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Your Loving Friend, Stanley:
the Great War correspondence between Stanley Spencer and Desmond Chute
ed.

essays by Paul Gough, 143 pages, 42 bw ills, Sansom
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This gem of a book transcribes the 31 letters the artist wrote to Desmond Chute, a young aesthete, whom Spencer befriended as a 24?year old orderly in a Bristol military hospital. Chute introduced Spencer to St Augustine?s Confessions, which transfigured the latter? s understanding of the hospital? s ?menial grime?. There are many moving passages such as when Spencer, in the Macedonian theatre of war, talks about, how in his art, ?I shall be able to show God in the bare ?real? things, in a limber wagon in ravines, in fowling mule lines.? Spencer? s wartime reminiscences of his native Cookham have a hallucinatory vividness. Philip Vann

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.
A note on the correspondence

Few British artists have written as many letters as Stanley Spencer. Even the best-informed estimates can only hazard the volume of words he committed to paper, though it is reckoned he wrote in primary material some two million words. The Tate Gallery alone holds eight-eight bulky notebooks, thirteen diaries, and over 900 extensive tracts of writing, ranging from cursory notes on the back of envelopes to jottings that cover many pages of his rather urgent script. Likening his output to that of James Joyce, one archivist has suggested that ‘Spencer’s writing presents a stream-of-consciousness chronicle of his own thoughts and feelings unparalleled both in volume and intensity by any artist in the twentieth century.’ (1)

Spencer’s letter writing began in earnest in the early 1920s when he was busy courting his first wife Hilda Carline. He exchanged daily correspondence with her, indeed sometimes writing several times a day. Part of a rich and talented circle of Hampstead artists, musicians and writers, Hilda offered Spencer an entirely new intellectual circle that in turn propagated new networks of correspondence. But to talk of this part of Spencer’s biography is to move ahead too soon. The letters reproduced in this volume relates to an earlier period, to a rather traumatic interlude in the young painter’s life that threatened to destabilise him just as he was gaining a footing in the British art scene. Instead of honing his extraordinary talents in Cookham and exhibiting in London, Spencer was posted to the teeming metropolis of a military hospital in Bristol. However, by chance, wandering into this harsh, unloved grimness came the young aesthete Desmond Chute. Their friendship was
founded on shared interests and a mutual love of poetry, music and intellectual company. Their subsequent correspondence, after Spencer was posted overseas, lasted some ten years and is a rich and intense exchange which kept Spencer in contact with the world of ideas and the arts while on active service.

From the very moment that Spencer sailed away on military duty, in the late summer of 1916, he wrote to Chute, sprinkling his letters with observations about his new surroundings, the sights in nature that he so revered, and the peculiar companions that worked and slept alongside him, including a cross-eyed carpenter from Middlesborough whose drinking habits astonished the unworldly Spencer. Not wishing to perturb the rather sensitive Chute, Spencer’s letters were full of gentle re-assurances, that even amongst ‘these “disgraceful characters” one might find the true power of forgiveness.’

(2) Also sprinkled throughout these letters are small drawings that convey what might not easily be expressed in words: the strange impression of a sailing ship seeming to float in the sky; the sight of a column of troops marching over undulating land; the difficulty of carrying the wounded through narrow communication trenches, and the recollection of an operation in the military hospital with its graphic description of the incision in the belly and ‘all the forceps radiating from it like this...’ (3)

However, conditions for reading and writing (let alone composing exquisite line drawings) were rarely ideal:

Thank you for that beautiful letter (wrote Spencer in July 1916) It is impossible to concentrate down here because there is a continual noise. The man who sleeps next to me has a noisy brain, if you know what that is like. I do not get one minute’s quiet since I have been here except when I have been home. There are thirty men present when I write these letters to you. (4)

Sadly, there are no surviving letters from Desmond Chute. It is likely that these were amongst the small pile of papers, letters and drawings that Spencer had to leave behind in his kit-bag in 1918 as his regiment prepared to join the final offensive against the Bulgarian army in northern Macedonia. Despite the best efforts of the authorities (including the staff at the Imperial
War Museum who later commissioned a painting from him) none of these precious belongings were ever recovered, and he was forced to concede that ‘… some Macedonian peasant now has my drawings.’ (5) There is, however, a powerful sense of conversation between the two men; Chute’s voice can be clearly heard in Spencer’s responses and a dialogue of deep friendship is ever present as two kindred spirits share thoughts on God, Gluck and St John’s Gospel. Chute was clearly a diligent and faithful respondent: Spencer less so, but given his unusual circumstances this is hardly surprising. In November 1916, for example, as Spencer recovered from an abortive attack on Machine Gun Hill, he acknowledged ‘3 letters from you … but I will write more properly when I feel more patient.’ (6)

As well as writers, composers and the occasional saint, the letters cover a range of diverse topics. Photographs are exchanged – reproductions of architectural corbels are mentioned in letters throughout summer of 1916, as are parcels of books on Duccio, Donatello and Dostoyevsky despatched by Chute to military camps in England and Macedonia. There is little doubt that Chute was a prolific and reliable correspondent; from Tweseldown Camp in mid-summer 1916 Spencer apologises for not having replied to ‘goodness knows how many postcards from you’ (7)

In the later letters, written from the battlefields of Macedonia when Spencer must have felt at his most bereft and homesick, there are some well-wrought reminiscences of Cookham, colourfully populated with a powerful sense of place and character. These highly moving passages are all the more remarkable coming from a young man who was largely self-taught, whose only formal early education had been offered to him and his brother Gilbert by his elder sisters in a small potting shed at the back of the family home. Take for example, the evocative opening paragraph of an eight-page reminiscence written from Salonika in March 1917:

I am walking across Cookham Moor in an easterly direction towards Cookham Village, it is about half past 3 on a Tuesday afternoon and I have just seen mama to the station. Walking up on to the causeway between the white posts placed at the eastern end, is Dorothy Balley; how much Dorothy you belong to the Marsh meadows, and the old village. I love your curiosity & simplicity, domestic Dorothy. I can now hear the anvil going in Mr. Lanes Blacksmith shop, situated on the right
of the street, & at the top end of it, as I walk towards it… (8)

Despite the rapport between the two men there is often a sense in Spencer’s writings that he wrote impulsively, for himself as much as for any recipient. There are few concessions in style for the reader, there are frequent meanderings, and some letters even seem to start mid-sentence. Although the majority follow conventional form, the letters are mannered by his idiosyncratic style and unorthodox use of grammar. Yet, as Jeremy Harvey has commented in a recent analysis of Spencer’s writing, Spencer’s occasionally peculiar ‘grammar, spelling and punctuation are soon grasped and are no stumbling block to gathering his meaning.’ (9) Vagaries of style aside, this suite of letters has an unmistakeable authority and integrity that can be missing from some of the painter’s later writing. John Rothenstein, in his scholarly appreciation of the painter’s correspondence and reminiscences, offers a timely warning against over-relying on some of the later letters, especially when seeking accurate or objective information. Suggesting that much recent biography had been distorted by an unchallenged reliance on his correspondence, he warned readers to be ‘acutely aware of the many pitfalls and fallacies that evidence of this kind can generate’, even suggesting that it was too easy to seek truth in a transitory emotion that had been ‘violently expressed’ in a letter or the product of an artist’s untypical mood. Concluding his words of caution, Rothenstein advises that a proper interpretation and evaluation of Spencer’s letters demands a ‘delicate and scrupulous scholarship and even so will remain a difficult, even complicated business.’ (10)

Happily, the correspondence between Chute and Spencer that is reproduced here is not mired by the controversies that hung over the painter in the 1930s and have divided opinion ever since. This ‘precious bundle’ of letters was found intact by the Classical academic Walter Shewring who had been sent by the family to Chute’s home in Italy to retrieve his papers. Transcribed by Shewring himself, it was deposited in the Spencer Gallery in Cookham. In 1982, drawing on these hand-written transcriptions, Ken Pople researched and assembled a small volume of background material to help illustrate the key personalities and offer some historical context. The
transcriptions in this book adhere to the customary conventions of presentation, with much of the spelling corrected to help guide understanding, and original page breaks maintained. Explanatory notes are used sparingly so as not to overwhelm the reader, but to offer a modicum of contextual material. Those pages that feature drawings or other graphic notes have been reproduced in full.

So to conclude this brief introduction, let us ask: what is the value of these letters? What do they tell us about Stanley Spencer, artist, friend and somewhat hapless soldier? In truth, they are a typical snapshot of the artist as a young man caught in a period of rapid and radical transition; a painter (to borrow a memorable phrase from Elizabeth Rothenstein) moving inexorably (and irreversibly) from being an intuitive artist to an imaginative one, displacing his art’s stillness and unity and stimulating a latent ‘enquiring and curious side’. (11) Above all, the letters do contain some of the key passages in Spencer’s biography, bringing fresh insights into our sense of Spencer and how he was being transformed by the experiences of warfare. The letters examined here tell us about his period in military training and his ‘release’ from the asylum-hospital in Bristol, followed by his tribulations on the battlefields of the forgotten Macedonian front, and then his second release, his personal ‘resurrection’ from soldier to civilian in early 1919. Running throughout the correspondence is a rich cultural seam of writers, musicians and poets he had been introduced to by Desmond in Bristol, a rich litany of names that includes Homer, Shakespeare, and Milton as well as Gluck, Mozart and Beethoven.

There are other significant statements and ideas: in one letter he passes damning judgment on the character of fellow-artist Henri Gaudier, in another he raises the spectre of painting his memories of the hospital in Bristol, starting first with a fresco of a surgical operation. Given Spencer’s achievements at Burghclere in the decade after the war this was quite a premonition, and it would return to him during his many barren months in Salonika. ‘This does not sound much’, he warns Chute, vividly detailing the forceps, the sterilisation and the incision, ‘but leave it to me.’ (12) Teasingly, there are references in letters from the front that predict the resurrection themes on the walls of the Sandham Memorial Chapel, which suggests that
Spencer was gestating his grand vision for a memorial scheme at a very early stage in his war:

Oh how I long to paint! A man told me there are churches full of frescos, & one in particular called the church of St Paul, which contains the life of St Paul on its walls. When this man told me this I began to long. I could not help thinking what a glorious thing it was to be an artist; to perform miracles, & then I wanted to work & couldn’t. If I see a man putting a bivouac up beautifully I want to do it myself. And when I read of Christ raising the dead, I want to raise the dead myself. (13)

Less expected are the long explanatory tracts that unravel the workings of a canvas gas mask or the inner mechanics of a cylindrical water bowser. Such procedures stimulated his innate sense of curiosity and fortified his literal and exacting nature. Quite what Desmond Chute would have made of the elaborate detail of water purification one can only guess, but given the alarming incidence of malaria and other water-borne disease on the Mediterranean theatres of war it clearly mattered greatly to Spencer and was drummed by rote into the medical orderlies:

We have 6 cups, nice clean ones, set in a row & filled with water from tank to within ½ inch of top. 3 drops of testing solution is put in each pot. We have a black pot & a tin full of bleaching powder & a 2 dram measure. We fill black pot up to mark with water & put one little measure full of bleaching powder into it & mix it into a thin paste. We then put 1 drop in first pot, 2 drops in second & so on to the sixth. Then the pots are left for ½ hour. We return when time is up & notice that Nos 1 2 3 4 & 5 are no longer blue & No 6 is not as blue as it was. In this case we should have to empty pots & put drop 7 8 9 10 11 12 respectively into each pot. No 7 would be the one & we should put 7 measures of Chloride of Lime into it, mix it up & pour it into tank. And to & behold you have pure water. (14)

There are also a number of musings on the progress of the war itself, observations – about the fighting on the Somme and the storming of Pozieres (by the Australian Division) that refute the easy observations made by commentators who state categorically that Spencer lived his life in a bubble isolated from the historic and contemporary circumstances of which he was part. And, throughout the letters from Hut 3, in D Lines at Tweseldown, there are endless predictions about where overseas they might be posted. Amongst the destinations rumoured in his letters are India, Mesopotamia, and rather
more vaguely the Far East or ‘the East somewhere’. As he and his troop were often drilled in tropical gear, wearing their khaki gear and sun helmets, they sensed, however, that they would not be sent to the Somme despite the immense scale and insatiable demands of that five-month long campaign.

One of the recurring themes in Spencer’s last letters sent from Salonika, refers to his hope that he would be officially recognised as a government war artist. In May 1918, he had received a formal offer from the Ministry of Information but gaining further confirmation had proved impossible. His frequent changes of unit and shifting address only exacerbated this dilemma. Desperate to return to England, to rid himself of the recurrent malaria that had smitten him time and time again, and ever anxious to re-connect with his creative self, his pleading to Chute (and to other correspondents) brought out some of his most brilliant prose: ‘If I get this job’, he wrote to Desmond in June, ‘I shall be able to show God in the bare ‘real’ things, in a limber wagon in ravines, in fouling mule lines.’ (15) Sadly, it was not until he reached England in mid-1919 that he could actually take up this commission, producing *Travoy's Arriving with Wounded*, one of the most quietly sublime canvases to emerge from the war. (16) Before that release, Spencer had to experience some of the very lowest points of what had, in truth, been an unrelentingly debilitating war experience. In his final surviving letter from the Front Spencer looked his faith squarely in the eye and found it almost wasted and threadbare. In abject desperation he asked of Chute what he could barely ask of himself:

Christ has been adequate to me in all things, but is he in this? You must know something of what I mean, Desmond. It is an awful shock to find how little my Faith has stood in my stead to help me. (16)

Of the thirty-one letters to Chute, two were sent from Devonport, twelve from Tweseldown near Aldershot, one written on board the ship as it sailed through the Mediterranean, and ten from the battle zone in Macedonia. Five letters date from after the war, two written from Spencer’s family home Fernlea in 1919, the others from Hampstead in 1926. Three years later the last in this series was sent from Wangford, Suffolk on the eve of the birth of Stanley and Hilda’s second daughter, Unity. As is evident from this pattern of correspondence, by the mid-1920s the relationship with Chute had lost its
intensity and the mail tailed off. From letters that had once ended ‘From your loving Stanley’ and ‘Your loving friend Stanley’, the later letters conclude with the more formal ‘Yours ever, Stanley Spencer’. (17) There was though to be a reunion in Ditchling, Sussex following an invitation from the sculptor Eric Gill with whom Chute was working. It is mentioned in passing in a letter sent in January 1919, but, in reality, it only weakened the intense bonds that had been tied during the Bristol months and the lifeline of letters that had sustained both men during the grim months of war.

Endnotes to Five


2 Letter 7, 26th July 1916

3 Letter 10, Summer 1916

4 Letter 6, received 24th July 1916

5 From Mosaic, an unpublished Spencer family record, held in the Berkshire County Records Office, Reading.

6 Letter 16, November 1916

7 Letter 9, Summer 1916

8 Letter 18, March 1917


10

11

12
Letter 10, Summer 1916

13
Letter 15, 28th October 1916

14
Letter 6, 24th July 1916

15
Letter 20, 25th May 1918

16
The full title of the larger canvas is: Travoys Arriving with Wounded at a Dressing-Station at Smol, Macedonia, September 1916, Oil on canvas, 183 x 218.5 cms. IWM:ART 2268. The Imperial War Museum catalogue has an accompanying text: ‘About the middle of September, 1916, the 22nd Division made an attack on Machine Gun Hill on the Doiran-Vardar Sector and held it for a few nights. During this period the wounded passed through the dressing-stations in a constant stream, by means of the mountain ambulance transport shown in the picture.’

17
Letter 23rd October 1918

18
Letter 29, 17th November 1929.