

# MODERN WAR

PAINTINGS

BY

C. R. W. NEVINSON

WITH AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY BY

P. G. KONODY

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*To Lord Rothermere  
under whose hospitable roof it was completed,  
this essay is dedicated  
as a modest mark of esteem  
by the author*

*Salhurst, November, 1916*



# MODERN WAR

THE chronicles of war and battle in art begin with what may be called athletics—the single combat in which man measures his strength against man—and end in monstrous mechanism and high explosives. In Homeric days individual prowess stood for everything in warfare. Whole armies remained mere spectators, whilst the leaders challenged each other and attacked each other single-handed. If a general engagement followed, it was again a series of simultaneous duels, a gladiatorial contest on a large scale. It was the Olympic games with the addition of death or conquest.

This was the spirit in which war was treated by the sculptors of ancient Greece. On the metopes of the Parthenon, on the tomb of Attalus, everywhere, indeed, where the deeds of Greek heroes, real or mythical, the Battles of the Centaurs and Lapithæ, the Trojan War, the Battle of the Amazons, formed the sculptors' subjects, we find this athletic conception, this glorification of the human body in action, lithe, supple, harmonious in line, grace wedded to strength. Greek pictorial art has to be judged almost entirely from literary references, the few things that have come down to us being the inferior productions of a late, decadent period. But it is certain that Greek painting was more sculptural than strictly pictorial in character, and that a classic battle picture would bear a close resemblance to a painted relief in which everything is centred on the rhythmic treatment of the human body, inanimate nature being almost entirely neglected.

The background of nature, of course, does not enter into this gladiatorial conception of war, because, apart from the essentially sculptural character of this art, hand-to-hand fighting is not affected by topographic considerations, by the lay of the land. The landscape background is neglected and does not, indeed, assume any degree of importance before the days when the invention of gunpowder and long-distance arms brought about a radical change in the science of warfare. To show the effect of gun-fire in a picture, or to depict the conditions of a battle in which

death is dealt out at long range, it is necessary to indicate aerial perspective, atmosphere, smoke, the nature of the ground, cover and exposure. It was a long time though, before the increased appreciation of the beauty and emotional effect of nature, together with that gradual improvement in firearms which led to what might be called the "invisible battle," where artillery fire is trained across mountain ranges upon a hidden enemy, and where spy-glasses are needed to detect the movement of troops, turned the battle picture into animated landscape pure and simple.

Many are the phases that lie between the classic Greek and the modern Impressionist idea of the artistic treatment of war. To give a complete history of this evolution, would be beyond the scope of this sketch. Let it suffice to indicate a few of the landmarks which illustrate how the successive changes in the conduct and psychology of war are mirrored in the art of each period. Each of these changes found adequate expression in art. It is in the nature of things that the business of war became ever less picturesque and "decorative" with the increased use of scientific appliances, which reached its climax in the present gigantic struggle of the nations. The artistic language of the past had no idiom that could adequately express the grim, hard, mechanical character of a war in which the decisive element is the efficiency of laboratories, foundries and engineering works. Only in the often quite unintelligible experiments of Cubism and Futurism could be found the germ of such an idiom. C. R. W. Nevinson, who, alone perhaps among living British painters, has grasped the significance of this mighty machine war from the artist's point of view, does not state his impressions and emotional experiences in terms of Cubism or of Futurism; but the intellectual curiosity which, in times of peace, had attracted him towards all rebellious movements, enables him now to effect a happy compromise between illustration and geometric abstraction, and to interpret with modern means the spirit and significance of modern war.

But let us return to our landmarks in the evolution of the war picture. Paolo Uccello is one that stands out conspicuously. His famous battle pictures at the National Gallery, the Louvre, and the Uffizi, reflect the spirit of the age of chivalry, when the battle was a kind of intensified tourney, a magnificent display of shining armour and waving plumes and rich trappings. War was a great decorative pageant, accompanied by comparatively trifling loss of life and limb. As such it appeared to Paolo Uccello. Rich



patterns, gay colour and decorative effectiveness were his chief concern. The newly discovered laws of perspective and foreshortening gave him as much pleasure as a new toy to a child. The decorative aim is everywhere in evidence, in the landscape background as much as in the gay confusion of the joust-like clash of arms.

Uccello is the typical quattrocentist. Pier dei Franceschi—at Arezzo—and many others in Tuscany and the rest of Italy treated war more or less in the same decorative spirit. In the next century, pageantry is replaced by the drama of battle, the flat pattern by carefully studied light and shade, the conventional background by atmospheric landscape. Leonardo's and Michelangelo's great battle pictures have perished, but Leonardo has jotted down in his notebooks his ideas on the manner of representing a battle. "You will," he says, "first of all make the smoke of artillery, which mingles with the air, together with the dust whirled up by the movement of horses and warriors . . ." Then follows a vivid description of atmospheric effects, of typical gesture and facial expression, of characteristic scenes to be witnessed on the battlefield, which it is the artist's business faithfully to record. Nothing is omitted. The bewildering confusion of the battlefield is systematized and brought into artistic cohesion. Raphael was not a scholar and thinker like that great universal genius Leonardo da Vinci, but his "Battle of Constantine," at the Vatican, is the most perfect example extant of this orderly confusion—chaos rhythmically arranged by supreme art.

Landscape, from being a mere accessory, has now become as important almost, pictorially, as the action. In Titian's "Battle of Cadore," a famous picture which has been completely destroyed, but is known to us from an early engraving, a further change may be noted: the landscape has become paramount. A well-known writer on art has aptly described it as "a landscape with figures in violent action."

An altogether different conception of the battle picture originates with the declining days of the Renaissance. The literary and historical interest become of supreme importance. The artist is deeply interested in questions of tactics and military science. It is his ambition to represent the tactical evolutions of field battle or siege. He becomes a chronicler. Vermeyen's series of cartoons for the Prado tapestries, depicting the Conquest of Tunis by Charles V, are vast panoramic views, showing every detail of the

military operations, the landing of the troops, the disposition of the different units, the attack and defence, ships, towers, fortifications, cannon, war engines, tents, and all other paraphernalia of campaigning. In similar fashion the Siege of Florence by the Prince of Orange is unrolled before our eyes by Vasari on the walls of the Palazzo Vecchio. The same prolific painter's "Siege of Pisa" and "Battle of Marciano" are a compromise between the classic manner of Raphael and the new "tactical" battle picture, in so far as great prominence is given to the group of fighters (disguised as ancient Romans) in the foreground, whilst the middle and far distances show the tactical movements of siege and battle.

What Vasari and, to a lesser extent, Vermeyen, managed to wed within the frame of one picture—the orderly operations of masses and the exciting hand-to-hand encounter of individuals—is divorced by the battle painters of the seventeenth century. With increased realism in the rendering of the landscape, which debars the artist from accentuating individual action in the distance, where the advancing lines and squares of troops appear as masses, the battle picture was bound to become more immobile, static and topographic. To make up for this loss of movement, the artists of that period—notably Van der Meulen and the other chroniclers of the campaign of the *grand monarque*, or, in Spain, Pereda and Leonardo, who decorated the Sala de las Comedias in the Buen Retiro palace—loved to show on an eminence in the immediate foreground the splendidly appanelled staff, with the king or commander-in-chief on a prancing horse, watching or directing the battle in the plain below. The actual battle has now been moved to the distance. The foreground is filled by a stately parade of the guiding intellect. The battle leaders are no longer engaged in fierce encounters, but witness the spectacle in comfort. It is the period towards the end of which the Prince de Soubise set out for his campaigns with an endless retinue of servants, cooks, and baggage waggons laden with everything that was needed for the uninterrupted enjoyment of the luxuries which formed the setting to court life in days of peace.

In striking contrast to this tactical battle picture, with its comparative lack of movement, though contemporary with it, is the once highly esteemed work of the feverishly impetuous painters of cavalry *mêlées*. Salvator Rosa, Wouvermans, Borgognone, Parrocel, and others, delighted in the inextricable confusion of the impossible violent compact of mounted soldiers. Horses and riders

are chaotically mixed up, the ranks penetrating each other in defiance of certified facts. Everything is in a whirl of furious movement, though sheer lack of space would make such movement absolutely impossible. The sense of order which underlies the carefully considered confusion of, say, Raphael's "Battle of Constantine" is utterly lost. Everything is tangled, mixed up, and disjointed.

The wave of enthusiasm that carried the arms of Napoleon from victory to victory was bound to leave its mark upon the art commemorating the achievements of the world's greatest strategic genius. The personal element becomes of supreme importance. Gros, Gérard, Giraudet, Charlet, to mention only the most prominent among the painters of the Napoleonic legend, were as much inspired by the emperor's personality as were his generals and his armies. "Vive Napoléon! Vive l'Empereur!" might be used as a general title for all these pictures in which everything is centred around the figure of the national hero. The sufferings and horrors of war are forgotten in the all-pervading intoxication with the glory of victory. Everybody is fired by the same impulse. Even the wounded and the dying forget their sad plight and join in acclaiming their idol. The heroic gesture of David's pseudo-classicism is not altogether absent, but it is almost justified by the epic grandeur of the theme.

A sole voice, far ahead of its time in this as in many other respects, is raised in protest against this glorification of wholesale slaughter for love of country or greed of conquest. The grim, tragic side of war, the unspeakable sufferings of a people under the invader's heel, are shown with trenchant, relentless realism by the Spaniard Goya in his series of "Los Desastres de la Guerra." Here, for the first time, war is not treated from the point of view of pageantry, heroism, or national self-glorification. It is an exposure of its naked horrors and of the misery it carries in its train. Yet Goya's indictment is not directed against war in general as much as against the outrageous conduct of his country's enemy. The condemnation of war on principle was left to a much more recent artist. It was the Russian, Wassilj Vereschschagin, who first used his brush, as his compatriot Tolstoi had used his pen, to attack militarism and the suffering inflicted by it on the people. He shows war shorn of its glory and glamour. Death and desolation everywhere, frozen carcasses, starvation, the groaning agony of the wounded, the misery of the civil population. With cutting irony he dedicated his painting of a gruesome pyramid of skulls "To all

the Conquerors of the World." Whatever may be thought of him as an artist, his pictures must be regarded as powerful sermons against war.

Vereschtschagin's humanitarian outlook was the natural consequence of the democratic tendencies of the later nineteenth century. The academic school, it is true, continued to feed on the traditions of the past. The spectacular side of war and the heroic gesture may even to this day be found in many an imaginative academic reconstruction of battles of the past. But whilst such things may achieve some kind of ephemeral popularity, they are of no permanent value for the history of art. Even Meissonier, once idolized for the miniature-like precision of his details, is gradually finding his modest level. The modern connoisseur is inclined to endorse Courbet's gibe that in Meissonier's pictures "everything is of iron except the cuirasses."

The artists who remained in touch with contemporary life, and whose work has to be regarded as the expression of the spirit of their age, had ceased to look upon war through rose-coloured spectacles. The defeat of France in the war of 1870-71 was perhaps one of the chief contributory causes. Paris had become the world's centre of artistic life and the fountain-head of artistic inspiration. The events of the disastrous war claimed the attention of the French painters, who had to solve an entirely new problem. For the first time the war painter had to deal with defeat, instead of devoting his talent to the commemoration of victory and to the glorification of those to whose strategic genius the victory was due.

As a natural consequence, the army leader and his staff disappear from the picture, and the fighting man, the unknown son of the people, who has to bear the brunt of fatigue and danger and suffering, enters into his own. The spectator is no longer placed in the vicinity of the staff to watch the tactical evolutions of the battle or to witness the wave of enthusiasm that makes the victorious troops acclaim the leader. He is taken into the heart of the battle, or rather into a detached corner of the scattered fighting, to witness some particular episode with all its distressing details of butchery and suffering. Of this nature are the battle pictures by Détaille, Neuville, Morot, and the other countless painters who have recorded the incidents of the Franco-Prussian war.

There are other reasons which make it necessary for the artist of more recent days to devote himself to the episode. With the improvement of modern engines of destruction which deal out

death across vast stretches of country, war has lost much of its picturesqueness. The painter who would attempt to represent the panorama of a battle would be reduced to landscape painting pure and simple. Resplendent armour and uniforms have been abolished, and everything is done to make the fighting invisible. The very colours used for active service uniform, khaki, "field-grey," and so forth, are chosen with this end in view. It is not without significance that in the majority of the Boer War pictures—that is to say in those that were painted by eye-witnesses, and not made up from descriptive material—the artist has confined himself to depicting the South African veldt, with, perhaps, in the foreground some khaki-clad soldiers who at a distance are almost undistinguishable from the parched soil on which they tread; whilst the actual fighting, the progress of the battle, is indicated by a few puffs of smoke over the far horizon.

If the difficulties of finding adequate terms for the artistic interpretation of modern war under these changed conditions had increased enormously, they appeared to have become insuperable when, in August, 1914, Europe was plunged into a war which, spreading over an ever more extended area, soon assumed proportions so gigantic as to make the most sanguinary conflicts of former days seem mere child's play. Never before had war been conducted simultaneously on land and on sea, in the air and under the ocean. Never before had the entire energy and inventive ingenuity of the great States of Europe been so completely concentrated on a vast work of destruction. Never before had individual heroism been rendered so puny by comparison with the vast results achieved by mechanical science and by the mobilization of the destructive forces of nature. Man, of course, directs the machine, but it is the machine that is the decisive factor. We may be thrilled by individual acts of devotion and bravery and self-sacrifice, but the story of this war is the story of gigantic shells, high explosives, submarines, torpedoes, aeroplanes and airships, poison gas and liquid fire, motor-cars and lorries and "tanks," trenches extending over hundreds of miles, dug-outs and barbed wire, searchlights, field telephones and wireless telegraphy.

It is fairly obvious that the ordinary representational manner of painting is wholly inadequate for the interpretation of this tremendous conflict in which all the forces of nature have to be conquered and pressed into service against the opposing enemy. A more synthetic method is needed to express the essential

character of this cataclysmic war, in which the very earth is disembowelled and rocky mountain summits are blown sky-high to bury all life under the falling debris. How could even a faint echo of such things find its way into that species of enlarged and coloured newspaper illustration that continues to represent the art of the battle painter on the walls of the Royal Academy? If there was a possible solution of the problem, it could not be offered by "official" art, but by the rebellious experimentalists for whom modern art began with Cézanne and who were waging a relentless war against all academic conventions.

One need not go so far as to accept Professor Michael Sadler's theory that the Great War is the outcome of the same restlessness and seething discontent that led to the expressionist and futurist revolution of the twentieth century. But the fact remains that there is now, as there has always been, an intimate connection between life in all its manifestations and vital art. Political and social upheavals are generally accompanied by a change in the æsthetic outlook, though the change in the æsthetic outlook is never the cause of the upheaval. New horizons are opened to human thought, and new forms have to be found to express these thoughts and emotions. It was inevitable that the painter who could successfully grapple with the unprecedented conditions of modern warfare should be an adherent of the modern school, an artist who has assimilated the theories of Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism, rejecting the too frequent extravagant exaggerations, and retaining all that could help him in solving the problem by which he was faced. One solitary artist of the independent group has had the courage to undertake the inspiring task. C. R. W. Nevinson stands alone, in England, as the painter of modern war.

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C. R. W. Nevinson was born on August 13th, 1889, the son of Henry Woodd Nevinson, the distinguished author and war correspondent. Destined to take up the profession of an engineer, he received his early education at University College School and at Uppingham. But from the outset he failed to achieve any distinction, except at drawing, for which he showed a marked aptitude and an inclination which was not to be denied. He was given his earliest tuition in art by the late John Fulleylove, whose authoritative architectural drawing and dislike of "sloppy modern work" first interested the budding artist in draughtsmanship.

In 1907, Nevinson entered the St. John's Wood School of Art,

as a preparatory step towards gaining admission to the Royal Academy Schools, but after a few terms he transferred his allegiance to the Slade School, where Henry Tonks and Frederick Brown expounded the theory of drawing, as drawing was understood by the great Ingres. The Slade School was then, in 1909-10, attracting considerable attention among the initiated by the abundance of original talent its excellent teaching brought to fruition. Among Nevinson's fellow-students were Mark Gertler, John Currie, Lightfoot, Spenser, Allinson, Nash, and Wadsworth, whose keenness and relentless student criticism upheld all that was best of Slade traditions. In view of the fact that the ignorant section of the public and, alas! not a few intolerant professional painters, are wont to ascribe to incompetent draughtsmanship any deliberate departure from photographic truth for the sake of increased expressiveness, it is worthy of notice that all these artists, Nevinson included, have passed with conspicuous success through the severe discipline of sensitive drawing. It is neither ignorance, nor carelessness, that leads to bold simplifications and wilful distortions, but the desire to invest form with a significance which can never be obtained from literal accuracy. And at the basis of it all is sure and often masterly draughtsmanship.

When Nevinson exhibited his first picture at the Friday Club, a view of a factory, he was under the spell of Monet and the French Impressionists. The first exhibition of the Post-Impressionists at the Grafton Galleries opened a new world to him. The experience was terribly upsetting. All his former idols were shattered, and Van Gogh enthroned in their place. Cézanne he regarded with a half suspicious admiration. But, for the time being, he continued to paint industrial cities in the Impressionist manner, with, perhaps, a little bolder accentuation of form and volume. One of his last pictures in this style is now in the possession of the Manchester Corporation Art Gallery.

Keenly responsive to fresh suggestions and new influences, Nevinson was next attracted by the Neo-Primitivism of his friends Gertler and Currie. The group of young enthusiasts, painted in the primitive manner by John Currie, created a mild sensation at the New English Art Club of 1911, at which exhibition Nevinson was represented by a portrait of the artist treated in the clear-cut, decorative manner of the early Italians. The picture was much admired and elicited cordial praise from such severe judges as Augustus John and William Rothenstein.

In the following year, 1912, Nevinson left London to resume his studies in Paris at Julien's and subsequently at the Cercle Russe. The new milieu soon made him shake off the earlier influences. He was turning his back upon the Italian Primitives as well as upon Ingres, Rembrandt, Goya, Claude and Turner, whose works he had always been studying, and to all of whom he had in his earlier student days paid the tribute of imitation. His first step in Paris was a frank return to Impressionism; but this Impressionism began to be modified by an ever-increasing interest in structural design as expounded by Cézanne. He became deeply interested in the experiments of the Post-Impressionists Marchant and Derain, whose work made him gradually understand the abstract forms of Picasso.

Back again in London, in the spring of 1913, Nevinson, at the invitation of Wyndham Lewis, with whom he had just become acquainted, exhibited his first "geometric" landscape with the group of art rebels who had collected round Roger Fry, the sponsor of Post-Impressionism in England. In the meanwhile London had been set agape with amazement by the Italian Futurists' display of their violent and bewildering break with all tradition in art. The term Futurism is even now so indiscriminately used as a convenient generalization of all art that aims at synthesis and abstraction that a brief explanation of the Futurists' real aims may not be altogether uncalled for.

The chief factor of Futurism is the introduction of dynamism into painting. If we speak of "movement" in a picture, it is only a relative term. It means that the static, immobile figures in a picture are shown in interrupted movement, but they remain static all the same. The Futurist, by depicting on one canvas the successive stages of movement and by showing the displacement of the objects in space which is the visual effect of real movement, tries to convey a dynamic sensation or impression. The result is, more often than not, mere kaleidoscopic confusion which leaves the spectator in complete ignorance of the artist's intention, and fails, therefore, in its function as a work of art, since it transmits neither emotion nor even sensation. Only in a few exceptional cases did the Italian Futurists manage to convey the desired impression. Nobody who visited the Sackville Gallery in 1912 is likely to forget the extraordinarily vivid sense of ballroom brightness and exuberantly gay movement conveyed by Severini's large "Pan-pan Dance at the Monico." Viewed closely, the picture bore the closest resemblance to a patchwork quilt made up of triangles and other geometric



figures in primary hues and black. At the right distance it created the precise effect avowedly aimed at by the artist: "Sensation of the bustle and hubbub created by the Tsiganes, the champagne-sodden crowd, the perverse dance of the professionals, the clashing of colours and laughter at the famous night-tavern at Montmartre."

Nevinson had seen this picture, which at once overwhelmed him with interest in the Futurist propaganda. He now met Gino Severini at lunch with Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and felt magnetically attracted by the Italian artist, with whom he shared that love of mechanism, industrial towns, and all modern activity, which is part of the Futurist gospel. The two young enthusiasts became warm friends, and Nevinson accompanied Severini back to Paris, where the Italian introduced him to the other members of the Cubist and Futurist groups.

Nevinson, always receptive to exciting influences, became a Futurist. As such he exhibited his first picture, "Le Train de Luxe," at the Doré Gallery in the autumn of 1913. At that time Marinetti himself, the founder and leader of the Futurist movement, came to London to give a series of lectures and to organize the scattered forces of English rebel art. The years just preceding the outbreak of the war were a time of great enthusiasms and great squabbles and jealousies. Marinetti, whose fiery eloquence and tremendously vital personality were such, that he could hypnotize an intellectual audience into the temporary belief that a kind of grotesque jumping-jack, made up of firewood, rags, cigarette-boxes and the like, was a greater work of art than Rodin's "Grand Penseur," actually succeeded for a while in infusing the various little groups of independent artists with some *esprit de corps*. Nevinson and Wyndham Lewis arranged a dinner in Marinetti's honour, which was marked by scenes of genuine enthusiasm. But the old jealousies were soon at work again. The little groups split into new groups. The London group seceded from the Roger Fry band. A new "Rebel Art Centre" was started, with Nevinson, Wyndham Lewis, and Wadsworth as leading spirits.

Marinetti returned in the summer of 1914, and issued, together with Nevinson, a manifesto on "Vital English Art." The manifesto pleaded for a strong, virile and anti-sentimental English Art, strengthened by physical and moral courage, a fearless desire of adventure, a worship of strength, with sport as an essential element. It declared war, among other things, upon the worship of tradition, the pessimistic, sceptical and narrow views of the English public,

the sickly revivals of mediævalism, æstheticism, and most existing art institutions. But it also condemned "the old grotesque ideal of genius—drunken, filthy, ragged, outcast; drunkenness the synonym of Art; Chelsea the Montmartre of London; the post-Rossettis with long hair under the sombrero, and other passéist filth."

This was, to say the least, ill-considered. The description bore too close a resemblance to some of Marinetti's English followers. The assumption of a kind of leadership by Nevinson, implied by his signature at the foot of this bomb-shell manifesto, was also resented by his fellow-members of the Rebel Art Centre. The Rebels rebelled once more and repudiated the manifesto. They became violent anti-Marinetists and anti-Futurists, and finally proceeded to the inevitable formation of a new group. "Vorticism" was born, but Nevinson was not invited to the function. He remained practically the sole British follower of the Italian Futurists, and devoted himself heart and soul to the construction of those kaleidoscopic puzzle pictures which endeavoured to introduce dynamism into pictorial art. Prophetic foresight was scarcely needed on the part of those who had followed the young artist's development, to recognize that he was passing through a transitory phase which afforded him, probably, more amusement than real satisfaction, although there can be no doubt as to the seriousness of his interest in the problem.

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This was the phase at which Nevinson had arrived when the war cloud burst over Europe in August, 1914. The praise of war had always been part of the violent Futurist gospel. Marinetti had loudly declared that he considered the hypothesis of the amicable fusion of the peoples an antiquated idea, and that he found in war alone the hygienics of the world. Indeed, the bulk of Futurist literature was devoted to the glorification of war and of all the mechanical appliances, productive of noise and speed, that are essential for the conduct of modern war.

As a true disciple of his master, Nevinson could not miss his chance to experience the emotions of war at first hand. Long before the introduction of compulsory service, that is to say in the autumn of 1914, he joined the colours and went to Flanders as a motor mechanic and ambulance driver. "My work," he stated in the foreword to the catalogue of his exhibition of war pictures at the Leicester Galleries, "took me everywhere between the coast

and Ypres along the French, British and Belgian lines. Later I became attached to the French Army, and I was glad, since it is to France—with her high standard of criticism, her interest in modern art and her appreciation of it—that I owe most of my artistic education, and it is her influence by which I am chiefly prompted. Subsequently, owing to ill health, I worked as a hospital orderly both in Dunkerque and London until, in January, 1916, I was invalided out of the army owing to rheumatic fever.”

Here we have, in plain words, the modest extent of Nevinson's military career—hard work, exposure that led to a breakdown in health, and little or no occasion to acquire military distinction. But there was compensation in the collecting of rich experience. Probably the very nature of his work as ambulance driver gave him a better opportunity for observing, for gathering impressions and storing up mental notes, than he would have found in any other capacity. His life was not passed between the trench and the rest camp, but he was able to roam along the whole fighting line. If he missed the excitement of bayonet charges, bombing, and sniping, of attack and of defence, he had his fill of the horrors of war at first-aid stations and base hospitals. He could study the scarred, desolate countryside, watch the effect of exploding shells, which must have been peculiarly fascinating to an artist who, as a confirmed Futurist, was accustomed to search at all times and in inanimate objects for “force lines,” that is to say the lines inherent in each object which “reveal how it would resolve itself, were it to follow the tendencies of its forces.” He lived in a Futurist atmosphere of speed and noise and concentrated energy. And everywhere he could see the machine at work.

But the outcome of it all was not what the artist had presumably expected in his first wave of enthusiasm. He returned with many illusions shattered. He had witnessed too much suffering and misery to believe any longer in war as the “hygienics of the world.” From this side a breach had been made in his Futurist entrenchment, and with this shaking of his faith came the loss of that defiant gaiety and wholesale rejection of all former artistic conventions which, before his departure for the front, had led him to paint a London crowd on the day of the declaration of war in the jig-saw puzzle manner of Severini's “Pan-pan” and in the colours of the Union Jack.

Yet, in the pictures he has painted since his return from Flanders and France, he has not altogether broken away from

Futurism, although he has rejected its extravagances and excesses. Through a tactful compromise between geometric abstraction and frank—sometimes brutally frank—illustration, Nevinson has done more towards reconciling the public to Futurist theories and aims than had been so far achieved by the most violent propaganda. I have had occasion, more than once, to discuss Nevinson's war pictures, at the time of their collective exhibition at the Leicester Galleries, with soldiers and officers who had been to the front, and who generally preceded their remarks by a frank confession that they knew nothing whatever about art. "But," they generally proceeded, "these pictures tell you more about the war, as it actually *is*, than any of the photographs and reproductions of drawings which fill our illustrated journals." The angles and planes in Nevinson's pictures, which are as far removed as could be from photographic truth, have nothing strange or bewildering even to the lay mind, and convey a sense of movement and volume which could never be suggested by ordinary means.

This modified Futurism, this compromise between the purely representational and a carefully thought-out geometric convention, is explained by Nevinson himself in the introductory note to his catalogue, in which he makes his profession of artistic faith :

"With some exceptions I still prefer to give in my pictures an abstract, dynamic, and mental impression rather than a concrete, static or optical. But it will be seen from the later examples of my painting that (though working within a geometrical convention) I free myself from all pedantic and academic theories of 'Post' or 'Neo,' as well as from the deadening influence of the idolatry to 'Primitives' and 'Old Masters,' which has lately caused so many enfeebled and emasculated revivals.

"Every artist of living force has always been and must be an outgrowth and spokesman of his time. It is impossible to express the scientific and mechanical spirit of this twentieth-century war with the languishing or obsolete symbolism of Mediæval and Classic Art.

"In the years just before the war the accusation of decadence was frequently brought against the young men and the artists of the day. No charge has proved more false.

"Already long before the war young artists in the Latin countries and England were seeking a wider inspiration than in the sickly worship of the nude and the over-sensual broodings of our elders which showed themselves in the literature and art of the

Yellow Book, in 'advanced dramas,' and in some of the Pre-Raphaelites, a tendency largely due to trivial lives possessing no other conception of adventure or emotion than sex.

"The intensity of the present time is producing a vital art in England. In theatres and picture-shop windows, it is true, an insipid and sentimental reaction against surrounding horrors is obvious, but a vital art may be trusted to overcome it. For the pressure of necessity is already compelling us to take up our natural position as pioneers in literature, art, science and industry—a position of initiative which over-prosperity, self-content, and insularity had tempted us comfortably to forego."

This is still the defiant, vigorous language characteristic of Futurist manifestos, but the work thus introduced is nevertheless a compromise. Not, indeed, the compromise of cowardice or ill success, but a compromise that has its root in the sober recognition of the futility of experiments unintelligible to everybody but the artist himself. Art is essentially social in its function. It is a language for the communication of emotions, or, at least, as some of the extreme modernists will have it, of sensations. If the artist invents a language of his own, which remains mere gibberish to everybody but himself, his effort remains futile. It is not art, however deep may have been the emotion he failed to transmit. Nevinson, in his war pictures, even where they approach most closely to complete abstraction, is never unintelligible. Moreover, he has undertaken himself to educate his audience, to lead them step by step to an understanding of his aims. He begins with absolute realism, which might almost be called photographic, were it not for the ruthless elimination of all unessential detail and a Cézannesque insistence on significant form. Take the picture entitled "A Taube." The lifeless body of a child is lying face downwards in a street devastated by a bomb explosion. The wall of the house at the back is scarred and cracked by the stones hurled against it from the torn pavement. One of the green shutters is wrenched from its hinges. No sign of life anywhere in this scene of destruction, which is painted with cruel realism and without a vestige of sentimentality. There is rude strength in the simple rendering of the forms which are blocked out with severe emphasis. The child is ungainly and unattractive and does not enlist sympathy through innocent charm. Nevinson needs no such mawkish means to express his horror of this murder from the clouds. The picture is grim, undiluted tragedy.

From this straightforward illustration the spectator was led by almost imperceptible degrees to the geometric abstraction of "Bursting Shells," which might be described, in Futurist language, as the liberation of the latent "force lines." This is by no means an impression of the usual effect of shells exploding in the air, but a coloured diagram of the direction taken by the sudden disintegration of solid matter. The movement is at the same time spiral and radiating; and colour is used in arbitrary fashion to give the sensation of terrific violence. The intermediate stages between these two extremes explained themselves so clearly, that the ordinary visitor to the gallery experienced no difficulty in understanding even the most abstract of the pictures shown.

On a previous occasion, at the London Salon in the spring of 1916, Nevinson had exhibited three pictures the very naming of which showed a didactic intention. Exhibited side by side, they were catalogued as "an illustration," "an interpretation," and "an abstraction." Nevinson obviously meant to demonstrate the manner in which pictorial art gradually emerges from its bondage to the representation of facts. If he did not altogether succeed in this endeavour, it was because his illustration, "The Mitrailleuse," was too geometric to have anything in common with what is generally understood by illustration; whilst his abstraction, "Violence," did not attain to the complete detachment from recognizable form which marks the improvisations of, say, Kandinsky. Nevinson was not sufficiently sure of himself. He resorted to the expedient of introducing a clearly recognizable gun, so that the language of form and colour should be aided by literary association.

If any individual picture of Nevinson's war series had to be chosen in support of the claim that Nevinson is the painter, *par excellence*, of modern war, none could serve the purpose better than this "Illustration: La Mitrailleuse," which has wisely been acquired by the Contemporary Art Society to become eventually the property of the nation. It has impressed with the same power critics as temperamental as Mr. Lewis Hind and as cool and objective as Mr. Walter Sickert. And each of them, in his own characteristic way, gives utterance to the same idea. "This is modern war," says Mr. Lewis Hind, "the man a machine, the machine is almost a man, no hint of humanity or pity about it, just war, the object of which is to kill." And Mr. Sickert, in the *Burlington Magazine*: "Mr. Nevinson's 'Mitrailleuse' will

probably remain the most authoritative and concentrated utterance on the war in the history of painting."

This crowded, compact composition takes the spectator into a timbered pit, the narrow space of which is filled by four French soldiers, one dead and three alive, and a machine gun. One of the soldiers looks with intense horror on his dead comrade; another has concentrated his fierce attention upon the mitrailleuse he is serving. His hand, glued, at it were, to the machine, seems to form part of it. It has an air of being cut out of steel as hard as that of the trench-helmet which protects his head. The little glimpse of grey sky above is cut into cloisons by a network of strong barbed wire.

Any description of the subject matter of this picture seems to justify the artist's choice of a title: an illustration. It might be just an episode of trench warfare, a snapshot of an incident of fighting. But "La Mitrailleuse" is far more than that. It is, indeed, an approach towards a synthesis of modern war, steely, grim, cruel, dominated by mechanical appliances. The death-dealing machinery and the men behind it are one. The angles and curves of the gun are continued or echoed in the soldiers' faces and uniforms. Everything is rigid and tense and horrible. The grimness of this scene, where death and life are thrown together indissolubly, is again unrelieved by human sentiment. Machines know no pity, and these French soldiers are part of their machine. Even the man who stares at the corpse is pitiless. His geometric features express naught but frozen horror. The other men, mere screws in the human war engine, fulfil their function oblivious of the presence of death in the ghastly pit. This, indeed, is "just war, the object of which is to kill."

An even more complete fusion of the man and the machine is to be found in the "Portrait of a Motor Ambulance Driver." The driver has almost ceased to be a man. He is merely the controlling force. His body is rigid; his hand clutches the steering wheel; his eyes are glued upon the road; he is an integral part of the car. And in his colour, as in his line, Nevinson insists upon this unity. Indeed, colour only exists to him for this purpose. He does not use it decoratively. His pictures are too cold, too steely, to have any value as decoration, although they are never without a fine rhythm of line. He probes into the essence of his subject and pays no attention to quality of paint or pleasing arrangement of colour. Some of these war pictures suggest a chisel rather than brush and

pigment. To appreciate them properly, one has to clear one's mind of all preconceived notions as to what a picture should be.

Not always, though, is Nevinson so disdainful of pictorial quality. In "Searchlights," the buildings silhouetted below the night sky with its shafts of bright lights intersecting in every direction, are painted with real tenderness and appreciation of tone values. The paint is handled with an affectionate regard for its quality, and not laid on roughly as though nothing mattered but the form expressed by it. At the same time, there is no attempt at representing a realistic impression of searchlights piercing the night-sky with streaks that start sharp and clear, then gradually lose their hard edges, and finally vanish in the darkness. The beams of light are treated just like diagrams. They widen with increasing distance from their source; but they remain practically the same in intensity right through, and lose none of the sharpness of their silhouette.

In another painting, "Pursuing a Taube," Nevinson not only endeavours successfully to convey a sense of atmosphere, but he actually takes delight in colour for its own sake. The picture is almost "pretty." Its pleasing character is the more commendable, as it is likely to reconcile the public to an experiment in pictorial dynamism which they might otherwise refuse to accept. The method adopted for expressing the rapid movement of the flying machines—a British biplane and two monoplanes in pursuit of a German Taube—may best be described as cinematographic, successive positions of the moving objects being indicated in the line of the flight, the outlines of the aeroplanes becoming more blurred as they recede from the most advanced position of the machines. The illusion of movement is truly extraordinary. It is inconceivable that anything like it could have been expressed by any other means. It almost suggests the possibility of gauging the rate of progress and to note the difference in speed between the Taube and its pursuers.

Nevinson delights in experiments. Having mastered the formula of stating movement by this species of pictorial cinematography, he sets about finding another solution of the same problem. "Before the Storm" is the title of another painting showing a biplane in swift flight. The picture has scarcely anything in common with the earlier "Pursuing a Taube." It has none of the flicker of the film. The clouds are not atmospheric, but rather like solid matter cut into cubic and spheric shapes around a luminous opening which suggests immense space and height. In perfect relation to the



cubic planes of the clouds, and as though it were part of them, is one the dark edge of which is like an extension of the biplane's tail, indicating the angle of the flight, the soaring towards the opening into the infinity of space. It is not too much to say, that never before has flight been expressed in paint so convincingly, so clearly. The picture fills one with a sense of the force which propels the weighty engine through space; with a sense of immense height; with the exhilaration of speed and of the laws of nature set at defiance. It is the one instance among all Nevinson's war pictures which shows the triumph and the mastery of the human mind over the elements, instead of depicting him as the slave of his own destructive inventions. "Before the Dawn" is an inspired and inspiring conception. It carries no hint of that deliberate calculation upon which works tinged with cubist tendencies are so often founded.

I have already referred to the absence of anything approaching sentimentality in Nevinson's war pictures. He records human suffering with cruel concentration on its visible effects, in a spirit of bitter resentment rather than of pity. Familiarity with hideous sights and with the groaning agony of the wounded cannot fail to blunt the sensibility of those who are brought into daily contact with the human wreckage of war. His routine work as orderly at military hospitals at home and abroad, if not exactly robbing him of all sympathy with physical pain and mental anguish, had at any rate trained him to look upon it in something of the spirit with which the military surgeon in his picture, "The Doctor," attends to his business of cutting and probing, intent upon his work and oblivious of the groans and screams of his patient whose agony would only be prolonged, and whose very life would be endangered, if the surgeon were to lose his steadiness of hand or to follow the perfectly natural impulse of interrupting the operation. Nothing could be more concentrated than the doctor's fixed gaze at the wound to which he is attending. And something of the same objective concentration is to be found in Nevinson's treatment of the gruesome scene, which recalls, notwithstanding the broad modern technique and subject, certain pictures by the Paduan primitive, Squarcione.

Nevinson accepts facts as they are, and depicts them in all their heart-rending crudeness and ugliness. A typical instance is the group of homeless refugees sitting, hopeless and dejected, at a street corner among the pile of their poor belongings: "Belgium, 1914." It is a picture of utter misery and helplessness, without

even the comforting touch of the bond of sympathy and mutual helpfulness which might unite these wretched outcasts. Shared suffering is divided suffering. But these haggard refugees bear their lot each alone and in silence. Their attitudes express dejection, their faces fierce resentment without resignation. They are oblivious of each other under the burden of their own tragic fate. They are brought into pictorial unity by coherent design, but spiritually they remain detached individuals. This "illustration," like the harrowing hospital scene, is, as it were, a vivid, concise description in trenchant terms, without any comment. The spectator is left to draw his own emotional conclusions.

And so it is with the terribly realistic study of a man suffering from shell shock, "In the Observation Ward." It is like a page from a medical book describing the symptoms of an illness. The disturbed features; the frightened, half-imbecile look; the saliva dribbling from the opened lips—everything spells: shell shock. This portrait, painted with unswerving insistence on the structural planes of the head, reveals more of the professional hospital worker's intellectual curiosity, than of pity or sympathy.

Nevinson's cruel objectivity is less pronounced in the powerfully impressive and thrilling hospital scene to which he has given the significant title "La Patrie." The scene is a first-aid hospital extemporized in a railway shed in close proximity to the fighting line. The scanty light that enters through two small, low windows and through the half-open door just suffices to reveal in sharp flashes the littered straw on which rest, in long parallel rows, the stretchers with their ghastly loads of agonized humanity. Some of the wounded are wrapped in their greatcoats, others partially undressed, with bandages on head, back, arm or foot, each trying to find the position which is most likely to give him relief, and each bearing the marks of intense pain in his features. In the background, where the light streams through the door, stretcher-bearers are seen, carrying or depositing their load of lacerated, writhing flesh. Perhaps it is not so much the picture itself as the idea suggested by its title, that produces an emotional effect altogether different from that of the other scenes of suffering here described. Through this literary association the tragic fact is raised from its realistic bareness to a loftier region. The war machine and its working are banished to the second plane, and a noble idea—sacrifice of life and limb and all for home and country—tones down the crudeness of the theme.

In just one other picture Nevinson departs from that attitude of hostility to sentimentality which makes him discard even legitimate sentiment. "Twilight" stands alone among the young artist's war pictures as an illustration of genuine humane feeling. Through the chill twilight greyness, a "Tommy" is seen staggering along, with grim determination of purpose, his body bent double under the dead weight of his wounded and apparently unconscious comrade whom he is carrying back from the trenches to the first-aid station. The group is blocked out with a sculptor's sense of massive form, the weight of the limp body splendidly expressed, the atmosphere clearly indicated in *pictorial* values and not translated into plastic terms as in so many of Nevinson's landscapes.

This substitution of plastic for atmospheric values is, perhaps, the feature of Nevinson's work that will be found most puzzling and difficult of explanation by those who are not familiar with the experiments of the Cubist school. Not that a sky like the one that stretches over the swampy desolation of "A Flooded Trench on the Yser" can be described as being "constructed" according to Cubist principles. Cubism, properly speaking, is far more abstract and unrelated to the real appearance of nature. But, like Nevinson's lucid and perfectly intelligible convention, it springs from a passionate desire to realize the volume of things. The plastic sense may be so strongly developed as to lead to a search for planes even in transparent atmosphere. Nevinson's sky is, as it were, conceived as sculpture, chiselled out in his imagination in broad planes, and then translated back into paint. The convention adopted for suggesting the heavy downpour of rain is that of the Japanese colour print designers.

Architecture as well as sculpture must have been in Nevinson's mind when he designed the sky of one of his searchlight pictures. Instead of the rectilinear shapes of the pearly grey sky in the Trench picture, we find here concentric curves and dome-like shapes, abstractions of form that, in their general effect, suggest the vaulting of a mighty cathedral. Without losing in expressiveness, Nevinson has here attained to a beauty of colour and rhythmic line comparable to that of the Italian Ballà, a master in the art of geometric abstraction. Ballà must also have been in the English artist's mind when he painted the "Bursting Shells," to which reference has already been made. There are two versions of the same subject—the one a pure abstraction of explosive force, the other, which marks a nearer approach to the beauty of Ballà's recent work, a compromise

between abstraction and representation, or illustration, the geometric formula of the liberated destructive force being set against a background of clearly recognizable buildings and paving-stones.

Among Nevinson's war pictures are others that deal with similar motives from an altogether different point of view. "A Star Shell" is almost pure impressionism—the radiance of luminous explosion high up in the night sky reflected in the glitter of the surfaces below that are turned towards the source of light. "A Strafing" gives the visual impression of concentrated artillery fire as seen from the trenches. In "Explosion," Nevinson has searched to give expression to the terrific force of a mine disembowelling the earth and throwing a mighty mass of solid matter sky-high with the dense volume of smoke that rises from the ground like an inverted pyramid. To the volcanic force of this sudden eruption are opposed the reposeful lines that lead in a gentle slope towards the mine crater. The form of the design may be likened to a sheaf of corn tied close to the spreading base. This opposition of repose and energy conveys an extraordinarily vivid sense of the explosive force that in a brief moment of action changes the solid surface of the earth.

But interesting though they be, it is not to pictures of this type that Nevinson owes his recognition. The paintings that afford him the best opportunity for following the curious bent of his talent are those in which he deals with the concerted, rhythmic movement of masses, and especially with soldiers on the march. All that Futurism could teach him with regard to dynamism in pictorial art, kept within bounds of perfect intelligibility, is embodied in the remarkably ingenious picture "Returning to the Trenches." It depicts a detachment of *poilus*, heavily laden with their rifles and complete campaigning accoutrements, marching along with swinging step towards the firing-line. The grimness of the business is unmistakable. This is obviously neither parade, nor manœuvre, but the real thing. The men vary in stature, in age, in strength, but they are all animated by the same impulse, the same discipline, the same devotion to duty. There is in this unity of purpose an intangible, spiritual rhythm, which is enforced by the rhythm of the swinging gait and the sweeping forward movement.

If the picture is closely analysed, it will be found that, from the highly placed "sky-line" down to the bottom of the canvas, it changes by almost imperceptible degrees from realism to something approaching undiluted cubism. The jagged silhouette formed by

the bayonets, képis and packs, rising and falling against the streaky sky in accordance with the varying height of the soldiers' figures, is, apart from the necessary simplification, as true and clear as a photographic snapshot. The feet and legs and the ground are indicated by a system of repeated angles, curves and straight lines that serve admirably to express the swinging rhythm of the march, but only hint at the reality of the obliterated forms. This apparent inconsistency admits of a perfectly logical explanation. In walking, a person's head and shoulders move at about half the rate of his legs, the movement of the torso being an almost even sliding through space, whereas the movement of each leg is broken by an interval of rest, when one foot touches the ground whilst the other swings forward. To make up for this interval of rest, in which the torso does not participate, the movement of the leg must be accelerated. The eye of the observer has thus more time to take in the shape of the slowly moving torso and head, than that of the foot, which, being the only part of the body completely at rest during the intervals of contact with the ground, has to make up for lost time. And this is exactly what Nevinson tries to arrive at in "Returning to the Trenches." The lower down your eye travels on the picture, the more you will find the solid forms of the body changed into planes and curves indicative of the direction and speed of the movement. The only forms that are stated with any degree of clearness are those of the hindmost feet, which are static at the moment of pushing off from the ground.

"Column on the March" is a similar subject, treated in less abstract fashion. Still, the forward pressure of the rhythmic tramp on the roughly paved French road is convincingly suggested by the zig-zag lines by which the solid mass of men stretching in vanishing perspective from end to end of the picture surface is articulated, and by the parallelism of the squared planes struck by the light. Very similar in treatment is the procession of army transport wagons "On the Road to Ypres." The same unity of purpose, the same jagged, angular rhythm which is happily carried into the very sky which has the air of being pierced and cut into rectilinear patterns by flashing searchlights. In "A Dawn, 1914," Nevinson insists more emphatically upon the zig-zag pattern, and reverts almost to the uncompromising Futurism of his "Declaration of War" and "Back in London." It shows a regiment of French infantry marching through a winding street which is viewed in boldly receding perspective. The whole width of the street is filled by the moving

mass of whom only the heads and shoulders and glittering bayonets are visible.

Invariably, Nevinson reveals great tact in adapting the means to the end. He is not the slave of his own convention. The formula that serves him for the expression of the dynamic state does not satisfy him when he aims at the interpretation of the static. Every picture is to him an experiment. And when a difficulty has been overcome to his satisfaction, his inquisitive mind turns to new problems. This accounts for his different manners of treating subjects that in their essential features are practically identical, like "Troops Resting" and "Sprucers." Each represents a group of soldiers in a restful state of immobility, but the *quality* of rest is utterly different in each of these paintings. In the first, which shows the men in their trench outfit reposing by the roadside, the effect is one of latent energy and activity temporarily suspended; and this in spite of the obvious fatigue which in some figures almost amounts to exhaustion. In the other, depicting some Army Service men resting among the heavy packages in their charge, the immobility is that of indolence and boredom. This effect is produced, not so much by attitude and facial expression, as by the selection of planes and angles.

Nevinson has told the world what he had to say about the war. He has done this with an emphasis and impressiveness which has gained him not only the tolerance, but the enthusiastic approval, even of those who were prone to scoff at all art that tries to break away from academic convention. If he has not exhausted the possibilities of his grand theme, he has extracted from it all that appealed to his temperament. He has done with the interpretation of war and may be confidently expected soon to start in search of new artistic adventure.

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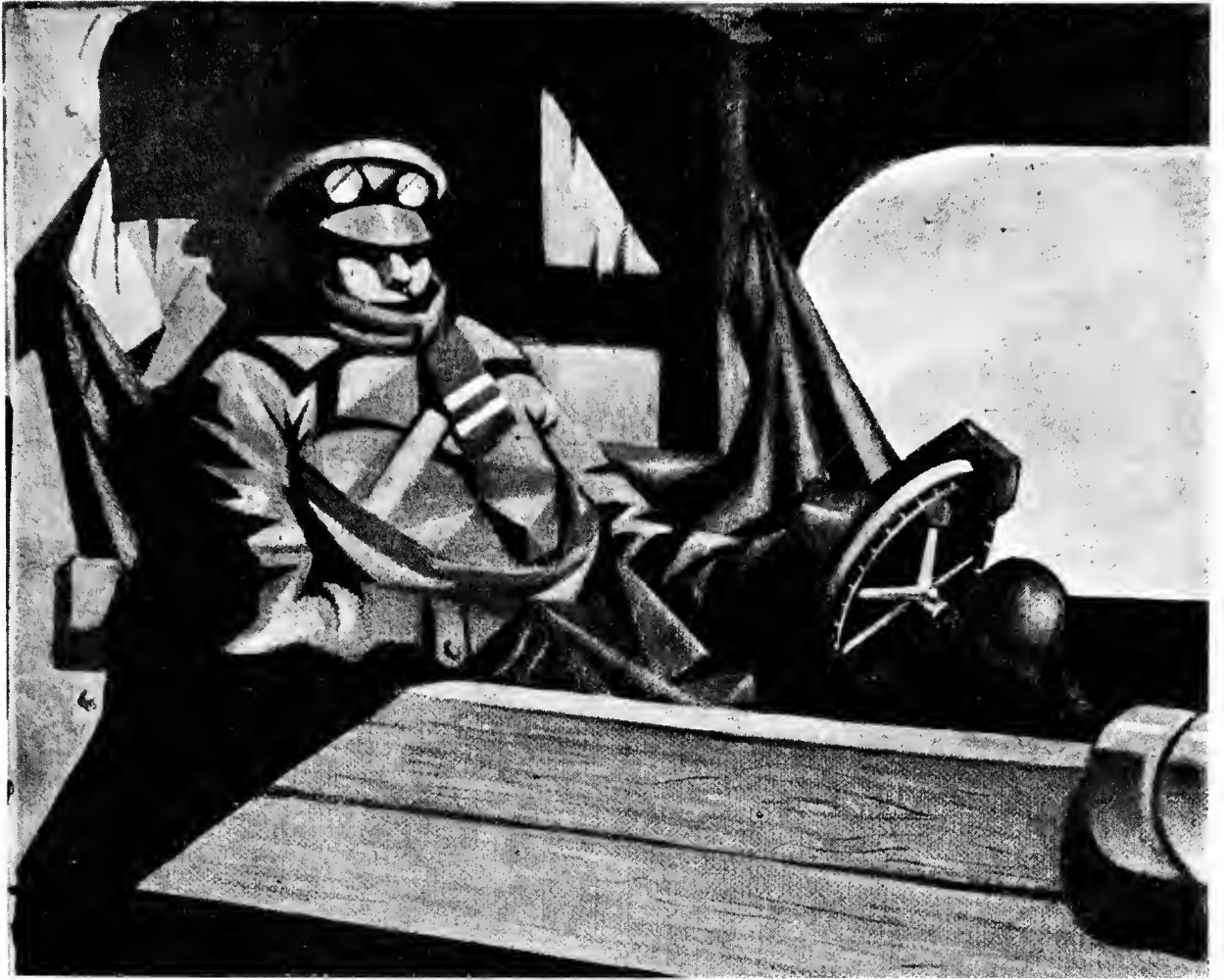
A TAUBE





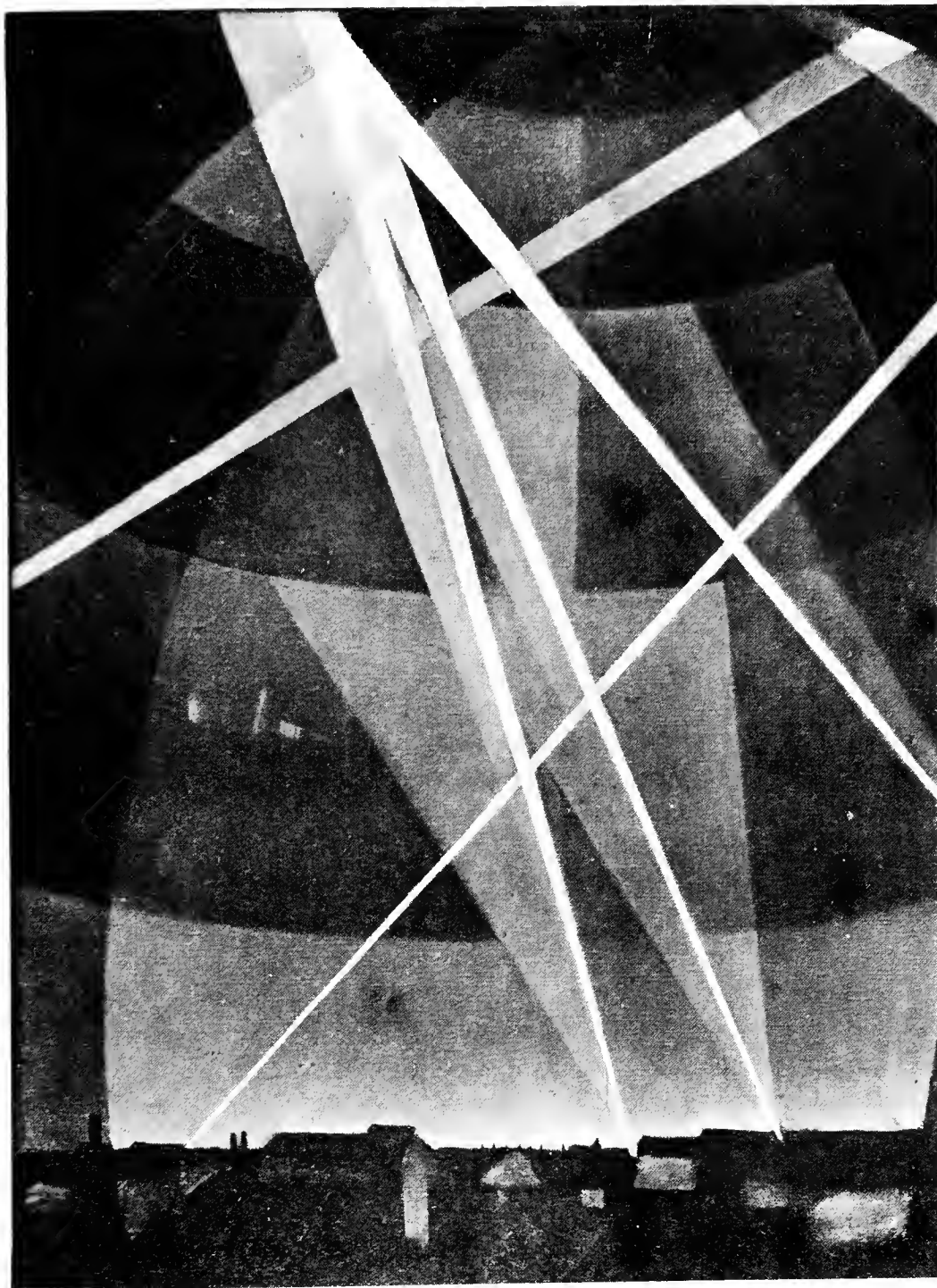
THE MITRAILLEUSE





MOTOR AMBULANCE DRIVER





SEARCHLIGHTS

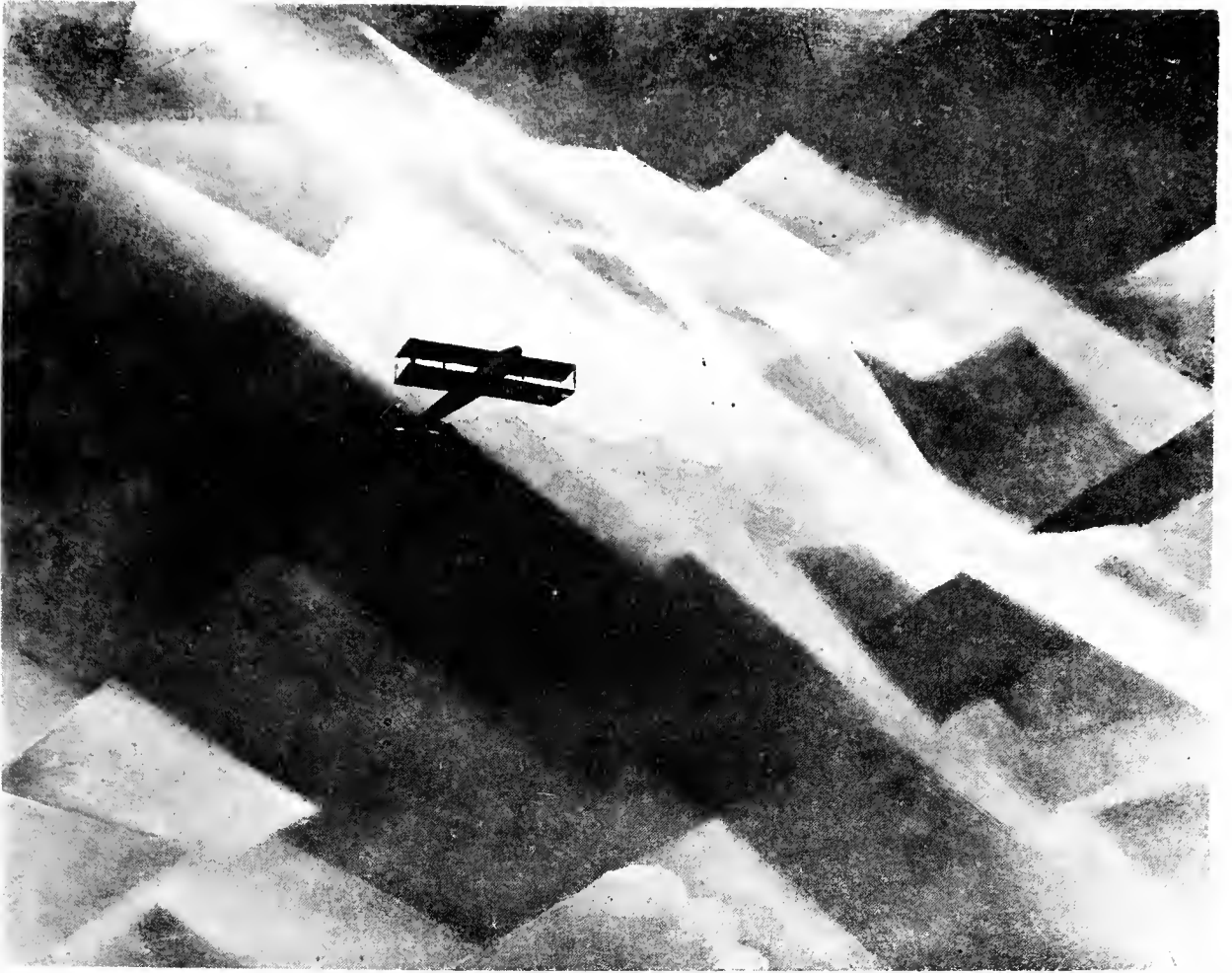






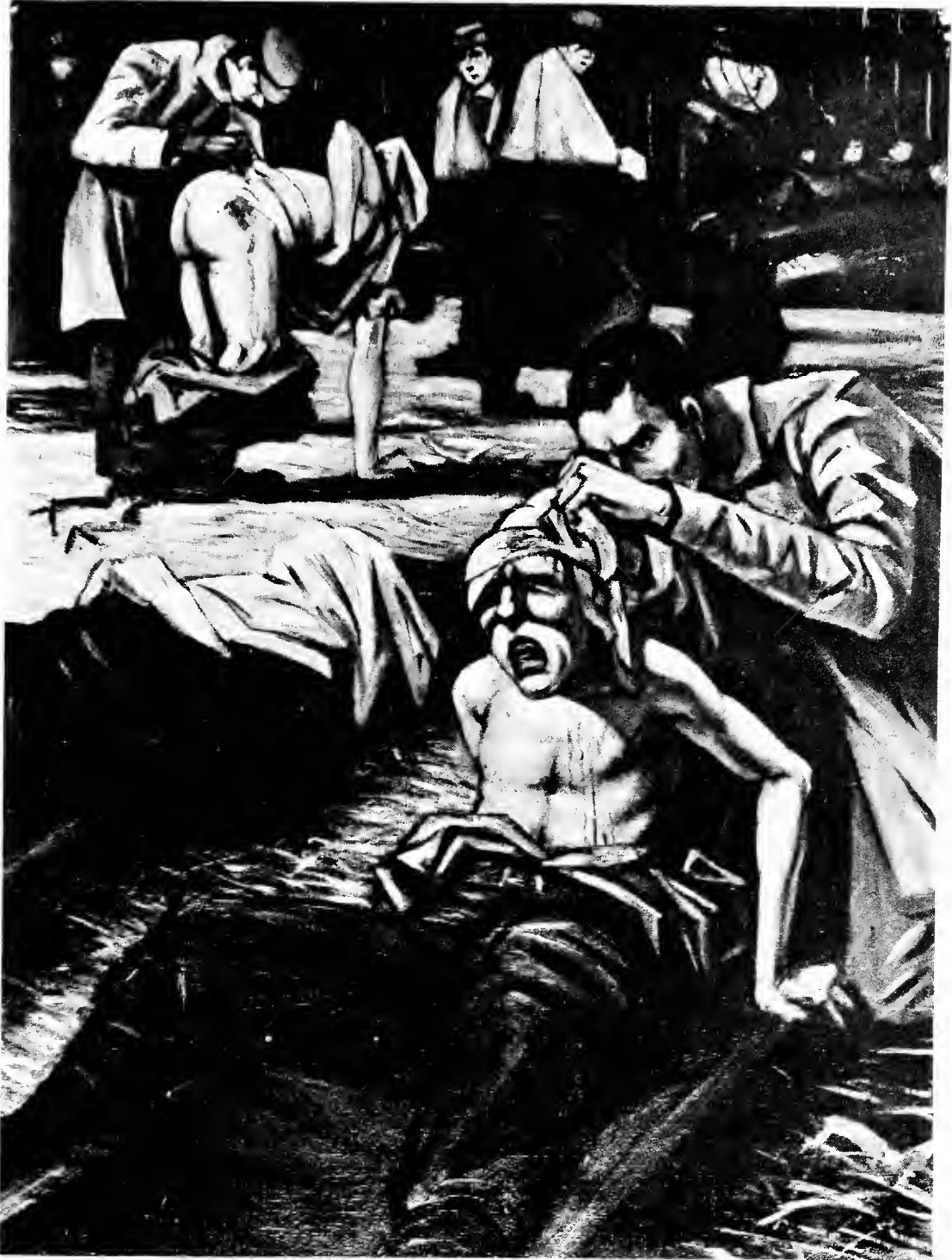
PURSUING A TAUBE





BEFORE THE STORM





THE DOCTOR





BELGIUM, 1914







IN THE OBSERVATION WARD





LA PATRIE

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TWILIGHT

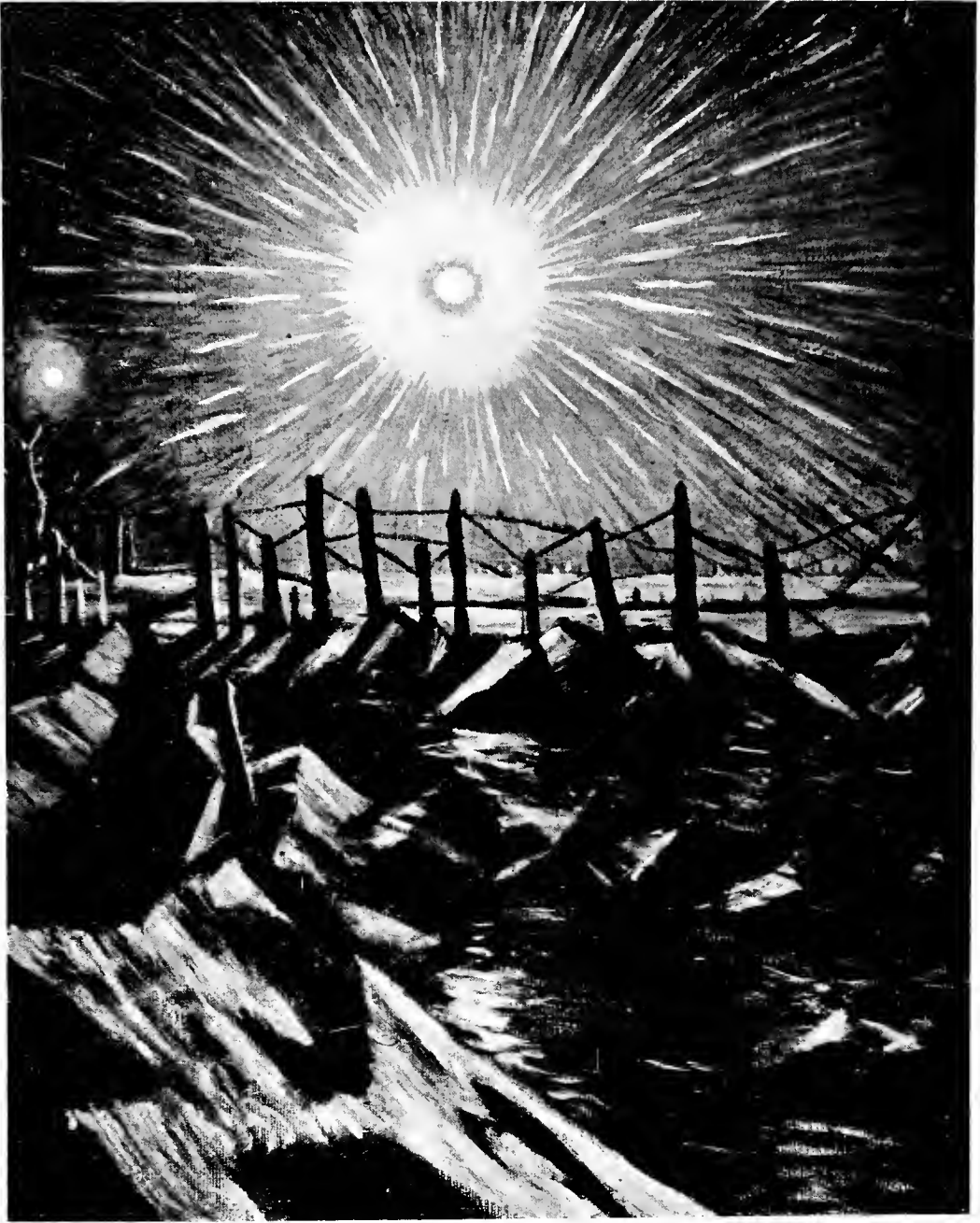




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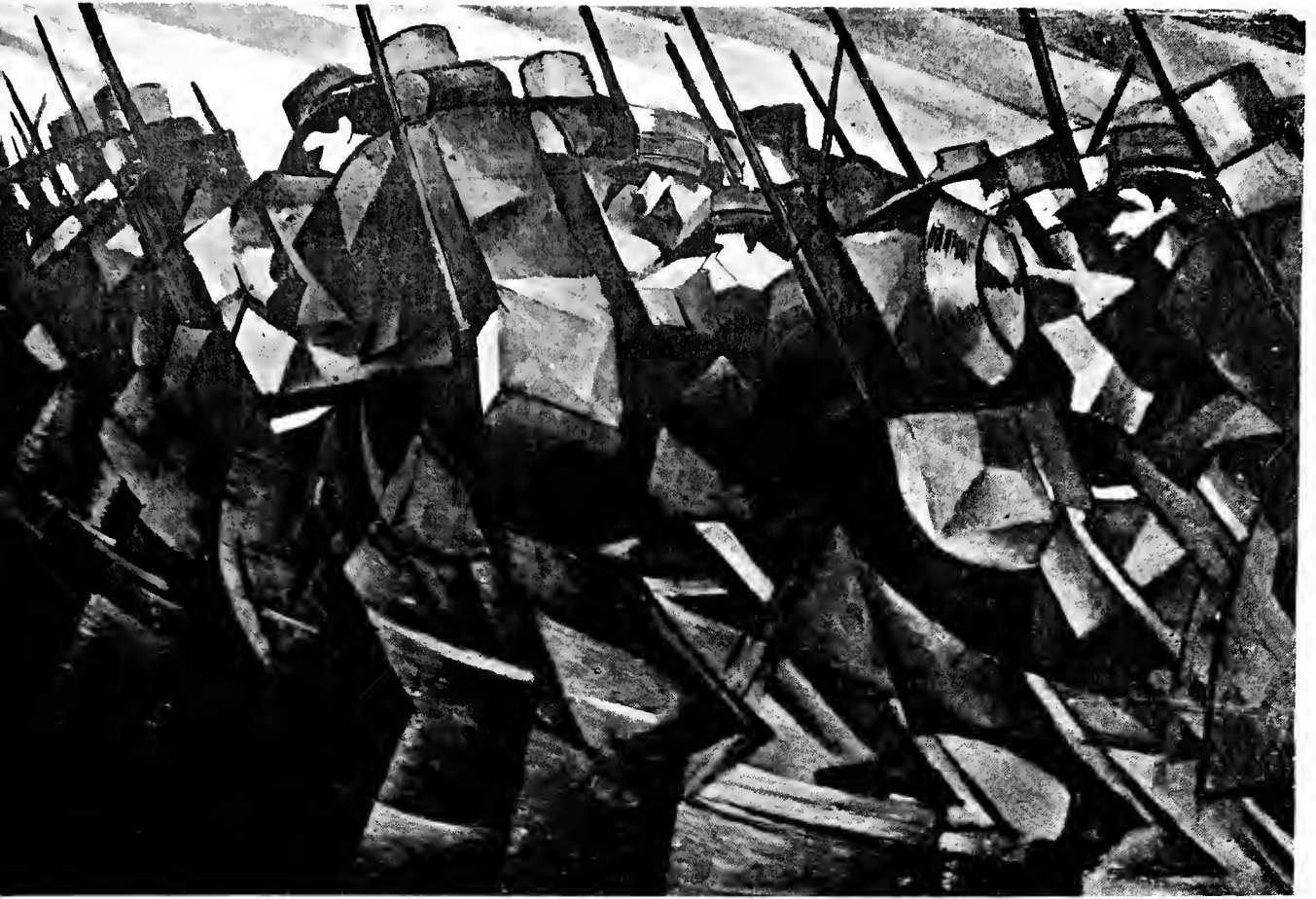






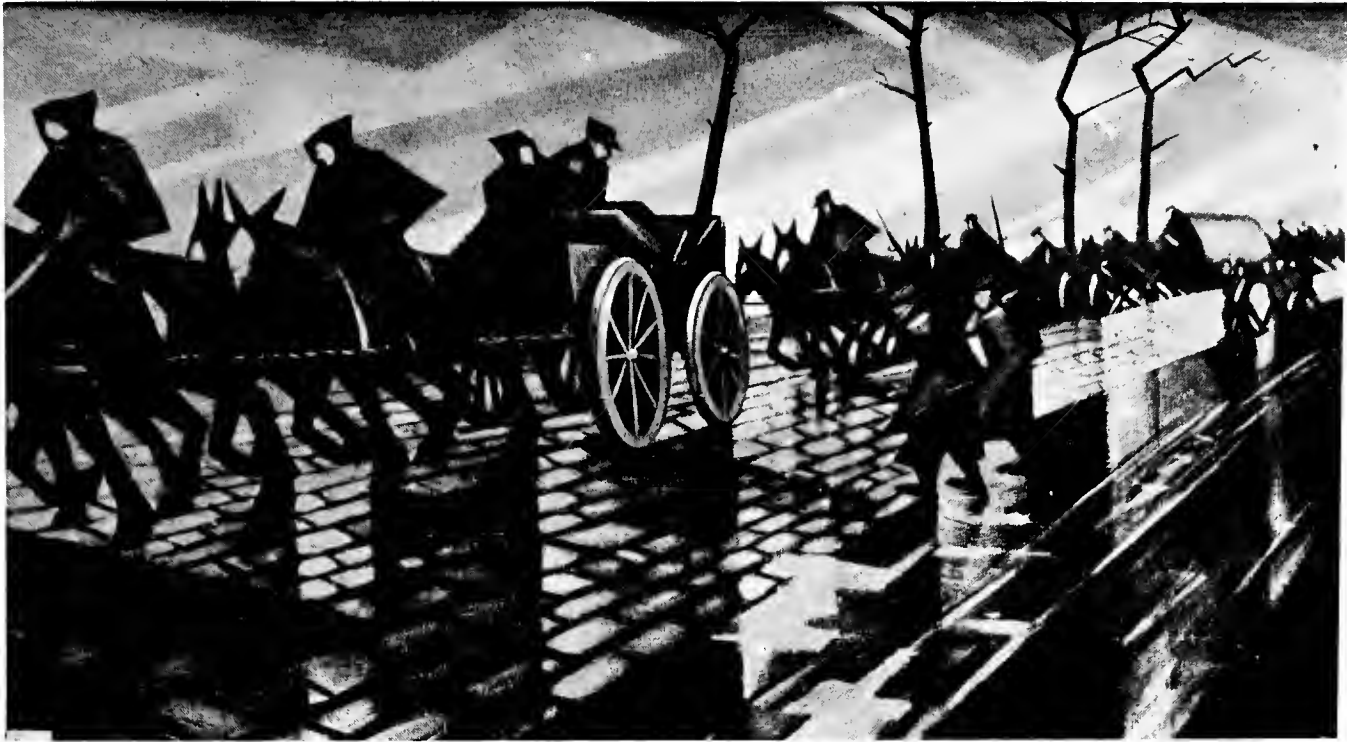
A STAR SHELL





RETURNING TO THE TRENCHES





ON THE ROAD TO YPRES





A DAWN: 1914







TROOPS RESTING





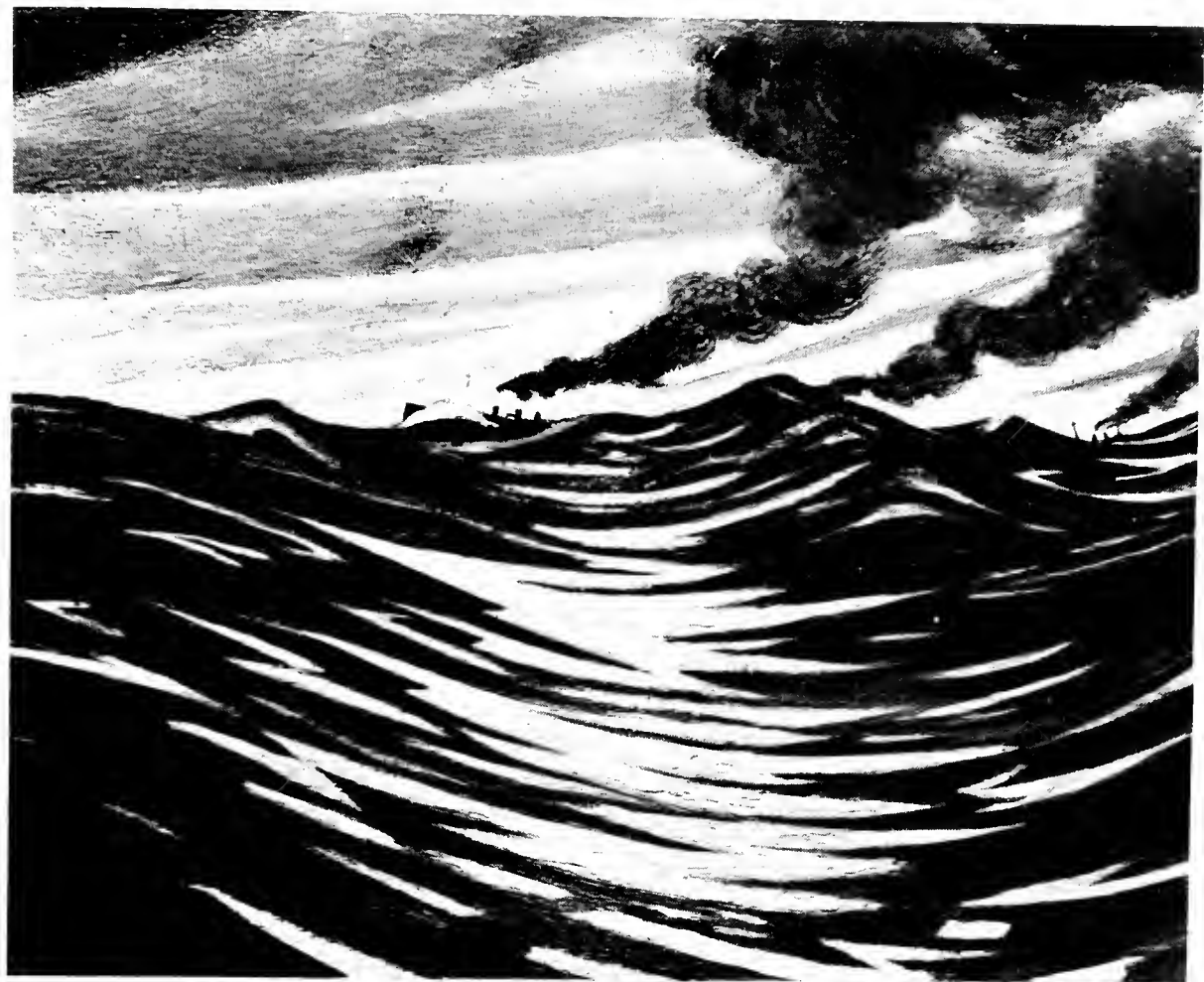
SPRUCERS





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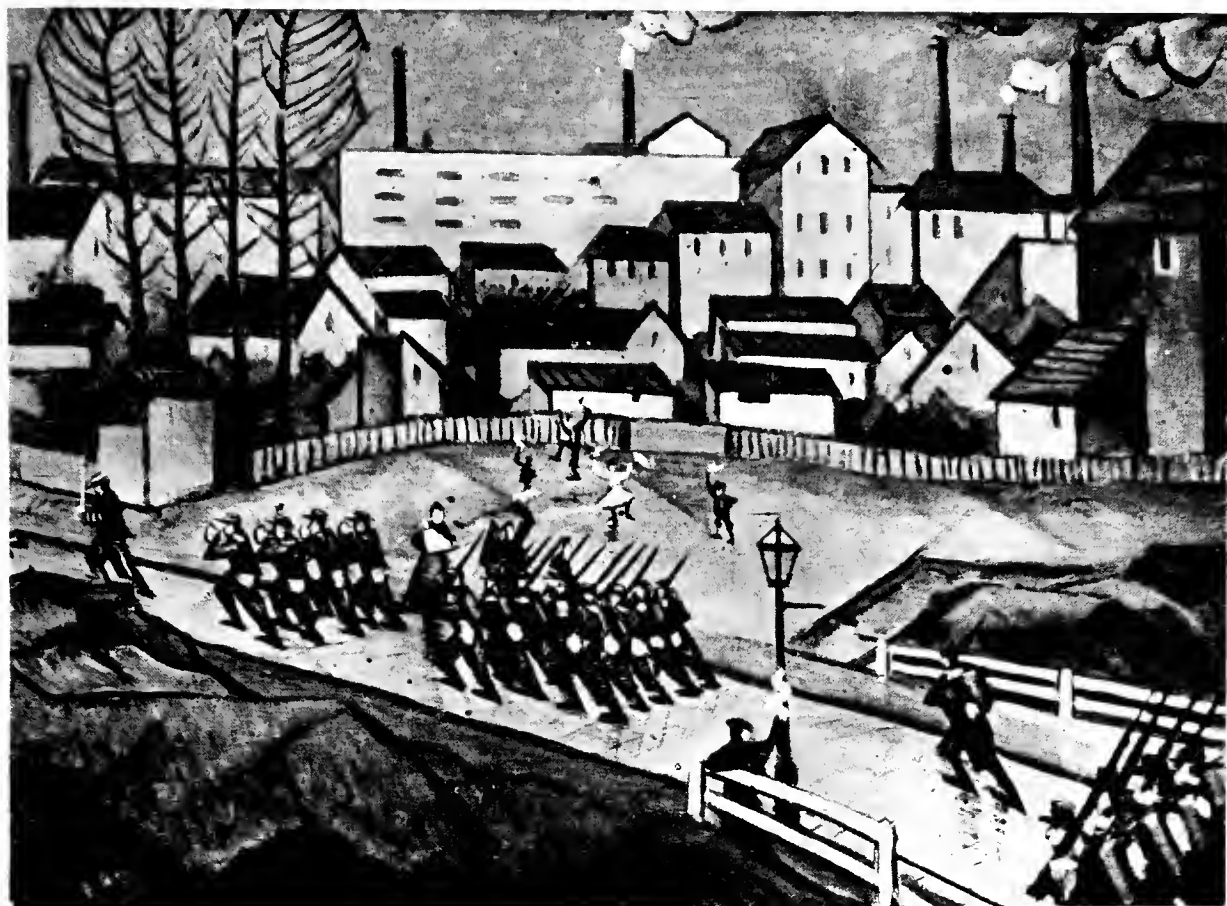




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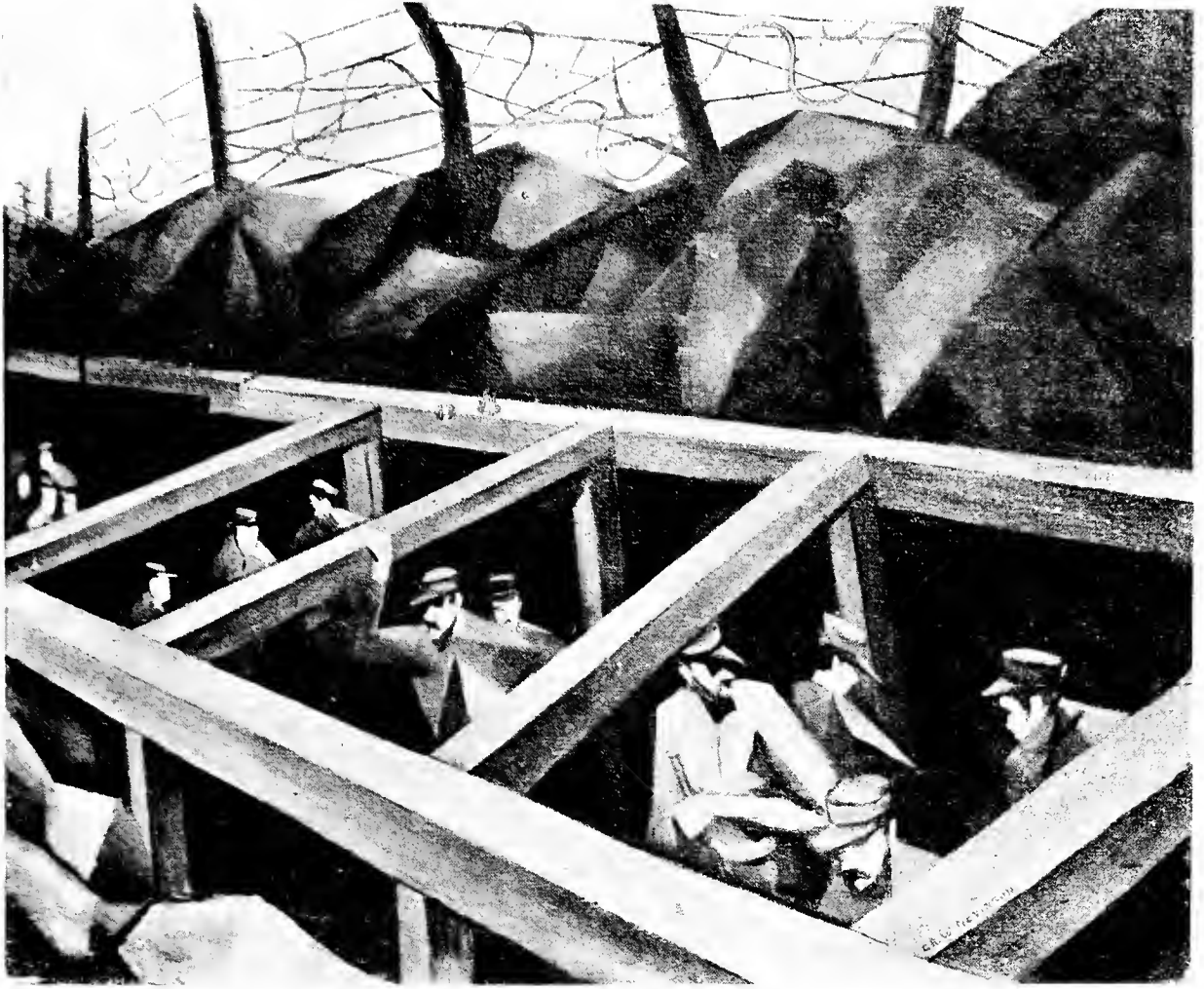






BRAVO!





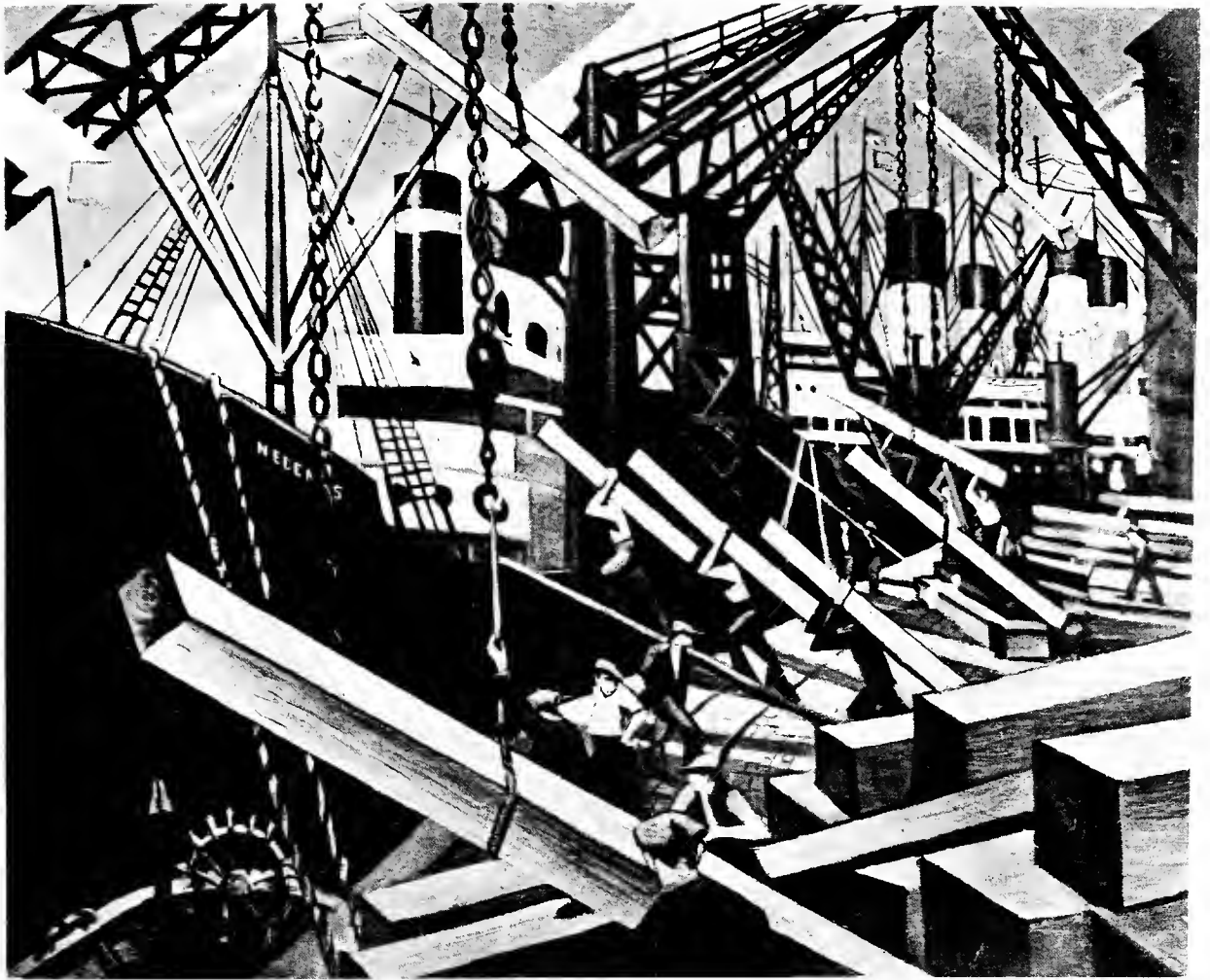
## LA GUERRE DES TROUS





BORSINGHE FARM





SOUTHAMPTON











