish art and is virtually straight out of a nativity by van der Weyden or Goes, just as Spencer's palette is a version of Brueghel's in his *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (c. 1600)³.

At the bottom of the picture, just to the left of centre, is an open book. The text cannot be read but from its layout the book might well be a Bible.

What is the context of *Villagers and Saints*? Spencer had just completed the Burghclere Memorial Chapel (the earliest sketches for which had been made in 1923, although painting did not commence until 1927) and moved back to Cookham, the village in which he had been born in 1891. The Burghclere chapel is a major and moving achievement in which Spencer melded his war experiences in Macedonia with the influence of Giotto's Arena Chapel in Padua to commemorate the death of Henry Sandham, the brother of Mary Behrend who was to become one of Spencer's main supporters and later helped finance Hull's acquisition of *Villagers and Saints*⁴. Sandham

² The saint with arms raised in exultation becomes very interesting as soon as one notices what the rag and bone man is putting into his sack: empty water bottles. It becomes interesting to wonder whether Spencer is slyly implying that some saints might retain human thirsts, or indeed if he is hinting at a baptismal theme. Is the saint imploring the rag and bone man to baptise him with bottled water because such is the only kind of pure water a secular age can truly understand? Or is the solution to the riddle much more banal? Gilbert Spencer identifies them as Vichy water bottles, and Stanley had been drinking Vichy water because of kidney problems (G. Spencer 1961: 184).

³ In the 1930s the compass of Spencer's painting moved from Italy to Germany, before synthesis of the two strands in the 1940s and 1950s. For example the head of the man in *Consciousness*, one of the series of the *Beatitudes of Love* of 1937 is distinctly Flemish, albeit with a very contemporary flavouring of Dix and Beckmann (although of course they were in their turn both heavily influenced by North European painters such as Bosch).

⁴ Spencer did not travel widely and his knowledge of Giotto was largely due to reproductions and Ruskin's *Giotto and his Works in Padua*, which he had been given around 1911 (Leder 1976: 15).

had died in 1919 as the result of an illness contracted whilst in the army in Macedonia (Malvern 2000; Robinson 1979: 26–27; Robinson 1991).

Work on the Memorial Chapel obviously whetted Spencer's appetite for large projects and gave him the confidence to imagine one of his own devising⁵. In a notebook entry probably written in 1938 Spencer reflected on an ambitious scheme upon which he had embarked in order to allow his work 'proper expression'. Yet because 'there has never appeared to be any likelihood of my being given the wherewithal to carry out such a scheme' it existed in imagination and fragments alone⁶. It was what Spencer called his Church-House, 'a church (parish church size) two houses (homes) & in the same district would be dotted about here & there little chapels . . . & little rooms' (S. Spencer 2001: 185). The walls of the Church-House would be covered with Spencer's paintings: the 'religious' works; nudes of his second wife Patricia Preece, and what amounted to works of devotion to his first wife Hilda (to whom Spencer wrote a stream of letters, even after her death in 1950). Each woman would be given a 'chapel' of her own. In his notebook Spencer said: 'Most of the paintings I have done since the Burghclere Memorial was finished in 1932 have been small parts of this scheme' (S. Spencer 2001: 185). *Villagers and Saints* consequently stands as one of the first pieces, if not *the* first, to be prepared for the walls of the imaginary Church-House (Bickerton 1961: 1⁷; Gormley 1976: 21).

The mixture of painting intended for the Church-House appears to be somewhat eclectic, ranging as it does from the spiritual to the erotic, or in different terms from the sacred to the profane. But this is the key to unlocking Spencer's concern for his work to be given 'proper expression'. He is not saying his work is of such a magnitude that only a kind of self-made cathedral is fit for its display. The phrase 'proper expression' isn't loaded in such a conceited way. Rather it goes to the heart of Spencer's understanding of the work of art, the work of the artist and, with a further step, to what he took religion to mean. There is 'proper expression' when there is integration of the part with a whole, an integration which moves from the local to the universal.

⁵ Frances Spalding however provides evidence to suggest Spencer's attraction to such projects might have been stimulated earlier than Burghclere: Spalding 2001.

⁶ The Church-House gave the organising principle for the Barbican Spencer exhibition in 1991: Alison 1991. A computer animation of Spencer's sketched for the scheme was made for the Spencer exhibition at Tate Britain in 2001. It can be viewed at: http://www.tate.org.uk/research/researchservices/archive/audiofilmhighlights/player_spencer.shtm.

⁷ This reference is from the catalogue to Spencer's first posthumous solo exhibition. He died on 14 December 1959, and the 45 piece exhibition was held in Worthing between 9 September and 7 October 1961. Portraits and landscapes dominated it.

At the level of the work of art, 'proper expression' prevails when, for Spencer, the method connects with meaning: 'The good picture is when the way (i.e. the particular character of sensibility evinced in the carrying out), is inseparable from the essential meaning & beauty of the picture' (S. Spencer 2001: 36). He used this principle as a very demanding yardstick with which to judge the work of others. Botticelli passed Spencer's test because each part contributes to the whole whereas Michelangelo failed it because, 'there are bits of Michelangelo wandering about here & there not quite knowing what they are up to or what they are there for... He seems to be not completely in control' (S. Spencer 2001: 37). *Villagers and Saints* can be judged to meet this demanding standard. First of all, its formal structure conveys a message focused on the man in grey, the man half-way between villager and saint. Second, the painting's essential meaning (villagers can become saints or, more interestingly, saints sit besides villagers if only we know how to look) is inseparable from its organisation. Spencer judged his landscapes to be failures by this standard. In the catalogue to the last solo show to be held in his lifetime, in order to raise funds for the maintenance of Cookham Church, Spencer wrote: 'While I have a certain respect for my landscapes I was never able to express in this form the meaning that was to be found in Cookham' (S. Spencer 1958: 1).

This takes the theme of 'proper expression' to the level of the work of the artist. According to Spencer, because Botticelli managed to subordinate everything to the integrity of his vision, all of his paintings are undeniably Botticelli's. 'Everything says Botticelli: with the same degree of robustness, certitude and clarity. This utter fusion of all the amazingly varied feelings and sensibilities that must have been in an artist of his calibre into one pure creative product Botticelli' (S. Spencer 2001: 37). In other words, in producing a body of work possessed of the integrity of a unitary vision, the artist creates both art and himself. The work is a *vocation* in which the production of work is a process of the production of the self. As Antony Gormley has said of Spencer: 'He projects an idea of human life as *immersion* and the development of human consciousness as its purpose' (Gormley 1992: 7). Like the men he sketched and painted in the Glasgow shipyards during the Second World War, Spencer appears to have identified himself as a worker engaged in a life-project as opposed to the creator of single paintings (S. Spencer 2001: 180). Just as the strength of a ship depends on the precision with which each rivet is hammered home, so Spencer's own paintings have individual quality, but are parts of a whole greater than the sum of its parts. In these terms, the impersonality of many of Spencer's landscapes, and the extent to which many of them might have been painted by anyone (or at least by someone not Stanley Spencer) is

the firmest evidence of his contention that they were done for money and were not expressive of his inner vision⁸.

The third level of 'proper expression', the one to which Spencer was aiming in the Church-House project, was complete integration. This is the point at which he shifts from the local to the universal. The clue to what integration meant for Spencer is provided by a notebook entry from around 1939–40: 'the religious experience & the ordinary life circumstances of my life...needed to be joined together in a kind of marriage in order that their full meaning could be attained' (S. Spencer 2001: 33). A few years later Spencer used the phrase 'a sort of heaven' which provided the title for the 1993 Tate Liverpool retrospective, and he went on: 'I am only interested in this world in so far as it assists or is useable as a means of my experiencing & revealing this other heaven world' (S. Spencer 2001: 104). At this level complete integration means the reconciliation of the local circumstances of everyday life with a sense of heaven which pulls the local into something much greater than itself but which also uses the local as a window on heaven. In this way, Spencer believed, both the ordinary and the spiritual can become real because they can both be revealed through the work of the artist, and this in turn is tantamount to 'the Resurrection happening every moment of one's life' (S. Spencer 2001: 120).

Villagers and Saints well reflects these claims. First of all, it explicitly joins together the religious and the ordinary and in so doing adds a new dimension to each. The inhabitants of Cookham become physical beings who are on their way to a kind of saintliness, and the saints become presences in the ordinary world. It is a Resurrection. Furthermore the local world of Cookham and the obsessive way in which two boys play marbles, stops being entirely banal and, instead, takes on the dimension of referencing a sort of heaven, here on earth. According to Spencer a village – and presumably therefore villagers too – are especially able to carry such weight of meaning because, 'Things are permanent and steadfast in a Village – it's religious in that way – things haven't altered much' (S.Spencer 1958: 2). Second, Resurrection stops being a single historical event and instead it becomes something happening everyday, eternally but not banally. The point was made exceptionally well by the author of the first book on Spencer, R.H. Wilenski (Wilenski 1924), when he later wrote of Spencer: 'when the story of the Gospels is veritably believed in, it is enacted daily for the believer in terms of his own environment. For such a believer there is no escape from the present connection with those happenings' (Wilenski 1958: 7). The man in grey is not

⁸ In a letter to Mary Behrend in 1935 Spencer complained: 'only the landscapes have a fair chance of selling & I would rather teach or write than do landscapes' (S. Spencer 2001: 168).

just asleep, he is in the process of Resurrection, while the saint on his knees in front of the rag and bone man is perhaps only recently resurrected and still possessed of memories of his physical life, a life retaining attractions. He has yet to join the heavenly choir of which the Flemish saint with long hair is a member. The boys playing marbles are innocent of the presences around them, although they too are inescapably players in the drama. Spencer communicates the beauty of the drama by showing the boys surrounded by a welcoming band of the Resurrected whom they shall eventually join even if such concerns are presently far from their minds.

In these terms it was *necessary* for the Church-House project to provide space for the display of nudes of the women Spencer loved as well as for paintings like the *Villagers and Saints*, with their obvious spiritual aspect. 'Spencer made no distinction between the sacred and the profane. It was quite natural to him to include the almost scientifically observed nudes of his second wife in his "Church-House"' (Gervais 1992: 255). This is because whatever their formal subject the bulk of the post-1932 paintings are representations of love, and for Spencer love is the essence of religion. Love and religion are identical because they both bring happiness and happiness in its turn brings a grateful aspiration to express what causes it: 'And this brings passion & passion brings & reaches to creative power. This is the way of Vision. It ends with me seeing this special, & to me crucial, meaningfulness in ordinary experience' (S. Spencer 2001: 253). In these terms, the conventional divide between the spiritual and the sensual actually becomes completely meaningless if not, more strongly, an obstacle in the way of an achievement of the 'proper expression' of love and religion. A nude becomes an obvious and necessary presence in a religious building so long as it is painted with gratitude towards the beloved, with the happiness caused by any expression of love. Consequently, it is quite wrong to interpret the nudes of Patricia Preece as merely sensual and erotic, even though Spencer clearly painted her with a very focussed eye. More importantly, the paintings are expressions of Spencer's gratitude for her, his love for her, and therefore the presence of absolute meaningfulness in everything⁹.

⁹ To this extent the steely distance from Spencer – almost contempt for him – in Patricia Preece's facial expressions becomes very pertinent. By turning away from Spencer, by letting him see her body without letting him express with her physical happiness for its presence, Preece is being nothing other than *ungrateful* (in the full meaning of the word). As such she repudiates the passion she causes. But Spencer does not cease to be grateful, and therefore he has to carry on expressing the special meaningfulness he sees in her. Gervais calls these paintings 'hymns of love' (Gervais 1992: 255) although Preece's face implies the love was all one way. Such is the dilemma in these paintings. For Spencer's exceptionally difficult relationship with Patricia Preece see Pople 1991. Meanwhile there are very few nudes of Spencer's first wife Hilda, and in terms of Spencer's own arguments this could only be because she refused to let him express his gratitude for her. However

Love then is the principle of complete integration and it is the vocation of the artist to try to find the means through which it can be given 'proper expression'. But in this way the artist's vocation becomes analogous with the work of God Himself. Spencer said God worked at Creation over a course of time, coming back to do more and more (rather than just pressing a button) because He was enjoying Himself. God created out of the aspiration and happiness borne of love. Spencer believed something similar was available to all of us if only we would look with imagination, integrating the seen with the unseen, looking with love: 'the love I should like to have the pleasure of introducing you to... is an art, a most difficult & exacting art, & the most sublime of all the arts, because it alone has the power to create, the power to conceive the miraculous, the revealing power...' (S. Spencer 2001: 111).

Enchantment

In a 1934 lecture Spencer had complained about the secular tendency to split love from God, and to associate love merely with instincts. The traces of this kind of separation run through condemnations of the plan to include sensual nudes in the Church-House. According to Spencer: 'The degree of our divorce from God, for which so many of us are suffering, has conducted our capacity to love into a sort of secular *cul-de-sac*'. But according to Spencer when love is connected with God it cannot possibly be a dead-end of any sort because, 'The love of God includes all our instincts and desires' (S. Spencer 2001: 163). The conventional distinction between the sacred and profane consequently collapses, and indeed Spencer identified secular distinctions as the root of many of the problems of the age. Once again the argument is one for complete integration since: 'The divorce from God produces a *general* divorce between all the varied capacities and desires of our nature' (S. Spencer 2001: 163).

The secular mind tries to overcome the divorce from God by parcelling up all the different aspects of what it means to be human, and through the identification of each with its own specific mode of expression and instrumental action. Spencer identifies secularity with an urge to classify the things of the world, thus making their fusion impossible. The end result is a variety of dead-ends where there could in fact be the apprehension of the fullness of love, the fullness of God. 'In the worship and love of God', Spencer wrote, 'there is no fear of *culs-de-sac*, no fear of overstating or exaggerating one's feelings, and it is in the nature of this fact that the creative faculties are quickened'

and despite their centrality to the Church-House project the nudes need to be kept in some perspective. In the course of his career Spencer painted fewer than twelve nudes.

(S. Spencer 2001: 164). Indeed: ‘Love can exist only when all doubt is removed and certainty of unlimitedness is clearly and consciously felt at the beginning’ (S. Spencer 2001: 166). *Villagers and Saints* put unlimitedness at the very beginning of the Church-House project, with its refusal to separate the two different categories of figures one from the other, and with its emphasis on the becoming of the man in the grey underwear¹⁰. By this argument, Fiona MacCarthy’s identification of the Church-House as Spencer’s ‘temple of eroticism’ is to miss the point entirely and to impose secular categories of precisely the kind Spencer had challenged (MacCarthy 1997: 55).

For these claims to be more than just grand sentiments, a certain definition of the relationship between the self and the world is necessary, and Spencer was aware of this. If his self were to be capable of proper expression, it had to be embraced as a self in relationship with others: ‘Every thing or person, other than myself, is a future potential part of myself, or a revealer of and agent in revealing unknown parts of myself’ (Spencer 2001: 166). To be properly human then, and to stand any chance of avoiding dead-ends of secular division, requires a recognition of the need to immerse the self in the presence of others. The self has to be able to soak up the outside, bringing it inside. Furthermore, these others become necessary for the self but they are not at all limited by the needs of the self. They are given an integrity and validity of their own, which it is the artist’s vocation to accept in gratitude. Here Spencer’s understandings of knowing and being coalesce.

From where does this view of the self, the world, and the relationships between them come? Clearly Spencer is repudiating what he identifies as the narrowness of the secular mind, and some of the responses to his work rather imply the validity of his depiction of it. For Gervais, Spencer’s vision came from a determined attempt to return to the kind of innocence symbolised by the boys in *Villagers and Saints*. The paintings are deliberately innocent because in no other way could Spencer even begin to recapture the sense of the banal everyday integration of everything which can lead boys to be more concerned with a game of marbles than the singing of saints (Gervais 1992: 247). Equally, Spencer’s commitment to the art of the Renaissance (it is noticeable how his writings rarely say anything about contemporary art and artists; his chosen peers were Giotto and Botticelli) can be taken to be a sign of a determination to return to a more innocent kind of art in which everything was integrated because created before secular classifications had become too entrenched. Meanwhile the first major North American Spencer exhibition, in Washington in 1997–98 and subsequently Mexico City and

¹⁰ Gervais sees the same refusal to separate the spiritual from the material in Spencer’s 1959 self-portrait: Gervais 1992: 246.

San Francisco, presented him as exemplary of an 'English vision', thus intimating a connection of his work with Blake but, paradoxically, particularising it even as the presentation was concerned to show Spencer's relevance beyond these shores (MacCarthy 1997¹¹).

I want to offer an alternative explanation to the question of the sources of Stanley Spencer's vision, and I want to attempt this by paying attention to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. Taylor wants to work out why belief in God is so difficult today when it was more or less impossible not to believe in Him a few centuries ago (Taylor 2007: 25), and his answer offers a way of understanding why and how Spencer could produce a picture like *Villagers and Saints* with its intermingling of the religious and the everyday, and moreover why he could understand love and God in the way he did. To put the matter precisely: Stanley Spencer's vision is indebted to the persistence in secular modernity of the possibility of the imagination of an enchanted world.

Working in terms of Max Weber's understanding, Taylor defines enchantment as an imaginary stressing the active role of spirits, demons and extra-human moral forces in the world. Because humans are understood as just one amongst many active forces, from within an enchanted imaginary it is necessary to be open to those other forces, to accept their reality and know how to apprehend them. An imaginary is understood by Taylor to be something like the overarching world view prior to philosophy through which societies and cultures historically make sense of what happens, how things hang together (or don't), and what judgements can be passed upon them (Taylor 2004). The enchanted imaginary accepts a world of action beyond the mind of humans, and therefore also a world of the unseen intermingling with the seen. This explains why in the enchanted imaginary it is pertinent to pray to saints or indeed to objects such as relics or specific places associated with particular events. Objects and places 'were loci of spiritual power; which is why they had to be treated with care, and if abused could wreak terrible damage' (Taylor 2007: 32). A particular view of the self follows from this enchanted world view. Whereas the secular self is, Taylor says, 'buffered' because it is built on the presumption of a distinction between the individual as mind capable of knowing a world always 'out there', the self in the conditions of enchantment is 'porous'; 'the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at all clearly drawn... So in the pre-modern world, meanings are not only in minds, but can reside in things, or in various kinds of extra-human

¹¹ The Preface to the book of the exhibition is noticeably unable to avoid a very secular 'come on'. It talks about how Spencer's 'astonishing nudes' demand attention in 'this sex-engrossed century' (MacCarthy 1997: vi). The passage was *not* written by Fiona MacCarthy.

but intra-cosmic subjects' (Taylor 2007: 32–33). In short, the imaginary of an enchanted world identifies everything as interconnected, porous to everything else, unlimited.

Obviously this is a gloss of Taylor's account, but what he outlines fits Stanley Spencer very well. Indeed, Spencer sees the world in terms of an enchanted imaginary.

First of all, Spencer stresses the porosity of everything to everything else, and he implicitly highlights the point when he identifies secularity with classification and the division of things from one another. Classification and separation are only imaginable as human actions if there is a prior supposition that all is connected. Indeed they are only imaginable as damaging, if connection is presupposed to be of the essence of things. Here it is also important to note how except in formal portraits Spencer always paints humans as social beings; as in Brueghel, people simply teem in his pictures, and these are people in relationship with one another. For example, in most of Spencer's Resurrection paintings the first thing the risen do is welcome one another by touching, thus mingling physical and spiritual presence¹². These are gestures of connection and, more strongly, of the integration of individuals into porous relationships of sociality irreducible to any single one of them. Taylor says, 'living in the enchanted, porous world. . . was inherently living socially' (Taylor 2007: 42). Or as Spencer seems to be saying; social relationships are redemptive so long as they are lived in terms of the complete integration of self with other following from loving gratitude for the other. Second, 'everything' includes time and space. As Wilenski noted, if the Gospel is true it is always true and therefore history evaporates, making it perfectly permissible to picture Christ carrying the Cross along a Cookham street (a scene Spencer painted in 1920). Time is not at all empty waiting to be filled (as Taylor drawing on Benjamin describes secular time: Taylor 2007: 54) rather it is always replete, always full if only there is openness to it. The fruit of openness is what Spencer realised but Taylor describes: 'The really real, full being is outside of time, unchanging. Time is a moving image of eternity. It is imperfect or tends to imperfection' (Taylor 2007: 55).

The thread running through Spencer's work consequently becomes his 'out of timeliness'. It is out of time because it expresses an enchanted imaginary in which eternal truths always remain the same. Yet this thread is always open to contradiction by the 'timeliness' Spencer tried to represent. After all if eternal truths are always the same they can be put into local and contemporary settings. But as soon as that is done, the eternal becomes visually incongruous. The works of Spencer in which the incongruity is resolved are those in

¹² The sociability of resurrection features at both Burghclere and in such canvases as the 1945 Resurrection at Aberdeen.

which it is presented as simply the way things are, and therefore as something approaching a question to the viewer precisely because the porosity represented in the painting is contrary to the buffered selves and limitation through classification promoted by secularity. The Hull *Villagers and Saints* is an example of success according to this measure.

Of course to offer this explanation is to beg a question. There is a suspicion it is a little too neat. It is one thing to explain *how* Spencer saw the world as he did, but the question remains of how *could* he so see it? It is one thing to identify Spencer with an enchanted imaginary, but still the problem remains of how he came to see the world in such a way given, as Taylor rightly sees, its marginality in a secular age. The sociological answer points towards the curiosities of Spencer's personal conditions of existence, rooted in a village downstream of the full brunt of secular modernity. But there is another more theological explanation, a far more interesting explanation, to be found tucked away in Spencer's own writings.

In the 1934 lecture, Spencer wrote a passage begging all the theological questions: 'When I lived in Cookham I was disturbed by a feeling of everything being meaningless. But quite suddenly I became aware that everything was full of special meaning, and this made everything holy'. Spencer continued: 'The instinct of Moses to take his shoes off when he saw the burning bush was very similar to my feelings. I saw many burning bushes in Cookham. I observed this sacred quality in most unexpected quarters'. Carrying on: 'What I saw was to me miraculous: compared to what I had seen previously, it was full of unexpected and surprising meaning and fullness' (S. Spencer 2001: 164). This is nothing less than the description of a *conversion*.

Taylor describes conversion as a process – it might be instant or it might be longer term – in which vision fundamentally changes as one moves beyond the dominant imaginary to the openness it denies. In secular modernity the dominant imaginary is identified by Taylor as the 'immanent frame', the imaginary establishing, 'the idea of an...order which could be understood on its own, without reference to interventions from outside (even if we might reason from it to a Creator, and even a benevolent Creator), the life of the buffered individual, instrumentally effective in secular time' (Taylor 2007: 543). This is precisely the world Spencer saw in terms of classification and dead-ends, and it is also noteworthy how he disdained the instrumental effectiveness of his landscapes (which were painted to raise the money to allow him the wherewithal for 'proper expression'). As a modern convert then Spencer's vision moved beyond the restrictions of the immanent frame and broke its limitations. As Taylor notes however conversion, 'may require her [the convert] to invent a new language or literary style. She breaks from the immanent order to a

larger, more encompassing one, which includes it while disrupting it' (Taylor 2007: 732). Once again then, it is a question of a distinctly 'timely out of timeliness'. For a visual example of the point Taylor is making it is necessary to look no further than *Villagers and Saints*.

But there is more to the link between Spencer's comments about what happened to him in Cookham and Taylor's remarks about conversion. Spencer's concern with 'proper expression' and complete integration, and indeed his seeing burning bushes everywhere, registers a sense of *fullness*. For Spencer the world became full in a way Taylor's immanent frame – or Spencer's own secularity – could not possibly imagine, and with this apprehension Spencer himself became full, and the fullness was one transforming what had previously seemed to him to be the dead meaninglessness of everything. This is what Taylor undoubtedly has in mind when he talks about, 'moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy. Our highest aspirations and our life energies are somehow lined up'. It is the fullness of, 'the presence of God, or the voice of nature, or the force which flows through everything, or the alignment in us of desire and the drive to form' (Taylor 2007: 6). Such was the fullness of Stanley Spencer; such were the consequences of his conversion into enchantment¹³.

Conclusion

At which point another question remains dangling, winking at us. If Spencer's art reflects his enchantment, and if his enchantment was the result of a conversion, what caused the conversion? Spencer himself provides few clues other than constantly to refer back to Cookham. He once spoke about how the *Swan Upping* painting (finished in 1919 and in the Tate) started to take form during a service in Cookham Church, listening to the sounds from the river (S. Spencer 1958: 1). Perhaps this little anecdote provides one kind of clue to the conversion of Stanley Spencer. Although *Swan Upping* was finished in 1919, it had actually been started in 1914–1915; the long gestation was due to his war service. The pat secular answer is consequently to identify Spencer's conversion as a more or less post-traumatic stress reaction to the war or as an attempt to come

¹³ 'Spencer wanted to impose himself on the world' claims David Gervais (Gervais 1992: 256). If the argument I have developed is plausible, Gervais's claim points in the wrong direction because Spencer's conversion entailed precisely a *loss* of the secular-modern buffered self to be imposed on the world.

to terms with the dissonance between backwater Cookham and militarised Macedonia. But this only holds if the conversion happened after 1918, and the evidence cannot sustain such a conclusion. The answer from within Taylor's immanent frame is thus unsteady at best.

This leaves the theological answer: Spencer's conversion was an act of grace. But again the supporting evidence appears to be thin. For example the off-hand way in which Spencer talks about what I have identified as his conversion experience either betrays embarrassment (but given the rest of Spencer's notebooks, it is improbable he would have been embarrassed about this in particular) or a failure on his part to appreciate the conversion for what it actually was; a moment of grace which in turn, as Taylor helps us to understand, involved a reimagination and revisioning of the world and self. Yet then it is necessary to wonder whether a man of the sensibility of Spencer would be likely to be guilty of such a failure of recognition. Those lines of enquiry are diverting, but they run the risk of being inconclusive, speculative or biographically reductive, thus piling mountains of secular knowledge before the presence of the work itself.

It is safest to turn to the work, and there the thinness of the evidence for a moment of grace is overcome. *Villagers and Saints*, like many of Spencer's works – but emphatically *not all* of them bearing in mind some of the landscapes or the *Peonies* in Nottingham Castle gallery – reflects a distinctive vision of the world, a vision of an enchanted world in which everything is precisely as it seems and yet also infinitely more. The work itself speaks better than any other kind of testimony of a movement beyond the limitations of the secular immanent frame, of a movement to recognition of the fullness of self, time and space all at once. It is fullness borne of the happiness of Resurrecting love reconciling what the secular imaginary is otherwise too keen to divorce and parcel up as the never-to-meet sacred and profane, heavenly and this-worldly. In this way Spencer's work is a grateful exercise in the sacramentalisation of the visible, the association of the seen with the unseen. His work is showing that love can be found in all things if only they are approached with a humble gratitude, and if love can be so found then equally God is available to all who are prepared happily to nurture the ability to see more than the framed and limited visible and material world.

Spencer shows what Taylor's philosophy implies at length; a sense of fullness awaits those who through a conversion of their vision and experience see independently of the immanent frame. Stanley Spencer's gift of enchantment is a vision of fully integrated love and repayment of the gratitude due to God as the most loving and happiest Creator.

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