Stephen Spender: Aspects of the Quest for Reality

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STEPHEN SPENDER: ASPECTS OF THE QUEST FOR REALITY

By

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CHAPTER I

ANTECEDENTS

The roots of W. B. Yeats reach far back into Ireland's legendary past; T. S. Eliot's mind is drawn to ancient fertility cults, to medieval conflicts between the realms of God and Caesar; in the poetry of W. H. Auden we find persistent echoes of Anglo-Saxon syntax and concept. The work of all of these men, marked though it is by the contemporary idiom, is linked significantly with the distant past. But when the mind begins to move backward through the years to find literary ancestors for Stephen Spender, it comes to an almost automatic halt in the early part of the nineteenth century. There is, of course, a reference to Icarus here, a Christ image there in Spender's poetry, but, on the whole, his work is a hall of echoes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If there is a certain hollowness in these echoes, it is perhaps because they do not reverberate from sufficient distances. If there is a unique vibrancy to them, it is, no doubt, because they are so immediately concerned with the contemporary situation. Spender's work insistently reminds us that, the nuclear bomb notwithstanding, we are very much a part of the nineteenth century. We are still plagued by the problems and dilemmas which confronted the Romantics and the Victorians.
Spender's own attitude toward the Romantics is complex; the nature of Romanticism makes this inevitable. On the one hand, the Romantics gained for the ego full developmental scope. They removed the ceiling from the universe; in the realm of thought, all things were possible; no external restrictions on the imagination were acceptable. Experience became a holy thing because it was the precious vehicle of cognition. On the other hand, when the Romantics freed man from the closed universe which he had hitherto inhabited, they unleashed a force which had as twin-aspected a potential as the smashing of the atom in our own "dirty century," to borrow Gabriel Fielding's phrase. In freeing the imagination and the sensual life from restrictions--from the nothing-too-much of the Greeks, from the complex of limitations set by Hebraic-Christian thought, they not only exalted the ego; they also placed it on trial. The question which they forced on the attention of their readers and which still, a century later, occupies their literary heirs, is the extent to which intuition and the testimony of the senses are trustworthy.

Spender unabashedly upholds the value of personal experience. The next chapter will attempt to show that when he asserts that everything which he has written is autobiography, he is not proclaiming a narcissistic preoccupation. Rather, he is affirming that to know one man well is to know something of humanity and that the writer who can reveal one man as he actually exists, with all pretensions stripped away, has laid bare a small but significant segment of reality.
Like the Romantics, then, Spender looks for answers not in any religious or political orthodoxy but within himself. But when he writes about the Romantics, it is not what he has in common with them which he stresses, but what seems to distance him from them.

For Spender, the word Romantic has a primarily visual connotation. It suggests "scenes of vastness or of solitude... a garden in which flowers are allowed to run wild."¹ What particularly characterizes the Romantic poet for him is the interaction between the solitude of nature and the poet's own solitude. He draws an implicit comparison between the Romantic poet's conception of nature and that of the twentieth-century writer. The latter also confronts an immensely lonely universe, but it is a universe that is cold, impenetrable, unyielding. The contemporary cannot enter into an empathic relationship with nature as could the thinkers of the early nineteenth century. Where they found a haven, he, more often than not, finds only rejection.

So deep was the Romantic poet's sense of union with nature that the line of demarcation between the objective and subjective worlds became obscured. In Spender's view, the Romantics tended to lose their contact with the real world, preferring an ideal universe in which they could intuit, in

contrast to such writers as Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton in the foreground of whose work "there is always the sense of the reality of the world with its secular and divine institutions."²

Throughout Spender's critical work, there runs an assumption which recalls Arnold's observation that poetry is a criticism of life. There is, consequently, a pejorative tone in his judgment of the Romantics, particularly of Keats, for abandoning the real world in favor of an imaginative realm of pure poetry. Spender repeatedly implies that Keats used poetry as an alternative to life, as an escape from the human situation. Keats had his non-Romantic moments, Spender points out, when a sense of "the solid and external" broke in upon his reveries.³ "Tasting Eve's Apple" and "Lines to Fanny" give expression to this atypical side of Keats. But on the whole, his poetry rejects the real world, and Spender sees in his work the same "spacious emptiness" which, for him, marks the work of the other Romantics.⁴

Spender's attitude toward Keats throws important light on his own poetic theory and practice. But what is important here is to underline the emphasis he places on the immersion of the poet in the "real" world.

²Ibid., p. 9.
³Ibid., p. 27.
⁴Ibid., p. 28.
We look in vain in Keat's poetry for the nineteenth century equivalents of pylons and airplanes. He consciously strove to be, like the Shakespeare he so venerated, a man not of an age but of all time. In a letter to his brother and sister-in-law dated December 31, 1818, he writes: "We with our bodily eyes see but the fashion and Manners of one country for one age—-and then we die. Now to me manners and custom long passed among the Babylonians or the Bactrians are as real, or even more real than those among which I now live."\(^5\)

Spender, of course, in common with every responsible individual who has lived through this era of concentration camps and nuclear bombs, looks within himself and finds a highly developed consciousness of what it means to be alive in the twentieth century. His present-mindedness is reenforced by the fact that we was born into a political, journalistic family. He himself dreamed, as a child, of becoming prime minister. A strong sense of the here and now is inevitably reflected in Spender's work and is one of the elements which lends it its real significance. It is because he finds a similar preoccupation in Shelley that he occasionally seems more sympathetic to him than to Keats.

Shelley's poetry tends toward an art which is in the widest sense political: that is to say it is concerned with the beliefs of those members of society who genuinely desire justice and liberty for the whole

of society, hating superstition. His mind was set on a path where politics becomes morals.

Shelley believed that poetry was about a world outside poetry itself, whereas to Keats poetry was simply about poetry, so that his poetry refers one back not to an observed world but to a trance-like state of mind, a classical mythology, Shakespeare, Boccaccio, or, in Hyperion, Milton.6

But when Keats looked within himself he found a very different being from the one which a similar inspection yielded either to Shelley or Spender. The sense of reality was bound up, for Keats as surely as for Eliot, with the non-temporal. For Spender to confront reality, it is necessary for him to enter deeply into the life of his own time. For Keats to do the same thing, it was necessary for him to escape from his time.

No one needs to be reminded that Keats' sense of beauty was so acute that it became inseparable from his sense of the real. If he could create something beautiful, he would inevitably create something true. The circumstances of the life he knew yielded suffering and ugliness. Not only was he plagued first by his brother Tom's illness and then by his own, but he had a contempt for the literary world of London, based on his recognition of the falsity of much of it. He had to look elsewhere for reality.

Spender finds in Keats' letters the only evidence that "he breathed the same air" as his fellow men.

He shared their world not in his verse but in his letters, which give one a vivid enough picture of literary gossip in Hampstead. . . . When one has absorbed Keats' factual life—with all its brightness and courageous smallness—from his letters, one cannot then transfer one's attention to his poetry and find that reading of life again, illuminated and better proportioned. . . . For Keats does not say anything in his poetry. . . . Keats, in his poetry, shed his factual life and lived another life in which he was companioned by Shakespeare and the memories of great men.7

In Spender's view, Keats relied too heavily on literature to feed the springs of his creative energy. "He happily derived his own poetry from an elixir of literary experiences. It is curious that amongst all his acute and profound critical reflections it never occurs to him that Shakespeare's own experience was not primarily of literature but of nature and life."8 Yet it is abundantly clear from the letters that Keats reverses Shakespeare precisely because he did know life so thoroughly. In his conversations with Shakespeare, Keats is able to confront a reality which transcends time and place, which reenforces his own experience of life and of men and women as no amount of contemporary conversation could have done. Keats had friends whom he loved, when he was not exasperated with them. But it seems evident that none of them had a mind as large or as hungry as his own. It was necessary for him to range through the centuries to find fully satisfactory

7Ibid., p. 577.
companionship, not, as Spender implies, as an alternative to reality, but as an anchor in it. An hour's discussion with Shelley or with Byron on literary or even on political topics would have seemed far more illusory to Keats than an hour spent in contemplation of a passage in Lear.

Spender's criticism of Keats is a valuable one. He acknowledges the greatness of the odes in which, he feels, Keats at last breaks down the barriers between his real and his poetic worlds. What he perhaps does not sufficiently acknowledge is that the poems on the nightingale and the urn grow from the same preoccupation which characterized Keats' early ambitious failures. Few would quarrel with Spender's judgment that "Endymion" is largely unreadable. Keats himself was well aware that it was a failure. But it is a significant failure, in the light of the great odes.

In the following lines, for instance, there is an extremely interesting foreshadowing of one of the themes of the nightingale ode.

Wherein lies happiness? In that which beck,
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
Full alchemiz'd and free of space. Behold
The clear religion of heaven! Fold
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,
And soothe thy lips: hist, when the airy stress
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
Aeolian magic from their lucid wombs:

---

Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs: . . .
Feel we these things?--that moment have we stept
Into a sort of oneness, and our state
Is like a floating spirit's. (I, 777-97) 10

This passage exemplifies as clearly as any other in the poem the weaknesses of Keats's early work: the somewhat mechanical rhymes, the luxuriating in poeticisms. But these accidentals do not obscure the fact that these lines are written, not about poetry, but about experience. That Keats himself felt an excruciating tension between his insights into the eternal and the actualities of daily existence is clearly indicated in the final stanza of the nightingale ode, where his uncertainty about the trustworthiness of his "intimations of immortality" is evidenced in the concluding line:

Fled is that music:--Do I wake or sleep? 11

It is this tension which gives the poem its greatness and it is a concept which might never have achieved perfect expression if Keats had not begun to play with it early in his poetic career.

There, when new wonders ceas'd to float before,
And thoughts of self came on, how crude and sore
The journey homeward to habitual self! 12

(II, 274-76)

In these lines from "Endymion," there is a very clear fore-shadowing of

11 Ibid., p. 209.
12 Ibid., p. 86.
Farewell, the very word is like a bell
Tolling me back from thee to my sole self.13

The judgment that Keats "says" nothing in his poetry may have a certain validity if it is accepted as hyperbole and applied to "Endymion" or "Hyperion"; it certainly is not true of the odes. Spender's criticism of Keats would be more impressive if he did not rest so many of his generalizations exclusively on the early poems.

His estimate of Shelley is more generous than his assessment of Keats; this may be partly explained by the fact that Shelley's mind and background were much more similar to his own than were Keats's. The fact that Shelley's father was a wealthy baronet undoubtedly meant that Shelley's social consciousness, like Spender's own, stemmed in part at least from a sense of guilt at having been born into a class which "protected" him from the harsh realities which confronted a majority of his fellows. Wealth and aristocracy became for Shelley as well as for Spender symbols of an unreal world, which was cut off from the significant struggle of humanity at large to win dignity and freedom.

Spender's likeness to Shelley has been pointed out more than once; Spender himself seems to allude to the comparison when he says: "His [Shelley's] youthful desire to identify himself with a revolutionary cause, his discovery within himself

13 Ibid., p. 209.
of original powers of judgement whereby he examined, as though for the first time, every existing social institution, his fads and eccentricities, and his perpetual adolescence, are recurrent qualities among the English upper classes. It is no mere chance that in every poetic generation, critics discover some poet who qualifies to be 'another Shelley'.

Spender is perhaps also thinking of himself when he distinguishes Shelley from Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, saying that Shelley "never went back on his revolutionary principles." He goes on to say "yet there is this important difference between the younger and the older Shelley. The first believed that evil is an external burden imposed on men by human institutions, which can be removed by external change. The later Shelley had looked far deeper into the heart of man and saw the corruption of power which turns to evil the means intended for good." In Spender's own case, it was undoubtedly his faith in "external change" which led him as a young man to join the Communist party. His discovery that Communists as well as capitalists are subject to the "corruption of power" has led him in later years to place more emphasis on individual morality than on the radical change of political institutions.


15 Ibid., p. 7.
Biographical parallels between the two men are not confined to the sympathy both felt for members of classes not their own. Spender indicates in *World Within World* that he has sought self-identification in relationships with men rather than with women. The first of these was with a fellow student at Oxford whom he calls Marston. Of Shelley's friendship with Jefferson Hogg (which began while both were undergraduates at Oxford) Spender says, "On Shelley's side this relationship was perhaps the first of a series of friendships in which he sought for someone who would understand him in a way which was almost absolute; someone with whom he could identify completely." 16

In their personal relationships, both men were haunted by a sense of guilt. Shelley's, of course, centered around the suicide of his first wife, Harriet. Spender's had to do with a young man named Jimmy Younger, who was his nominal secretary for a number of years and for whose involvement in the Spanish Civil War Spender felt himself responsible.

Far more important than any casual biographical similarities, however, are the attitudes toward poetry which Spender shares with Shelley. Shelley's "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know" is cited by Spender as a justification of his own view that poetry must be intimately linked with the time in which the poet lives. Commenting on the line, Spender says, "By this, Shelley means creating in poetry

16 Ibid., p. 9.
a language of the imagination which may include the enormous advances in specialized knowledge of the modern age. Thus poetry may become a meeting place of the forces most affecting a modern society." 17

Not only is Spender in agreement with Shelley on the desirability of relating poetry to the external world in which one lives; both men emphasize the individuality of the poet and the importance of his love relationships in determining this individuality. Spender lauds Shelley for remembering, despite his public concerns, "that the poet is an individual with particular tastes decided by his own personality, that is by his individual capacity for love." 18

It is the kind of present-mindedness which Shelley reveals in his sonnet "England in 1819," written after the Peterloo riots, which links him most closely to Spender and the other revolutionary writers of the 30's. Shelley is concerned here not with the immortality of beauty but with the contemporaneity of ugliness--an ugliness caused by political injustice. His language, freed from poeticisms, becomes an unadorned tool of social criticism. The sincerity of his concern has stripped away, as in the best of Spender's social poetry, all ornamentation. Each syllable seems to be spat out of a mouth twisted in contempt for those who have disallowed the cause of the hungry.

17 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
18 Ibid., p. 22.
Shelley excoriates "An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king,--" He goes on to speak of

Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, with a blow,--
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled field,--
An army, which liberticide and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield,--
Golden and sanguine laws which tempt and slay;
Religion Christless, Godless--a book sealed;
A Senate,--Time's worst statute unrepealed,--
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom may Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.19

There is no question that the plight of the poor, who had been left virtually breadless because of the Corn Laws, was real to Shelley in a way that his father's home and the life it symbolized could never be real. Shelley succeeds in conveying to his readers the reality of "our tempestuous day."

For Spender, too, only the present is real. Preoccupation with the past is to him a dangerous manifestation of escapist tendencies. Whereas the garden of his childhood home becomes a symbol of an unreal felicity, linked to a Georgian dream world, marks of the contemporary industrial world, because they are significantly connected with the life of the whole community, become trustworthy signs of the real.

Real were iron rails, and smashing the grass,
Real these wheels on which I rode, real this compelled time.20


But if Spender's perception of the reality of iron rails links him to Shelley's apprehension of contemporary reality, the reference to the smashing of the grass, in the lines just quoted, indicates how far apart the two poets are in their views of nature.

Shelley sees nature as the garment of a benevolent spirit whom he seems to identify with quintessential Mind. In the following lines from "The Revolt of Islam," he seems to identify Wisdom, who is being apostrophized, with a maternal earth-spirit.

O Spirit vast and deep as Night and Heaven!  
Mother and soul of all to which is given  
The light of life, the loveliness of being,  
Lo! thou dost re-ascend the human heart,  
Thy throne of power, almighty as thou wert  
In dreams of Poets old grown pale by seeing  
The shade of thee:--now, millions start  
To feel thy lightnings through them burning:  
Nature, or God, or Love, or Pleasure,  
Or Sympathy the sad tears turning  
To mutual smiles, a drainless treasure,  
Descends amidst us;--Scorn, and Hate,  
Revenge and Selfishness are desolate--  
A hundred nations swear that there shall be  
Pity and Peace and Love, among the good and free! 21

For Shelley, the prophetic mission of the poet demanded that he enter into union with eternal Mind and through his vision help to bring humanity into conformity with it. The contemplation of visible nature was a means by which the poet might penetrate to the essence of the spirit which animated it. It was this spirit, then, which was for Shelley the supreme reality. His rejection of the life which his father represented

21 The Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley, I, 103.
his rejection of political and social institutions, stemmed
from his conviction that they led away from, rather than to the
heart of, this truth.

Spender seems much less certain than Shelley was about the
existence of a benevolent, eternal Mind. His statements bearing
on this question are, as we shall see in the next chapter,
contradictory. His impatience with the search for an absolute
of men like Eliot and Auden suggests that he himself is content
to let his metaphysics remain hazy. Perhaps the troubling
thinness of Spender's thought is attributable to the fact that
he places great emphasis on the consciousness of man, but seems
to have a limited curiosity about the sources of that
consciousness.

At any rate, he is determined not to be lulled into a
sense of false security by an empathic sense of oneness with the
more pacific aspects of nature. He seems to regard any such
experience as illusory. In the image of the rails crushing the
grass, the rails become a concrete symbol of what the
consciousness of man can produce, and man's consciousness is
seen to be superior to any purely natural phenomenon such as
grass. "Unreal those cows, those wave-winged storks," he
goes on to say.

This same emphasis appears in the opening lines of "The
Landscape Near an Aerodrome":

More beautiful and soft than any moth
With burring furred antennae feeling its huge path
Through dusk, the air liner with shut-off engines
Glides over suburbs and the sleeves set trailing tall
To point the wind.\textsuperscript{23}

And in the concluding lines of "The Express" the same kind of contrast between the man-made and the natural is drawn. He is speaking of the train:

Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced,
Wrapt in her music no bird song, no, nor bough
Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal.\textsuperscript{24}

In a television interview, Spender indicated that these lines were not to be taken seriously—\textemdash that a bird song was of course more beautiful than the sound of a train. He suggested that he was simply using a kind of ironic hyperbole. But hyperbole or not, the recurrence of the artefact-vs.-nature concept in his poetry indicates a perhaps not fully conscious determination to divest himself of a sentimentally romantic attitude toward nature.

Despite this anti-romanticism, it is not strange that among Victorian poets, it is those who manifest a strong Romantic tendency who seem to Spender to be most relevant to the contemporary poet. Hopkins' Romanticism consisted in his assertion of his own individual vision. "The dearest freshness" that lived "deep down things" could only be perceived if the uniqueness of the object or person was respected and explored.

\textsuperscript{23}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{24}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 40.
So keen was his veneration for the unique that it became necessary for him to dislocate the language to some extent in order to express it. For all of this, Spender has the deepest admiration. For Spender's own holy of holies is the human personality. Though the two men differ markedly as to the best means of realizing the fullness of personal being, they are at one in their desire to safeguard the sacredness of the self. Strangely enough, the submission to orthodoxy which so bothers Spender in the case of Eliot and Auden is seen in Hopkins as a necessary mode of self-realization.

In speaking about the religious atmosphere in which Hopkins made his decision to be a Roman Catholic, Spender sets up a rather over-simplified set of alternatives as the only possible choices for men of the post-Darwin era. Either, he says, one could accept the development of scientific thought and subordinate religious belief to it, ultimately perhaps seeing it "as a branch of English literature," or one could insist on dogma and ritual and reject conflicting scientific developments.25

While many literary men were content with the first alternative, Hopkins, according to Spender, could not accept a "vague, emotional, humanistic religion of a general kind." The same tendency which led to the highly individualized diction of

25The comments on Hopkins and Hardy which are given here were made by Spender during a course which he gave at Northwestern University, Winter, 1963.
his poetry also led to what Spender calls his "infituation with dogma." This tendency Spender defines as "an obsession with seeing things with utmost precision." For Hopkins this was a way of achieving authenticity, which is, for Spender, the queen of poetic virtues.

If it is a characteristic of Romantic poetry to see the beauties of nature as emblems of a metaphysical reality, then it must be acknowledged that Hopkins carried Romanticism to a pitch which Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley did not exceed. Hopkins' identification of Christ with the windhover is a far more daring and explicit imaginative flight than Keats' questing and tentative linking of the nightingale to the concept of immortality. And the concluding lines of "Pied Beauty"

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

or the lines from "Hurrahing in Harvest"

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;

clearly indicate the uses to which the orthodox mind puts the Romantic preoccupation.

But of this aspect of Hopkins romanticism, Spender has little to say. What he does emphasize is the Jesuit poet's

---

rejection of a romantic tendency which Spender sees to be dangerous—that is the belief that the artist was "separate from the rest of society, living according to improvised standards."

This rejection is the more remarkable to Spender since he sees Hopkins as a man under special temptation to be an "aesthetic drifter" and as one who was "obviously rather effeminate."

When Spender says that Hopkins felt it was more important to be a man than to be a poet one has the sense that he is identifying Hopkins with the Thirties poets' rejection of art-for-art's sake. The implicit contrast, of course, is with a poet like Keats, who, in Spender's view, felt it more important to be a poet than to be a man.

Although he does not draw an explicit parallel, Spender may be thinking of his own poetry and of that of the other Thirties poets when he points out that Hopkins was concerned with readers living in an industrial society. The Jesuit recognized, Spender feels, that such readers would not tolerate a "poetic" language. They were too immersed in an industrial, materialistic "reality" to be reached by an idealized version of a poetic world presented in a tired, pretty diction.

In Hopkins' remarks on Tennyson's use of Parnassian, he shows the same preoccupation with authenticity which marks Spender's poetic practice. In a letter written to A. W. M. Baillie, September 10, 1864, Hopkins speaks of various levels of writing which poets achieve. The first is the "language of inspiration."
I mean by it a mood of great, abnormal in fact, mental acuteness, either energetic or receptive, according as the thoughts which arise in it seem generated by a stress and action of the brain, or to strike into it unasked. . . . The second kind I call Parnassian. It can only be spoken by poets, but is not in the highest sense poetry. . . . It is spoken on and from the level of a poet's mind, not, as in the other case, when the inspiration, which is the gift of genius, raises him above himself. . . . I believe that when a poet palls on us it is because of his Parnassian. We seem to have found out his secret.27

Hopkins goes on to discuss other levels, but it is the concept of Parnassian which particularly interests Spender, for he obviously equates Parnassian, as does Hopkins himself, with a certain falsification of experience— with a turning away from life and toward "literature." One cannot read or listen for long to Spender's critical comments without becoming aware that, conscious craftsman though he is, he sees a great danger in a too conscious craftsmanship. The following comment from the introduction to his Collected Poems underlines this apprehension:

A temptation I have guarded against is that of making more than a discreet and almost unnoticeable minimum of technical tidyings up. Nothing seems easier when one is older, than to correct a rhyme or rhythm which eluded one's youthful incompetence. Yet the technical flaw in an early poem may reflect a true inadequacy to impose a finished form upon an incomplete experience. It may even (as in the juvenilia of most good poets) have a certain beauty in realizing the rightness of such an incompleteness. A correction may therefore have the result of turning

something which had the rough quality of a flaw in a semi-precious stone, into a work of superficial preciosity."28

These remarks indicate that Spender is determined to subordinate his own power of Parnassian to an absolutely valid rendering of experience. That he and other poets are able to pursue this goal with greater freedom he traces partly to Hopkins' pioneering efforts in breaking with the iambic line.

Spender is aware that Hopkins' technical innovations cannot be separated from his fidelity to his inspiration. If he were to render his insights authentically it would be necessary for him "to invent new forms and a highly individual idiom" and particularly to get away from the regular metrics of Victorian poets, which had become soporific. He had to be free to manipulate accents in such a way that they would influence meaning. In Hopkins' emphasis on the stressed syllable and his lack of interest in the number of unstressed syllables, Spender sees what was, from the standpoint of contemporary poetical practice, perhaps the most important technical innovation of poetry in the nineteenth century.

Not only did accent come to influence meaning, but the poet was freed from the necessity of fitting his thought to a rigid system of metrical stress. When Spender draws attention to Hopkins' comment that "Walt Whitman's mind is more like my own than that of any man living" we are reminded that Hopkins did

28 Spender, Collected Poems, xvii.
for English poetry something similar to what Whitman did for his American literary heirs.

His assertion of individuality in technique as well as his awareness of the conditions of the age in which he lived are the aspects of Hopkins' concern with the real which most interest Spender. (In this connection, it is interesting to note that in a class period devoted to a consideration of "The Wreck of the Deutschland," Spender did not make a single remark on the content of the poem.)

Spender obviously has a greater interest in Hardy's philosophic bent than in Hopkins'. Though he himself refuses to be wholly pessimistic about mankind's lot (he deplores the nihilism of a writer like Jean Anouilh, for instance), he values Hardy's honesty in giving poetic and fictional expression to a point of view which owed nothing to a desire to comfort his readers. Historically important because his work gives expression to the widespread inability of late nineteenth century thinkers to reconcile any conception of a benevolent providence with the scientific developments of the time, Hardy had, for Spender, the virtue of looking unflinchingly at a universe which offered man more thorns than roses.

Unlike Hopkins, Hardy doesn't count as a professional poet, in Spender's view. Like a hermit crab, "he crept into shells left around by Tennyson and Swinburne." What Spender calls the "highly personal, idiosyncratic" nature of Hardy's work stemmed, not from his metrical practice, but from his thought.
Spender sees the highest courage of the modern as the ability to accept the condition of man in all its terror and ugliness without resorting to illusions to veil the bitter reality. Man can only progress, he feels, if he takes a cold, hard look at the position on which he presently stands. This, of course, was precisely Hardy's point of view. He rejected the prevailing optimism of his period, acknowledging that he was one "born out of due time."

The final stanza of "In Tenebris: II," despite its unsophisticated rhythm, speaks with a particularly resonant voice to the contemporary poet:

Let him in whose ears the low-voiced Best is killed by the clash of the First,  
Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst,  
Who feels that delight is a delicate growth cramped by crookedness, custom, and fear,  
Get him up and be gone as one shaped awry; he disturbs the order here.29

Spender values these lines because they give the reader the feeling that he is "in touch with a real person, not just with an attitude." Once again he is stressing the function of poetry as the revelation of the individual vision of the poet, unobscured by literary posturing.

The contrast which Hardy draws between the illusory contentment of many of his fellows and his own realistic view of the grimmer side of life is similar to one which Spender

dramatizes in "The Fates." In this poem, which deals with a mother's determination to protect her son from unhappiness, the mother represents the same kind of Victorian ostrich-like attitude that Hardy refers to in the first line of his poem: the attitude "That things are all as they best may be, save a few to be right ere long."

The mother in Spender's poem has turned her home into a "stage where nothing happens that can matter/ Except that we look well produced and bright."

If there were a guest, who in the course Of gossip, spoke of 'so-and-so's divorce,' Or else 'Poor Lady X, she died of cancer,' You had your fine frank answer, Questioning him with vivid curiosity: Poverty, adultery, disease, what next monstrosity! You smiled, perhaps, at your guest's eccentricity, Who laid such specimens out on the floor.

The mother also ignored other realities in the best Victorian tradition and managed to communicate to her son a sense of the uncleanliness of the body. He grew up, thinking his mother's make-believe world "quite real."

And yet he had his moments of uneasiness When, in the dazzling garden of his family, With green sunlight reflected on your dress, His body suddenly seemed an obscenity, A changeling smuggled to the wrong address.

In this poem, as in many others of Spender's, garden and lawn become symbols of unreality. It takes a war to force the young man to confront the unlovely aspects of life which exist outside the family garden.
Into the dust he falls,
Oval face carved from a mother's kisses
Eternally chaste ivory
Fallen back, staring at the sun, the eyes at last cut open.30

The tone of these lines is more reminiscent of Wilfrid Owen than of Hardy, but Owen is himself clearly in the Hardy tradition. More than once Hardy sounds the theme which becomes important in Owen and is echoed in Spender of war setting up artificial enmities between men who, left to their own devices, would have been friends. In "The Dynasts," for instance, the Spirit of the Pities speaks:

What do I see but thirsty, throbbing bands
From these inimic hosts defiling down
In homely need towards the little stream
That parts their enmities, and drinking there!
They get to grasping hands across the rill,
Sealing their sameness as earth's sojourners.--
What more could plead the wryness of the times
Than such unstudied piteous pantomimes!31

The same concept recurs in "The Man He Killed," particularly in the last stanza:

"Yes; quaint and curious war is!
You shoot a fellow down
You'd treat if met where any bar is,
Or help to half a crown.32

In both of these passages, there is a tone of philosophic acceptance of the way things are which distances Hardy from

30 Spender, Collected Poems, 131-33.
32 Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 269.
Owen's savage irony, compared to which Spender pales. But in another passage from "The Dynasts," the relationship of both twentieth-century poets to their embittered predecessor can be seen quite clearly. The Spirit Ironic is speaking. He refers to the "groping tentativeness of an Immanent Will" and goes on to say, "The spectacle of Its instruments, set to riddle one another through, and then to drink together in peace and concord is where the humour comes in, and makes the play worth seeing!"

Hardy's refusal to sugar-coat ugliness or human folly made him a favorite with many contemporary poets. He is linked to Spender in another way, though. Bereft of orthodox belief about the meaning behind human tragedy, he placed a great premium on the value of personal experience and of personal qualities. In his novels, for instance, characters like Tess and Clym Yeobright attain a kind of humanistic sanctity through fidelity to the highest promptings of their own natures. Spender says that for Hardy (and he might just as well be speaking of himself) life is only meaningful if the most personal feelings are carefully tended. He notes the importance of memory to Hardy, pointing to the poem in which the earlier poet commemorated his love for his long dead first wife. Spender has great admiration for the honesty with which Hardy deals with his emotion in these poems. They may have supplied

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33 Hardy, The Dynasts, Part Second, p. 173.
an unconscious model for his own most recent poetry, which has the experiences of his youth as a major concern. The concluding lines of Hardy's "After a Journey," in which he recounts a sense of oneness with his wife thirty years after her death, suggest Spender very strongly, both in their naked statement and in their rhythm:

I am just the same as when
Our days were a joy, and our paths through flowers.34

Compare with these the last lines of Spender's "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love."

For me this memory which I now behold,
When, from the pasturage, azure rounds me in rings,
And the lark ascends, and his voice still rings,still rings.35

If Spender's relationship to Hardy exists in the area of content, the influence on him of the Imagists lies almost exclusively in the realm of technique. The clear, hard image as an antidote to excessive romanticizing was a sine qua non for any writer who hoped to be taken seriously after the second decade of the twentieth century. The emphasis which T. E. Hulme, often credited with having written the primer of Imagism, placed on capturing the precise "curve" of an experience through careful observation and through the avoidance of conventional poetic language was felt not only by writers like Pound and Eliot, but also by members of the Auden group. The influence

34 Hardy, Collected Poems, p. 329.
can be seen in all of Spender's best verse, but the poem of his which is perhaps most imagistic is not one of his better poems. It is one of the Marston group, first published in *Twenty Poems*, when the poet was only twenty-one. It seems to exist—and this is rare in Spender's poetry—primarily for the sake of the images:

Marston, dropping it in the grate, broke his pipe. Nothing hung on this act, it was no symbol Ludicrous for calamity, but merely ludicrous.

That heavy-wrought briar with the great pine face
Now split across like a boxer's hanging dream
Of punishing a nigger, he brought from the continent;
It was his absurd relic, like bones,
Of stamping on the white face mountains,
Early beds in huts, and other journeys.

To hold the banks of the Danube, the slow barges down the river,
Those coracles with faces painted on,
Demanded his last money,
A foodless journey home, as pilgrimage. 36

This poem quite obviously satisfies Hulme's demand for reverence before the concrete object. It is almost totally devoid of statement. What emotion comes through—and a good deal of it does come through—comes via the images. "Like a boxer's hanging dream/ Of punishing a nigger" is an example of what Hulme would have meant by fancy, which he, like Coleridge, distinguishes from imagination, and which he equates with freshness of metaphor.

The subject matter of these lines is embarrassingly slight. It is the fragility of subject, as a matter of fact, which

indicates most clearly the emotion of the poem. The reader feels that only a state of hero-worship could induce such intensity of interest in so trivial an incident.

This, too, places the lines in the Imagist tradition. Hulme was quite emphatic in saying that the subject of a poem doesn't matter. He goes on to say, "It isn't the scale or kind of emotion produced that decides, but this one fact: Is there any real zest in it? Did the poet have an actually realized visual object before him in which he delighted? It doesn't matter if it were a lady's shoe or the starry heavens."37

Of the poets most frequently referred to as members of the Imagist movement (Richard Aldington, H.D., John Gould Fletcher, F. S. Flint, Amy Lowell, D. H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound), Spender acknowledges indebtedness only to Lawrence and his influence obviously lay more in the area of theme than of technique. But to the poet who is probably the imagist par excellence of twentieth century poetry, he admits a strong debt. This poet is of course Edith Sitwell.

"I first read the early poems of Miss Sitwell when I was sixteen. At this time I was enchanted by them and my own early efforts were often their imitators.... They create pictures, hard, angular, toy-like, brightly colored and vividly seen,

37 T. E. Hulme, Speculations; Essays on humanism and the philosophy of art, ed. Herbert Read (London, 1936), p. 137.
extremely self-contained, which are unlike any other poetry."

It is not what he has in common with the Imagists, however, but the way in which he differs from them that is most significant to an understanding of Spender's poetic theory and practice.

As I mentioned earlier, Hulme saw the emphasis on a careful description of external objects as a necessary antidote to a romantic attitude which tended to blur the distinction between subjective and objective reality. Spender, too, objects to this blurring. It is what he finds dangerous in poets like Wordsworth and Shelley.

Here is Hulme on the subject: "Romanticism, for example, confuses both human and divine things by not clearly separating them. The main thing with which it can be reproached is that it blurs the clear outlines of human relations—whether in political thought or in the literary treatment of sex—by introducing in them the Perfection that properly belongs to the non-human."\(^{39}\)

And Spender:

With unromantic poetry, the difference between the real and the unreal, between fancy and imagination, between subject-matter and language, are as

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\(^{39}\) Hulme, pp. 10-11.
apparent as that between woodlands and a mountain range. In the world of romantic poetry there is a more blurred distinction between what is real and what is unreal, because everything is soaked in the poetic. . . . Romantic poetry allows none of its content to remain itself. It melts everything down into an inferior flame of romantic imaginings and then it recreates everything in a world of poetry removed from the standards of actuality. ⁴⁰

Thus far, Hulme and Spender seem to be saying very much the same thing. But when it comes to Hulme's actual definition of the terms *romantic* and *classical*, the break in thought between the two men becomes quite apparent.

Here is the root of all romanticism: that man the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities; and if you can so rearrange society by the destruction of oppressive order then these possibilities will have a chance and you will get Progress.

One can define the classical quite clearly as the exact opposite of this. Man is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant. It is only by tradition and organisation that anything decent can be got out of him. ⁴¹

Although Spender is careful not to give a simple-minded assent to the idea of an inevitable Progress, his feeling for the grandeur of the human potential would place him squarely on the romantic side of such a dichotomy as Hulme proposes. From the young aviator in Spender's "He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye" who "almost had won/ War on the sun" to Margaret in the Elegy whose "breasts break with white lilies,/ ⁴²


⁴¹Hulme, *p. 116.*
Her eyes with Margaret," there is a sense of wonder at the triumphs of which the human spirit is capable: triumphs which have nothing to do with adherence to tradition or to specific religious beliefs, but only with the fulfillment of one's humanity in some significant way. It is precisely here that Spender breaks with Hulme and with Eliot, both of whom are more in sympathy with the classical than with the romantic point of view.

Hulme associates agnosticism with the romantic attitude. "... part of the fixed nature of man is belief in the Deity," he says. "It is parallel to appetite, the instinct of sex, and all the other fixed qualities. ... By the perverted rhetoric of Rationalism, your natural instincts are suppressed and you are converted into an agnostic. ... You don't believe in Heaven, so you begin to believe in a heaven on earth. ... Romanticism, then, and this is the best definition I can give of it, is spilt religion."42

Spender does not formulate his own religious attitude, and when his various statements about metaphysical belief are brought together, the results are extremely confusing. His most explicit statement seems to be this one from Life and the Poet:

The true tendency of poetry in our time is not clutching at straws, but towards an agnosticism which travels through experiences of time and space,

42 Ibid., pp. 117-18.
and through the minds and dreams of individuals into the unconscious. The dogmatic in religion or in politics is only a makeshift made necessary sometimes because in morals we need discipline and in politics freedom. Yet in poetry this discipline and freedom should not be based on dogma, but on respect for the conditions within which our realisation of life can develop to the furthest extent.

For Spender, the unconscious is a more valid reflection of reality than is the conscious. The fact that Spender's view of man's significance differs so radically from Hulme's is a key to why Spender finds the Imagist approach to poetry valuable but incomplete. Poetry, for Spender, is one of the ways through which man comes into contact with the unconscious, or the real. It, like love, is one of the means by which man divests himself of the "clothes" of civilization which are learned, artificial and unreal. An image is only fully significant for him if it reverberates, that is, if it suggests levels of meaning beyond its visual outlines. According to Hulme, "It is essential to prove that beauty may be in small, dry things"; for Spender, who insists on a poet's moral commitment, the "small, dry thing" may be a legitimate starting point, but it is only that. In significant poetry, it will be used to "say" something.

Probably the Imagist poet who said most was D. H. Lawrence. Although Lawrence asserted on one occasion that there never had been such a thing as Imagism—that it was all an illusion of

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44 Hulme, p. 131.
Ezra Pound's, he is considered a member of the group because his work was included in the Imagist anthologies edited by Amy Lowell.

In the realm of ideas, Lawrence is perhaps the most important single influence on Spender. In *World Within World*, Spender acknowledges his indebtedness to the controversial novelist-poet-critic, saying "No attempt to resume Lawrence's ideas can explain the influence they had over me."46

Once again, Spender's preoccupation with the real becomes apparent, for he saw in Lawrence a refutation of the Victorian view that one of the most important areas of life should be admitted to consciousness as little as possible. Much of the internal action of Spender's autobiographical novel, *The Backward Son*, revolves around the protagonist's need to shake off the concept of the uncleanness of the body which had been communicated to him by his family. The self-acceptance which was long in coming to him was delayed by his inability to reconcile the sexless youngster his parents would have liked him to be with the normally sexed one he actually was.

There is a marked similarity to Joyce in Spender's rebellion against the unreal attitude toward sex which he encountered in his childhood. A view of life which attempted to

read the instinctual nature of man out of existence (or at least out of consciousness) necessarily appeared mutilated to a sensitive, intelligent, honest youngster. There is humorous exaggeration in his statement that the English brand of Puritanism simply ignores three-fourths of life, but to ignore any aspect of man's nature seemed to Spender a crime against humanity and against truth.

That one statement of Lawrence's has particular significance for Spender is attested by the fact that he quotes from it both in The Destructive Element and in The Creative Element. The statement is contained in a letter which Lawrence wrote to Edward Garnett about The Rainbow:

... the psychic-non-human in humanity is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element, which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent... it is the inhuman will... that fascinates me. I don't so much care about what the woman feels—in the ordinary usage of the word. That presumes an ego to feel with. I only care about what the woman is—what she is—inhumanly, physiologically, materially... 47

Thus, Lawrence places the most significant aspect of reality in the unconscious, the instinctual, the "within" Spender's own emphasis on "withinness" or introspection grows from the same conviction. He believes, like Lawrence, that there is a common unconscious and that, paradoxically, men are most truly themselves when they can find their way back to this.

common denominator, when they can unlearn many of the restraints which the conscious will of civilization has imposed on them. Spender finds "that the outer shell which mostly differentiates and individualizes life exhibits secondary, acquired characteristics, and that the primary characteristics belong to the unconscious and are therefore collective." 48

The Lawrence influence perhaps does more than anything else to explain what may be called Spender's optimism. He sees the modern plight realistically and has no Utopian faith in the inevitability of progress. A blind faith in science to advance civilization is simply a form of materialism in his view. And he resolutely refuses to settle for any species of materialism. If civilization is going to advance, it must do so through the full expansion of the human potential. The failure of this potential to actualize itself has resulted in what he calls "the living death of the modern world." 49 But Lawrence has indicated a way out of the tomb, Spender thinks, by liberating the concept of sex and by equating it with life. The setting straight of inter-personal relationships is the first step toward the solution of widespread social evils. Thus Lawrence manages to do something which is essential for Spender: to synthesize the personal and the public solution to the contemporary cancer. The infusion of public and private concern is what he himself

48 Spender, The Destructive Element, p. 177.
49 Ibid., p. 178.
has attempted in Vienna and "Elegy for Margaret"; and it is what he criticizes Eliot and Auden for not having done. In finding their private answers in a return to orthodoxy, they have, he seems to suggest, betrayed the public question. Lawrence's solution has a universal applicability, Spender thinks, which the dogmatic creeds of Eliot and Auden lack, and which gives him a particular eminence as a critic of contemporary life.

It [Lawrence's view of sex] is an admission, on the physical level, that our need for one another is greater than our need for many other things; and thus in its pride and humility it is an assertion of the value of human existence above materialism and intellectualism. It fuses within a moment the fierce joy of the satyrs and fauns, and the seriousness of the modern. So sex is really a symbolic act making channels through the falsity of modern civilization to human truth.50

Spender views the religious solutions of Eliot and Auden as intellectual (and consequently partial) in character. He noted once in a lecture that Eliot gets his philosophy at the best philosophy stores. This implies, of course, that because there is a submission of the individual intellect to a system external to it, there is a consequent lack of authenticity. But Lawrence has forged his own philosophy from the testimony of his personal experience. His is a philosophy of the blood, and this, for Spender, is infinitely more valid than one of the brain. He took nothing on faith. He did not "escape" into an orthodoxy which separated him from his fellow man. Consequently,

he is an acceptable prophet: "The importance, then, of Lawrence as a revolutionary and a preacher, is that he insisted on real and living values: real life, real sexual experience, real death. All ideas of love and honour could be sacrificed to these realities. This is revolutionary, because it is clear that if human beings insist on having lives with these values, they cannot accept society as it now is."\(^{51}\)

It was another aspect of reality that Wilfrid Owen forced on his contemporaries. While Spender seems to feel that Owen had a more vital influence on Auden's work than on his own, he acknowledges a general indebtedness of contemporary poets to the promising young ironist whose career was terminated by his death in World War I. "I think it is true to say that Owen is the most useful influence in modern verse, although he is a lesser poet than Hopkins or Eliot."\(^{52}\) What Spender seems to mean by this is that in Hopkins and Eliot the form is indissolubly linked to the substance. Another poet whose angle of vision differs from theirs consequently finds their techniques useless; their poetic manners are too clearly stamped by their own personalities. Owen, on the other hand, worked out a poetic form which was simply the vehicle of what he had to say. He laid particular stress on the use of assonance and the relationship of similar but non-identical vowel sounds to one another.

\(^{52}\)Ibid., p. 220.
The technique, not of course original with Owen but emphasized and perfected by him, has been particularly useful to Spender because, by his own admission, he has not been fortunate in the use of rhyme.

To judge from his letters, Owen felt about Keats much as Keats felt about Shakespeare. His early verse is written in a Keatsian manner; one poem is called "On Seeing a Lock of Keats's Hair"; in a letter to Siegfried Sassoon he places Keats before Christ, saying "I hold you as Keats+Christ+Elijah+my Colonel—my father-confessor+Amenophis IV, in profile. . . If you consider what the above names have severally done for me, you will know what you are doing."  

It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that for Spender Owen represents the antipodes of the Keatsian position. For Keats, according to Spender, projected his own private world into his poetry. Owen's poetry, on the other hand, is almost totally externalized.

The pressure of meaning in his poetry is not the pressure of self-expression, of his private utterance, but the pressure of a whole world of everything that is not himself, of war, of an actuality that is scarcely even interpreted in his poetry, but which is recreated through it. In his art he is not creating his own world, he is re-creating the external world. . . . Owen's poetry. . . exists by its reference to some external object; if it had not been the War, it might have been the industrial towns, and the distressed areas.  

The external world which Owen recreated was an ugly one, and he had a moral purpose in making his picture as unlovely as possible. This purpose was, quite simply, to stop the war and to prevent future ones. In order to do this, he felt that it was essential to strip away the illusion and hypocrisy that colored civilian attitudes toward war. Rupert Brooke's desire to make the site of his foreign grave "forever England" could be read not without sentiment, but certainly without horror by his civilian audience. But Owen saw that the sentiment which this romantic kind of war poetry inspired was dangerous, because it allowed the civilian population to feel virtuous for its participation in an action which made such heroic statements possible. Owen wanted the civilians to feel guilty for any responsibility they bore, no matter how remote, for the suffering and death of fighting men. He was deliberately rubbing his reader's senses in the actual sights, sounds, smells and taste of war:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin,
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie, Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.55

55 Owen, p. 66.
Owen believed that only hypocrisy and insincerity could allow a Christian to sanction war. He emerges from his writing as an almost unbearably poignant symbol of modern man: a creature at his best desiring only to give himself in love to his fellow man, yet forced by social, economic and political evils into postures of hatred.

The influence of Owen on Auden, Spender and other poets of their generation was certainly not limited to the area of technique. They too were repelled by the evils of a society that seemed to place men at one another's throats; they too were horrified by a community nominally Christian, in which they discerned few evidences of real Christian thought and feeling; they too deplored the injustice which allowed one group to prosper while another suffered. While Owen's sympathy was primarily with the fighting men, the pity of Auden and Spender was drawn to the economic victims of the depression which followed in the wake of the war.

"The Poetry is in the pity," Owen had said. For Spender, too, the poetry is in the pity. This is evident in the poetry dealing with his childhood ("My parents kept me from children who were rough") as well as in poems dealing with adult experiences. In "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," which is perhaps Spender's most perfectly realized poem, the relationship to Owen can be clearly seen. The moral purpose of the poem is readily apparent. Through concrete imagery he is
determined to make his readers see the wretched state of the children's actual condition and surroundings, which make all talk of beauty a kind of blasphemy. The poem was written, Spender indicated in a television interview, when he was asked to lecture to school children on modern poetry. He made a preliminary trip to a school in order to get the feel of his audience; what he saw there decided him against giving the lecture.

He describes the children's faces:

Like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor,
The tall girl with her weighed down head. The paper-seeming boy, with rat's eyes.

Then he notes the reminders in the room of other worlds:

Shakespeare's head
Cloudless at dawn; civilized dome riding all cities.
Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-handed map
Awarding the world its world.56

For the poverty-shackled children, these reminders are only teasing illusions. Spender felt that to have lectured to them about poetry would simply have been a further impertinence. Instead of the lecture, he wrote a poem which is reminiscent not only of Owen and Shelley, but also of Dickens and early Shaw. Social passion shines through it more luminously than through any of his other poems, and because the passion is authentic, because it derives from an actual experience rather than from an intellectualized point of view, it is saved from being mere propaganda.

56 Spender, Collected Poems, p. 64.
Because he is frequently represented in anthologies by his "social" poems, there is a tendency to think of Spender as more of a revolutionary poet than he actually is. On balance, his poems dealing with personal relationships and insights are seen to outweigh in bulk the works dealing with social questions. Yet there is an involvement with the contemporary scene in his poetry which distinguishes it from that of the two titans of twentieth century literature, William Butler Yeats and T. S. Eliot. Spender's admiration for both men is tempered by a sense that there is something vital which is missing in their work.

About Yeats, Spender paraphrases Andre Gide's comment that the greatest French writer was "Victor Hugo, alas." Most contemporary English writers, Spender thinks, would hold that the greatest master of the English language in the twentieth century was "William Butler Yeats, alas." The "alas" rests on the fact that Yeats was not in sympathy with modern science or with modern social developments. Yeats's work, according to Spender, is "devoid of any unifying moral subject, and it develops in a perpetual search for one." 58

This judgment is, of course, open to argument. There are readers who find in Yeats as intense a moral passion as any that they can perceive in the poets of the Thirties, and this

57 This comment was made during the course given by Spender at Northwestern University, Winter, 1963.
58 Spender, The Destructive Element, p. 128.
precisely because his insights transcended any particular political or social point of view. Even in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," which Spender dismisses as an example of romantic, escapist poetry at its most inconsequential, it is possible to see a highly moral response to the poet's vocation. Spender has perhaps written nothing more imperceptive than his comment on the line, "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree." "It calls up the image of a young man reclining on a yellow satin sofa. There would be a roar of thunder, a flash, and he would be off." Such a falsification of the mood of the poem seems almost incredible; if it were not balanced by a sensitive appreciation of Yeats' later work, it would make Spender as critic a laughingstock.

But even if one were to concede that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" expresses an escapist view toward life, the same change certainly cannot be leveled against such poems as "Easter 1916," "A Prayer for My Daughter," or "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation." Each of these poems "means" with a vengeance; each enshrines a value or a set of values. In the first, Yeats says that dedication to an ideal, despite the chaos it may bring about, can confer upon a life which otherwise seems paltry and humdrum "a terrible beauty." The other two poems give expression to Yeats's conviction that the real beauty of

59 Ibid., p. 117.
life is inseparable from tradition and an aristocracy of manner. It is easy enough to ridicule, as Spender does, the qualities which Yeats desires for his daughter. A list of some of them makes the poet seem snobbish and superficial. But a close reading of the poem makes it seem clear that what he is rejecting is the flamboyant physical beauty and activist energy of a Maud Gonne, in favor of the spiritual beauty and calm wisdom of a Lady Gregory. He is making a choice of values. In this sense, the poem is clearly moral.

What Spender really means when he says that Yeats's poetry is devoid of moral subject (he excludes "The Second Coming" from this judgment) is that Yeats's values are different from his own. Yeats is, in some aspects of his thought, reactionary where Spender would have him be revolutionary. But it is well to note the roundedness of Yeats's thought. He may doubt that those who will benefit from the land agitation can produce the greatness of thought necessary to literature; he may desire ceremony in his daughter's home; but he sees beauty in revolutionary passion, and he once wrote Lady Gregory: "In a battle like Ireland's which is one of poverty against wealth, we must prove our sincerity by making ourselves unpopular to wealth. We must accept the baptism of the gutter. Have not all the leaders done that?" 60

Spender's "alas" over the literary remains of Yeats should not be over-emphasized. It was, after all, only an ironic tag for a very sound judgment, the burden of which was Yeats' greatness. (While Yeats was still alive, Eliot decided that Ezra Pound was "probably the most important living poet in our language.") "What one admires in Yeats' poetry," Spender says, "is, in fact, not its mystery, its magic, or even its atmosphere: but its passion, its humanity, its occasional marvelous lucidity, its technical mastery, its strength, its reality and its opportunism."61

Yeats had achieved the individual vision which, for Spender, is far more significant than any surrender to orthodoxy could be. He does not pretend to understand Yeats's taste for the occult (although he seems far more sympathetic to it in *The Creative Element*, published in 1953 than he was in *The Destructive Element*, which appeared almost two decades earlier). But he does esteem the courage with which Yeats struck out on his own to make what sense he could of this and other worlds. Avowedly religious by nature, Yeats refused to accept any creed because for him, as for Spender, experience was the touchstone of reality. This is the link between the two men.

Spender frankly admits that his sympathies are ranged on the side of those, like Yeats and Rilke, who opt for personal

vision rather than for an orthodox religious or political creed. And his own work is largely an attempt to communicate his own vision. When he jocularly referred to those who see religion as a sort of adjunct to English literature, he was probably not very far from stating his own position. He obviously believes that orthodox faiths are anachronisms, but because he is so opposed to materialism, he is convinced of the necessity for reasserting spiritual values. This it is the function of art to do.

For Yeats, of course, as the Byzantium poems illustrate, art became a value superior to life itself. And Spender, in commenting on these poems, seems to identify himself with the Yeatsian point of view. "He [Yeats] does make us see that man creates something more important than man, something which disdains its creator, and that this art-object is yet profoundly human—in fact is perhaps the true humanity, and all the rest sentiment and self-pity."62

The "perhaps" in the above quotation is significant, for Spender himself is constantly torn between the claims of art and those of personal relationships. If in the judgment on Yeats he seems to swing to the side of art, it is perhaps because it more fully than love enshrines the individual human consciousness and because it extends to a wider circle of people. Important as personal relationships are to Spender, they are not far-reaching

62 Spender, The Creative Element, p. 117.
enough to satisfy his sense of social mission. Here he seems to say that art is "perhaps" more real than life in that it isolates at a pitch of intensity the most significant part of life which is consciousness, whereas life itself is made up of such a welter of fears and failures as well as spasmodic moments of insight that it loses some of its realness. The creative act becomes a species of contemplation. In "Dark and Light," Spender says:

My words like eyes through night, strain to seek Some centre for their light

Yet the centre is feared and avoided as well as sought.

My words like eyes that flinch from light, avoid The light, and seek their night.63

The double attitude manifested here toward breaking "out of the chaos of my darkness/ Into a lucid day" recalls, even if faintly, the double attitude toward being which runs through Eliot's work. From the early poems such as "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "Portrait of a Lady," to the "Four Quartets," there is manifested both a fear of non-being, of the missed potential, of the dessicated life; and a fear of being, of a commitment to living life on a significant level. For Eliot, sea, rose and fire are important images of the fullness of being. For Spender light and centre are the images more frequently used.

63Spender, Collected Poems, p. 76.
But Spender, both as we see him in his autobiography and as he emerges in his creative work, is almost the exact opposite of a Prufrock character. (He identifies Eliot with Prufrock, incidentally, indicating that Eliot's own speech patterns are similar to his famous character's.) Whereas Prufrock and the young man in "Portrait of a Lady" carefully hold themselves back from deep entanglements with another human being, the Spender figure rushes headlong into such entanglements. Some of Spender's early poetry is a trifle embarrassing in the nakedness of the emotion it reveals. This is true, too, of the short story "By the Lake" and of certain passages in World Within World. There seems to be in Spender a conscious straining away from the Eliot-like suppressing or transmutting of emotion. The ingenuousness with which Spender deals with personal relationships is one of the strengths of his work and one of its greatest dangers. It is dangerous because it sometimes degenerates into sentimentality, but it carries a note of unforced sincerity that is lacking in a great deal of contemporary poetry.

In reading Spender's work, we feel that we are in direct contact with a personality, and with a very human one, because of the candor with which his fears and failings are confessed. Spender's work exhudes personality, while in Eliot there is a conscious attempt to depersonalize.

In After Strange Gods, Eliot laments "the whole movement of several centuries toward the aggrandisement and exploitation
of personality." His reason for fearing the cult of personality is made clear in the same work:

The first requisite usually held up by the promoters of personality is that a man should "be himself"; and this "sincerity" is considered more important than that the self in question should, socially and spiritually, be a good or a bad one. This view of personality is merely an assumption on the part of the modern world, and is no more tenable than several other views which have been held at various times and in various places. The personality thus expressed, the personality which fascinates us in the work of philosophy or art, tends naturally to be the unregenerate personality, partly self-deceived and partly irresponsible, and because of its freedom, terribly limited by prejudice and self-conceit, capable of much good or great mischief according to the natural goodness or impurity of the man: and we are all, naturally, impure.

These lines point to one of the fundamental breaks in thought between Eliot and Spender. For it is because of his suspicion of the unregenerate personality that Eliot subscribes to a religion which imposes checks on man's self-deception and irresponsibility. The mind of man is, in his view, too fallible not to submit itself to a system external to it. Without some kind of objective measuring rod, there is nothing to protect the mind of man from delusion. This implies, of course, that religion is the guardian of absolute truth which exists prior to and independent of man's knowledge of it.

For Spender, on the other hand, man's consciousness is seen as a kind of partner with "Immortal Spirit" in the discovery of

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65 Ibid., p. 68.
truth. "One is the witness through which the whole knows it exists." The submission to an external system, therefore, is a kind of betrayal of everyman's vocation: to be true to his private vision. Much of Emerson's idea of self-reliance underlies Spender's distrust of orthodoxies.

For Eliot, a religious creed is a bulwark against illusion; for Spender it is perhaps the greatest of all illusions because it fixes man's sights on a world other than this, whereas in his view this world, this life, this time are the great realities.

Spender criticizes Eliot for an insufficient awareness of "the world outside." He sees Eliot's view of life as excessively intellectualized. The older poet, in Spender's view, values external reality only for what it impresses on the mind, not for what it is in itself. "The fact is that Eliot has quite ignored the kind of artist whose creativeness is stimulated by a perpetual tension between the objective world, the world of nature, and his own inner world: and this consciousness of the world outside is the only real impersonality." Spender believes that one of the most serious failures in Eliot's poetry is his inability to create characters who are fully human. This he attributes to Eliot's religious preoccupation. For Eliot, those who do not accept a religious view of life are not themselves alive in any significant sense.

66 Spender, Collected Poems, p. 142.
"because they are not allowed to hold with any conviction the small private beliefs which are as many as people's private occupations." 68

The denial of humanity, of life, of realness to those who are "Exiles from single Being of Belief" seems to Spender to be an arrogant dismissal of a large segment of society. And it is because there is a certain validity in his judgment that his own poetry serves as a significant complement to that written in the Eliot tradition. He is a spokesman for those who, without orthodox religious belief, refuse to accept a nihilistic attitude toward life, who resolutely search for positive values in human relationships, in labor for the common good, in art.

It can be argued, of course, that Eliot's view is the more radically logical one: that life without religious belief is a meaningless excursion into experience to which only illusions can give a spurious significance. But the fact remains that a great number of men in this age which has been called post-Christian are devoid of orthodox belief and that many of them nevertheless do not despair. We need to have a record of their spiritual experience to fill out our picture of our own time. Such a record is available to us in the work of Stephen Spender. If at times it seems shallow, it has the virtue of being trustworthily authentic. Perhaps it is necessary to dare illusion, as the Romantics and as Eliot have done, in order to

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68 Ibid., p. 147.
communicate a sense of the fullness of experience. But illusions
do not come easily at the present moment in time. "Perhaps,"
Spender says, "a deliberate, conscious, limited, cautious
poetry of experiences, carefully chosen and rationally explored,
is inevitable today." 69 This, really, is what he has given us.

69 Stephen Spender, The Struggle of the Modern (Berkeley,
California, 1963), p. 266.
CHAPTER II

THE EGO

"An 'I' can never be great man," Stephen Spender says in one of his more frequently anthologized poems. But as Spender knows and has proclaimed, a writer's "I" is an extremely important part of his professional equipment. Literary analysts may hold that Maggie Tulliver, David Copperfield and Stephen Dedalus are so close to their creators' own experiences that their characterization is weakened by an element of self-pity. Even admirers of Shelley may shy away from his "I fall upon the thorns of life, I bleed," because of its frankly confessional nature. Critics may condemn Arthur Miller for the unveiled use of autobiographical material which he has made in After the Fall, particularly since some of it is damaging to those close to him. And the influence of T. S. Eliot, with his rigid sense of decorum about separating the writer's life from his work may so prevail that "objective correlative" and "artistic distance" have become key words of literary criticism in our time. Nevertheless, it is still possible to react positively, almost with a sense of relief, to the unfashionable, childlike ingenuousness of a writer whose avowed intention is to reveal his ego to the world.
And this is Stephen Spender's purpose. As a matter of fact, the degree of frankness which is apparent in Spender's autobiography as well as the openly autobiographical nature of much of his creative work might lead one to suspect that Spender is careless of his privacy. He creates a different impression, however, in an article published in Saturday Review. In the article, "How Much Should a Biographer Tell," Spender deals with the "dark" and intensely personal material which may become available to a biographer or researcher. He makes a distinction about what may legitimately be told of a subject who is dead and of one who is still living.

About the dead, he maintains that our age demands and should receive a full account, including weaknesses as well as strengths. He notes that our point of view differs from that prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Samuel Johnson's Lives of the Poets was marked by a reticence about the peccadillos of its subjects (the life of Savage being a "notorious" exception); and Matthew Arnold viewed with distaste Dowden's frankness about Shelley's irregularities. But in our own time, Spender goes on to say, we have become conscious of the important relationship that exists between a poet's life and his work.

"We are inclined to think that everything, however private, is relevant to the work, the man, and the vocation. We are moving toward a state of affairs in which the work of a writer
and his biography will merge, as it were, into a single consciousness. When we know all about the work and all about the life, both work and life will contribute meanings to a sum.\textsuperscript{1} Spender grants that the unenlightened may find their appreciation of an artist's work inhibited by their knowledge of his moral failures and that the zeal of researchers to present material of a personal nature may sometimes be excessive. Nevertheless, he says, "My own view is that I do not think that the dead have very much claim to be protected from research workers."\textsuperscript{2} For the living, on the other hand, he feels that such protection is essential. If the artist's life becomes public property, he, like the statesman, will be under pressure to conform to standards of behavior of which the public approves. His truth to himself will thus be challenged, and, as a consequence, the experience on which his work must be based will be limited by artificial considerations. The work will inevitably suffer.

If this is Spender's view of the living writer's need for privacy, why did he write \textit{World Within World}, in which he reveals not only intensely private, emotional experiences, but also courses of action which mark a definite departure from publicly accepted \textit{mores}? He answers this question in the introduction to his autobiography, in which he says, "I believe

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\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., p. 19.
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obstinately that, if I am able to write with truth about what has happened to me, this can help others who have lived through the same sort of thing. In this belief I have risking being indiscreet, and I have written occasionally of experiences which seem strange to me myself, and which I have not seen discussed elsewhere.\textsuperscript{3} The important point, of course, is that he has been able to make the selection of what it is safe to reveal and what it is necessary, for his own artistic as well as personal well-being, to keep to himself. Thus he says, "Here I have tried to be as truthful as I can, within the limits of certain inevitable reticences; and to write of experiences from which I feel I have learned how to live."\textsuperscript{4}

The exploration of his own ego, both in prose and poetry, did not stem from any conviction of his own superiority to his fellow men. As a matter of fact, his autobiography and his fiction make abundantly clear his very keen sense of his own limitations. But this is balanced by a recognition that any ego is significant because it is a type of all egos and hence is at least one key to universal truth.

During his years at Oxford, Spender had a friend whom he calls Tristan, who constantly reminded him of the gulf that existed between Auden's brilliance and his (Spender's)


\textsuperscript{4}Loc. cit.
mediocrity. Referring to himself and Spender he would say, "We're just little undergraduates."

Spender's comment on this remark is revelatory of his attitude toward the significance of the self. "After all, in a way he was right, because my 'extraordinariness', if I had it, did not lie in my being exceptionally clever or even gifted. It lay in a strong grasp of my uniqueness in time and space, in my simplicity. I was aware that I was different from everyone else in the same way in which everyone is different from everyone else."5

The exploration of this difference as an approach to reality has been one of Spender's main preoccupations, and it is a preoccupation for which he makes no apology. In distinguishing himself from other members of the Auden group he says, "As for me, I was an autobiographer restlessly searching for forms in which to express the stages of my development."6 He again stresses his autobiographical preoccupation in recounting a conversation with Eliot. He had told Eliot that he wanted to be a poet and novelist, and Eliot had pointed out that poetry was a demanding vocation, which required a man's fullest attention. Spender found this unsettling because it forced on him the realization that he could not dedicate himself singlemindedly to poetry. "My problem is that which this book must make apparent: what I write are fragments of autobiography:

5Ibid., p. 44.
6Ibid., p. 138.
sometimes they are poems, sometimes stories, and the longer passages may take the form of novels.7

The life which was to be the subject of most of Spender's work began in 1909. His childhood was spent at Sheringham and at Hampstead, where his family relationships seem to have had the effect of increasing a natural diffidence and self-consciousness. His mother was a semi-invalid, who was intelligent, highly sensitive and artistically gifted. One of the few incidents about her which he includes in World Within World is an occasion on which she appeared at the door of the nursery, where he and the other children had been playing a game which had disturbed her; here she proclaimed, "I now know the sorrow of having borne children."8

She had a tendency to snub Stephen, her most sensitive son, which was supplemented by her husband's habit of referring to him as "the fool" or "the black sheep." Harold Spender, a lecturer and writer, who supported the Liberal party and once, in 1923, ran for Parliament, was an object of adulation for Spender during his childhood. Before his father died, when he was seventeen years old, however, he had discovered that his parent was a failure, and he became contemptuous of the aura of unreality which surrounded the man.

7Ibid., p. 147.
8Ibid., p. 3.
Michael Spender, Stephen's older brother, was, on the other hand, quite securely anchored in reality, but his was an almost exclusively scientific reality; he had little sympathy and a good deal of contempt for the hypersensitive, imaginative, poetic Stephen. "For of all our family, I and Michael had rejected the entire family as 'inefficient', I was the one who most strikingly represented irrationality to him." \(^9\)

The effect which such large-scale rejection had on Spender is not belabored in *World Within World*, but it is made abundantly clear in his first novel, *The Backward Son*. The title of the novel is indicative of the terms in which he saw his childhood and his relationship with his parents.

*The Backward Son* deals largely with the school life of Geoffrey Brand. It is clearly autobiographical. There are so many parallels between the novel and Spender's non-fiction account of his childhood, both in his autobiography and in his poetry, that it may be conjectured that the entire account is substantially true. The author is very much involved with his subject; the novel is certainly open to the criticism that the characterization of Geoffrey is lacking in detachment. But perhaps one of the reasons that we esteem artistic distance is that it allows us to place suffering in remote perspective. When an author treats the misfortunes of childhood with humor and a this-is-to-be-expected attitude, we admire him for his

maturity and lack of self-pity. But it may take a humorless, self-pitying absorption in a situation to render fully all its colors. I am not at all sure that a more "distanced" David Copperfield or Stephen Dedalus or Maggie Tulliver or, on a far lower artistic scale, Geoffrey Brand, would be desirable. Spender's absorption in his own ego results in The Backward Son in a valuable psychological document, not because of what it tells us about Spender, but because it provides us with one more picture of the difficulty a sensitive child experiences in coming to terms with himself and with the world.

That Spender has written his novel not primarily to create an art object, but rather to approach truth through an exploration of his own experience seems indicated by the epigraph he has chosen. It is from T. S. Eliot's The Family Reunion:

It is possible
You are the consciousness of your unhappy family,
Its bird sent flying through the purgatorial flame.
Indeed it is possible. You may learn hereafter,
Moving alone through flames of ice, chosen
To resolve the enchantment under which we suffer.

The idea of an inherited consciousness underlies many of Spender's poems. It is implied for instance in "I think continually of those who are truly great." His examination of members of his family, both in prose and in poetry, undoubtedly stems from his conviction that they are a part of himself and that he cannot understand himself without understanding them. With Spender more than with most writers the reader has the feeling that he is serving as a non-directive counselor,
providing a sounding board against which the author can work through the vast network of people and events which have contributed to making him what he is. One gets the impression in reading Spender—and the impression is strongly underscored by his latest poetry—that his writing is a process of self-discovery which is a psychological necessity for him, quite apart from any artistic necessity. "Pronouns in this Time," published in 1963, as well as The Backward Son, which appeared twenty-three years earlier, might have been exercises written at the direction of a psychiatrist.

The novel begins on the day that Geoffrey Brand leaves home to begin life at Tisselthorp school. It ends on the day he leaves school. But although it is set almost entirely at Tisselthorp, it is very much concerned with family relationships. Geoffrey's father is a Liberal M.P. Like Harold Spender, he is given to vigorous exhortations to his round-shouldered, diffident son, who, in marked contrast to his brilliant older brother, is unable to pass examinations. (Spender's own inability to pass examinations is one of the factors which decided him against a career in politics.) Typical of Spender's own father is this bit of dialogue and description of the elder Brand: "'When we're young, we have to train ourselves for the greater struggle of being grown up.' He raised his eyebrows again and looked up as though he were surmounting some imaginary mountain which confronted him, with perfect ease."10

The mountain as a metaphor for life was a favorite both with Harold Spender and the older Brand. Both in fiction and in life, father and son played at mountain-climbing. The difficulty of this pursuit seems to have fascinated Harold Spender, who saw it as perhaps the greatest natural symbol of the challenge life presented. (This interest, communicated to Stephen, perhaps explains why images of height occur so frequently in Spender's poetry.) But in his constant stressing of the difficulty of life, Harold Spender inhibited his son's ability to succeed. The father had passed on to the son a kind of obsession with difficulty. Spender recounts in his autobiography that when a teacher asked him a question to which he knew the answer he was afraid to give it, reasoning that since it had been easy to arrive at, it must be wrong. He failed at sports, too, he indicates, because they were presented to him not simply as games but as symbols of the battle of life.

The similarity between fiction and life is carried over to the characterization of Mrs. Brand, who is presented as a "marvelously brilliant" woman, who draws and writes poetry. She is also described as a "childish and neurotic invalid."11 Echoing Mrs. Spender, she says to her children on one occasion, "What a terrible burden it is to have children! . . . Who would ever endure the ingratitude of being a mother?"12

11Ibid., p. 262.
12Ibid., p. 147.
Geoffrey, the second son in the Brand family, is placed between Hilary, the brilliant elder brother, and Christopher (in real life, Humphrey), the attractive younger one to whom Geoffrey is deeply devoted. (There is no counterpart in the novel for Spender's sister, Christine.) Geoffrey knows he can never achieve the intellectual success of Hilary or the social acceptance of Christopher. But on one occasion, when his mother softens toward him, she indicates at least one area in which he excels the others.

'You know, I think you're quite different from the others. You musn't get the idea that you're backward fixed in your head. I know you have lots of things about you which people might misunderstand. . . .'

Misunderstand! The word struck in him a note of exaltation. . . .

'I think you feel more deeply than any of the others,' she said.\(^{13}\)

Geoffrey's almost ecstatic reaction to any indication that he is loved or accepted for what he is underlines his intense loneliness. The childhood described in *The Backward Son* seems to be largely a fruitless search for an empathic relationship with another human being. Geoffrey comes closest to this with his brother Christopher, but even this relationship is marred by his own jealousy of the younger boy. Spender describes Geoffrey as spiteful and shows instances of his spitefulness with the other students as well as with his brother. The reader is left

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 17.
with the strong impression, however, that this streak of meanness has grown out of his emotional insecurity and his conviction that he is a failure.

But so too has a tremendous ambition. The very fact that he is the backward son means to him that he must redeem himself by achieving fame. It is undoubtedly his love for his father that turns his earliest ambition toward politics. "To his second son, the father was not only the mountaineer but also the mountain, and now that other people were turning to look... he longed to shout out to the passers-by that they were in the presence of Hubert Brand, M.P., and his son who would one day be Prime Minister."\(^{14}\)

In another passage, he speaks of his desire for literary fame. "He would be acclaimed by all, he would write the greatest book the world had ever known! Nothing but the greatest and most blazoned and triumphant was worthy of his father."

Spender links his ambition and his relationship with his father not only in the novel, but also in a poem, "The Ambitious Son."

My childhood went for rides on your wishes
As a beggar's eye strides a tinsel horse,
And how I reeled before your windy lashes
Fit to drive a paper boat off its course!

Deep in my heart I learned this lesson
As well have never been born at all
As live through life and fail to impress on Time, our family name, inch-tall.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 138.
Father, how we both pitied those who had let
The emptiness of their unknown name
Gleam on a rose and fade on a secret,
Far from our trumpeting posthumous fame!

In this poem, Spender makes clear that fame meant more to him,
at least as a youngster, than simply a sop to personal vanity.

It was a means of establishing reality.

For how shall we prove that we really exist
Unless we hear, over and over,
Our ego through the world persist
With all the guns of the self-lover?

Oh, when the weight of Time's whole darkness
Presses upon our shuttered fall,
How shall we prove, if our lives went markless,
That we have lived at all.

The poem goes on to describe the son's disillusionment with and
contempt for his father. It reveals, as does World Within World,
Spender's lack of emotion at the time of his father's death.

But the significance of his relationship with his father in his
own quest for truth is made clear in the following lines:

Behold, a star fled from your breast
Of death, into my life of night
Making your long rest my unrest,
My head burn with frustrated light.

Through my breast there broke the fire
Of a prophetic son's anointment
Seeking a fame greater than Empire.
It was then I made my appointment

With Truth, beyond the doors of Death.
How like an engine do I press
Towards that terminus of my last breath,
When all the Future you and I possess

Will open out onto those endless spaces
Where, from an incorruptible mine,
Yours and my name take their places
Among the deathless names that shine.15

Neither The Backward Son nor "The Ambitious Son" ranks
very high as a work of art. In the last pages of the novel, for
instance, there is an unaccountable shift in point of view from
the son to the father. The poem reveals, as clearly as any of
Spender's work, his tendency to deal too immediately with
autobiographical material without submitting it to the degree of
imaginative shaping necessary to great poetry. Many of the
lines are prosaic; most of the rhymes seemed forced; and such
bald references as those to "a prophetic son's anointment" and
"my appointment/With Truth" inevitably bring a smile to the
reader's lips. But the poem, like the novel, gives us important
insights into the way Spender's mind functions and particularly
into the influence of his family relationships on his life and
work.

There are other areas of his life which are illuminated in
the novel. One is his relationship with his peers. This aspect
of the novel is significant because of the light it throws on
Spender's love poetry. Just as Geoffrey longs for acceptance by
his family, so he desires to be a part of the school community.
He is terrified of ostracism, and in order to avoid it, he
exhibits a strong tendency to conform. Although he is not
greatly interested in sports, he makes an effort to succeed at

15Stephen Spender, Ruins and Visions: Poems; 1934-42 (New
them merely to ingratiate himself with the other boys. Much of
the time he feels isolated, but there are occasions when he is
aware of a sense of oneness with the others. He recognizes that
his classmates have the same need of affection which torments
him. This is demonstrated by the fact that several of the boys
ask their melancholy and unattractive teacher, Miss Higgins, for
a kiss. "The boys lay quietly waiting, forgetting for the time
being to conceal their longing for affection."16 The coldness
of the chapel also causes him to feel fellowship with the boys
who "created a certain warmth and radiance to which he clung.
For the first time, he thought 'we'--the boys and himself
against the chapel--instead of 'I' against all of 'them.'"17

In associating with the other boys, Geoffrey becomes aware
of the emphasis which they place on class. Spender treats this
subject ironically in the novel, particularly the fact that
Geoffrey himself is extremely class-conscious. The cruelty and
irrationality connected with social stratification are clearly
dramatized and perhaps help to explain Spender's later sympathy
with Communism.

Palmer, one of the leaders of the boys, has assigned his
schoolmates to their various social classes. He announces that
Fallow's mother is "'a washerwoman, isn't she, Fallow? So he's
lower class.' A howl of misery was the reply."18

17 Ibid., p. 38.
18 Ibid., p. 56.
Geoffrey, asked what class he belongs to, is not immediately sure; but then he reasons that since his father is an M.P. and since his family knows several lords, they must be First Class. He reveals this fact "with a thrill of pride."\textsuperscript{19}

The students who boarded were, in general, of a higher class than the day-boys and the boarders disdained the others, ridiculing their accents, which revealed their inferior social standing. But Spender underlines the artificiality of the stratification by noting that when both groups were engaged in a game, or in trading various items of food, considerations of social rank were forgotten. "Then for a few minutes the whole school became natural and ordinary, and the boarders, instead of being little monsters, were ordinary small boys."\textsuperscript{20}

The novel communicates a sense of perplexed brooding over youth's inhumanity to youth. This, of course, is an important aspect of Spender's over-all concern with the force of hatred existing in the world. The emphasis he places on the tendency of youngsters to be cruel to one another brings out his belief, implied in some of his poems, that there is a strong natural impulse toward evil in the individual. This takes on particular significance in view of his attitude of amused contempt toward those orthodox thinkers who hold belief in the doctrine of

\textsuperscript{19}Loc. cit.

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., pp. 84-85.
Original Sin. Here, as in other areas, one feels that Spender's experience of life, honestly rendered in his creative writing, tends to belie his conscious attitudes.

In the novel, sports as well as class provide an opportunity for displays of cruelty. Geoffrey is warned by the older boys (and he takes the warning as a threat) that he must make no mistake in soccer. His response to this is a "shock of pure hatred for Palmer and Richards."\(^{21}\) But on another occasion, when he has done well as a goalie in a soccer game, Richards smiles at him and temporarily his sense of isolation fades. "For a moment he loved himself, not secretly and for himself, but openly and for them."\(^{22}\)

In his poem "My parents kept me from children who were rough," Spender demonstrates the same sense of isolation, linked to social standing, and the same frustration at the barriers which inhibit love, which appear in the novel. In the case of the poem, the other children are the very poor, "whose thighs showed through rags." But his school relationships were marked by the same kind of fear which the poem reveals.

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron
Their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.
I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys
Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 168.

\(^{22}\)Ibid., p. 88.
They were lithe, they sprang out behind hedges
Like dogs to bark at my world. They threw mud
While I looked the other way, pretending to smile.
I longed to forgive them, but they never smiled.23

Clearly implied in the last lines of the poem is the
straining toward love, capable of transcending differences of
class and of nation, which lies at the heart of Spender's crea-
tive work. More than implied is the air of mourning over the
human tendency toward brutality, which is the eternal antagonist
of that love. If it can be conjectured that Spender's sympathy
for Communism may have had its roots in his childhood, it can
certainly be surmised that his hatred of fascism was a natural
development from his youthful experience of cruelty in its
various forms, including his own capacity for injustice.

In The Backward Son, Geoffrey's fear of physical violence
at the hands of his schoolmates is illustrated in a passage
which takes place before he leaves home. He notices a cat and
dog playing in the garden, and he thinks, "No one drove them out
into the world, no one beat them with rods, no one shut them up
in class-rooms and made them learn lessons, no one forcibly
introduced them to other cats and dogs who would probably do
their best to tear them into pieces."24 As in "My parents kept
me from children who were rough," Spender uses animal imagery to
express the child's horror at the lack of the specifically human

23Stephen Spender, Collected Poems, 1928-1953 (New York,

24Spender, The Backward Son, pp. 11-12.
quality of love in relationships among children. The passage is extremely gauche, because we feel that the mature novelist is identifying completely with the child's attitude. Spender has not achieved Joyce's success in rendering the child's mentality with complete lucidity but without implied comment. Nevertheless, he does take us inside the child's mind and he does make us (if we can momentarily lay aside our aesthetic sensibilities) realize afresh every youngster's abyssmal need for acceptance by his own age group.

Although Geoffrey is tormented, he is not actually torn in pieces, but Spender indicates that the boys enjoy physical violence. Fallow, at one point, is being beaten by the Head. "'Gosh, I wonder what he'll get,' exclaimed Tike, hugging himself with unconcealed satisfaction. 'Oh, a whacking, I expect,' said Palmer, pretending boredom whilst his eyes were shining.'" 25 Spender implies that the beatings supply a welcome diversion for the boys. Not only do they secretly relish beatings; they are openly treacherous to one another, laughing or jeering when the Head is tormenting one of them.

Geoffrey is struck by Palmer for saying "caned" instead of "whacked." Richards taunts, "'Write home and tell mummy we're rough.'"

Another form of cruelty to which Geoffrey is subjected is that of being taunted about his partly German background. He

25 Ibid., p. 40.
has admitted to the boys that his mother's family name is Schroeder. (Spender's own mother's name was Schuster.) As he spells it, his mouth becomes parched with fear. The boys refer to him as a Hun, a cowardly Boche, an enemy. "We don't like Huns at Tisselthorp," Palmer tells him. 26

Geoffrey is particularly fearful of the other boys when he learns that his younger brother is going to join him at school. "Suddenly he had a vision of them all, like a pack of dogs, let loose on his brother, and this seemed more intolerable than anything they could now do to him himself." 27

But if the boys are pictured as brutal, it is in the characterization of the headmaster that Spender presents the fascist type most graphically. Actually, the portrait of this man is more caricature than characterization. He does not come through as a believable human being. But then neither do many Nazis when they are presented fictionally. Perhaps it is that we prefer to believe, ostrich-like, that such individuals cannot exist. He is strongly reminiscent, at any rate, of schoolmasters in David Copperfield and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

The Head is presented as a man who enjoys beating youngsters. His injustice is brought out in an incident in which he forces Geoffrey to write to his parents that he has lied about

26 Ibid., p. 164.

27 Ibid., p. 162.
a situation at school which he had actually reported truthfully.
Apart from the headmaster's relationship with the boys, Spender
uses him as a type of chauvinist who is completely out of touch
with political reality. He tells the boys:

"After all, in a world full of insecurity, the British
Empire is just like a dear old fussy hen, clucking to
her chicks to gather under her wings for safety. As
one nation after another outside the Pax Britannica
falls into chaos, its inhabitants envy this great
Empire of ours, and wish that they belonged to it.
Today the Russians, living under the Red Terror, are
whispering to each other: 'Wouldn't it be simpler,
after all, to rest under the wing of that kind old
Mother of the Nations?'. Of course, it would be
difficult, but if it could be arranged, what would
make more surely for perpetual peace than that the
whole world should become British?" 28

Spender uses him also to satirize his countrymen who
unconsciously enjoyed their hatred of Germany in the period
between the wars. For Spender believes that Allied treatment
of Germany after World War I was at least partly responsible for
the rise of Hitler. "A clenching of whichever hand was not
engaged in passing food between those impressionable lips, a
sudden tautening of the back and shoulders, a well-known frank
blazing of the sapphire eyes, were the Head's response to a
clarion call to the readers of the Daily Sketch to make Germany
pay till the pips squeak, and to remain ever conscious of the
Hun Menace."

28 Ibid., pp. 77-78.

29 Ibid., p. 64.
Geoffrey's attitude toward his fellow students and toward his headmaster, into which Spender enters sympathetically, explains why the author repeatedly uses images of imprisonment in speaking of school life. But in one regard school means a new kind of freedom for Geoffrey. This was in the matter of sex.

Palmer questions Geoffrey on this subject as part of the regular routine for new boys. He asks him to name "an unmentionable part of the body." Geoffrey is at first scandalized and feels the immense gulf which exists between school where such matters are made the subject of conversation and his home where "every inch of paint and carpet was a denial of indecencies." He refuses to admit that he knows the name.

He would not be trapped into admitting to those thoughts which he alone was bad enough to have. But as soon as he had said "No," the position seemed reversed. Now to deny seemed to condemn him to as great a loneliness, as, at home with his parents, to admit them had done. Because, spoken of as they spoke, it was obvious that everyone had a body and everyone's body had functions which it was useless to deny. Even his parents had bodies... How was it that when they spoke to him during the day, they appeared to him completely unphysical, spiritual beings, a face, a voice and some clothes, like angels in white dresses. He is finally forced by Palmer to name the part of the body and he finds that it is a relief... He knew now that a world existed in some other minds corresponding to that which he thought only present in the wickedness of his own imagination. He answered their question with a rising excitement of shameful joy, as though the very fact of their having bodies was an incarnation of his own most hidden thoughts.31

30 Ibid., p. 49.
31 Ibid., pp. 50-51.
Nevertheless, Geoffrey sides with their teacher, Miss Higgins, who is horrified when she learns what the boys have been discussing. She represents home to him, and purity and decency. He desires strongly to become a part of the kind of purity which she stands for. But while "one side of him wanted to be good, another side wanted to be wicked even beyond Tisselthorp's dreams of wickedness."

Now his thoughts left the pure realm of his home and the suits which his father and Mr. Leather wore, and fled to the moon. For he imagined that on the moon there lived a shameless race of people who had never heard of purity. They never wore clothes, they devoted their whole lives to the pleasures of the body, they never wanted to win the moral approval of their fellow men, they had no ambitions, they enjoyed interminable pleasurable physical sensations. When you went amongst them, they simply introduced you to their pleasures, they assured you that these were not wrong, that no one would ever punish you, that the whispers of conscience would not bury themselves, like worms, in your bowels.32

The Backward Son was published in 1940, but a fragment of a long poem, "Pronouns in this Time," which appeared almost a quarter of a century later, reveals the same preoccupations that these passages evidence. In both poem and novel, clothes become a symbol of the gulf that exists in the child's imagination between his own "wickedness" and the "purity" of his parents and Mr. Leather, the headmaster. In the poem, he describes a night in his childhood when he is thinking of these figures:

32Ibid., p. 55.
I could not think my father even
Except at breakfast with *The Times*
Spread out behind an egg: . . .
And through the dark my mother glimmered
Like ectoplasm, where I saw her
With a headache in a chaise longue
Staring at an open cheque book
As at some stage with Hamlet dying.
Above my bed upon his rostrum
Cawed Mr Leather, our headmaster,
His grapeveined jowls hanging down
Like imperial Caesar's toga.

He goes on to discuss the appraisal he made of what it meant to
be an adult:

> Being grown up, I thought, was when
> What they show themselves outside
> Is what they have become within.
> They hide no dark uncertain night,
> No child who cries, frightened of dark.
> Growing up means fitting into clothes
> That are their words—and when
> They let these down, they do not name
> Their nakedness. Their bodies
> To them are only shapes for fitting
> Dresses on to, waxwork dummies
> Sometimes naked in shop-windows,
> Unthinkabilities too terrible
> To look at or be mentioned
> There only to put clothes on: dolls
> Stuffings of rags, straw, into which
> Skirts, sailor suits, are stitched.

But even as a child he was aware of the unreality of the masks
which his elders presented to the world. He reasons that they
must have moments of confrontation when, divested of their
"clothes" they must face up to the same immensities that
confront him.

> And yet I knew it could not be so!
> I knew they must be lying,
> Ivy, Miss Cox, Mrs Alger,
> My father, mother, Mr Leather,
Alone in my same darkness, staring
At distances the sun-illumined
Blue-painted day all day screened out,
The billion-orbed shining not-self,
Spheres of fire and ice, revolving,
As if on wheels, and entering,
Immense as Cunard liners, through
The channels of their eyes, to change
Inside their skulls to images
That have no density: a thought.

He finds consolation in the fact that the gulf of clothes is not a real one. It lessens his sense of isolation to realize that they must confront the same realities that he must: the self and the "not-self." The paradox implied here is that in his very isolation he finds a sense of community, knowing that others must be participating in an identical experience.

Ivy, Miss Cox, Mrs Alger,
My father, mother, Mr Leather,
All lie down knowing that their names
Even are not themselves, but signals
Set above them like inn signs
Outside, for others' eyes to read.
Now aims, achievements, rank
Are coverings set aside
Like clothes over a chair.
And not just those I knew, but also
The mightiest and the cleverest
Now know that they are only I.33

The poem reveals, as does The Backward Son, the great tension which exists in Spender between absorption in the ego, on the one hand, and an overpowering need to get beyond the self, to find common cause with other human beings. But it fails to bring out another tension dramatized in the novel:

that between the desire for moral perfection and for the ultimate in sensual experience. It is this latter tension which so strongly recalls Stephen Dedalus. So too do Geoffrey Brand's specifically religious attitudes. He identifies with Christ, viewing suffering as the primary means of becoming one with Him. He even desires crucifixion, for this would admit him wholly to participation in Christ's love for mankind. As he contemplates the passion, he cries at the thought of the agony in the garden, and he finally decides that he would not be able to bear the pain of the crucifixion.

He thinks of the thieves crucified with Christ, and he follows them in his imagination through a world of sensual pleasure. A strong physical reaction results and is followed by a deep penitence. "And now he saw that the only thing that prevented him from reaching to the perfection of Christ was the sin which was purely sin, sin for its own sake, irresistible because it had the taste of a world unknown to the world of his father and Tisselthorp, a world attainable in his own body."

Geoffrey feels that the enormity of his sin sets him apart from others. He is sure that the other boys are incapable of the same degree of wickedness that he is guilty of. Yet he feels almost helpless against the demands of his body. As in the case of Stephen Dedalus, there seems to be in Geoffrey's mind a troubling confusion between temptation and sin.

\[34\] Spender, *The Backward Son*, p. 177.
Without that one compelling fleshly sin, how easy it would be to become perfect. . . . But this one incurable passion which when it swept him up in its wicked and fascinating imagery used his mind and body as an instrument wholly in its power, made every other effort a hypocrisy, a mask of virtue, worse than useless.

"No, I will fight temptation, I will overcome my body, I will resist!" . . . Determined not to spare himself, he raised his hand and struck himself as hard as he could in his side, where Christ was wounded. Then the distressing images faded from his mind, and his body surrendered to another wickedness—sleep.35

Geoffrey has recorded some of his prayers in his diary. Palmer and Richards steal it, but it is retrieved by Miss Higgins and given to the Head. He informs Geoffrey that it is un-English to make an open avowal of one's feelings, particularly of one's religious beliefs. "However deeply religious we may be underneath, we think it unhealthy to mention the name of our Lord too often."36 He then glues together the pages of the diary containing the prayers.

But if the Head fails completely to understand Geoffrey, his wife makes up for it to some extent by commiserating with the boy about his sensitivity. Just as when his mother alluded to this facet of his personality, Geoffrey is ecstatic to think that he has somehow been singled out as different. He reasons that "everything seemed justified if what he went through now was part of a capacity within himself which produced a greater punishment than others. He was at the centre of a silence which

36 Ibid., pp. 184-85.
went through his whole life and had nothing to do with his age."³⁷

He learns to cherish his identity because, despite all the suffering to which it exposes him, it provides him with his most immediate insight into being. What Spender seems to try to establish in the novel as in his autobiography and poetry is that his ego is a laboratory which offers him his best opportunity for arriving at some knowledge about the meaning of life.

Thus he does not envy his brother Hilary or Palmer. "Being the cold cock of the walk would not console me for the loss of a passion that makes everyone an equal and a friend." He congratulates himself on having escaped being someone else. There are times when he doubt his own reality, when he feels that he is perhaps "nothing" or "an emptiness." But he is "here" and "they" are "there." "Being I is home."³⁸ Then he decides that it may be "they" who are unreal in their unquestioning acceptance of themselves without wondering what they are. He longs for a friend who will be absorbed in the question of who he is as is Geoffrey himself.

In his autobiography, Spender says little about his early school life, but what he does say underlines the similarity between life and art. One incident in particular has this effect. He had been punished by the schoolmaster for eating an

³⁷Ibid., pp. 107-08.
³⁸Ibid., p. 120.
extra ¼ slice of bread, and his music teacher, in attempting to console him, told him that while he would perhaps be unhappy during all the time he is at school, he would begin to be happy later.

"You will be happier than most people."

I never forgot Greatorx' remark, slipped like a banned letter into the concentration camp of my childhood; and when I was grown up, I wrote and thanked him for having made it, and confirmed that it was true.39

The use of the term "concentration camp" seems overly dramatic in terms of what Spender actually tells us about his childhood. Again we are reminded that he makes very little attempt at achieving an objective tone in discussing his personal experience. The element of self-pity is unmistakable. But so is the honesty with which he renders his subjective reaction. To gloss over the suffering of his early life with an irony which it would be easy for an adult to adopt would seem to Spender a distortion of reality. He felt that childhood was a concentration camp. Therefore it was a concentration camp. Here the romantic in Spender becomes evident. For what one feels about a situation is to him more true than any objective rendering of the facts could be. This may perhaps partly explain his enthusiasm for a writer like Henry James, whose inspection of feeling becomes aggravatingly minute at times.

It may explain, too, why Spender's autobiography40 is largely a record of personal relationships rather than of

40All of the biographical material in this chapter is taken from World Within World unless otherwise noted.
events. One of the most significant of these relationships is that with his maternal grandmother, Hilda Schuster. He calls his attachment to this remarkable woman his first deep friendship. She sympathized with his interest in modern art and in contemporary poetry in a way that was impossible for his father. She entered, too, into his own desire to write poetry. He felt that she accepted him as he was. It was this element that was lacking in most of his family relationships and which he was constantly seeking in friendship.

She embodied a spirit of international love which made her the antithesis of the type represented by the headmaster in The Backward Son. Spender had pictured the latter as rejoicing over headlines which encouraged hatred of Germany. But of Hilda Schuster her grandson says, "She was a thin, bowed, passionate figure who mourned over starvation in Austria and Germany, the triumphant inhumanity of the victors over the defeated, the shrieking of hatred in newspaper headlines which haunted our childhood--'Squeeze the Huns until the pips squeak!' She grieved over the lack of love as a guiding spirit in the world."\(^{41}\)

Spender's grandfather, Ernest Joseph Schuster, was Jewish, a fact of which his grandson did not become aware until he was sixteen years old. At that point Spender says, he began to feel Jewish. "I began to realize that I had more in common with the

\(^{41}\text{Ibid.}, p. 12.\)
sensitive, rather soft, inquisitive, interior Jewish boys, than
with the aloof, hard, external English. There was a vulnera-
bility, a tendency to self-hatred and self-pity, an underlying
perpetual mourning amounting at times to spiritual defeatism,
about my own nature which, even to myself, in my English
surroundings, seemed foreign. 42

The sense of being foreign became more acute for Spender
when he was sent abroad by his grandmother after his father's
death. Spender chose to visit France, but his grandmother
elected to have him live in the home of a Protestant minister in
Nantes. He was extremely homesick, particularly for a woman
named Caroline Alington, who had come to live with the Spender
children as a kind of companion and house-mother after Harold
Spender's death. Spender became so disenchanted with France (he
had looked forward to the storied world of Paris, not to the
"bourgeois" one of Nantes) that he was sent to Lausanne, where
he lived at a pension which overlooked the lake of Geneva. His
relationship here with another English boy, whom he at once
despised and desired is recounted in the short story "By the
Lake," which is included in his collection, The Burning Cactus.

Shortly after his return home, he entered Oxford. His
expectations about his life there conflicted sharply with the
actuality. "I hoped to be received into some smiling and
forgiving companionship within which I would effortlessly,

42 Ibid., p. 13.
without guilt, among loving companions, flower."\(^{43}\) Spender is not incapable of treating himself with irony, but the fact that he can make this kind of statement about himself in all seriousness causes the reader to marvel. Shades of Oscar Wilde hover over his account of his years at Oxford. It is not difficult to understand that Spender should have found himself looked down on by public-school boys. Because he was not interested in sports and was very much absorbed in the arts, he was considered eccentric. In his disappointment at not being accepted, he emphasized his eccentricity. He took to wearing a red tie, proclaimed that he was a Socialist and a genius, and made unpatriotic pronouncements.

While he was at Oxford, however, he formed three friendships which were to have a strong influence on him. One was with Auden, another with a student whom he calls Marston, and the third with Christopher Isherwood, whom he met through Auden.

An example of Auden's hold over him is shown by the fact that when he learned that Auden wrote only one poem in three weeks, he cut his own output down from four poems a day to one in three weeks. He also accepted docilely Auden's decisions about what poets "mattered." Those who did were Owen, Hopkins, Edward Thomas, A. E. Housman, and Eliot. As Eliot was later to do, Auden indicated that Spender should abandon prose and devote himself entirely to poetry. He would occasionally single

\(^{43}\)Ibid., p. 31.
out a line which Spender had written for praise. This gave the younger boy hope. "'But do you really think I am any good?' 'Of course,' he replied frigidly. 'But why?' 'Because you are so infinitely capable of being humiliated. Art is born of humiliation,' he added in his icy voice—and left me wondering when he could feel humiliated." Later Auden reversed his earlier judgment and told Spender that he should devote himself not to poetry but to autobiographical prose.

Another student who influenced Spender during his Oxford years was quite different from Auden. He was an athlete with few aesthetic interests. Whereas Spender had hero-worshiped Auden, he was infatuated with Marston, who did not return his interest, but who was polite to him. Despite its failure on a personal level, Spender felt that the relationship had a significant effect on his poetry. It caused him "to write poems different from any others I have done. A concrete situation had suddenly crystallized feelings which until then had been diffused and found no object." (His Marston poems will be discussed in Chapter III.)

Friendships which were apparently of a more even balance were formed by Spender with Louis MacNeice, Bernard Spencer, Humphrey House, Arthur Calder-Marshall, and Isaiah Berlin. With the last named, he shared a deep interest in music, particularly

\[44\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 52.}\]
\[45\text{Ibid.}, \text{pp. 66-67.}\]
As secretary of the University English Club, Spender invited to Oxford many of the leading poets of the day. Among these were Walter de la Mare, Edmund Blunden, J. C. Squire, Humbert Wolfe and William Plomer. From most of these he received advice, some of it quite discouraging, about the career of poetry. But what he wanted was not their advice but their friendship. He longed to join the fellowship of poets.

As a step toward that goal, he published poems and articles in the university magazines, and he confesses that to see his work in print filled him with an intoxicating sense of accomplishment and pride.

It constituted a form of liberation from the self-doubt which had plagued him during his early life. Another form of liberation occurred during a visit he made to Hamburg in the summer of 1929. The German city was characterized at that time by an air of great freedom. This was evident in the architecture, in the arts, and in the recreation of the young people. Spender calls the sun "a primary social force in this Germany." It was a healing force, an antidote to war, a vibrant reminder of the power of nature. Swimming and sun-bathing were extremely popular. So were parties and night-clubbing. Great sexual freedom was prevalent.

In this environment, he experienced an expansion of personality. He says that on his walks through Hamburg, "I had a tremendous sense of release, of having got away from Oxford
and home. Drums and flags seemed to march through my brain: it was as though my blood were a river of music. An embrace of recognition seemed celebrated between my inner life and the green, throbbing world outside. 46

Among the friendships which he formed in Hamburg was one with two young men whom he calls Heinrich and Joachim. It is these men, one "the new, bronzed German," the other a "communist clerk... with world-offended eyes," whom he writes of in his poem "In 1929."

But more crucial to his development was his friendship with "Walter." Spender was apparently victimized by the unemployed young man to whom he repeatedly loaned money for a journey which was never made. Walter did two things for him, however. By accepting his loans, he eased Spender's sense of guilt at having money when so many were indigent. And in his relationship with Walter, the young Englishman found "a grain of real affection of the kind that I had not had before... With him I escaped to some extent from the over-spiritualized, puritan, competitive atmosphere in which I had been brought up, to something denser, less pure, but out of which I could extract and refine little granules of affection." 47 The reader's amusement at the "little granules" phrase is somewhat tempered by the realization, borne

46 Ibid., p. 109.

47 Ibid., pp. 117-118.
in on him by The Backward Son, of the relentless need in Spender to find a response to his own desire to love.

Far different from Walter was fictionist Christopher Isherwood, whom Spender had known as a friend and near-mentor of Auden's at Oxford. As in his relationship with Auden, Spender seems to have been follower and admirer, caught up in the spell of a stronger personality. But because Isherwood, too, was a writer, the friendship was important to him professionally. Isherwood's approval of his work gave him a much needed confidence.

This confidence was strengthened by three publications which appeared in the early 1930's: New Signatures and New Country, edited by Michael Roberts, and Spender's own Poems. The first two volumes included work of Spender, along with that of Auden, William Empson, C. Day Lewis, Rex Warner, William Plomer, A. J. S. Tessimond, and Julian Bell. Roberts had brought together a number of revolutionary voices of which Spender's was hailed as one of the most promising. Since Spender's own book appeared shortly after Auden's Poems and Day Lewis's Transitional Poem, the work of the three poets became identified with one another, although, as Spender insists, they "were very different talents." 48

Encouraging the development of his own talent were several literary figures, among them Virginia Woolf, Rosamond Lehmann

48 Ibid., p. 138.
and Victoria Sackville-West. As a young poet, he reveled in the patronage of these established writers. He was also befriended by Eliot, to whom an acquaintance had sent a copy of his Poems. He was much impressed by the brilliance of these men and women, although he felt the lack of political dedication in their work.

Being caught up in the literary life of England, however, proved harmful to his literary output. Consequently, he decided to spend six months of every year abroad. During these periods, he deliberately curtailed his social activities so that he would have more time to spend on his work.

A break with Christopher Isherwood in the winter of 1932 had led to a sense of great loneliness. In Spender, as his novel makes clear, the need to be first in the affections of another human being had been acute since childhood. After his falling-out with Isherwood, this need became very pronounced. As a result, he took into his employment a young man named Jimmy Younger, nominally as secretary but actually as companion. The relationship between the two was a stormy one. Jimmy was undisciplined and unproductive, and Spender found this a drain on his creative energies. Jimmy, on his part, resented his dependence on Spender. They quarreled frequently. The relationship finally reached a point beyond which Spender felt it could not progress. This caused him to seek actively for feminine companionship.
A liaison with an American woman, then living in Vienna, followed. He calls this woman Elizabeth. His relationship with her was disturbed by the fact that he could not bring himself to break off with Jimmy, who was ill at the time. Elizabeth finally became engaged to someone else, and shortly thereafter Spender and Jimmy parted.

In the years during which his private life had centered around his friendship with Jimmy and his love affair with Elizabeth, his public concern had been focused on the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. He was incensed at the apathy with which the rest of Europe confronted the activities of the Nazis in Germany. In his long poem, Vienna, published in 1934, Spender tried to bring together his public and his private concerns, but he acknowledges that he failed to fuse the two successfully.

As was the case with most liberal writers in the 1930's, Spender's sympathies were very much involved with the fortunes of the Republican government in Spain during the Civil War. Although he did not actively engage in the fighting, as many of his associates did, he was a vocal supporter of the Republican cause. It was in 1936, when he was invited to speak at an Aid to Spain meeting at Oxford, that he met the woman who was to become his first wife, Agnes Marie (Inez) Pearn, a member of the Spanish Aid Committee.
He proposed to her the day following their meeting and was accepted. The proposal was followed by serious misgivings on Spender's part, but he put these aside, and three weeks later he and Inez were married. Initially their marriage seems to have been a happy one, although Spender's interest in the Spanish Civil War took him away from home.

When asked to join the Communist Party as a means of supporting the Loyalist cause in Spain, he agreed. One of his first acts as a Communist was to write an article for the Daily Worker, in which he set forth his own views, which differed from prevailing Communist doctrine. He was critical, for instance, of the Moscow trials. In The God that Failed, Spender says that he was only a member of the Party for a few weeks. The major reason that Communism could not hold him was that it involved a denial of intellectual freedom and honesty. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, he felt that honesty demanded an admission that atrocities were being committed by the Republican as well as by the Fascist forces. He could not sympathize with the Communist view that the end justifies the means and that the intellectual who wants to support Communism must agree to write only what will help the Communist position.

Despite the fact that he recognized Republican guilt in the conduct of the war, however, his hatred of Fascism was so great

that his sympathies never wavered. He found himself in a difficult situation in Spain, though, due to the fact that Jimmy Younger, who had followed him into the Communist Party and had then joined the International Brigade, had become disenchanted with the war and wanted to go home. Spender felt responsible for Jimmy's presence in Spain, and did what he could to have him transferred to a non-combatant position. This seemed to some Republican sympathizers like a defection.

The official reason for Spender's first visit to Spain was a request by the Daily Worker that he report on a Russian ship sunk by the Italians in the Mediterranean. Although he was not spectacularly successful in his inquiries about the ship, he began to acquaint himself with the political and military situations. This visit determined him to return to Spain, and he was given a specific reason for doing so when he was asked to become head of British broadcasting for a Socialist Party radio station in Valencia. By the time he arrived in Valencia, the station had been abolished due to the unification of political parties.

In the summer of 1937, Spender paid a third visit to Spain, this time to attend the Writers' Congress in Madrid. He saw positive value in the Congress in that it dramatized the international character of anti-Fascist feeling. On the other hand, he says that it "had something about it of a Spoiled Children's Party, something which brought out the worst in many
He was later to satirize the Congress in his novelette, *Engaged in Writing*.

On his return to London, Spender became preoccupied with the personal in a reaction against his Communist phase. The poetry he wrote was concerned with personal isolation; he resumed his interest in painting in order to have another vehicle for projecting his personal vision; and he underwent psycho-analysis. Meanwhile, his marriage failed; his wife had fallen in love with someone else. One of Spender's most frankly personal poems, "Song," which begins "Stranger, you who hide my love," deals with this crisis in his life.

It was during World War II, in 1941, that he was married again, this time to Natasha Litvin, a pianist. He says little about this marriage in his autobiography, but what he does say implies that in this relationship he at last found the full mutual love for which he had been searching all his life. The poem, "To Natasha" underlines this impression.

The knowledge that he was to become a father for the first time (he has a son and a daughter) held great significance for him. He mentions a time during his work for the Auxiliary Fire Service, in which he served from 1942 to 1944, when he was attempting to put out a fire by turning a hose on it. "There was a rustling and crackling all around me, and in my heart I felt the peace which I had always longed to know before I went

out on a fire, the knowledge that we were going to have a child. It was as though a cycle of living was completed, and in the fire I stood in the centre of a wheel of my own life where childhood and middle age and death were the same."51

Before his second marriage, Spender had embarked on a journalistic venture with Cyril Connolly and Peter Watson. This was the magazine Horizon. The planning of the magazine began in October, 1939, and the first issue appeared in January, 1940. Although Spender admired Connolly, the editor, he found himself at odds with him. "I, who started out with concern for planning post-war Britain, defending democracy, encouraging young writers and so forth, was disconcerted to find myself with an editor who showed little sense of responsibility about these things."52 Nevertheless, Spender served as co-editor until 1941.

Since the war, he has traveled extensively. In 1945, he undertook a survey of conditions in post-war Germany for the British government. An account of this experience is presented in European Witness. Learning Laughter gives his impressions of Israel, based on the study of a youth group there which he made in the spring of 1952. Much of his time in the last two decades has been spent in the United States, where he has taught at several universities.53 He is a relaxed and affable teacher who

51Ibid., p. 322.
52Ibid., p. 293.
communicates well with students. His work as a teacher has been in addition to editorial chores for the magazine *Encounter*, founded in 1953, of which he was first co-editor and then corresponding editor. He left the magazine in June 1967 when he learned that it was partially subsidized by the CIA.  

Although he brought out the volume *Collected Poems* in 1955, Spender has published little new poetry in recent years. Much of his latest poetry is concerned with youthful experiences. An important critical study, *The Creative Element*, appeared in 1953. His most recent long prose study is *The Struggle of the Modern*, 1963. In a journalistic vein, he published *The Year of the Young Rebels* in 1969.

From this overview of Spender's life and work, it can be seen that there is substance to his claim that everything he writes is autobiography. But the full significance which he attaches to the ego can only be understood in the light of his religious beliefs. As I remarked in the last chapter, his statements on this subject are confusing. In *Learning Laughter*, he refers to himself as a Christian. In *Life and the Poet*, he suggests that the most satisfactory attitude for a poet is agnosticism. An anecdote in *European Witness*, however, contains a comment that most thorough-going agnostics would hesitate to make. Spender had gone to visit a Catholic priest in Cologne.

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The priest was out when he arrived and, while he was waiting, he learned that the nephew of one of the women in the room was dying and needed penicillin. The woman introduced herself, saying, "You are an Englishman. Oh, perhaps you are sent by God to help us." Spender comments, "I was not surprised, as I thought it extremely likely that I was sent by God for some purpose or other."55

The late novelist Rose Macaulay tells in a letter to Father Hamilton Johnson of a conversation she had with Spender. "He rather interested me by saying that, though he couldn't believe much of what Christianity taught and held, he was an Anglican because he thought it such a good 'framework for moral aspiration.'"56

Like Eliot and Auden, then, Spender has aligned himself with a church, but there is a major difference between his position and that of the other poets. In their pursuit of spiritual values, they have accepted the fact that there are two modes of knowing: one, through accepting information on the word of another; the other, through personal discovery yielded by experience. But Spender implied in his course at Northwestern University that because Eliot and Auden have accepted certain truths on faith, they have taken up an isolated position, cut

off from the mainstream of contemporary life. For contemporary man, in Spender's view, has lost touch with most of the values of traditional religion. Perhaps most significantly, he has lost his belief in belief. He can no longer accept pronouncements on faith, simply because they are handed down by an authoritative body.

Spender sees himself as a spokesman for the modern who cannot accept dogma. His thirst for metaphysical truth is a relentless one, though, and since one avenue of pursuing it is closed to him, he places the heaviest importance on the other—the self and its intuitions. The burden frequently seems too weighty a one to be sustained. Some of Spender's recent poetry is capable of moving the reader to deep pity for its author, because he seems determined to comb through memories of his youth to yield meanings which they of themselves are impotent to provide.

The poetry actually written when he was a young man reveals a more immediate rendering of experience, a less tortuous examination of that experience than does much of the later work. In "Rolled over on Europe," for instance, Spender communicates directly a sense of mystery that exists in the relationship between man and the universe and the complicity of both in the tragedy that was overtaking Europe in the early 1930's, when the poem was written.
Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars
Below us; above our heads, the night
Frozen again to stars; the stars
In pools between our coats; and that charmed moon.

In these few lines, Spender manages to intimate both a
sense of the gulf which separates man from nature--the repeti-
tion of the word "frozen" helps to accomplish this--and of the
union of the individual with the external world: "the stars/ In
pools between our coats." The crucifixion image in the
succeeding lines reenforces the sense of union:

Ah, what supports? What cross draws out our arms,
Heaves up our bodies toward the wind
And hammers us between the mirrored lights?

Night, stars, moon, wind--these are symbols of elemental forces,
the contemplation of which brings the poet to the brink of the
unknown. There is a sense of relief in the abrupt withdrawal to
the known, which marks the second and final stanza.

Only my body is real; which wolves
Are free to oppress and gnaw. Only this rose
My friend laid on my breast, and these few lines
Written from home, are real.57

Actually, in this brief stanza, he points to three of the four
major avenues by which he approaches reality; the self ("my
body"); love ("this rose"); and poetry ("these few lines").
Both love and poetry are for Spender, of course, means of
expanding and fulfilling the self. They are trustworthy because
experience has, to some extent, at least, dispelled the mystery
from them. It is another kind of experience which he describes

57Spender, Collected Poetry, p. 4.
in the first stanza, from which the mystery has not been dispelled, and of which, consequently, he seems to question the reality. Yet, in a perhaps unintentional paradox, it is the first stanza which communicates an intensely lived experience, while the second, with its talk of the real, seems almost artificially intellectualized.

The idea of the barrier which exists between man and external reality and which necessitates a delving into personal experience is expressed in another early poem, "Never being, but always at the edge of Being." Here he says:

I move lips for tasting, I move hands for touching, 
But never come nearer than touching 
Though Spirit lean outward for seeing. 
Observing rose, gold, eyes, an admired landscape, 
My senses record the act of wishing, 
Wishing to be 
Rose, gold, landscape or another. 58

As in "Rolled over on Europe," there is an abrupt transition between the first part of the poem and the conclusion. In this case, the break comes between the lines just quoted and the final line: "I claim fulfilment in the fact of loving."

These two poems illustrate one of the tensions that run through Spender's work. There is a yearning toward the metaphysical on the one hand, and on the other a determination not to venture beyond an experience which can be reconciled with the verities of our scientific age.

58 Ibid., p. 13.
In "Explorations," Spender attempts his fullest exposition of the situation of man. The opening lines strongly recall "Rolled over on Europe" in the double sense they give of man's nearness to and isolation from nature. Even "frozen," the word he uses as a symbol of the apartness of the stars in the earlier poem, recurs in the later one.

We fly through a night of stars
Whose remote frozen tongues speak
A language of mirrors, Greek to Greek,
Flashing across space, each to each.
0 night of Venus and Mars,
In a dance of life extinct, far far far from these wars.

The reference to the "tongues which speak/ A language of mirrors" suggests that the universe knows and utters truths which man cannot comprehend. Yet his flight through the stars indicates his yearning to hear and understand what they say. Particularly in the time of war when the fact of death and a sense of the meaninglessness of human existence is forced on man's consciousness, particularly then does the mystery of the heaven's "dance of life" tantalize the intellect. The repetition of the word "far" in the last line of this introductory section of the poem stresses the remoteness into which war has forced any secrets that the stars might have to reveal.

In Part I, Spender underlines man's loneliness, his single-ness, the poverty of his mental life, stripped bare of the comforting clothes of faith.

Within our nakedness, nakedness still
Is the naked mind.
Man, however, is the reflection of all that has been and is. He is one of the instruments through which the universe realizes itself. But this instrumentality, which gives him a unique significance, is severely limited by time. Man's grandeur lies in the fact that he is used during his moment on earth by some larger will which only becomes fully conscious of itself by the cooperation of his own human will. His tragedy consists in the fate he must ultimately confront—that of being discarded when his brief moment of time is at an end.

Past and stars show
Through the columned bones. Tomorrow
Will blow away the temple of each will.
The Universe, by inches, minutes, fills
Our hollowed tongues. Name and image glow
In word and form. Star and history know
That they exist, in life existence kills.

The other parts of the poem work variations on the themes dealt with here: the inexorability of life and death; the use and disuse of man by an at least partly blind force outside himself; the indigence of man's spiritual condition. (In Part II, the word "naked" is used four times in the first four lines.) The idea of the consumption of man by outside forces is concretized in a food image.

Miles and hours upon you feed.
They eat your eyes out with their avid distance
They eat your heart out with their empty need;
They eat your soul out with vanished significance.

Part III reemphasizes man's littleness: "We are not worlds, no, nor infinity," but it introduces a new concept:
man's efforts are seen to acquire meaning in that they form a bridge between the limited, known "thisness" of the earth and the expansive, mysterious "thatness" of the heavens.

The tower we build soars like an arrow
From the earth's rim towards the sky's,
Upwards-downwards in a star-filled pond,
Climbing and diving from our world, to narrow
The gap between the world shut in the eyes
And the receding world of light beyond.

The tower and arrow images in these lines reenforce the sense of straining to transcend the human situation that is implied in the opening lines of the poem, a straining toward the heavens that man cannot quite reach, but which sends messages of its illuminations through the reflections of the stars in ponds. This reference recalls "the stars/ In pools between our coats" from "Rolled over on Europe."

Preoccupation with the heavens (and Spender is certainly preoccupied with them; star and sun recur as images in his poetry with amazing frequency) has not led the poet, at least in his writing, to conjectures about the intelligence which must have planned and sustained them. He seems to accept the final mystery of which the skies are a vast symbol as impenetrable by the human intelligence. Part IV of "Explorations" refers to modern men as "Exiles from single Being of Belief." It goes on to describe the modern's plight of imprisonment within himself.

They know inextricable knots which bind Each to himself; blind walls that blind Their eyes revolving inwardly in grief. Each circular self saws round his little leaf Whose close serrated edge is his own kind.
Cut off from traditional faith, contemporary man is thrust back upon himself. Yet he is never free of the impulse to attain to something outside himself.

Dreams of a vast Outside inside each mind
May tempt with world each one to be a thief.

Spender seems to suggest here that the intuitions of an external reality and the sense of wholeness which it promises may lead the individual to make more ambitious claims for his own nature than the human condition actually warrants.

Spender reminds men that despite their intuitions, despite their desire to relate to "a vast Outside,"

... they are not aeons, they are not space,
Not empires, not maps; they are only Heads dreaming pictures, each fixed in his place.

In the use of the words "Dreams" and "dreaming," in reference to man's insights into external reality, Spender hints at the danger of illusion, at the uncertainty which attends on anything approximating metaphysical speculation. Again and again he returns to what he feels can be known with certainty: that time and space require the consciousness of man to validate themselves:

And Geography and History are unfurled Within each separate skull, grown lonely With Time, making, shedding, a World.

"Explorations" succeeds in conveying in concrete terms the plight of the agnostic contemporary. He aspires to infinity, but he cannot achieve it. Though he is cut off from a personal
God, he cannot cut himself off from a longing to identify with a force outside himself. His own littleness and limitations mock his dreams, but they are only one side of the coin. The other is that his consciousness makes him a vital partner in the evolutionary onrush. The animating force of the universe, which in Part V of the poem Spender calls Immortal Spirit, is not conceived as a supreme intelligence ordering creation but as a progressive impulse which only becomes conscious of itself through the awareness of man.

That Immortal Spirit is the single ghost
Of every time incarnate in one time
Which to achieve its timelessness must climb
Our bodies, and in our senses be engrossed.
Without that Spirit within, our lives are lost
Fragments, disturbing the earth's rim.
Unless we will it live, that God pines, dim,
Ghost in our lives: its life, our death, the cost.

The mortal sin of contemporary man is his failure to make himself available to the progressive force.

The Spirit of present, past, futurity
Seeks through the many-headed wills
To build the invisible visible city.
Shut in himself, each blind, beaked subject kills
His neighbour and himself, and shuts out pity
For that flame-winged Creator who fulfills.\(^59\)

The fact that the language of these lines brings to mind both Shaw's Life Force and the Holy Spirit of Christianity is a reminder that the orthodox and the non-orthodox are perhaps not so far apart as we (Spender among us) are sometimes inclined to believe. If there is ever an ecumenical movement to bring

\(^59\)Ibid., pp. 139-42.
believers and agnostics into one fold, some of Spender's poetry might provide a valuable basis for discussion.

Sin and sanctity are not words that appear often in Spender's writing. Yet it is obvious that in his view those who allow themselves to be immersed in materialism are sinning against the light. His saints, on the other hand, are those who have aligned themselves on the side of the immaterial--who have opted for the soul.

"I think continually of those who were truly great" is reminiscent of Wordsworth's "Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," for Spender speaks in this poem of those "Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history." In this line he suggests, as he does elsewhere that despite the unique individuality of every human being, there is a corporate nature that links soul to soul in a long progression from the beginning of time to the present, and the implication, of course, is that this progression will continue if it can obtain the cooperation of those who are "truly great."

For Spender, as for Wordsworth, light is a symbol of an ultimate, immaterial reality. But whereas for Wordsworth it is the child whose vision is most perfectly attuned to the "celestia l light," for Spender it is the great men who have refused to allow the material to obscure their vision. They have "remembered the soul's history/ Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,/ Endless and singing." The use of the
word "corridor" provides an effective image to suggest the linking of generation to generation and the transmission of the spiritual heritage from one age to another. But the great are not simply those who remember the light, but those who proclaim it, those "Whose lovely ambition/ Was that their lips, still touched with fire,/ Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song." When he says, "still touched with fire," Spender implies that in a pre-existence the soul was in union with fire. By fire he seems to mean quintessential being, pure actuality at its zenith, which is the source of joy. The words "singing" and "song" in the first stanza suggest strongly the joy which surrounds the spirit. The great, for Spender, are not those who have turned away from the pleasures of life, but those who affirmed them, ". . . who hoarded from the Spring branches/ The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms."

In his second stanza, he makes it clear that the instinctive life is not the enemy of the Spirit, but is, rather, an essential part of it and a messenger to man of the Spirit's existence.

What is precious, is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.

Just as he used "corridors" to suggest timelessness in the first stanza, here he uses "ageless springs" to reiterate the sense of eternity which the soul of man, of which his sensual nature is an integral part, forces on his consciousness. The great are
those who, freed from guilt and materialistic considerations, can respond whole-heartedly, with their total beings, to natural beauty or to human love.

What is precious, is . . . Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light Nor its grave evening demand for love. Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother With noise and fog, the flowering of the Spirit.

Spender implies in his final stanza that the great forces of nature are in partnership with large-souled men in proclaiming the Spirit, for he speaks of snow, sun, grass, and wind as commemorating "the truly great."

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields, See how these names are feted by the waving grass And by the streamers of white cloud And whispers of wind in the listening sky.

He reemphasizes the total commitment of his heroes to being:

. . . those who in their lives fought for life, Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre. Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun, And left the vivid air signed with their honour. 60

In World Within World Spender speaks of the sun as a symbol of "the great wealth of nature within the poverty of man." 61 When he refers in the poem to great men being "Born of the sun," he is perhaps suggesting that they share with it one important quality: fidelity to and vibrant proclamation of their own natures. Of all the natural forces, the sun most vividly utters

60 Ibid., p. 32.
the fact that it exists at a high level of intensity. This for Spender is what great men must do. They must catch the contagion of the sun's fire. They must be with a vengeance, with awakened mind and heart and senses, constantly opposing the "noise and fog," which wage a war of attrition on the will.

Here again Spender underlines the significance of the ego, for obviously man cannot fully realize his own nature unless he first knows it. In affirming themselves, the great have affirmed a part of being. This is perhaps just another way of saying that in being true to one's inspiration, one comes into contact with a reality that is external to the self, but in which the self somehow participates. Spender plays with this idea in "Beethoven's Death Mask," in which he shows the composer as both isolated from external reality and as an instrument through which it manifests itself.

He is imprisoned, masked, shut off from Being.
Life, like a fountain, he sees leap--outside.

Yet, in that head there twists the roaring cloud
And coils, as in a shell, the roaring wave.
The damp leaves whisper; bending to the rain
The April rises in him chokes his lungs
And climbs the torturing passage of his brain.

Then the drums move away, the Distance shows:
Now cloud-hid peaks are bared; the mystic One
Horizons haze, as the blue incense, heaven.
Peace, peace... Then splitting skull and dream,
there comes
Blotting our lights, the Trumpeter, the sun. 62

62 Spender, Collected Poetry, pp. 11-12.
"Being," "the mystic One," "the Trumpeter, the sun," all of these seem to be names Spender has chosen for absolute reality, and Beethoven, one of the "truly great," through his response to inspiration, his "bending to the rain," enters into mysterious union with that reality.

Spender also deals with his saints in "Exiles from Their Land, History Their Domicile." Here life is seen as a time of exile from being, to which the individual is linked only by his will. The printed page of history becomes for those it acclaims a "heaven on which their wills write worlds." They have been saved by death from life's anti-heroic warfare on significant existence.

Death has nothing else to do
But state and stay and make
Them one with what they willed--
(two lives
Were exile from their being)

But the poet must still endure his exile. His will has not yet been fixed by death and is still subject to the onslaughts which life makes on it.

Oh, in those lineaments of immense simplicity
Where is the similarity
With my own wavering uncertainty?
What divides
Their death my purpose, from my life my weakness?63

Here, weakness is opposed to will. In "I think continually," "traffic"--the press of day to day activities, absorption in the material, is opposed to soul. The same mournful note about

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63 Ibid., pp. 61-63.
the character of life's relentless warfare against the Spirit is sounded in "What I expected, was/ Thunder, fighting." In this poem, there is a reflection of Spender's childhood preoccupation with mountain-climbing as a symbol of life's struggle. But his experience has revealed to him that the surest attrition on the soul comes unheralded by calls to battle, unmarked by conflict with the great forces of nature.

What I had not foreseen
Was the gradual day
Weakening the will
Leaking the brightness away,
The lack of good to touch,
The fading of body and soul
--Smoke before wind,
Corrupt, unsubstantial.

The theme recurs in "An 'I' can never be great man," in which the soul, the "great 'I'," is engulfed by the various preoccupations which make up life.

Central "I" is surrounded by "I eating,"
"I loving," "I angry," "I excreting,"
And the great "I" planted in him
Has nothing to do with all these,

Can never claim its true place
RESTING in the forehead, and calm in his gaze.

When Spender comes closest to despair in his poetry, it is from the difficulty of keeping his spiritual vision before him.

Modern life is seen as inimical to it.

Without that once clear aim, the path of flight To follow for a lifetime through white air,

64 Ibid., p. 15.
65 Ibid., p. 10.
This century chokes me under roots of night.
I suffer like history in Dark Ages, where
Truth lies in dungeons, too deep for whisper. 66

The discouragement which marks the spiritual struggle against
hopelessness, against a sense of the meaninglessness of
existence, is described in "To Natasha," in which the power of
the imagination is seen as a powerful tool for combating
despair:

I am one who knows each day his past
Tear out the links from an achieving chain;
Daily through vigorous imagining
I summon my being again
Out of a chaos of nothing
My grasp on nothing builds my everything
Lest what I am should relapse into pieces. 67

But the great nothing is that of death. Although in "Exiles
from Their Land" the printed word is seen as conferring
immortality, Spender mourns the brevity of human life. The
individual is "brief man alive" in the final part of
"Explorations" through whose limbs stares "One outside time."

I who say I call that eye I
Which is the mirror in which things see
Nothing except themselves. I die.
The world, the things seen, still will be.
Upon this eye the vast reflections lie
But that which passes, passes away, is I. 68

But the significance of being oneself is a constant for Spender.
Man may be doomed to a final loss of consciousness in death, but

66 Ibid., p. 28.
67 Spender, Ruins and Visions, p. 137.
68 Spender, Collected Poetry, p. 142.
while he retains consciousness he is a part of reality, linked
to his fellowmen in that each of them bodies forth reality just
as he does. In "Pronouns in this Time" he gives fresh
expression to the themes already discussed in this chapter.

I bear witness
That all are one. For what each thinks
His separate secret self
Is that which says I AM in all. . . .
Life has lit its lamps a moment
In your glistening eyes, . . .
Each of ye is ghost that fills
A leaf unfurling on that tree
Whose roots reach to your forefathers,
Whose living tongue proclaims: "I want
Light to breathe
And so become
I who am I in all."69

Through the transparent revelation of his own experience,
Spender gives the reader a poignant, if occasionally a taste-
less, picture of modern man. Retaining the child's need for
certainty, he is cut off from the child's assurance that
certainty exists. His lack of sophistication and his honesty
in dealing with himself impress strongly on the reader the kind
of suffering sustained by one who is peculiarly sensitive,
peculiarly anxious about the nature of non-material reality,
and who is yet unable to venture forth on what, to some men,
has been the ultimate in personal experience--the blind leap of
faith. Mortimer Adler remarked once that we cannot believe what
we know. Perhaps the impression the reader frequently receives
that there is a low ceiling on Spender's poetry results from the

fact that he can believe only what he knows, and that again and again he retreats to a knowledge that is limited by his own experience. But if the ceiling is low, it contains a skylight, and that skylight is the testimony of his experience that a spiritual reality exists. If a poetry of personal experience is to be valuable on more than an aesthetic basis, it must convince us that the poet has been sufficiently humble before life to refract reality authentically. Spender's poetry carries this conviction.
CHAPTER III

LOVE

Like many of his contemporaries, Spender places high importance on interpersonal relationships precisely because he is so uncertain about other spiritual reality. The experience of loving and being loved is one of the ways in which he proves (or constructs) his own existence.

His early short stories, published in 1936 in the volume The Burning Cactus,¹ are preoccupied with the failure of love. Most of his characters are isolated within their own egotistic needs. The yearning toward a mutual affection is almost palpable, but it is never realized.

In "By the Lake," Richard Birney, a young English boy, is sent to a school in Switzerland for backward and nervous students. He receives a message that his mother is seriously ill, but he is unable to summon any loving response to the news. He thinks to himself:

He was the sort of person who is so egoistic and self-interested, he could not remember people who are ill or who fell away from his immediate self-interest. . . . He hated to be the person that he was. He was overwhelmed to turn the sudden corner and to meet

himself face to face: the face of a selfish, uncaring, lustful and egoistic young man. Yet, he reflected with satisfaction, he was upset; yes, genuinely upset.²

Richard tries to break out of his isolation by establishing a friendship with one of the other students, an English boy named Donald to whom he is attracted. But there is a serious lack of understanding between them. Donald is extremely naive and he appeals to Richard to dispel his ignorance. Richard tries to explain to him the unfortunate result of the adult conspiracy of silence about sex.

"Well, think what happens at school, how miserable you are, because you are always wanting to know about sex. How you continually think yourself wicked and believe that no one else can be as wicked as you are. Yet all the time, really, everyone around is occupied with the same thoughts and concealing them. The masters keep you as busy as possible with work and games, and stamp-collecting and debating, so that you have no time to think about this dreadful thing and no time to think either about the other more beautiful things that make life worth living. Then, when you are about sixteen, at an age when the grocer's and errand boys are walking out with their first girls, you fall in love with some cherubic looking boy in the first form, who has a clear skin and blue eyes, and who needs protecting."⁴

Spender has never been reticent about his own homosexual liaisons, but in World Within World he seems to suggest that they are as normal and morally unobjectionable as a heterosexual

²Ibid., p. 250.
³A non-fiction account of this relationship is given in World Within World, p. 30.
⁴Spender, The Burning Cactus, pp. 239-40.
relationship. In the passage just quoted, however, he shows an insight into the fact that homosexuality, in Richard's case, at least, is an aberration resulting from an emotional crippling in childhood. And later in the story in another conversation between Richard and Donauld, he has Richard imply that homosexual dalliance is not only unnatural but also wrong. Richard asks Donauld, who has been sitting on his knee:

"Do you love me?"
"Love you! What do you mean? How could I?"
"I mean, why were you sitting on my knee just now like that?"
"Why? I was only teasing. Besides, you pulled me there, for fun!"
"Did I? Well, I suppose you're right. Tell me, do you feel an inclination of that sort toward me? I mean, do I attract you in any way whatsoever?"
"I quite like you, of course. That is as long as you don't behave madly."
"Well, then, tell me, do you like me in the same way you might like a woman—a girl?"
"What's up with you?"
"Tell me."
"No, I don't feel for you like that at all. So that's that. But I don't understand. What are you getting at?"
"Nothing. I suppose you can leave me now. I'm all right."
"No, I'm not going to leave you. You must explain now what this mystery is all about. You told me once before that what's true can't hurt," Donauld said, trembling slightly.
"I was being silly then. This might hurt you. It isn't truth, it's ugliness."

As in other instances in Spender's work, this totally honest rendering of an experience seems to touch on a reality

5Spender, World Within World, pp. 185-86.
which he does not subscribe to intellectually. His importance as a writer lies at least partially in the complete openness and faithfulness with which he records his passage through life.

Richard and Donauld are seen to be on completely different wavelengths. Their failure to meet one another on a common plane underlines the loneliness of the more sophisticated, more sensitive, more passionate Richard. A similar failure to communicate is the theme of another story in the same collection. "The Cousins" tells of the visit of a young German to the country home of his English cousins. They are athletic, competent in the physical sphere and uninterested in the intellectual. He is an enthusiastically committed Socialist who would rather play chess than tennis. Werner loves his cousins but is completely isolated from them because of the difference in their outlook. His overtures toward them rejected, he cuts his visit short. He feels that his cousins are "voices in an inescapable dream." When he at last destroyed this vision, it was succeeded by one still more disturbing: that he himself, who stalked along the morning road, tall under the trees, who was now carried rapidly in a glass, wooden and iron machine rolling over metal lines through the landscape toward the town, that he was a ghost. "Our impact," he thought, "is ghostly. Which of us exists and which is dead." 

7Ibid., pp. 149-50.
The story clearly demonstrates that Werner's sense of unreality stems from the failure to establish a fully human intercourse of thought and feeling with people he had resolved to love. Werner's experience is also a reflection of Spender's own sense of estrangement from the anti-poetic, pro-athletic types that he considered typically English.

Spender says in *World Within World* that as a young man he consciously sought for a kind of love that would transcend physical desire. This ideal coexisted in him with a Lawrentian need to celebrate sexual freedom. He refers in his autobiography to the deep influence Lawrence had on him. Yet there is very little in his fiction to reflect this influence. One passage that does reflect it occurs in the story "The Burning Cactus." Till, the central character, thinks: "When one reflected on the chaos of political life in his own country, these people seemed like enthusiastic children tasting cigarettes and wine for the first time. He realized the uselessness of every experience except explosive individual feelings, which shot one like an aimless but hot rocket across an expanse of waste in which the sun was cooling and the world running down and corruption like a moss infringing on the edge of reality."  

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But the emptiness of physical sensation when it is divorced from mutual love is demonstrated in another story, "The Dead Island." The central characters are both unnamed. One is a woman who has been married three times and has had countless affairs. The other is a young man who, as the story develops, turns out to be an alcoholic. They have an affair. After a moment of physically satisfying union, she begins to cry and says to him, "I don't know you, dear, we don't know each other. Please say something." He remains silent. She continues, "This is hell, we are in hell." 11

They meet the next day, each one trying to make amends for the failure of the previous night. He brings presents and she tries to explain away what has happened: "After all, the trouble really is simply that we don't know each other." 12

He looks to her for healing; in turn he tries to heal her. "You are afraid of yourself as a vessel," he tells her. 13

She admits to herself that she is afraid, afraid of many things but most of all of not being able to meet his needs. "For she did not love him." 14

Despite the deep need each has to break out of his prison of self, they find that physical liaison when it is

11 Ibid., pp. 45-46.
12 Ibid., p. 47.
13 Ibid., p. 52.
14 Ibid., p. 53.
unaccompanied by affection is not a satisfactory means toward that end. As a matter of fact it is a deterrent. "... in a moment of luminous hatred he saw that she too was like a negative on which he had stamped a black and white photograph of evil, by their sexual act devoid of love."^{15}

Each of them is infected with self-hatred. "Their hatred, directed not at each other but at themselves, isolated them in a loneliness beyond mere anger."^{16}

If, as Spender has said, everything he writes is autobiography, the stories in *The Burning Cactus* would suggest that at the time he wrote them he had had no experience either with men or with women of a psychologically satisfying love. But by the time he wrote the novelette *The Fool and the Princess*,^{17} which was published in 1958, this situation had evidently changed. For he writes here of an ideal love, never satisfied by physical contact, but capable of enduring, of transcending time and place because it is not primarily rooted in the senses.

Harvey Granville and his wife Kate have become estranged after Harvey's return from his work at a displaced persons camp in Germany. While there, he had fallen in love with a DP,

referred to in the camp as "The Princess." Spender treats Harvey with a degree of irony, but it is evident that he takes him seriously, too.

Yet although it seemed to him that he was really suffering because of his separation from Moura, the Princess, his suffering lacked purity. It proved to him that he was sensitive. All the purity was hers, hers moving downstairs, hers moving out into the darkness, hers if perhaps, she drowned herself in some river. For himself, by comparison with the grief he caused her, his own agony seemed slightly absurd, unreal.18

His love for Moura impels him to return to Germany. Here he sees her again under very uncomfortable circumstances in the hut which she shares with several other women. He reflects on his feeling for her:

To respect someone else, not to make advances, to take nothing for granted, were signs of distinction in this place, where love could only perhaps be demonstrated by an adoring refusal to touch the loved one, and given the continuation of such circumstances, there might even be a revival of the medieval conception of courtly love.19

He thinks at first that the relationship is unreal because it is non-physical. "Nothing had, in fact, ever 'happened'. It was all simply an idea, and if neither of them referred to it, it would become less than a dream."20

But almost immediately after thinking this, he experiences the reality of her love for him. This in turn convinces him

18 Ibid., p. 176.
19 Ibid., pp. 208-09.
that there is something that is real in himself. The failure of love in "The Cousins" made Werner feel ghostly; here the experience of a supra-physical bond with another human being gives Harvey a new sense of his own identity.

For the first time, she looked at him in a way that he knew very well: with an absorption so complete that it left him very free to look at her. Her eyes opened rather wide under the lashes, her forehead puckered slightly, she was attentive as though holding her breath. She seemed to be making a great estimate of him, and to have a charity which saw through the faults to what she alone knew and judged to be the best. Her look made him see that some of his remarks were really sincere, that there was a true element of generosity in his gifts of parcels, that he was capable of surprising sacrifices, and that beyond his afflicting self-consciousness there were unspent mines of goodness and spontaneity. And when she attended like this, she was quite unaware of herself, so that he was able to see her loving him, without her even knowing that she did so.21

Moura indicates that nothing can come of their love because of their obligations—she to her ailing mother and her sister, he to his wife and son. He asks

"Do you think what we had is lost, then?"
"No. I don't think it is lost because it was real. . . ."
"I mean that one really has one doesn't lose. What one really was, one is. It is difficult to explain. But it's part of oneself, in one's bones and mind, like the village where we were children. It's only if you're like my mother and, to some extent, my sister, and you insist on dragging the past into the present, that you lose both past and present."22

21 Ibid., pp. 210-11.

22 Ibid., p. 214.
Harvey then refers to an idea a friend has suggested to him: that there is such a thing as an "invisible menage."

"... without knowing it perhaps even, certain people are bound together, married, always present with one another. The "invisible menage" falls perhaps outside all their conscious arrangements. It is always there."

This kind of spiritual union takes on a significance for him that is lacking in his actual marriage. "He was aware... within himself of something very perverse: a conviction that the relationship with Moura which was going to end that afternoon was sacred and demanded a fidelity which he could never give to marriage. It imposed a freezing chastity on his real marriage. Or which was his real marriage?"

A friend of Harvey's has brought Kate to Paris to meet him on his way home from Germany. While they are in Paris, Moura passes through en route to Australia. Harvey says goodbye to her and puts her on her train. As he walks back to the hotel to join Kate, he feels "unaccountably exalted, nervously at peace with himself, as though whatever might happen now, he was on the verge of his own truth."

He finds Kate in their hotel room half asleep. While she is in this state she suddenly says: "Mon mari est mon frere."

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23 Ibid., p. 215.
24 Ibid., p. 226.
25 Ibid., p. 237.
(She has been studying beginning French.) Harvey is moved by this semi-conscious comment on the nature of their relationship. Momentarily, he identifies Kate with Moura.

Then he thought of their home, Dunky, Geoff [his son and a playmate], orange curtains, their day-to-day life together, and saw how, for a time, something came into his existence which could not accept his marriage. Yet underneath it all, Kate on the bed was no more like the superfice of their day-to-day existing than he was himself. She stayed beneath and beyond it like a religion which he knew to be ultimately true, in which he ultimately lacked the faith to believe. Yet because he knew this, he could not know anything else, anything less than this. They had nothing except one another. He walked over to the bed, and very gently began to wake her.  

While in The Burning Cactus the characters are sealed off from one another and we see only negatively the importance of love, here in The Fool and the Princess there is an affirmation of the kind of interpersonal bond which confers a new validity on individual existence. Harvey's feeling for Moura was not only significant in itself; it also served as a catalyst in advancing his relationship with his wife to a new level of maturity. Because of his love for Moura, Harvey had fallen out of love with Kate. When he returns to his wife emotionally, it is not to be "in love" with her again; it is rather to bring her an acceptance, a compassion, and an understanding that are stripped of all illusion. And in so doing, he has found "his own truth."

26 Ibid., pp. 238-39.
Spender's poetry dealing with love shows a development similar to that to be observed in his fiction. Certain of his early poems, some of those of the Marston group, for instance, which were written in the early Thirties, reveal an uncauterized extravagance of feeling which is characteristic of youthful infatuation. The effect of this is sometimes unfortunate. The following lines, of which he thought enough to include them in his Collected Poems, are an example:

Not to you I sighed. No, not a word. We climbed together. Any feeling was Formed with the hills. It was like trees' unheard And monumental sign of country peace.

But next day, stumbling, panting up dark stairs, Rushing in room and door flung wide, I knew. Oh empty walls, book carcases, blank chairs All splintered in my head and cried for you. 27

The experience is real enough. Perhaps that is the difficulty—that it is too real. Most people have had a similar experience; there is nothing in the poem to individuate Spender's seared affections from those of any other young person. This is probably simply to say that the language is not sufficiently compelling. For in other poems of the same group (named for an Oxford friend for whom Spender formed an overpowering attachment when he was a student) there are not only memorable individual lines; richly satisfying total effects are also successfully achieved. There are, for instance, the 27

concluding lines from "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing."

When we touched hands,
I felt the whole rebel, feared mutiny
And turned away,
Thinking, if these were tricklings through a dam,
I must have love enough to run a factory on,
Or give a city power, or drive a train.28

Other of the Marston poems reveal an ingenuous hero worship which bears out the impression of the relationship given by Spender in World Within World.29 Nothing that Marston does seems too usual or prosaic to escape Spender's poetic attention. The act of breaking a pipe, for instance, calls forth a poem which I quoted in an earlier chapter. Or Marston sleeps, and even in this somewhat negative activity reveals to his admirer a god-like dimension.

Lying awake at night
   Shows again the difference
   Between me and his innocence.
I vow he was born of light
   And that dark gradually
   Closed each eye,
   He woke, he sleeps, so naturally.

So, born of nature, amongst humans divine,
He copied, and was, our sun.
   His mood was thunder
   For anger,
   But mostly a calm English one.30

Departing from the inconsequential to consider Marston's death, Spender memorializes him in "He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye." Again the superhuman is suggested.

28Ibid., p. 7.
This aristocrat, superb of all instinct,
With death close linked
Had paced the enormous cloud, almost had won
War on the sun;
Till now, like Icarus mid-ocean drowned,
Hands, wings, are found.31

The idealizing of Marston which these poems illustrate
indicates an uncritical acceptance of infatuation and the
vision of the beloved which issued from it. In other early
poems not of the Marston group, however, Spender takes a more
realistic view of love. As in the short stories, he is haunted
by the imperfection of interpersonal relations. "Shapes of
death haunt life," for instance, comments on love that is not
reciprocated:

Unrequited love, never solving
The need to become another's body
Yearns toward dissolution.

The same poem goes on to suggest that love is robbed of its
purity by ambition.

Ambition is my wish: that flat thin flame
I feed, plants my own shadow. It changes love
For love of being loved, or loving.32

"Your body is stars whose million glitter here" opens with
what is perhaps Spender's most explicit hymning of physical
union.

Your body is stars whose million glitter here:
I am lost among the branches of this sky
Here near my breast, here in my nostrils, here
Where our vast arms like streams of fire lie.

31 Ibid., p. 3.
32 Ibid., p. 22.
How can this end? My healing fills the night
And hangs its flags in worlds I cannot near.
Our movements range through miles, and when we kiss
The moment widens to enclose the years.

Yet even here there is a failure to reach that total communion
with another for which the poet yearns.

So with this face of love, whose breathings are
A mystery shadowed on the desert floor:
The promise hangs, this swarm of stars and flowers,
And then there comes the shutting of a door. [33]

The last line with its abrupt change of mood is particularly
effective in showing the inability of even the most physically
satisfying union to bring about the spiritual oneness which it
seems to promise. The first two stanzas suggest that the poet
has, through an experience of sensual fulfillment, penetrated to
a new level of reality. But the final stanza, with its "surprise
ending," points to the illusory nature of physical ecstasy.

This is not to suggest that Spender in any way under-
estimates the importance of sensual pleasure. Quite the
reverse. He revolts against the Victorian prudery which
dominated his childhood.

Passing, men are sorry for the birds in cages
And for unrestricted nature, hedged and lined.
But what do they say to your pleasant bird
Physical dalliance, since years confined?

Behind three centuries, behind the trimmed park,
Woods you felled, your clothes, houses you built,
Only love remembers where that bird dipped his head,
Only suns, light years distant, flash along his neck.

33 Ibid., p. 33.
Dance will you, and sing? Yet swear he is dead. Invent politics to hide him and law suits and suits. Now he's forbidden, and quite banned like grass, Where the fields are covered with suburban houses.

The poem contains a grim warning against the physical danger of sexual repression.

Yes! And if you still bar your pretty bird, remember Revenge and despair make their home in your bowels. Life cannot pardon a purity without scruple The knife in one's own flesh, the angel and destroyer, Inventor of self-martyrdom, serene and terrible.34

But it is not so much the denial of physical pleasure which concerns Spender as what he considers to be typically English inhibitions about any mutual feeling, particularly between men. In "Oh young men, oh young comrades," a poem with strong Whitmanesque overtones, he calls on his contemporaries to renounce their fathers' houses and the cult of money on which they rest and exalt instead "your body and your fiery soul," "your valued sex." He summons them to a new dimension of friendship based on their rejection of the economic order.

Oh comrades, step beautifully from the solid wall advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill advance to rebel and remember what you have no ghost ever had, immured in his hall.35

As in "The Fates," the paternal home is seen as a symbol of unreality, whereas sleeping "with friend on hill" suggests liberation into an area of authentic human experience.

34 Ibid., pp. 29-30.

35 Ibid., p. 31.
Authenticity stamps most of Spender's love poems, those that were inspired by women as well as those inspired by men. He has recorded with an almost painful honesty, for instance, his reaction to his separation from his first wife, Inez Pearn. The anguish of separation is the theme of several poems written between 1937 and 1939: "No Orpheus No Eurydice," "The Double Shame," "A Separation." But the most memorable rendering of this experience is in "Song." There is an irony here which one doesn't find often in Spender's poetry.

Stranger, you who hide my love
    In the curved cheek of a smile
And sleep with her upon a tongue
    Of soft lies that beguile,
    Your paradisal ecstasy
Is justified is justified
By hunger of all beasts beneath
    The overhanging cloud
    Who to snatch quick pleasures run
Before their momentary sun
Be eclipsed by death.

There is also a strong tone of moral indignation which is missing in his account of the affair in World Within World. Once again the reader has the impression that Spender's creative power presents a particular experience with a validity which transcends his purely intellectual convictions.

Lightly, lightly, from my sleep
    She stole, our vows of dew to break
Upon a day of melting rain
    Another love to take;
    Her happy happy perfidy
Was justified was justified

36 Spender, World Within World, pp. 259-60.
Since compulsive needs of sense
    Clamour to be satisfied
    And she was never one to miss
    Plausible happiness

Of a new experience.

Even the rhythm of the poem, with its almost singsong repetition
of the word justified, supplies an ironic contrast to what is
being said.

I, who stand beneath a bitter
    Blasted tree, with the green life
Of summer joy cut from my side
    By that self-justifying knife,
    In my exiled misery
Were justified were justified
If upon two lives I preyed
    Or punished with my suicide,
    Or murdered pity in my heart
    Or two other lives did part
To make the world pay what I paid.

In the final stanza, however, the bitterness is allayed and
the gentle sweetness which one often finds in Spender comes to
the fore. It is almost as if in writing the first three
stanzas, he has exorcized the demon of angry judgment and has
come to terms with his sorrow.

Oh, but supposing that I climb
    Alone to the high room of clouds
Up a ladder of the time
And lie upon a bed alone
    And tear a feather from a wing
And listen to the world below
And write round my high paper walls
    Anything and everything
Which I know and do not know!

Spender's love poetry written between 1941 and 1949 and
inspired by his second wife, Natasha Litvin, suggests that he

37Spender, Collected Poems, pp. 103-04.
has finally found the emotional fulfillment, combining physical and psychological union, which he has been seeking. This comes through most clearly in poems which touch on his wife's pregnancy. In "One," for instance, he seems to identify his love for her with life itself, suggesting that he has found peace and meaning in their relationship.

Here then
She lies
Her hair a scroll along
The grooved warm nape
Her lips half-meeting on a smile
Breath almost unbreathing
O life
A word this word my love upon the white
Linen
As though I wrote her name out on this page.

My concentra-
tion on her quietness
Intensifies like light ringed from this lamp
That throws its halo upward on the ceiling

Here we
Are one
Here where my waking walks upon her sleep
One within one
And darkly meeting in the hidden child. 38

In "Earth-Treading Stars That Make Dark Heaven Light," published for the first time in book form in 1964, Spender reaffirms his belief in the metaphysical relationship that raises human intercourse above the animal level. He refers first to the lonely, united to one another in a physical passion that links them to their jungle forebears.

38 Ibid., p. 158.
There, in each other,
Beyond their coverings of clothes
And names, they see flesh blaze, and then
Those pasts they were before they were
Themselves, emerge: ape, lion, fox. Their mouths
Conjoined, they utter cries that once
Jibbered upside down through branches
Before woods ever dreamed of huts.

But a specifically human capacity penetrates beyond the realm of sense to an area where lovers freely circumscribe their liberty through a promise of fidelity. This is the spiritual dimension of love.

But two there are who look so deep
Into each other's night, they see
Yet further than their meeting bodies
And earliest most brilliant star,
To where is nothing but a vow
That is their truth. Those instruments
Of world made flesh, they bore to prove
Before all change, their changeless word. 39

This same emphasis on the specifically human component in man is evident in Spender's most ambitious poem dealing with love, which was written in 1945, not for a sweetheart, a wife, or a friend, but for his sister-in-law, Margaret Spender. "Elegy for Margaret," 40 in its simplicity and directness of statement, almost defies comment. But it deserves closer attention than it has yet received because it represents Spender at his best. This despite the fact that his use of rhyme is sometimes distracting and his control not always

perfect. Yet the poem conveys a depth of feeling that is moving in its genuineness and disinterestedness.

It is a long poem (it runs to 215 lines and consists of six parts). The first part is addressed to the beloved woman, "Darling of our hearts," who is dying of cancer. Her imminent death is referred to in images that are not particularly fresh—"the thick night of ultimate sea"; the "bitter black severing tide." Yet the emotion comes through perhaps more forcefully than it would if the language of the poem were calling attention to itself. His sincerity is always one of Spender's most attractive virtues. Here his obvious respect for the woman he is writing about prevents that sincerity from degenerating into the maudlin or sentimental. His hatred of the disease which "Seizes on the pastures of your flesh" is somewhat tempered by his recognition of the spiritual vitality of the dying woman. "Here in this room you are outside this room." She is larger than the illness which will eventually claim her life; there is a force in her which is independent of what is taking place in her body.

She survives waves of pain.

And the weak eyes flinch with their hoping light
Which, where we wait, blinds our still hoping sight.

But hope fades under the onslaught of the "mocking illness that contrives/ Moving away some miles/ To ricochet at one appointed date."
Margaret's suffering has conferred on her a reality that the healthy lack; it links her symbolically with Europe which is also infected with an incurable malignancy.

Least of our world, you are most this world
Today, when those who are well are those who hide
In dreams painted by unfulfilled desire
From hatred triumphing outside:
And when the brave, who live and love, are hurled
Through waters of a flood shot through with fire;

Where sailor's eyes rolling on floors of seas
Hold in their luminous darkening irises
The memory of some lost still dancing girl,
The possible attainable happy peace
Of statued Europe with its pastures fertile,
Dying, like a girl, of a doomed, hidden disease.

Spender concludes Part I by relating Margaret's death to his own life. Again the link between suffering and reality seems to be suggested. Not only does Margaret herself become one with a tormented world, but, by his participation in her agony and death, the poet experiences reality at a new pitch of intensity.

So, to be honest, I must wear your death
Next to my heart, where others wear their love,
Indeed it is my love, my link with life
My word of life being knowledge of such death.
My dying word because of you can live,
Crowned with your death, this life upon my breath.

Part II opens with an effective image of the dying woman dominating her suffering by sheer force of character.

From a tree choked by ivy, rotted
By kidney-shaped fungus on the bark
Out of a topmost branch,
A spray of leaves is seen
That shoots against the ice-cold sky its mark.
The dying tree still has the strength to launch
The drained life of the sap
Into that upward arrowing glance
Above the strangling cords of evergreen.

Although at this point in the poem Spender does not introduce
the idea of immortality, he almost makes the reader confront it
by forcing into his consciousness the disjunction between the
wasted physical condition of the invalid and the sweet,
courageous aliveness of her spirit.

Above the sad grey flesh
What smile surmounts your dying
On the peak of your gaze!

The course of the disease has drastically altered her flesh,
yet she still

Asserts one usual, laughing word
Above this languor of death.

The independence of the essential person from what is happening
to her body strikes the reader again and again throughout the
course of the poem.

Time fills
The hollow well of bones
Drop by drop with dying--
Yet all the life we knew
The eyes hold still.

Yet the paradox of life remains: the superior force
(spirit) is destined to be vanquished by the laws of an
inferior force (flesh). In Part III Spender uses a double
image of light to express the tragic reality:

Poor girl, inhabitant of a stark land,
Where death covers your gaze,
As though the full moon might
Cast over the midsummer blaze
Its bright and dead white pall of night.

As he linked Margaret's disease to that of Europe in Part I, here he likens her external gaiety to that of the earth, which also has ways of covering over the tragedy that lies at its heart.

Poor child, you wear your summer dress,
And black shoes striped with gold
As today its variegated cover
Of feathery grass and spangling flowers
Delineating colour over
Shadows within which bells are tolled.

The link between Margaret's response to suffering and that of the earth is more clearly stated in the original version of this section, which appeared in Ruins and Visions under the title "Wings of the Dove."41

Poor child, you wear your summer dress,
And your scarf striped with gold
As the earth wears a variegated cover
Of coloured flowers
Covering chaos and destruction over
Where deaths are told.

The tinkering which Spender has done with these lines shows him moving away from bald, direct statement to a more resonant suggestion. The imagery also becomes more detailed and specific, "coloured flowers" giving way to "feathery grass and spangling flowers." But the lines in both versions are significant because they are an example of his repeated

attempts to link the emotions arising out of his private life with more cosmic concerns. He seems almost to savor his suffering because it links him to the suffering world.

our minds
Become one with the weeping
Of that mortality
Which through sleep is unsleeping.

He also values his grief because it is a testament to his love.

All it [his weeping] can prove
Is that extremes of love
Reach the Arctic Pole of the white bone
Where panic fills our night all night alone.

He goes on to say:

Yet my grief for you is myself, a dream,
Tomorrow's light will sweep away.

These are the most ambiguous lines in the poem and perhaps the most interesting. The words "my grief for you is myself" seem to suggest that his suffering has forced him to confront himself at the deepest level of his being, the point at which he most really is. Yet the next phrase, "a dream," connotes unreality. There is an apparent contradiction between the two ideas. But perhaps what he is saying is that the quintessential self which he perceives in the darkness of his grief can only be faced and apprehended as reality momentarily. There is an immediate retreat from it, a dismissal of the experience as a dream. The lines recall Eliot's "Human kind cannot bear very much reality."
In Part IV, Spender returns to the tree image which dominates Part II.

Already you are beginning to become
Fallen tree-trunk with sun-sculptured limbs
In a perspective of dead branches and dry bones
Encircled by encroaching monumental stones.

No longer does the tree put forth green shoots as it did in the earlier section. No longer does the dying woman smile. The remorseless disease takes its victorious course.

Those that begin to cease to be your eyes
Are flowers whose petals fade and honey dries
Crowded over with end of summer butterflies.

In the closing lines of this part, there is a quiet acceptance of the unquiet terror of imminent death. The language here is beautifully controlled, the reference to the Eumenides being allowed to carry the emotional thrust of the stanza.

Evening brings the opening of the windows.
Now your last sunset throws
Shadows from the roots of trees
Thrusting hounds it unleashes.
In the sky fades the cinder of a rose.
The Eumenides strain forwards.
The pack of night stretches towards us.

Turning away from direct address to Margaret, Spender in Part V examines the nature of love. He begins by rejecting the erotic as the ultimate expression of love.

The final act of love
Is not of dear and dear
Blue-bird-shell eye pink-sea-shell ear
Dove twining neck with dove
In the succeeding stanzas he suggests that the lover must undergo a kind of emotional dark night when all illusion born of sexual considerations is stripped away by suffering before he can experience the full validity of love.

Oh no, it is the world-storm fruit
Sperm of tangling distress,
Mouth raging in the wilderness,
Fingernail tearing at dry root.

The deprived, fanatic lover
Naked in the desert
Of all except his heart
In his abandon must cover

With wild lips and torn hands
With blanket made from his own hair
With comfort made from his despair
The sexless corpse laid in the sands.

The words wilderness, dry, naked, desert, sands, all suggest the aridity which must succeed the blue and pink "prettiness" of feeling which he referred to in the first stanza. Nowhere in Spender's work is one more conscious than in this section of the elegy of a language chosen inevitably to express a deeply felt experience. What he is actually doing, of course, is linking the concepts of love and death, and holding that only the lover who has looked resolutely at death can know the full dimension of his own emotion.

He pursues that narrow path
Where the cheek leads to the skull
And the skull into spaces, full
Of lilies, and death.

As with the saints ("Dazed, he finds himself among/ Saints who slept with hideous sins"), the experience of suffering and the
contemplation of death lead to an enlarged understanding of love, an expansion of the heart to universal limits.

'Now we assume this coarseness
Of loved and loving bone
Where all are all and all alone
And to love means to bless
Everything and everyone.'

One is not often tempted to refer to Spender as a metaphysical poet; yet this section of the poem, which could stand very well on its own as an examination of the transition from eros to agape, gives moving expression to a supra-sensual experience.

The final section of the elegy is addressed to Humphrey Spender, Margaret's husband and Spender's "Dearest and nearest brother." Although he says "I bring no consolation," this section of the poem takes a resolutely positive attitude towards Margaret's death. He suggests first of all that death dissolves the ambivalence of feeling that we have towards the living.

Yet those we lose, we learn
With singleness to love:
Regret stronger than passion holds
Her the times remove:

He goes on to extend the somewhat hollow comfort that the person who loses a loved one through death is more fortunate than the person who is shackled in life to someone he doesn't love. The prosiness of this stanza reflects the commonplaceness of the thought:

Better in death to know
The happiness we lose
Than die in life in meaningless
Misery of those
Who lie beside chosen
Companions they never chose.

Spender then recovers beautifully, giving effective expression
to his belief that grief can compel creative thought. The last
two lines of this stanza are perhaps the loveliest in the poem.

Orpheus, maker of music,
Clasped his pale bride
Upon that terrible river
Of those who have died;
Then of his poems the uttermost
Laurel sprang from his side.

Another flower image, this time one of resurrection, concludes
the following stanza.

When your red eyes follow
Her body dazed and hurt
Under the torrid mirage
Of delirious desert,
Her breasts break with white lilies,
Her eyes with Margaret.

The last lines suggest with admirable concision a personality so
intense that it is inconceivable to think of it succumbing
finally to death.

The final stanza of the elegy makes explicit Spender's
belief that Margaret's defeat by death is only a temporary one.

He again uses the color white to symbolize resurrection:

As she will live who, candle-lit
Floats upon her final breath
The ceiling of the frosty night
And her high room beneath
Wearing not like destruction, but
Like a white dress, her death.
It may seem to some like desecration to mention Spender in the same breath with Milton. Yet despite the gap which separates him from Milton's grandeur, there is a sense in which his elegy is a more satisfying one that "Lydidas." It gives us a double characterization. Margaret's valor and unconquerableness come through with great clarity. She solicits our pity, but much more our respect. And Spender himself can be "experienced," working through the problems of love and death without the benefit of any orthodox belief. He isn't in the position of the believer who can accept death because he subscribes intellectually to a dogma on immortality. Rather he submits himself humbly to the experience of a particular death and existentially confronts the reality that there is a force in man which is undying. Such testimony is precious in an age of unbelief.

So too are the insights which he gives us into love. They are neither profound nor original, but we recognize them as having a universality born of their honesty and simplicity. Despite the fact that he moves at ease in the international intellectual community, Spender has never let himself be tarnished with a false sophistication. He reports what he has experienced with a child's candor and directness. His
emotional encounters with men and women have been an exploration of reality, and he has been generous enough to share that exploration with his readers.
Despite the intentness of his introspection, Spender has resolutely turned his gaze outward in his search for meaning and for a sense of reality. He has surveyed the landscape of an industrial, war-torn civilization and has attempted to discover some channel which would relate his private experiences with the great public issues of the day. He says that while "on the one hand, I wished to plunge deep into the sources of childhood and accept myself, on the other I wished to attach myself to outward things."\(^1\)

He was of course influenced in his determination to get outside himself by his association with Auden at Oxford. As Hugh Alden Nelson has clearly illustrated, the talents of Spender, Day Lewis and Auden were very different.\(^2\) This has not prevented critics from referring to them as members of a group or school. The poets themselves have been at pains to refute this idea. Spender stresses the difference among the three by

\(^{1}\text{Stephen Spender, World Within World (London, 1951), p. 256.}\)

saying that Auden was an intellectual poet, Day Lewis was a traditional follower of the Georgians, and he himself was an autobiographer "restlessly searching for forms in which to express the stages of my development." ³ And Day Lewis says:

In the sense of a concerted effort by a group of poets to impress themselves upon the public, to write differently from their predecessors or about different subjects, it was not a movement at all. Though Auden, Spender, MacNeice and I have all known each other personally since the mid-Thirties, each of us had not even met all three others till after the publication of New Signatures in 1932, while it was only in 1947 that Auden, Spender and I found ourselves together for the first time in one room. We did not know we were a movement until the critics told us that we were. ⁴

Nevertheless, Spender did enter into Auden's orbit while the two were at Oxford and the association marked a turning point in the younger poet's development. "Until I met Auden," he says, "my idea of poetry remained that of a separate poetic world apart from the real world." ⁵ What he absorbed from Auden was a determination to write about the contemporary scene in a contemporary idiom. Though it would have been a violation of his own nature for him to take on the detached, clinical attitude of Auden, the latter's counsel provided a needed corrective for Spender's tendency toward an excessive subjectivity.

⁵Spender, World Within World, p. 94.
He told me that the subject of a poem was only the peg on which to hang the poetry. A poet was a kind of chemist who mixed his poems out of words, whilst remaining detached from his own feelings. Feelings and emotional experiences were only the occasion which precipitated into the mind the idea of a poem. When this had been suggested he arranged words into patterns with a mind whose aim was not to express a feeling, but to concentrate on the best arrangement that could be derived from the occasion.  

The effects of this emphasis on objectivity are apparent in several of Spender's best-known early poems, such as "The Express," "The Pylons," and "The Landscape near an Aerodrome," all written in the early Thirties. In all of these, the subject is the contemporary scene; the poet himself remains discreetly in the background. These poems are not merely objective descriptions, however. Each of them "says" something.

The blunt exclamation of the pylons, for instance, is contrasted with the understatement of the countryside which they have invaded.

The secret of these hills was stone, and cottages Of that stone made, And crumbling roads That turned on sudden hidden villages.

Now over these small hills, they have built the concrete That trails black wire; Pylons, those pillars Bare like nude giant girls that have no secret.

The diction of the first two stanzas seems to indicate that the blatant presence of the pylons is objectionable to the poet, that he yearns for the secretness and hiddenness of a

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6Ibid., p. 51.
non-industrialized landscape, and to some extent that is
probably true. But the last stanza makes it clear that the
pylons are welcomed in so far as they are a symbol of progress.

This dwarfs our emerald country by its trek
So tall with prophecy:
Dreaming of cities
Where often clouds shall lean their swan-white neck. 7

More idealized symbols of progress are the airliner in "The
Landscape near an Aerodrome," which is described as "More
beautiful and soft than any moth" 8 and the locomotive in "The
Express":

Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced,
Wrapt in her music no-bird song, no, nor bough
Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal. 9

Spender's approach to poetry is a highly moral one. He is
an "engaged" writer, although in recent years his poetry has
tended to be personal rather than social. In the Thirties,
however, when he first came to prominence, he unequivocally
aligned himself and his work with the fortunes of the laboring
class. In Forward from Liberalism, a book-length essay
published in 1937 in which he presents his political credo, he
writes:

And the artist, I believe, will fight on the side
of the workers, because he wishes to bridge the gulf
between his mental surroundings and the actual

7 Stephen Spender, Collected Poems: 1928-1953 (New York,
1955), p. 43.
8 Ibid., p. 41.
9 Ibid., p. 40.
conditions in which the majority of men are made to live, by transforming these conditions; because he wishes to break away from the private worlds of romanticism; because a new age of creative activity can only exist in an environment of peace and social justice; because art must spring, not from the sensibility of a few segregated individuals, but from roots which reach toward the lives of the whole people; because his final goal is an unpolitical age, in which great works of art may be produced.10

Perhaps nowhere does Spender show the relationship between writer and worker more clearly than he does in Vienna, a long poem written in 1934 in which he tries to reconcile his public concerns with his private emotions.

A few words should be said about the political background of the poem. The setting is in the early Thirties when the Socialist and Clerical parties were vying for power in Austria. The Clericalists dominated the governing body of Austria, while the Socialists were in control in Vienna. In 1932, Dollfuss, backed by the Clerical party, became chancellor. He appealed to Mussolini for help against the Nazi party. Mussolini demanded that in return the Socialist party be destroyed. In order to carry out this objective, Dollfuss in February 1934 provoked a revolt by the Viennese Socialists which he then proceeded to crush. Although the Socialists had been promised amnesty, many of their leaders were executed and thousands were sent to concentration camps. Shortly after the Vienna uprising, Dollfuss was assassinated by the Nazis, who assumed control of

the government. They were soon turned out of power by the military arm of the Clerical party and were sent out of Austria.\textsuperscript{11}

Part I of \textit{Vienna}, entitled "Arrival at the City,"\textsuperscript{12} is largely a contemplation on death in life and life in death. As in "Exiles from Their Land, History Their Domicile," Spender seems to say here that it is death which confers meaningful life, but he does not go so far as to imply a personal immortality, as he does in "Elegy for Margaret." There is always a certain vagueness when Spender writes about death. \textit{World Within World} bears out the impression created by his poetry that he is uncertain about the nature of individual survival after death. Yet his belief is clear that the dead, at least certain ones among them, communicate a sense of spiritual reality to the living which living men are unable to do because they are so immersed in the trivial details of daily existence.

The ambiguity of Spender's attitude is brought out in the half-question which opens the poem and which is reiterated throughout.

Whether the man living or the man dying
Whether this man's dead life, or that man's life dying
His real life a fading light his real death a light growing

As in the poetry discussed in Chapter II, Spender uses light as

\textsuperscript{11}Robert M. Raynor, \textit{The Twenty Years' Truce} (London, 1943), pp. 180-83.

a symbol of "being" or significant existence. He goes on to consider "the live dead I live with." These are the ladies who live at his pension and the proprietor of the pension, whom the poet seems to identify with political leaders: "our king and prime minister/ Our wet dream dictator, our people's president."

In this part of the poem, Spender employs snatches of dialogue, much as Eliot does in The Waste Land, to communicate a sense of the unreality of the living. The proprietor seems to be for him a type of bourgeois whose concerns are divorced from the most serious aspects of existence in the twentieth century.

"When I acted
"All through the States--hopped through the chorus girl ranks---. . . .
"How much, how much did that tie cost?
"How much, how much do you think I lost
"What with the war and the inflation and what with our old picturesque estate gone?"

Although Spender softens his satiric picture of the ladies of the pension when he speaks of "their kind gray cropped love prattling/ Amongst diseases," he pulls out all the stops to describe the existence of the proprietor: "this man's dead life stinking, like an open wound decaying." With this kind of non-being, Spender compares the actual approach to death of one who has lived significantly, "his death/ Opening to life like a flower him overarching." One line of his description of this man recalls Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night" and is a reminder that Spender and Thomas, despite their difference in technique, share a passion for life lived at a
high pitch of intensity. Spender describes the hair of the
dying man, "Wild above the wreck, like grass tall on a ruin."
Thomas writes of a "Good man whose . . . frail deeds might have
danced in a green bay" and of "Wild men who caught and sang the
sun in flight."\(^{13}\)

Although Spender's poem does not make clear the dying man's
political complexion, his short story, "Two Deaths," identifies
him as an official of the Socialist party. His hair is
described in the story in diction similar to that used in the
poem: "Above this ruin, his short grey hair bristled vividly,
like a tuft of grass."\(^{14}\) The story makes it clear that Spender
knew very little about the old man. He was simply a patient whom
he saw when he went to visit a friend in the hospital. It was
enough for him to know that the object of his interest was a
Socialist. He was thus involved in the struggle for human
rights, in the fight against tyranny and this, for Spender, gave
to his life a validity which conferred its own immortality. The
old man had grasped reality through his commitment to political
action.

The story brings out Spender's own sense of unreality
because he himself was committed only in sympathy. There was no
question about where his sympathies lay. He was hostile to the

\(^{13}\) Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New York,

\(^{14}\) Stephen Spender, *The Burning Cactus* (London, 1936),
p. 189.
"dictatorial Government" of the Dollfuss regime. Intellectually he was at one with those who strove against it. "This struggle affected me more powerfully than I had imagined any public event could do. Yet I felt completely an outsider." He reasoned that even if he had been like Dr. Meer, a character in the story who "had a finger in every Continental pie," he would not feel less remote. "Yet I still would not be sharing the struggle of the Viennese workers, I would only become a ghost, an abstraction, a starting point." 

It is clear that in Vienna Spender is trying to construct a bridge between his personal experience and public events. Writing of the poem in World Within World he says, "In part this expressed my indignation at the suppression of the Viennese Socialists by Dollfuss, Fey and Starhemberg; but in part also it was concerned with a love relationship. I meant to show that the two experiences were different, though related. For both were intense, emotional and personal, although the one was public, the other private. The validity of the one was dependent on that of the other: for in a world where humanity was trampled on publicly, private affection was also undermined." 

Vienna shows him trying to feel his way to the heart of the political situation and so lessen his own sense of ghostliness.

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15 Ibid., pp. 190-91.  
16 Spender, World Within World, p. 192.
In Chapter II, I called attention to several instances in Spender's poetry where he intimates at once a sense of isolation from and a desire to be a part of, nature. Vienna manifests the same kind of tension, but this time it is political events rather than nature which the poet is concerned with.

We breathe the bandaged air and watch through windows Metal limbs, glass eyes, ourselves frozen on fires. "Windows" suggests a separation between the poet and the activity in the Viennese streets, while "frozen" implies an inability to act purposefully despite the "Fires," the political unrest which seethes outside.

Because of the feeling of guilt which arises out of his sense of apartness from the political scene, the poet attempts to force a synthesis between the world outside and his own emotional life. Force is the appropriate word because as Spender himself admits, the attempt at fusion does not come off. He speaks about the possibility of forgiveness in the political arena:

Unless indeed we stand upon a word, Forgiveness, the brink of a renewing river...

Then, in a labored transition, he goes on to say:

A word, a brink, like the first uttered love. Upon the pulsing throat springs the hot tiger. Instantly released, in joy and sorrow they fall, Escaping the whole world, two separate worlds of one, Writing a new world with their figure 2.

After a few more lines about the lovers, Spender returns to the political reality which confronts the city. No integration
between the personal and the political has been achieved, but
the very failure underlines the tremendous need which exists in
the poet for such a synthesis.

The conclusion of "Arrival at the City" reverts to a
consideration of reality: it consists not in death, not in love,
not in the death-in-life of the bourgeois, but in the Socialist
will to change the conditions of life.

Not love, not death, not the dead living:
But cold cold as "the will to alleviate
"Certain material evils."

Spender describes the present, inheritor of the past represented
by the old ladies and the proprietor of the pension, in terms of
"speechless pavement," "the defeated/ Staring, white canal," and
"the morning, which is a dulled cistern."

Reality belongs to the future, and to those who work to
achieve it.

The live ones are
Those who, going to work early, behold the world's
Utter margin where all is stone and iron,
And wrong. While the dead sleep
The bins are emptied, the streets washed of their dung
The first trucks shunted; and the will emerges
On alteration. Alteration.

Despite a somewhat simplistic effect created by an
uncritical Marxist attitude, Vienna contains individual lines of
highly competent poetry. The conjunction of sense, feeling and
sound in the following lines, for instance, is almost perfect:

The settled mountain, the background to our lives
Slides its burnt slopes, where legend told
Our parents walked with God.
This makes it the more tantalizing that the poem is probably S.pender's most obscure. One of the difficulties in interpretation lies in identifying the "we" who appear in various parts of the poem. In "Arrival at the City," "we" seems to refer to those inhabitants of the city who, like the poet himself, are not committed to political action, are not the workers actually living Vienna's life, but who "watch through windows" the strife between the Socialists and the Dollfuss government.

In Part II, "Parade of the Executive," however, the "we" becomes more difficult to establish. In this part of the poem, there appear in the margins the headings "The Executive," "The Unemployed," and "The Stranger." The first section is marked "The Executive." It opens:

In order to create order, in order
To illustrate the truth that we are your ancestors
Let the generals wear their orders
Let the firemen dress like archdukes let the army
Be only one of six private armies
Let there be processions O let banners
Stream through the streets that anyhow look like pictures
Let no one disagree let Dollfuss
Fey, Stahremberg, the whole bloody lot
Appear frequently, shaking hands at street corners
Looking like bad sculptures of their photographs.

In the first lines, "we" appear to be members of the Dollfuss regime, those who are staging the parade. Yet the attitude toward Dollfuss, Fey and Stahremberg is clearly hostile. The same difficulty occurs in a later section, also marked "The

17Spender, Vienna, pp. 19-25.
Executive," which opens "A fine show we offer on a windy day," again identifying the "we" with the manipulators of the parade. But a description of Fey a few lines later (his "strong white face") is certainly ironic as is the description of Dollfuss with his daughter, "smiling, smiling." Several lines further on the speakers say of the Dollfuss ministers, "These men we trust," and "The cardinal cheers us with a dash of scarlet." (Spender implicates the Church in the repressive anti-Socialist measures of the Dollfuss regime: he speaks earlier of "gunfire hammered with Holy Ghost.")

Repeated readings of this part of the poem do nothing to dispel the impression that Spender has handled point of view awkwardly. This is not surprising since one of the major weaknesses of his fiction is an inability to sustain a single viewpoint or to handle transitions from one mind to another smoothly and convincingly. Undoubtedly, the poet's intention here was to have "we" represent the pro-Dollfuss point of view, but to present that point of view ironically. The poem would have been immeasurably strengthened if he had succeeded.

Even as it stands, certain segments of "Parade of the Executive" are effective in the overall context of the poem. The following lines, for instance, sustain the questioning tone that is initiated in "Arrival at the City," and help to give a depth beyond its Marxist preoccupations to the poem.
We listen at the walls of wombs. Does life
Contradict us? Life? Life? In oil-tarred pissoirs
(Odourless) amongst cartoons? In back streets,
In rooms with bugs, in courts with sunless flowers
When radio crazily jazzes
And the gross arms of women beat their carpets?

In "Arrival at the City," Spender had identified life with those
who work while "the dead sleep." In the lines just quoted, he
seems to identify life with those parts of the city where the
workers live. Such words as "pissoir," "bugs," "sunless," and
"gross," key the passage and suggest Spender's belief that those
who know intimately the unlovely side of life are in closest
contact with its reality.

The questioning goes on in the next lines, which carry the
implication of an almost mystical exultation among the Socialists,
from which the non-Socialist is shut out:

Why did one dying, among their wounded,
In a dark groaning attic, suddenly sing?

The dramatic juxtaposition of the word "sing" with "dying,"
"wounded," "dark," and "groaning," carries a suggestion of
resurrection after crucifixion, a raising of the spirit over the
oppression of the body. Here as in the case of the dying man in
"Arrival at the City," Spender suggests a vitality among the
Socialists which allows them to triumph over physical death.

One gets the impression that at the time Vienna was written,
Spender would have ranked almost any Socialist among "those who
are truly great." This is a far cry, as we shall see later,
from the cynical attitude expressed in the novelette Engaged in
Writing, written two decades later.
In the final lines of "Parade of the Executive," Spender imagines a stranger, who is apparently a Christ figure ("A stranger's sandalled feet from cool hills") but who is certainly an impartial judge, appearing to answer the question What is wrong?

Would he forgive us?
Would he
Glance at a minister who smiles and smiles
"How now! A rat? Dead for a ducat." Shoot!

The idea of judgment is very important to Spender. He indicates in *World Within World* his belief that every man is subject to a judgment which is not of this world. Here the idea of a figure who suggests Christ passing judgment on Dollfuss (the "minister who smiles and smiles") reinforces the black and white morality of the poem—the suggestion of sanctity which hovers around the Socialists and of damnation which surrounds the anti-Socialists.

In Part III, "The Death of Heroes," the point of view becomes that of the Socialists.

Our fatal unconfidence attempted a bridge
Between revolution and the already providing World.

Here Spender deals explicitly with the outbreak of civil war in Austria in February of 1934. The Socialists, who attempted to defend their position from the housing developments which the city government had built, were put down in a matter of days by the national government. Spender's journalistic instinct

18Ibid., pp. 27-36.
becomes more apparent in this poem than in any of his others.

Some passages read like straight reporting:

First, when the lights failed, our spirit flared up
As a match spirits: then, when they took over the power station
The lights glared, trams budged: our match went out.

Like a good reporter, he quotes an old man whose son was killed in the Goethe Hof, one of the major centers of the fighting in Vienna:

"... I lived with my son and wife
In the Goethe Hof. On that morning
Feb 13, I was pacing my white, loved room
My own, with windows on both sides, high up, like a tower.

... "It was no joke to hear
And see my son lie dead. That was at 12.
There were four more whose dying choked the stairs."

The reportorial tone becomes more pronounced when paragraphs of prose are interjected into the poem:

Those at Florisdorf who bombarded the police station; the firemen who fought, led by Weissel; smuggling of guns and food to our comrades through the sewers; there was fighting underground; also on the pitchy bank of the canal.

But superimposed on the journalistic tone is one of lyric idealism. This becomes clear in the lines quoted above in which the old man speaks in idyllic terms of his living quarters in the housing development built by the Socialists. The whiteness of the room, the height, "like a tower," are symbolic of the happiness which in the poet's view Socialism could provide for men if it were free of the oppression of reactionary forces.
The symbolic importance of the housing is made clear later in the poem:

There were some suffered from the destruction of houses
More than from the death of men: they weep for their houses
That endured enormous wounds, a man's abyss.
So the once sun-flaked walls, our elaborated pride,
Were more our life than any man's one life, though proud.

It is perhaps the conjunction of lyricism with journalism which most clearly stamps the poem with individuality and which gives it its strength. For it does have strength, despite its occasional obscurity and despite its frequent descent to a prosiness which even the intentional journalistic flavor does not justify. For instance, this speech of Wallisch, the Socialist leader, does not seem to be imagined vividly enough to be successfully integrated into the fabric of the poem:

"At the age of 11 I became a mason's apprentice
"I was exploited even as a child
"At 16 I became an assistant and at 17
"I made my travels in Austria and Germany
"And saw oppression of the workers."

But the lyric tone constantly reasserts itself:

There are some flowers spring in our memory
There are some birds that cut the bare sky.
We in prison meditate much on the rare gentian
Are terrible in our envy of the beasts' freedom
Become dangerous as birds, as flowers.

The reaction to Wallisch's death is also described in compelling language:

After, Wallisch was a word buried
In unmarked ground: but walls have ears and mouths
That uttered us his grave.
In passages like these, Spender seems most at home, for through the power of his imagination, he has identified himself with the workers, an identification which seems to be essential to allay his sense of guilt for his own bourgeois background and his inherited money. Now he observes the Socialist cause not "through windows" but from its own heart. And despite one's attitude toward his political position, it must be admitted that his social passion comes through, at least intermittently, in poetically valid terms. It is unfortunate that here, as in "Elegy for Margaret," he sometimes mars his effects by a use of awkward and forced rhyme. An unintentionally ludicrous effect is created, for instance, when he says:

The blacklegs jeered
But in their heart I have reason to believe that even the worst cheered.

Almost as unadroit is the rhyme with which he closes Part III. He is speaking of those Socialists who survived the February revolution.

Constructing cells, ignorant of their leaders, assuming roles;
They change death's signal honour for a life of moles.

Part IV, "Analysis and Statement,"¹⁹ though far from lucid, is important to any study of Spender for here the poet makes his most deliberate attempt to fuse all of his approaches to reality: the ego, political vision, love, poetry. It is in one sense an analysis of despair, in another a statement of hope.

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 37-43.
As such, it is an admirable attempt to weigh the dark and the bright aspects of life and to penetrate to some central meaning. "Analysis and Statement" opens with the presentation of five voices; these are intended to present various aspects of the poet's own mind. The first exalts the understanding because of its visionary quality which confers on man a dignity which all his suffering and ignobility cannot cancel.

"Our understanding is a recognizable saviour
"Forever a vision, beneath wounds, also beneath
"Our least excusable behaviour."

One is reminded of "An 'I' can never be great man," where "central I" is seen to be separate from all the other I's that make up the personality. Here the understanding seems to hold the place of central I. It is a comforting reminder Spender presents us with (and one which he himself with his obsessive sense of guilt must have found consoling) that an intellectual apprehension of truth has a validity of its own, even when we are most discouraged about our ability to act in conformity with that apprehension.

The second voice exalts not the understanding but the eye. The individual takes on importance as a recording instrument on which experience, and hence reality, registers. Here we see an anticipation of the idea Spender develops in "Explorations."

"The immeasurable eye an instant wide
"That feeds on fields of white and separates
"The countless dark: I value its
"Album of snaps."
The significance of the ego is thus reaffirmed in one of Spender's most clearly political poems. So too is the importance of love. The third voice begins:

"I love a friend
Who is external."

The externality is meaningful because it helps to validate the poet's experience. His love, in other words, is not simply a projection of himself, but represents a concrete otherness.

It is a different kind of other that the fourth voice is preoccupied with. The identity of the "they" in this section is not made clear, although it is manifest that "they" have somehow injured the poet.

"It is that my devotion they have spilled
And bled my veins of trust across their sport."

But he is intent on forgiveness because his love is universal. In speaking of "them" and their reaction to him, Spender introduces the idea of his poetry. Despite "their lack of understanding," they will inevitably be affected by what he has written, which becomes a crystallization of what he has willed.

"For my acts are explicit, and they will wonder
"At images left and so completely willed.
"These will disturb like a minor illness;
"They will recall me as Unhappiness."

The last voice deals with the impurity of motive that marks human life. The poet speaks of the fact that "men live from admiration." Because of the fact that they are cut off from reality "Their happiness itself becomes a trick."
There is evidence in the last part of the poem that the poet's experience in Vienna has had spiritual repercussions in his life. He uses the desert as a symbol of aridity, implying that he has been stripped of his youthful illusions about the triumph of Socialism, and that he is being drawn into the mystery and emptiness of spiritual purgation.

Beneath the lower ribs and the navel
I hold the desert, dividing my health
With five voices. As I grow older
Imaging the sands' outward empty form
My journeys grow wider,
Nearer and nearer to Africa.

Africa suggests the unknown, the mysterious. This idea is picked up a few lines further on with a reference to "my travels through an unknown mental country" where "The bare slopes presupposed despair."

But a note of hope is sounded through the reintroduction of the figure of the stranger. The impression that he is Christ is strengthened by such lines as "He not soothing us with doom. Nor blessing / Like love, his saints." Among his saints are those "who sell all/ Give to their first prostitute." The implication is that if Christ were to walk the streets of Vienna, He would not be allied with the official Christian church. He would side rather with those Socialists who, for Spender, were the real saints, living, instead of preaching, a full Christian life.

Those burrowing beneath frontier, shot as spies because Sensitive to new contours; those building insect cells Beneath the monstrous shell of ruins; altering
The conformation of masses, that at last conjoin
Accomplished in justice to reject a husk.
Their walls already rest upon their dead, on Wallisch
Trapped in the mountains, on Weisel the engineer. . .
On all the others. These are our ancestors.

With these lines the poem closes, emphasizing the link
between living and dead and suggesting that as long as these
martyrs endure in the memory of their friends and followers
there will be hope for the future.

Vienna revolves around paradoxes—two in particular. The
first is that the dead are more truly alive than the living; the
second is that the judgment of God will be on the side of those
who oppose the established Christian church. These themes
override in significance Spender’s attempt to link his personal
emotional involvement with the Socialist struggle.

But there is a link between Spender’s political and
personal poetry that he has never made explicit, but which
forces itself on the reader’s attention when he reads Vienna in
conjunction with “Elegy for Margaret.” That is the imagery of
the spiritual desert which occurs in both poems. An experience
of negation, succeeding youthful optimism about love and
politics, emerges as a kind of corridor which must be traveled
in order to reach the doorway to reality.

The intense desire for social justice which is manifested
in Vienna had its roots in Spender’s childhood. In “My parents
kept me from children who were rough,”20 we are given the

picture of a youngster of middle class background longing to make friends with underprivileged children, but rejected by them because he was not one of them. And in The God that Failed he indicates that the chain of events that led to his joining the Communist Party began when he was a child.

What had impressed me most in the gospels was that all men are equal in the eyes of God, and that the riches of the few are an injustice to the many. My sense of the equality of men was based not so much on an awareness of the masses as on loneliness. I can remember lying awake at night thinking of this human condition in which everyone living, without the asking, is thrust upon the earth, where he is enclosed with himself, a stranger to the rest of humanity, needing love and facing his own death. Since to be born is to be Robinson Crusoe cast up by elemental powers upon an island, how unjust it seems that all men are not free to share what nature offers here; that there should be men and women who are not permitted to explore the world into which they are born, but who are throughout their lives sealed into leaden slums as into living tombs. It seemed to me as it still seems—that the unique condition of each person within life outweighs the considerations which justify class and privilege.21

In the Thirties, Spender saw Communism as the answer to the inequities of life. Although he was aware of some of the graver shortcomings of the Communist system, he told himself that the crimes of capitalism were much greater.22 And he was incredibly optimistic about the situation in Russia. He admitted in Forward from Liberalism that the lack of Habeas Corpus and of "a fair and equal trial within a reasonable time after arrest"23

22 Ibid., p. 238.
23 Spender, Forward from Liberalism, p. 274.
were serious drawbacks, but he pictured the typical Russian as enjoying great freedom "to express his opinions, vote, criticize, learn, understand." And he says about the Soviet constitution that it "has discovered the inviolable material basis of freedom which consists of economic freedom and the basic, equal rights of work, leisure and security in illness and old age. Having discovered what is essential to freedom, the Soviet state quite rightly insists that this shall not be disputed; no one is 'free' to preach against freedom, to uphold private enterprise or exploitation of man by man. Freedom is not a joke to be turned against those who believe in it."

This kind of doublethink seems worthy of 1984, but there is no doubt that Spender was quite sincere about it at the time Forward from Liberalism was published in 1937. It was this highly idealized view of Communism that allowed him to write Trial of a Judge, which appeared in the following year.

Trial of a Judge is Spender's attempt at the dramatic form. The plot is simple. Petra, a young Polish Jew and a Communist, is brutally murdered by a group of five Fascists. The judge tries the latter, finds them guilty and sentences them to death. Shortly after this, he tries three Communists and, although he is sympathetic with them, he is forced to give them the death sentence, too. They had been carrying arms illegally and for this crime the death sentence is mandatory.

\[24\] Ibid., p. 272.
\[25\] Ibid., p. 275.
The judge is visited by Hummeldorf, a highly placed member of the government, and told that he must reprieve the Fascists. When he suggests that the three Communists should then be pardoned, too, he is told that only the death of the Communists and the reprieve of the Fascists can forestall a revolution in which the Fascists would triumph. Urged by his wife and Hummeldorf, the judge gives in:

I here bury my own will and cancel
My mystical hand and my unbiased sight.
I reprieve Petra's murderers and suffer those to die
Whom the time kills. Thus we who are ghosts
Survive amongst the new and potent living
To read by clearer and clearer signs
That day long past on which we died. 26

The judge reverses himself again, however, after Petra's younger brother has been shot by the Fascists. He withdraws his reprieve of Petra's murderers and he promises the Communists a new trial. The judge is relieved of his office and is turned over to the Fascists he had condemned to be tried by them. He is found guilty of treason and executed. The last act is largely a debate between the judge and a Red prisoner as to whether the Communists should use violence against the Fascists. This debate is undoubtedly an externalizing of a problem which haunted Spender. Did the horrors committed in the name of politics in the Twentieth Century make commitment to abstract principle an unaffordable luxury? Was it necessary for every

man who rejected Fascist violence to accept the violence of the Communists? Was devotion to impartial truth a refuge open only to cowards?

Because his own answer to each of these questions was no, Spender broke with the Communist Party shortly after he joined it in 1937. The problem is one that has dramatic potential, but that potential is not realized in Trial of a Judge. One important reason for this is the melodramatic characterization. The Communists are pictured in highly idealized terms, much as Spender had pictured the Socialists in Vienna. Although Petra is dead before the play begins, he is given a kind of secular canonization by various characters.

The Fourth Black Prisoner says of him:

To judge from books and papers spread around, Petra was like an angel, without food Existing singly from his light of mind. 27

The Fifth Black Prisoner makes him a Christ figure:

But we are slayers, springing Upon the weak from topmost branches, Killing the akapi, the kid, the pascal lamb. 28

His mother sees him as the ideal son:

We went to bed early, for my son was a good son Causing me no anxiety with late hours but staying at home; Going to rest at dark and rising to read by the dawn. He was what you might call a studious one. 29

27 Ibid., p. 12.
28 Ibid., p. 13.
29 Ibid., p. 16.
Later she says, "He was mature and gentle, like a girl." 30

Petra's brother also pictures him in idealized terms:

His living was one word
Influencing surrounding speech
Of a crowd's life, printless until
The words of all this time are frozen
By all our deaths into the winter library
Where life continually flows into books. 31

The brother himself shares Petra's nobility.

I must be poor.
To cross that frontier all I need declare
Is I have nothing and I give my life
To those with nothing but their lives. 32

The judge's wife on the other hand is a caricature of the embittered, bloodthirsty woman. She is also a symbol of German chauvinism.

I hate
this younger generation who are discontented, too lazy to work, ungrateful to those who slave day and night for them. . . . I wish that there would be another war, like a great bonfire on which to cast these faggots. 33

She sides with Petra's murderers because they were willing to lose their lives in order to rid the country of a rat. 34

In the characterization of the judge himself there is greater subtlety. The judge represents those human beings who

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30 Ibid., p. 17.
31 Ibid., p. 18.
32 Ibid., p. 21.
33 Ibid., p. 30.
34 Ibid., p. 31.
clinging to some absolute (in his case, the law) and find in it comfort and assurance for years. Suddenly it is shown to be hollow and consequently all of life becomes meaningless. The judge is used by Spender to question whether the luxury of disinterestedness can be indulged by modern man. Must he choose sides in order to stand against the greater evil, even if he has to associate himself with violence in order to do it?

As Justin Replogle has observed, Spender's attitude towards the judge is ambivalent. Yet, Replogle goes on to say, "one must assume that in the end the play is intended to suggest that despite the attractiveness of the judge his position is untenable. . . . The play shows that the only alternatives are Fascism and Communism."35

It is possible to see the play in another light, though. Some of the judge's speeches are persuasive enough to remain in the audience's mind despite the fact that the chorus of Red prisoners has the last word. When he is relieved of his judicial powers by Hummeldorf, the judge laments his powerlessness.

How we are nothing: our lives drop like mummies Of the Egyptian past exposed to the real time.

Petra's fiancee turns on him:

Yes! Be like Christ!
Stand there, time's martyr, with your thin
Sexless body stripped, and the protruding ribs
Scarred on your side like the weals of whips.
Let your selfpitying eyes sink
Deep into their bone wells and stare
At the world's tragedy played out in that one skull.
Let the iron outward spear
Knock at your heart in vain; your answer is the same
To those who kill you, as that you gave my lover
--Blood and water and death!36

The judge condemns himself for his lapse but Petra's fiancee
refuses to let him find refuge in an emotional remorse:

No, no, you are not that mad and glittering snowman
Which you imagine. Simply, you are mistaken.
It is your misfortune, for which we pity you,
That being too honest for one time, you lacked strength
To be born into another.37

In the lines just quoted, the fiancee appears to serve as
Spender's raisonner. Yet further on, the judge seems to take
over that role. In his argument with the Communists he is given
the more compelling lines. He laments that when the Communists

Those who are now oppressed with be the oppressors,
The oppressors the oppressed. For your
World and theirs exist to maintain their worlds
And truth becomes the slave of the arrangements
Whilst abstract reasoning is treated as a traitor
Sniped at by necessity.38

36 Spender, Trial of a Judge, p. 62.
37 Ibid., p. 82.
38 Ibid., p. 83.
Here abstract reasoning, of which the judge is an incarnation, is clearly intended to have the sympathy of the audience.

Certain phrases which the judge uses are reminiscent of Spender's own thought. The word centre, for instance, which Spender frequently uses to suggest validity or reality, recurs in the judge's speeches:

Yet I believe
That if we reject the violence
Which they use, we coil
At least within ourselves, that life
Which grows at last into a world.
Then, from the impregnable centre
Of what we are, we answer
Their injustice with justice, their running
Terroristic lie with fixed truth.
Our single and simple being
Will be the terrible angel
And white whiteness which though they deny
Betray even their convoluted darkness.
But if we use their methods
Of lies and hate, then we betray
The achievement in ourselves; our truth
Becomes the prisoner of necessity
Equally with their untruth, ourselves
Their stone and stupid opposite.39

The judge sounds even more like a mouthpiece for Spender when he refers to judgment, for one of the poet's strongest beliefs is that there is a power somewhere which judges good and evil. The judge might be Spender himself speaking when he says:

And I believe
That in our acts we are responsible
Before a final judgment, whether indeed
Those legends of belief which made
The traditional sky fluid with prayer
Freeze time suddenly into a single crystal

39Ibid., p. 85.
Where history is transparent; or whether
Each generation is the outpost
Of a total spiritual territory
And defeats, even of necessity,
Are defeats indeed: for they transmit
The violence and hatred which we used
And the children's faces which we breed
Grow into those enemy faces.
We gave our lives to kill.40

The diction in the following lines is a clue to Spender's attitude toward the judge, for the concept of the centre recurs and the words being and fire strongly recall "I think continually of those who are truly great." The judge says:

The agony breaks through my veins
Which blaze till all my being
Has blossomed in a single flower of fire
Where I am at the centre of the sky.41

Because he has placed more emphasis on being than on acting, he has achieved an experience of reality which has caught him up and lifted him at least momentarily to the heart of a mysterious truth. The concluding lines of "I think continually" use similar language:

The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun, they traveled a short while towards the sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.42

One might expect after reading Vienna and Trial of a Judge that Spender's war poetry would raise to heroic stature those

40 Ibid., pp. 85-86.
41 Ibid., p. 88.
42 Spender, Collected Poems, p. 32.
who had taken up arms against Fascism. This is not the case. The poetry for the most part is quiet and lacking in dramatics of any kind.

In poems about the Spanish Civil War, written between 1936 and 1939, Spender reveals not so much the savage anger of a Wilfred Owen as an overwhelming sadness that men have put all the resources of their humanity to such hideous use. The poems are non-partisan, despite the fact that Spender was violently opposed to Franco. They reveal the dimension of the human tragedy that is war and they defy the reader to dismiss or to accept (which is the real danger) any single death as a statistic.

In three of the poems, Spender uses the olive tree as a symbol of that half of existence that is life- and joy-giving and that makes the death-dealing other half seem like a madman's dream. "A Stopwatch and an Ordnance Map" uses the refrain

All under the olive trees to close each stanza.

A stopwatch and an ordnance map.
And the bones are fixed at five
Under the moon's timelessness;
But another who lives on
Wears within his heart for ever
Space split open by the bullet
All under the olive trees.43

The effect here and in the other poems in which the same symbol is used is also to suggest the indifference of nature to the individual tragedy for which war is responsible. Spender

43Ibid., p. 87.
focuses on the individual to point up the apparently mindless and meaningless way that he becomes a victim of the war machine.

There is "The Coward," for instance:

He saw the flagship at the quay,
His mother's care, his lover's kiss,
The white accompaniment of spray,
Lead to the bullet and to this.
Flesh, bone, muscles, eyes,
Built in their noble tower of lies,
Scattered on the icy breeze
Him their false promises betrayed.
All the visions in one instant
Changed to this fixed continual present
Under the grey olive trees.\textsuperscript{44}

Or the young boy in "Ultima Ratio Regum":

The guns spell money's ultimate reason
In letters of lead on the Spring hillside.
But the boy lying dead under the olive trees
Was too young and too silly
To have been notable to their important eye.
He was a better target for a kiss.

The last stanza employs a quiet irony which is as effective in its way as the explosive fury of a poet like Owen.

Consider his life which was valueless
In terms of employment, hotel ledgers, news files.
Consider. One bullet in ten thousand kills a man.
Ask. Was so much expenditure justified
On the death of one so young, and so silly
Lying under the olive trees, \(0\) world, \(0\) death?\textsuperscript{45}

Implicit in all of these poems seems to be the question: which is real, the olive trees or the hideous human tragedy which they impassively witness? Perhaps more fundamentally, can there be a reality which encompasses both, or must man suffer forever from

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 89.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., pp. 85-86.
split vision, seeing now the olive tree, now human agony, but never able to fuse the two into a meaningful vision of the real.

It is not surprising to find in his later war poems, those written about World War II between 1940 and 1944, recurring religious imagery. Most of it is used negatively, but the very fact that it does recur suggests a painful awareness of the void that has been left in his life and thought by the loss of his childhood's faith. "The War God," for instance, opens with an image of the Holy Spirit.

Why cannot the one good
Benevolent feasible
Final dove, descend?

The poem goes on to answer the question by saying that the defeated inevitably dream of retribution, the seed of new wars. And men are alone in the endless cycle of hatred which this sets up. Modern man can no longer look to a superior power to help him out of his difficulties.

The world is the world
And not the slain
Nor the slayer, forgive.
There's no heaven above
To make passionate histories
End with endless love.
Yet under wild seas
Of chafing despairs
Love's need does not cease. 46

Yet the poem taken as a whole is not despairing, because there is a suggestion that if the problem is recognized it can be attacked. There is no defiant shaking of a fist at a God who

46 Ibid., pp. 115-16.
refuses to intervene in the affairs of men. Rather, the poet
is placing the responsibility for the condition man finds
himself in squarely on his own shoulders. He does not go so far
as to say "We must love one another or die" but this is clearly
what he implies. The dove cannot descend while man insists on
hating.

The same emphasis concludes "Air Raid Across the Bay at
Plymouth." It is not Hardy's unwee'ting deity but man himself
who is the villain.

Round the coast, the waves
Chuck in between rocks.
In the fields the corn
Sways, with metallic clicks.
Man hammers nails in Man,
High on his crucifix. 47

But his own inhumanity is only one half of modern man's
predicament. The other is his divorce from traditional faith,
as the concluding lines of "June 1940" attest.

But the ghost of one who was young ancl died,
In the cross-fire of two wars, through the faint
leaves sighed:

"I am cold as a cold world alone
Voyaging through space without faith or aim
And no Star whose rays point a Cross to believe in,
And an endless, empty need to atone." 48

The idea of atonement comes up again in the novelette
Engaged in Writing, which Spender published in 1958. It shows a
major shift away from his earlier political works both in tone

47 Ibid., p. 118.
48 Ibid., p. 121.
and in substance. The kind of superhuman perfection with which Spender endowed Socialist and Communist in Vienna and Trial of a Judge is nowhere in evidence here. All the characters, including the central figure, Olim Asphalt, are treated with heavy irony.

The scene of the novelette is Venice, where a conference of European intellectuals of the Left has been called, drawing its participants from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Olim Asphalt attends as a representative of LITUNO, a literary and cultural suborgan or the UN. Like Geoffrey Brand in The Backward Son and Richard Birney in "By the Lake," he is described as self-hating, guilt-ridden, subject to feelings of persecution, pathetically eager to be accepted by his colleagues. But he also has a social conscience which has been stripped of its illusions that Communists are a superior breed of people and that their noble aims excuse their crimes against humanity. At the opening of the story, he is preoccupied with Kurschev's denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress. Despite his revulsion from the crimes of Stalin, however, he still does not feel for him the intense hatred that he had felt for Hitler.

He started up on some frantic sums with corpses: seven million incinerated Jews against a great many more millions in slave camps or executed (but the trouble is that one doesn't ever know how many sands there are on the shore. And slave camps is itself the kind of rhetorical phrase one is ashamed to use.) Finally one had to dismiss all this reality as
unreal, because it was too vastly real to contemplate. And if one entered into it one would be annihilated.49

He attempts to escape in thought from the hideous political realities of modern times by considering the more personal side of the coin of twentieth century existence.

The train took up the rhythm and offered reality on sleepers: la douceur de vivre, love affairs, America. One had to go on, improvising happiness from day to day, postponing doom by ignoring events that, happening over the rim of the horizon, were inconceivable here. Inconceivable. Unreal. That was better.50

Yet he cannot long maintain, even to himself, the fiction that the grim political crimes of this century are unreal. He cannot even dodge his responsibility to take sides by equating the evils of East and West. For Olim, as for Spender himself, the need to commit himself to the most suffering segment of humanity is paramount.

Engagement! The body, that is the rub, because the flesh is weak, and cannot sustain the strong spirit. Engagement in this time is to hurl myself into battles on the side of the lesser, against the greater evil; to be starved with the starving, burned with the burning; shovelled into gas ovens and sent wandering over deserts; put in cattle trucks with the deported; driven across borders with the refugees. Engagement is to lose my freedom, and to find it again; to sacrifice my life even, and yet retain my sensibility, my nerves, my art; to be a skeleton, a cinder, yet to witness and create.51


50 Ibid., p. 11.

51 Ibid., pp. 61-62.
But he finds himself unable to follow his desires. As an intellectual observing other intellectuals, he is oppressed by his impotence to make common cause with the victims of political injustice.

Engagement! He boiled, he burned, he felt hungry and parched. For an authentic moment, he really felt engaged. (But of course, he was just sitting here; he wasn't.) If one were engaged in writing here, for example. How could one be engaged to describe this scene, describe these shadow men sitting round this table?

... One would have to discover, one would have invent some point of individual sensibility, one of us here, connected electrically with that world of the damned: a pure receiver of that reality. Tormented, destroyed, terrified, conscious, and in the centre of his abjectness, heroically full of creation. 52

Suffering is still the ultimate touchstone of reality for Spender. What bothers him about the "shadow men" at the conference is that they seem to be playing intellectual games that are far removed from the authentic needs of men for freedom from persecution. He treats the participants and the meeting itself with a degree of cynicism which shows how far he has come from the adulation of political heroes in earlier works. There is, for instance, his description of the Russian delegates: "The grey fatigue of Pobedin's face looked mysterious, Korovin's expression of retarded puberty ardent, whilst the ebullient Pomyalov combined the audacity of a bandit with the authority of a somewhat sinister policeman, and the jollity of a gypsy." 53

52 Ibid., p. 62.
53 Ibid., p. 35.
He also gives a satiric account of an Italian anti-Fascist movie which is shown to the delegates. "This film all took place in . . . grey rooms and grey streets, with workers, and uniforms, and speeches, and violence. The whole mythology was so familiar, in a language difficult to follow, that after a time Olim wearied. . . ." 54

Olim watches the reaction to the movie of an English scientist, Dunstan Curlew, who has accepted the Stalinist crimes. Tears stream from Curlew's eyes when he sees the anti-Fascist hero's bicycle thrown on a bonfire by the Fascists. Olim asks another English delegate, Alex Merton, "How is it that a person who reproaches Sereno for mentioning tens of thousands of real victims, can be so moved by fictitious suffering?"

"He cares for what he sees enacted in front of his eyes. What he hears spoken about remains an abstraction."

"But he accepts the crimes of Stalin in the name of an abstraction--progress, the hypothetical happiness of people who are unborn."

"All the same, the real acted out incident causes him to suffer profoundly. It might be that which is so dangerous. The dictator doesn't lose his power to weep over a worker's dead child, and as long as he retains this power, everything seems justified to him. Anyway, after all, who cares for what happens to thousands of people one has never seen? Who cares? Do you care? Does anyone? Really! Admit the truth!" 55

But the point is that Olim and Spender do care. One of the causes for Olim's disenchantment with the intellectuals at the

54 Ibid., p. 130.
55 Ibid., p. 131.
conference is that he feels they have dissipated their social passion by pouring it into their books. Literary success, he suggests, dulls a writer's moral acuity. He listens to the Italian novelist Longhi, who speaks of events in his boyhood "before he did that which Olim more and more identified with the Fall--published his first best-seller."56

Earlier in the novelette, Alex Merton had come to a similar conclusion. He speaks of people "who began by being moralists and who then derived from their moral passion a point of view that could be converted into literature, which they then sold to a public. . . . The moment a bureaucracy in the East, or a large reading public in the West, takes over a writer, he loses contact with his reality, which simply becomes one of his personal assets. The doubts and questions attached to his moral being--in which a person's reality lies--have been taken over by his public name."57

One of the interesting aspects of Olim's thought is the surfacing from time to time of an apparently suppressed religious sensibility. We are told at one point, for instance, that "Olim Asphalt believed involuntarily and obsessively in the Last Judgment."58 Later, in a conversation with Alex Merton, he talks about abandoning a political position.

56 Ibid., p. 69.
57 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
58 Ibid., p. 120.
"It isn't a matter of being persuaded that an argument is wrong, but of acting because thousands of people have been murdered."

"Acting. . . acting. . . acting. . . how?. . .

"Well, then, you force me to be idiotic. I have no basis for believing in penitence, and I am a pretty good example of an impenitent myself. But what I really mean is--repenting!"

"You're in all probability perfectly right. Repenting--yes--but how?"

"In some quite unsophisticated way. Going on a pilgrimage or crusade perhaps. Wearing sackcloth and ashes," he laughed, self-parodying.59

Once again the idea is suggested that reality is somehow bound up with suffering and that the person who is free from suffering is cut off from confronting the painful mystery which lies at the heart of life.

The character in the book who seems to be most in touch with reality is the Hungarian delegate, Csongor Botor. And he is in touch with it precisely to the extent that he is in torment. He had been forced by political considerations to denounce the poetry of his best friend, who was subsequently arrested and imprisoned. That experience, together with the loss of freedom which he and his countrymen have suffered, has given him an apprehension of reality that is different from that of any of the other delegates. At one point, Botor is listening to a speech, his thoughts, which claim to be absolute truth, are making.

... each real moment claims that there is no other moment apart from its terrible self. It rages at the idea that anything else could be more

59Ibid., p. 129.
appallingly real. Horror is envious. In your countries, gentlemen, there is Remembrance of Things Past, in our countries there are moments with gnashing teeth that tear you apart, devour you into themselves. For the sake of the sacred truth, I implore you, gentlemen, to drop talking about realism, engagement, and the rest. No one has the right to talk about reality who does not live night and day on a diet of the irremediable. 60

Like Olim and Alex Merton, he is distrustful of literature. It acts as a palliative, he thinks, dulling the full impact of life's tragedy. "Yet now he had touched the burning core of reality [his betrayal of his friend], he despised the literature which transformed what acted upon you into what was thinkable. He wanted the word to be the object from which you could not get away. The fire that freezes the hand that feeds it." 61

There is no program for setting the world to rights either stated or implied in Engaged in Writing. Although he doesn't employ the imagery of the spiritual desert here, there is a pervading sense of intellectual aridity and impotence which suggests that Spender has been stripped of still another illusion—that literature can somehow ameliorate the tragedy of the human condition. There has been a marked change in his thought since the time of Vienna, which glorified a political action. Engaged in Writing hints at an almost mystical confrontation of reality in the depths of one's own soul when Olim mentions his need to atone personally for public crimes.

60 Ibid., p. 87.
61 Ibid., p. 147.
Yet Spender is no hermit. The Year of the Young Rebels, published in 1969, shows a sympathetic and optimistic interest in the attempts of young radicals to reshape the world. What has perhaps remained most constant in his attitude towards the world outside is his hatred of a materialism which threatens to swamp man's spiritual ideals. He was and has remained a spokesman for the liberty of the individual conscience and for man's imperative need in both his personal and political relations to undertake the difficult journey away from self and into loving communication with his fellows.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

An attempt has been made in these pages to determine what reality means to Stephen Spender, a poet who has steered a middle course between subscribing to religious orthodoxy on the one hand and succumbing to nihilism on the other. A study of his work reveals a kind of insouciant gallantry in his confrontation of life without the shield of traditional faith or modern cynicism.

In his discussion of other writers it becomes clear that while he has deep romantic sympathies he is wary of the romantic writer's tendency to blur the distinction between objective and subjective reality. He is anxious to preserve the identity of the world outside the writer's mind. This is why he sees Shelley as a more relevant, though not necessarily a greater, poet than Keats. Keats, he suggests, withdrew from the real world and used his imagination as a kind of anodyne for the multifold pain he encountered.

Where Spender is most at one with the Romantics is in his belief that experience and the process of writing about experience are modes of grasping the real which no amount of pure intellection can equal. He is concerned that poetry be
absolutely honest—that each writer render as truthfully as he can the significant circumstances of his passage through life. For this reason he values Hopkins, who had to dislocate the language to say as precisely as he could what his experience of life had been. He values the unadulterated vision of human suffering to be found in the work of Hardy and Owen. And he values perhaps most of all the pioneering work Lawrence did in dealing frankly and openly with sex and the subconscious. For to Spender the subconscious is more real than the conscious and the testimony of the blood more reliable than the testimony of the intellect.

The pure transmission of experience from writer to reader is the almost priestly duty of the artist in Spender's view. Although he makes the negative judgment that Yeats never found a moral subject, he reveres the great Irishman and identifies himself with Yeat's vision of art as being in some sense superior to life.

Poetry, since it is the fruit of man's working at the highest pitch of his consciousness, becomes a vehicle of cognition, crystallizing man's experience of his own ego, of his beloved, and of the great social and political world outside. It is at his own peril that artist withdraws from any of these preoccupations into a "readymade" creed. Spender, of course, acknowledges Eliot's greatness, but he implies that Eliot's religious convictions have dropped a screen between the poet
and his experience of the world. Something immediate, he suggests, has been lost.

Monumental as was Eliot's contribution to English literature, it needs to be complemented, if we are to understand our own times, by the testimony of those who fight their way to truth through a sea of uncertainty from which they never quite emerge. Spender is such a man. And his witness, as he speaks to us of himself, of love, and of political questions, is particularly valuable because it is so simple, so sincere, so lucid. No process of intellectualizing intervenes between writer and reader. The unadorned experience is there to be shared.

The reader feels this sharing most forcefully in Spender's autobiography, World Within World, in his autobiographical fiction, and in the poetry dealing with his childhood and with love. Here there is a greater openness, a greater eagerness to reveal himself to the world than one finds in his political poetry. Some would label the degree of frankness with which he writes about himself as indiscreet, others as egotistical. But Spender obviously believes that one's own mind and heart provide the best laboratories for searching out the truth about all minds and hearts. He presents this paradox: that in exploring what seems most unique about oneself, one sometimes finds the most direct path to the universal.
The individual is important, in Spender's view, not only because he is a microcosm, but also because he is a kind of recording instrument through which an ultimate Reality discovers and proclaims itself. Man's significance lies in the fact that he is an essential partner in the evolutionary onrush; his tragedy in the fact that he is mortal.

But during man's sojourn on earth, there are two ways of penetrating to the heart of reality: one is through personal relationships with men and women; the other is through political involvement. There is in Spender's love poetry both a celebration of the sensual and an implication that the highest and purest form of love is supra-sensual and disinterested. This implication is underlined in his fiction dealing with love.

Some of Spender's most satisfactory lyrics were written about his love relationships with men. There is a suggestion of a more quietly, deeply experienced reality in poems inspired by his second wife. But the poem that speaks most movingly of love, partly because there is no element in it of infatuation or self-seeking, is the elegy written for his sister-in-law, Margaret Spender. Here Spender suggests that the most real core of love is only revealed to the person who has suffered the stripping away of all illusions.

In the elegy, as in his long political poem, Vienna, Spender seeks to integrate his personal and his public concerns. Although he is not completely successful, the effort he makes
illustrates the deep need he felt to reach out in love not only to individual men and women who attracted him, but also to the large segments of humanity who suffered from poverty and political oppression.

From his school days on, Spender despised the Fascist type and mourned over the failure of love and the prevalence of cruelty and hatred. When he was at Oxford, he encountered like-minded men; it was there that he came under the influence of Auden and became acquainted with Day Lewis and MacNeice.

From Auden he learned that poetry was not a separate world cut off from real life and the immediate concerns of men. He came to believe that the writer must ally himself with the workers. In Vienna he reveals his own sense of unreality because he did not take an active part in the Socialist struggle against the Dollfuss government. Yet he was able to use his imagination as a vehicle to identify himself with the workers.

In Trial of a Judge he poses this question: during a time of crisis, can a man devote himself to impartial truth or must he side with the lesser as against the greater evil? Spender seems to answer this question by saying that man must be true to his own conscience, rejecting violence and hatred, whatever their political complexion. By seeking out the truth in his own heart, he makes contact with ultimate reality. But the play only makes this point after having raised the Communist characters to heroic stature.
There are no heroics in Spender's war poetry. He mourns the senseless expenditure of life, the spectacle of man crucifying his fellow man for no valid reason. He focuses on the individual soldier rather than on a panoramic view of war. And in one of the poems, he brings in the idea of atonement.

This concept links his poetry to the novelette *Engaged in Writing*, in which the central figure, Olim Asphalt, confesses a personal need to atone for the Twentieth Century crimes against humanity. The story satirizes intellectuals from both sides of the Iron Curtain. It suggests that they are shadowy figures who lack the vision of reality which only acute suffering can confer.

Spender is a sensitive instrument on which the times have recorded themselves with admirable precision. Despite his deep yearning for a meaningful political commitment, he has refused to lend himself and his talents to propaganda. He writes only what he has actually experienced as true. In his unremitting search for the real, he has explored his own ego, the dimensions of love and art, and the great public questions of the day. He has done this with a candor and simplicity which claim the gratitude of his readers.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Marion King has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

13 May 1970
Date

Signature of Adviser