

## Chapter – IV

### The Middle Phase : New Signatures – The Still Centre.

In 1932 a young enthusiast of modern poetry, Michael Roberts, working with Leonard and Virginia Woolf at their Hogarth Press, put together an anthology of poems by young, recently discovered writers. The key poets were Spender, Auden, Day Lewis, William Empson, John Lehmann, and the American Richard Eberhart. Robert's intention was to survey the imagery of modern life and to develop a new intellectual and imaginative synthesis that would deal positively with the problem of life in the twentieth century. The anthology was a great success, selling out quickly, and had to be reprinted *in a new weeks*. *The book was hailed as a "manifesto of new poetry, and the poets* within its pages found themselves lumped together in the imagination of readers as '*New Signatures Poets*' ". *New Signatures* spawned *New Country* in 1933 and John Lehmann's magazine *New Writing*, which unlike the *Left Review* was more interested in literature than in politics.

Spender contributed more poetry to *New Signatures* than any of the other eight poets represented therein. Most of his seven contributions are part of the permanent canon of twentieth-century British poetry. Spender included all of them in *Poems of 1933*.

"The Express" is considered one of Spender's signature poems, embodying as it does the very essence of the aesthetics of the Pylon Poets: the transmutation of the antipoetic material of modern life into poetry. "The Express" is an art modern painting in words. As in some Edward Hopper paintings, there are no people in this poem, wherein a train, a machine as terrible as death, is personified as a lovely woman:

And always light, aerial underneath  
 Goes the elate metre of her wheels.  
 Steaming through metal landscape on her lines  
 She plunges new eras of wild happiness  
 Where speed throws up strange shapes, board curves  
 And parallels clean like the steel of guns. (NS, 92)

For the train and the plane and the gasworks are more significant in modern life than the fields and forms of ancient song: "Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced / wrapped in her music no bird song, no, no bough / Breaking with honey bud, shall ever equal" (NS,93), The train "acquires mystery" and "she begins to sing." Then she screams and is heard "further than Edinburgh or Rome /Beyondthe crest of the world." Here is orgasm. Here, too, is political elan, for the express symbolizes the force of "the first, powerful, plain manifesto" driving the revolution to its appointment with destiny.

"The Funeral" is one Spender's great short poems in which lyric sensibility was manifestly with political statement. It is vintage Spender, as is "The Landscape near an Aerodrome" written a short while later. Spender is fascinated with the processes and products of industry, and he both admires and envies the workers in factory and mill. The virile pride in the description of the funeral of the worker who "excelled all others in making drivingbelts" and the future that his labor has made possible sound like an anthem and recalls huge Soviet posters of the 1930s and 1940s:

They walk home remembering the straining red flags;  
 And with pennons of song fluttering through their blood  
 They dream of the World State  
 With its towns like brain-centers and its pulsingarteries. (NS, 95)

Later on Spender would find the overtness of poems like "The Funeral" somewhat embarrassing and would include them in anthologies and collections only

because the public expected to see them there, but the fact is that youthful panache and the lyric fusion of romantic and modern images continue to thrill new readers, especially the young and idealistic.

“I Think Continually” is an elegiac poem reminiscent of Laurence Binyon’s “For the Fallen.” With exquisite phrasing, Spender admires those strong personalities who are so unified that a single expression may be their apt signature. The great are imaginatively with fire and sun in their struggle to aid and to save their fellow humans:

The names of those who in their lives fought for life,  
---Who wore at their hearts the hearts the flame’s centre:  
Born of the sub, they travelled a short while toward the sun  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.(NS, 90)

These are the people with a destiny, who bring with them from the spiritual realm of perfection a memory of glory:

I think continually of those who were truly great.  
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history  
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns  
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition  
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,  
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot in song.(NS, 89)

Spender may not be one of the truly great, and the poem may express a degree of envy and resignation, but the awareness of the spiritual dimension of greatness is of significance. “Who lives under the shadow of war” reminds the reader that Spender’s generation is an interwar group of survivors. The young poet knows that no writer’s words can stop the next war.

“On Young Man” is a poem of political commitment exhorting his fellow youth to leave “those ladies like flies perfect in amber” and “those financiers like fossils of bones in coal” to “advance to rebuild” their society, not forgetting to “sleep with friend to hill” (NS,86). The images are intense and precise, but also somewhat labored, and one recalls MacNeice’s mean description of Spender as a poet patiently pressing clichés into poetic shape with steady and powerful hands.<sup>14</sup> Spender did “press” in much of his earliest poetry, but he pressed metaphysical imagery, not clichés.

“My Parents” deplores and upbringing that separated him from boys of the working class and made him their perceived enemy: “My parents kept me from children who were rough.” The persona came to fear them when they “sprang out behind hedges / Like dogs to bark at out world.” He “longed to forgive them, but they never smiled” (NS, 94).

“The Prisoners” is a weaker poem, flabbily self-referential and unable to evoke much of a credible sense of live in prison. The employment of the pathetic fallacy does not help. It is hard to imagine a “liquid door / Melting it with their anger.

It is easy to see how Spender’s committed, exuberant poems excited a poetry-reading public in the early 1930s seeking a poetry of social hope, a public prepared to sort out and grace the machine-dominated environment it seemed somehow to have wandered into.

*Poems* (1933) contains 33 poems of which 16 had appeared in previous volumes, including *New Signatures* Changes are minor. The second edition of *Poems*, published in September 1934, contains 40 poems Spender having dropped 2 (“I hear the cries of evening” and “My parents quarrel in the neighbor room”) and added 9 (“At the end of two month’ holiday,” “After success, your little afternoon success,” “Alas, when he laughs it is not he,” “The Shapes of Death,” “For T.A.H.R.,” “

Van der Lubbe, “ “ Passing, men are sorry for the birds in cages, “ “Perhaps,” and “ New Year”). The 1934 American edition, Spender’s first book published in the United States, restored the 2 omitted poems. The American edition is considered definitive.

Within two years of the publication of *Poems*, Morton Zabel, in *Poetry*, called Spender “one of the most important young poets in England,” one who would prove to be “a writer not only of immediate values but of permanent and convincing truth.” *Poems* is an estimable achievement, projecting an exuberant quality to be long remembered and happily recalled, like Shelley’s, that of a young bard of wide-even affirmation. “The naivete is Spender . . . its goes along with a genuine innocence of eye, and a capacity not only for being easily moved, but for honouring that emotion in strong and direct expression.”

Variations of subject and style abound in *Poems*; rhetorical declamations, conversation, commentaries on current issues and public events, and “The Landscape near an Aerodrome” employ imagery from modern technology instead of from traditional, outdated sources. The eponymous pylons, carrying electrical power above a valley, introduce the landscape of the future: “Like whips of anger / With lightning’s danger / There runs the quick perspective of the future.” Nature is diminished by the power of human ingenuity, and the anthropomorphized pylons take on an aura of sexuality:

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.(P, 57)

“ The Landscape near and Aerodrome” depicts the changing concept of what is beautiful and fascinating turning, away from traditional landscape, ruined town,

and the displays of religion, to the sleek, streamlined machines of speed and mechanical power. A descending airliner is like a great eagle alighting:

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. Gently, broadly, she falls  
Scarcely disturbing charted currents of air.(P, 55)

The passengers now can see the ruins that rampant, uncaring, capitalistic industrialization has wrought:

now let their eyes trained by watching  
Penetrate through dusk the outskirts of this town  
Here where industry shows a fraying edge.  
Here they may see what is being done.(P, 55)

Finally, as the earth images grow larger and larger,

Beyond the winking masthead light  
And the landing-ground, they observe the outposts  
Of work: chimneys like land black fingers  
Or figures frightening and mad: and squat buildings  
With their strange air behind trees, like women's faces  
Shattered by grief.(P,55)

And they find a "landscape of hysteria" where a church is blocking that imagistic source of creativity and love, the sun:

Then, as they land, they hear the tolling bell  
Reaching across the landscape of hysteria  
To where, larger than all the charcoaled batteries  
And imaged towers against that dying sky,  
Religion stands, the church blocking the sun.(P, 56)

The message is to have faith in the new forces symbolized by train, plane, and pylon and to abandon the old institutions like the church because they block the guiding light to the future.

In "In railway halls" and "Moving through the silent crowd" Spender paints a drama of despair in church institutions created for the welfare of human have failed and the pitiful poor have nothing but time: "In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic, / They beg, their eyes made big by empty staring / And only measuring Time, like the blank clock" (P, 60).

The unemployed teem on the streets in "Moving through the silent crowd":

They lounge at corners of the street  
And greet friends with a shrug of shoulder  
And turn their empty pockets out,  
The cynical gestures of the poor. (P, 30)

The predominant emotion in these early poems is pity. This recurring theme, the keystone of Spender's poetry, is partly a result of the influence of Wilfred Owen, who took as his subject pity for the suffering soldiers in war. Spender pitied the suffering of the victims of economic crisis.

Another iterative Spender theme consolidated in Poems is the primary significance of personal relations in life. In poems like "Those fireballs, those ashes" and the earlier emphasized the centrality of the physical aspect of human greatness. The sensuous being comes first. Relationships must have their physical dimensions, and this is true for great and small. Friends and lovers are more vital to physical and mental health, artistic achievement, and political action than are family, country, ideals, or ideology. MacNeice recalls Spender's "building what castles he could out of personal relations." The power of the intimate exalted all.

“For T.A.R.H., “ somewhat revised later, is based on spender’s relationship with his sometime secretary, Tony Hyndman, but primarily deals with the poet’s inner-world reaction to the creative and destructive powers of love and to love’s capacity to induce forgiveness:

At night my life lies with no past nor future  
But only space. It watches  
Hope and despair and the small vivid longings  
Like minnows gnaw the body. Where it drank love  
It lives in sameness. Here are  
Gestures indelible.(P, 36)

“How strangely this sub reminds me of my love” finds the persona staring longingly at the other male’s face, taking his photograph, so to speak, with the retinas of his eyes in order to remember to glorious day. The young lover is like the god Apollo.

In “Your body is stars whose million glitter here,” a lover is anatomized metaphorically as uses parataxis to paint a surrealistic canvas:

Your body is stars whose million glitter here:  
I am lost amongst the branches of this sky  
Here near my breast, here in my nostrils, here  
Where out vast arms like streams of fire lie.(P, 35)

Unfortunately, the plethora of images seems to melt and drip, and when in the end “there comes the shuttering of a door,” the reader does not know on what it shuts.

“What I expected” debunks the youthful fancy of the poet’s heroic self-image:

What I expected was  
Thunder, fighting,  
Long struggles with men



And climbing.  
After continual straining  
I should grow strong;  
Then the rocks would shake  
And I should rest long.(P, 25)

Alas, he could not foresee the common fate of love and life: "The pulverous grief / Melting the bones with pity, / The sick falling from earth"(P, 25-26).

"Without that once clear aim, the path of flight" despairs that the twentieth century is like the Dark Ages, in that social and psychological truth lie both "in dungeons" of the mind and the real dungeons of political repression. Another type of repression is dealt with in "Passing, man are sorry for the birds in cages. " Here the persona is able to announce the release of "the birds of delight" from its cage and denounce the false ideas that have kept it in prison. Those who lock up the joys of life destroy themselves.

" Van der Lubbe," named for the innocent defendant tried by the Nazis on a trumped-up charge of causing the Reichstag fire, is a political poem emphasizing the correlation between public and private Thanatos, which together shape the destructive element in humankind. Other very political poems are " Perhaps," in which several violent acts take place, their settings, time, and purpose remaining vague. " After they have tired " expects the revolution to bring a dazzling dawn without banks, cathedrals, and insane rulers. In "New year" the persona urges the oppressed to rise up and create that new dawn but "effect . . . beauty without robbery" (P ,64). Spender is always a little chary of revolution; he cannot accommodate himself to the bloodshed.

"My parents quarrel in the neighbor room," which complements "My parents kept me from children who were rough," from *New Signatures*, is a miniatures

version of George Meredith's *Modern Love*. The persona, here a horrified son, listens to his parents wage war in their bedroom.

The last poem in the collection, "Not palaces, an era's crown," is an awkward Marxist piece with some foolish metaphors, such as a 'battleship towering from hilly waves." Yet the poem is also a call to duty. The poet instructs his senses and his readers' to abandon their "gardens" and their "singing feasts" and submit to the design of the will to serve the "flag of our purpose" (P ,67).

Despite the seemingly political nature of much of *Poems*, a large percentage of the pieces are about self. In one sense, the collection is a course in personal analysis, the self being reconciled with internal needs and social concerns. The id and the superego struggle but accommodate. After all, if Marx saw change as predicated on material forces in society, Freud believed that change was motivated by forces within the individual. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) Freud is concerned with a person's relation to his guilt and to his society. In respect to the latter, Spender's early poems are as much Freudian as they are Marxist. The widespread fascination with Freud in the 1930s could no more have escaped Spender's attention than it did Auden's.

*Poems* is a remarkable achievement for a very young poet in a great hurry to get things said. Samuel Hynes, in *The Auden Generation*, poses a key question that imaginative writers faced throughout the 1930s: "Is the role of a poet a defensible one in such a time? And if it is, what sort of poem should he write? Is the traditional private contest of lyric poetry appropriate . . . to a time of public distress? Spender's answer in *Poems* is a resounding yes. A lyric could be both private and public, both a song and a manifesto. This was the accomplishment of *Poems*: capturing the

interest of a British public still exhausted by World War I, still grieving over the decimation of the brightest of a generation, and continually disappointed with its leadership. That public wanted to understand the inherent nature, the psychological makeup, and the source of energy of the inspiring figures of the human race, “those who were truly great.” *Poems* addressed the need.

*Vienna* (1934) is Spender’s grand attempt to project into public view “the conflict between personal life and public causes” (WW,174). The experiences of a love relationship and the poet’s indignation at the suppression of the Viennese Socialists by Prime Minister Engelbert Dollfuss were different but related, for although one was public and one private, both were intensely emotional and personal. Spender felt “the poem fails because it does not fuse the two halves of a split situation, and attain a unity where the inner passion becomes inseparable from the outer one”(WW,174).

In *Poems* the cure for human ills lies in making the individual more happy and more aware of instincts, freeing sexuality, and developing emotional potential. In *Vienna* Spender explicitly considers the notion of “individual love as a cultural panacea” and then rejects it “in favor of a Marxist program.”

The four-part, 37-page *Vienna* is Spender’s longest and most ambitious poem. It, more than any other work of his, shows Eliot’s influence. The fact that Spender not only spent so much time in Austria and Germany but also chose to set his “epic” in a Central European capital at what he immediately recognized as a pivotal place and point in twentieth-century European history underscores Eliot’s position that English “writers cannot afford to throw over the European tradition. In Eliot’s view, the English artist needs to turn his or her mind east to the Continent and away from the west (America) and the world (the British Empire). For Spender’s

generation of poets *The Waste Land* was the great “epic” of the century. In Spender’s construct and interpretation of events, Vienna, embattled, gutted, and raped of its hope, becomes a “wasteland” in which the dream of a socialist civilization perishes. *Vienna*, embattled, gutted, and raped of its hope, becomes a “wasteland” in which the dream of a socialist civilization perished. Vienna is, then, symbolic of the European cities in which the lights of political and individual freedom were going out in the 1930s. *Vienna* is a prophecy. Thy very imagery of the poem is Eliotic, with strings of images sequencing in emotional rather than logical iterations while fulfilling the precept of the objective correlative.

The first section of the poem, “Arrival at the city,” describes the persona’s coming to Vienna, where he takes up residence in the Pension Beaurepas, in which most of the inhabitants are old ladies who prattle on about their medical problems and elderly lovers. The proprietor, an ex-actor who likes to pass as an Englishman and who wishes to introduce the persona to his obscene version of *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses)----“*penis in circensem.*” The proprietor, a faded dandy, sports “wing tie. Winged nose. A bleared, active eye./ The stick and strut of a sprucer day” (V,10). But “this man’s dead life stinking” is like an open wounded decaying. He is so obscene that the persona prefers “the wholly dead” to the living corpse and bag of corruption.

The persona wanders to another part of the city, a square quarter that is “the part true to this town” (V, 12). It is like a hospital for a sick city:

Unhomely windows, floors scrubbed clean of love,  
A Waste canvas sky, informed nuns,  
Streets thinking with the silver ambulance.  
We breathe the bandaged air and watch though  
                  windows

Metal limbs, glass eyes, ourselves frozen on fires.

(V, 12)

“Arrival at the City” thus provided the backdrop for the tragedy of the oppression and murder of a decayed city, whose sacrifice may provide understanding and inspiration for those trying to prevent the death of Western civilization.

The second section, “Parade of the Executive,” is even more abstract than the first. The suggestion of a foreign journalist surveying and recording the degeneration of an exotic city, like Isherwood in Berlin, disappears as the poem metamorphoses into a position paper by “the Executive, who advocates obedience to the director and his henchmen and the maintenance of appearances:

Let no one disagree let Dollfuss  
Fey, Stahremberg, the whole bloody lot  
Appear frequently, shaking hands at street corners  
Looking like bands sculptures of their photographs.  
Let there be bands and stands and preparations.  
And grateful peasants in Consumed deputations  
Create the ghost of an empress’s coronation  
Stalking the streets and holding up the trams.(V., 14)

Meanwhile, there are the unemployed who are

Dispersed like idle points of a vague star:  
Huddled on benches, nude at bathing places,  
And made invisible by crucifying suns  
Day after day, again with grief afire at night,  
They do not watch what we show.  
Their eyes are fixed upon an economic margin.

(V, 14)

And there is a stranger, an observer, “a witness free from danger,” like Spender, who sees a government minister, after deceitful public event “who smiles



understanding that “out sexes are the valid flowers / Sprinkled across the total world and wet / With night”(V, 34).

Unlike Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, published 12 years earlier, Spender’s *Vienna* does not present a coherent, overall vision. Its obscurity seems imposed. However, as Samuel Hynes points out, “*Vienna* is a poem not so much about the history of the uprising as about the mythology. It is not a narrative, though it includes narrative passages: it does not tell the whole story, it ignores chronology, and it does not explain. What Spender seems to have aimed at was the expression of his own personal sense of Vienna.

The *Still Centre* (1939) contains 39 poems written between 1934 and 1939. They are grouped into four parts and preceded by a forward in which Spender explains that the poems in Part One were the first written and are subject-oriented. Parts Two and Three contain political poems, the last of which are concerned with Spain. Part Four is not directly referred to, but Spender states that the violence of the times he was living in and the need for action could make a writer feel that writing was “perhaps something that he is ashamed of. For this reason, in my most recent poems [the bulk of Part Four], I have included within my subjects weakness and fantasy and illusion.” No more *Viennas* for him. Intrepid Spender flew in the face of expectations: he would write a song of himself when all thought he would continue to engage in political battle with fascism. Disillusionment with communism may have partly caused this turn, but the change was primarily the result of an unleashing of the pent-up romantic in the poet. Spender had come to feel that he was his own manifesto. As Eliot fled from the wasteland to religion and as Auden ran away to America to escape the coming chaos, Spender retreated to the still on the isle of self.

Speaking of *The Still Centre*, David Daiches says, "The vein of lyrical speculation in this volume sometimes produces poetry which can hold its own with anything produced in the century." The collection's value was immediately recognized, receiving such critical accolades as "the best work of one of the most competent and sincere of living poets."

The title of the collection derives from Spender's sense of living on "the edge of being," on the periphery of events in the 1930s. "I had always the sense of living on the circumference of a circle at whose centre I could never be" (WW, 174-75). In *The Still Centre*, Spender is here less concerned with relating the self to the outside world. Instead, like Rainer Maria Rilke, he strives to convert external phenomena into symbols of the inner experience: "Ideally, the artist should transform the environment into his own world." Looking out the window of a train he sees his image against the traveling landscape. That outside world is fleeting and unreal.

In the introduction of *The Still Centre*, Spender says that "poetry does not state truth, it states the conditions within which something felt is true. Even while he is writing about the little portion of reality which is part of his experience, the poet may be conscious of a different reality outside. His problem is to relate the small truth to the sense of a wider, perhaps theoretically known truth outside his experience" (SC, 10). Spender had struggled throughout the decade from pre-Oxford isolation through fervent desire for social action, to political disappointment, and finally to a renewal of hope for human survival, humanistic values, and personal love.

Part One's rather didactic poetry begins with "Polar Exploration," an early-1930s poem in which arctic explorers march through a world of white to winter quarters, exploring the realm of male relationships as much external nature. Their intense lives contrast with the dull, bourgeois existence at home. The persona has



come to realize that he is symbolically living in a new Ice Age: “War / Ice our anger transformed?” But the more evil place “Is the North / Over there,” presumably Germany, with “ a tangible, real madness” and led by “ A glittering simpleton” (SC, 18 ), an underestimation of Hitler.

“Easter Monday,” another early poem in the collection, is a political piece. On the day after day after the Resurrection

The bourgeois in tweeds  
Holds in his golden spectacles'  
Twin lenses, velvet and fat  
Mountains. But look, rough hands  
From trams, 'buses, bicycles, and of tramps,  
Like one hand red with labour, grasp  
The furred and future bloom  
Of their falling, falling world.

(SC, 19-20)

The Resurrection is like a revolution, but the “one hand red with labour,” not with blood, will shape the future. The political position is more Fabian than Marxian.

The important love motive in *The Still Centre* begins with “Experience.” Indeed, love is the ultimate “centre” the poet seeks. In obtaining experience, the persona bids farewell to childhood, to the “headaching” world before heterosexual experience, and enters the new world of Eros in which exists “two people . . . and both double, yet different. I entered with myself, I left with a woman” (SC, 21).

For C. Day Lewis the following lines were “pure poetry”, impossible to transcribe into prose without impairing meaning:

Good-bye now, good-bye: the early and sad hills  
Dazed with their houses, like a faint migraine  
Orchards bear memory in cloudy branches.  
The entire world roars in a child's brain.

(SC, 21-22)

One of Spender's "obsessive themes" is the unity of being. Humans struggle toward that state. Some may achieve the condition of unity after death. "Exiles from Their Land, History Their Domicile" is "about those who have, after their deaths, obtained for their lives a symbolic significance which certainly passed unnoticed when they were living." Death chooses purposes and actions that give lives symbolic significance; "what miracle divides / Our propose form our weakness?" (SC, 25). Great historical exiles bring their values to bear on the present. They are "freedom's friend." Although they "were jokes to children," their will, their courage, "their deeds and deaths are birds" (SC, 24). The persona prays to them"

Recall me from life's exile, let me join  
Those who now kneel to kiss their sands,  
And let my words restore  
Their printed, laurelled, victoried message.

SC, 25)

Spender yet thinks "continually of those who were truly great."

In "The Past Values," retitled "The Living Values" in *Collected Poems, 1928-1953*, the past is challenged as being destructive. The glazed look in the portraits of old masters appears like "the eyes of the freshly young dead / sprawled in the mud of battle" (SC, 26). A metaphysical conceit licks together the sad eyes of the inspirers, the dusty glass over portraits, the fog. And those poor soldiers "struck . . . with lead so swift / Their falling slight stared through its glass" (SC, 27). At the same time, "The Past Values" laments that modern war perverts and destroys the greatness of our legacy. Eros and Thanatos ever entwine. The old masters inspire creation and destruction, for they have also left us the patriotism and lust that have brought young soldiers to their deaths and ended their "dream of fills."

Although close to propaganda, "An Elementary School Class Room in a Slum" presents the poet's sincere concern for the social anomaly of children with

their future “painted with a fog. “ Shakespeare and geography are meaningless to hungry children who “wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel / with mended glass.” Their maps are blotted “with slums as big as doom” (SX, 29). The poem succeeds because of its sheer lyrical quality, its deep pity, its justifiable anger, and its prescription for the salvation of all parties to the social contract: create a Laurentian world for children where sensation and intellect unite to “break the town” and find a history “whose language is the sun,” while the children joyously “let their tongues ? Run naked into books” (SC, 29).

Because it is also about children and rebirth, “ A Footnote (from Mars’s Chapter on the Working Day)” in Part Two is discussed here. At the opening, children in school mouth foolishness and errors until, as in the speeches of Lear’s Fool, the images have deeper meaning than the denotation:

“So perhaps all the people are dead, and we’re birds  
“Shut in steel cages by the devil who’s good,  
“Like the miners in their pit cages  
“And us in our chimneys to climb, as we should.”

(SC, 43)

Children in their “angel infancy” are indeed birds, and the adults are dead, their souls imprisoned in error. Yet the children, with instinctive cognition, understand their tragic fate.

The last poem in Part One, “the Uncreated Chaos, “in four parts and 84 lines, is the second longest and one of the most significant in the collection. In it Spender expresses what for him was the great modern dilemma: being drawn toward the will and the world in which it is operative while simultaneously disarming to escape both will and world to the still center.

The world requires our obeisance: "To the hanging despair of eyes in the street, offer / Your making hands and your guts on skewers of pity" (SC, 30). At the same time, we poor spirits feed a fantasy:

When the pyramid sky is piled with clouds of sand  
which the yellow  
Sun blasts above, respond to that day's doom  
With a headache. Let your ghost follow  
The young men to the Pole, up Everest, to war: by  
love, be shot.

(SC, 30)

But always "the uncreating chaos" of modern life descends upon us and destroys integrity while promoting selfishness, vanity, and hedonism:

For the uncreating chaos descends  
And claims you in marriage: though a man, you were  
ever a bride:  
Ever beneath the supple surface of summer muscle,  
The fountain evening talk cupping the summer stars,  
The student who chucks back the lock from his hair  
In front of a silver glass,  
You were only anxious that all these passions should  
last.

(SC, 30)

Part of the uncreating chaos, developing like a cosmic storm, is the rise of the Nazis, a truly destructive element:

Meagre men shoot up. Rockets, rockets,  
A corporal's {Hitler} fiery tongue wags about burring  
parliament.  
There flows in the tide of killers, the whip-masters,  
Breeches and gaiters camouflage blood.

(SC 32-33)

What is to be done when a terrible world is too much with us? One does one's work. That is the only answer. One changes what one can and returns to "the

simple mechanism. . . Clear day, thoughts of the work-room, the desk, / The hand, symbols of power” (SC, 33). The progress of “The Uncreating Chaos” is in the desperate struggle between the archetypal forces of creation and destruction, with human love on the I-Thou scale the saving grace and the hope of rebirth. Thus, “The Uncreating Chaos” is the turning point in Spender’s poetry. The poet has defined his work: it is poetry. The cost in isolation must be borne.

Part Two of *The Still Centre* is a miscellany of Marxist poems, sketches, love poems, and typical Spender machinery pieces, such as “View from a Train” and “The Midlands Express.” These, along with “House at Edge of Railway Lines” in Part Four, show that Spender had not quite finished with what Auden called the “strict beauty of locomotive.”

“View from a Train” again finds the persona seeing himself reflected in a train’s window superimposed upon the landscape and remembering that the “man behind his mask still wears a child.” “The Midlands Express” is another “The Express.” This train is a “Muscular Virtuoso!” and very sexy, for “all England lies beneath you like a woman / With limbs ravished” (SC, 47). The train is compared, not quite convincingly, to “great art . . . whose giant travelling ease / Is the vessel of its effort and fatigue” (SC.,47)

In “House at Edge of Railway Lines” the persona looks for love while journeying on a train. It is “and age of bombs” and the passengers search for “hope on the horizon,” but the persons, looking elsewhere, wished “without knocking to enter / The life that lies behind / the edges of drawn blinds” (SC, 103), as if he were lover calling. In the tranquil home we all long for “love fills rooms, as gold / Pours into a valid mould” (SC, 103).

“Hoelderlin’s Old Age, “ like “Beethoven’s Death Mask,” is an elegy and a celebration of old age and evening. In the German romantic tradition, the old poet Johann Holderlin defies death’s power as his “soul sings / Burning vividly in the centre of a cold sky” (SC, 37). Holderlin has found his still center.

Three poems in Part Two are quite personal. “Hampstead Autumn” is a childhood reminiscence of a mature man who sorts out what he can and what he cannot regain from the past. In the end, the sub sets on “images,/Continuous and fragile as China” (SC, 38). The four-line “In the Street “ is unusually aphoristic for Spender. The persona comes out in favor of isolation, “ a blank wall with myself face to face,” having grown weary of “the lies and lights of the complex street” (SC, 39). “In the Street” counters the sentimentality of “Hampstead Autumn” with existential self-reliance. “The Room on the Square, Finds a rejected lover accepting his isolation as the climbs to “the dark room / Which hangs above the square.” Again, as in “House at the Edge of Railway Lines,” the persona sees love happening elsewhere and to others, and he misses it sorely. The dark room once had a “light in the window [ that ] seemed perpetual” (SC, 40) because love was there for him. Yet love and loss are natural to the human experience, begetting growth.

“The Indifferent One” and “Three Days” are also love poems about loss. Although personal and obscure in their reference, they remain accessible in emotion, description, and sensuality. The former asks the love one for “the smile’s indifference which forgives” (SC, 49), and the latter finds the persona reminiscing on “sensual memories” and “pour image and those days of glass” (SC, 51).

“The Marginal Field” is a socialist poem that deplores the exploitation of the farmer, but strained language militates against the message, although the opening stanza is lyrically fine, presenting yet again a view through a glass:



Huddled in linen woven by remote hands.  
When the machines are stilled, a common suffering  
Whitens the air with breath and makes both one  
As though these enemies slept in each other's arms.

(SC, 56)

Clarity bursts over Spender's war poetry like a flare in the night. "Two Armies" dominates the panorama of war. More intimate scenes, comparable to cinematic close-ups, come later.

The sardonic "Ultima Ratio Regum" (The final argument of kings) describe the death of an insignificant, unknown soldier killed in a cause he did not comprehend: "The boy lying dead under the olive trees / Was too young and too silly / To have been notable to their important eye. " The next line, so shocking, emphasized the odd eroticism of war: "He was a better target for a kiss" (SC, 57). Yet was it foolish and wasteful:

Consider. One bullet in ten thousand kills a man.  
Ask. Was so much expenditure justified  
On the death of one so young and to silly  
Lying under the olive trees, O world, O death?

(SC, 58)

There are no heroes or heroics in Spender's view of war. In that sense, he is an "antiwar poet. In the introduction to *The Still Centre* Spender makes it clear that he cannot write about heroism because it was not his experience (SC, 10). He could write about pity. That he knew. So did Wilfred Owen, who said, "My subject is war and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity."

For a noncombatant-----perhaps because he could keep some distance, physically and emotionally----Spender's war imagery is unusually evocative: "The unflowering wall sprouted with guns, / Machine-gun anger quickly scythed the grasses" (SC, 57). His only American equal in this kind of imagery is Randall Jerrell in such poems as "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner."



“The coward” shows the persona’s pity for a soldier who has destroyed his whole life in a moment of cowardice: “I gather all my life and pour / Out its love and comfort here” (SC, 60). The referential image is of a soldier emptying his canteen. But there is a drop of human kindness left for him. The persona states, “My love and pity shall not cease / for a lifetime at least” (SC, 60). Spender was accused of being a tourist at war. Unfair! He was committed to the Spanish Republic, and his anguish was as real as anyone’s. By his own admission, he would not have been much of a soldier.

In the fine poem “A stopwatch and an Ordinance Map,” Spender again depicts the death of a soldier, one who will no longer need to know the time and place. A moment of violence and pain “and the bones are fixed at give / Under the moon’s timelessness” (SC, 61).

“War photograph” is surely a commentary on the most famous photo of the Spanish Civil War, Robert Capa’s picture of a Republican soldier at the moment he was shot: “the instant lurks / With its metal fang planned for my heart” (SC, 62). The dying soldier knows that the ultimate photo is taken by fate: “My corpse be covered with the snows’ December / And roots push through skin’s silent drum / When the years and fields forget, but the whitened bones remember” (SC, 63). Perhaps to avoid the Capa connection, Spender changed the poem’s title to “In No Man’s Land” and shortened the piece in *Collected Poems, 1928-1953*.

In the Petrarchan “Sonnet” the persona criticizes the world for looking at his lover as surface image “moving upon the social glass of silver” (SC, 64), but he plunges through those mirrored rays to his lover’s hidden inner self.” The persona cannot solve the troubles of the world, but he can drown in the life of his love.



arrived, skillfully sums up the themes and attitudes of the Spanish Civil War poems. The extended metaphor of the poem is a broken circle representing the open bay, the incompleteness of the social revolution, the imperfection of war, and the unfulfilled hope of children:

As a child holds a pt  
Arms clutching but with bands that do not join  
. . . . .  
So the earth-and-rock flesh arms of this harbour  
Embrace but do not enclose the sea.

(SC, 71)

The persona symbolically tries to bring the diverse parts of incompleteness together and find the truth: “My circling arms rest on a newspaper / empty in my mind as the glittering stone / Because I search for an image “ (SC, 71). But then nothing is complete in the waste and chaos of war, and the poet, after the port is evacuated, “is left alone on the bridge / Where the cleaving river trickles like saliva / At the exact centre, solitary as a target” (SC, 72). “Port Bou” is one of Spender’s most accessible and powerful poems. The poet stands there, almost asking to be wounded. He can not actively participate in the cause, but through his poetic sensibility he can express the suffering, the folly, and the pity. That is some service after all. That is the purpose of the Spanish Civil War poems.

Hugh D. Ford notes that instead of descending on “fundamental ideas about freedom and liberty,” Spender’s “poems expound upon death, suffering, fear and concern over the fate of the innocent and the cowardly.” In the Spanish Civil War poems, Spender ceased to try to fuse poetry and public policy. The poems are without villains. The subjects are the dead, the defeated, and the frightened. Spender’s good friend and coeditor of *Horizon*, Cyril Connolly, authored a colossal understatement when he referred to “Mr. Spender’s not very martial muse.” As

Katherine Bail Hoskins says , “ No absolute pacifist wrote more convincing antiwar poems during the thirties than this fervent apologist for collective security.”

Part Four of *The Still Centre* disappoints somewhat after the intensity of Part Three, but its contents logically follow Spender’s retreat from political commitment. These poems seek primarily, but not exclusively, to deal with the inanition and breakdown of Spender’s first marriage and the resulting loss, isolation, and disappointment with the love. Significantly and sadly, Spender dedicated *The Still Centre* to the wife was losing.

The poems of loss of love begin with “The Human Situation,” wherein the persona’s troubled past is exorcised by Eros and “ my Womanly companion, / Revolving around me with light” (SC, 80). “The Separation” is a poem in which lovers are parted because the persona has been busy traveling, but unlike “The Human Situation,” it falls back on clichés such as “my map / With meaningless names of places” (SC, 84). The lament is prosy:

To bring me back to you, earth  
Must turn, the aeroplane  
Must fly across the glittering spaces,  
The clocks must run, the scenery change  
From mountains into town.

(SC, 4)

But then comes the last stanza of the poem, which is strong Spender. The lovers will find peace together when the will to serve the outside world is curbed:

Shuttered by dark at the still centre  
Of the world’s circular terror,  
O tender birth of life and mirror  
Of lips, where love at last finds peace  
Released from the will’s error.

(SC, 85)

“Two Kisses” and “The Little Coat” are two more love poems. The former has the longing persona remembering the kiss he wears “like a feather / Laid upon my cheek” (SC, 86), and the latter presents an extended metaphor in which a torn coat presages loss “like dolls in attics / When the children have grown and ceased to play” (SC, 87). The persona desires to be held in a “solemn kiss” that will provide “the loving stillness” (SC, 88).

“Variations on My Life: The First” and “Variations on My Life: The Second,” the last love poems in the collection, are enigmatic pieces in which the tormented persona, with never enough air, space, or light, laments love past and lost, but realizes he will never abandon loving, “which nothing does refuse / and only death denies” (SC, 92).

In “The Mask,” Spender again employs glass and reflection imagery as the persona sees “the world with lenses.” The eyes are the windows on reality: “My life confronts my life with eyes” (SC, 101). Other people revolve around the circles of his sight, but their passions are invisible. “They are the mirrors of the foreign masks / Stamped into shapes” (SC, 102). We can only know people one at a time, and then, because of masks, only imperfectly, for reality is merely our own consciousness. Thus, the solipsism of “The Mask” is the perfect paradigm of modernity.

“Napoleon in 1814” is the longest (114 lines) poem in *The Still Centre* and clearly the product of prolonged and troubled political thought. Napoleon represents Stalin, who in the 1930s was “the Man of Destiny”: “Men spoke of you as Nature, and they made / a science of your moods” (SC, 97). Was ever the idea of dictator encapsulated in so few words? (SC, 97). Was ever the idea of director encapsulated in so few words? Napoleon is presented in what Valentine Cunningham calls “heroic ‘3-s images,” such as “In you the Caesars,” “sun” and “superhuman shadow.”

Spender was seeking to express the essence of a Napoleon. He had changed his mind about power politics and the morality of “good tyranny fighting evil tyranny (i.e., Stalin versus Hitler). As in “The Mask,” individual consciousness shapes Napoleon’s self-image as “the genius whom all envied, “ with a difference:

You were the last to see what they all saw  
That you, the blinding one, were now the blind  
The Man of Destiny, ill destined.

For, as your face grew older, there hung a lag  
Like a double chin in your mind. The jaw  
Had in its always forward thrust  
Grown heavy.

(SC, 96)

Napoleon should have truly studied and understood himself. Instead, he was left with the “wreck of deeds, the empty words.” And after all, what is history but words? Great Rhetoric, now like Hitler’s and Stalin’s is “Hidden in the hollow bones.” Napoleon in 1814” is a fine example of how Spender could bring his knowledge of history, his admiration for greatness and strength, his distrust of military force, and his puissant imagery of war and death to bear on an issue of the gravest importance: the attraction and the peril of the cult of personality.

“To a Spanish Poet (for Manuel Altoaguirre)” is the last poem in *The Still Centre*. It is an *aveatque vale* to all the “idea” of Spain connoted in the 1930s, to the decade itself, and to the poet’s youth. An English poet eulogizes a Spanish poet who was driven from Spain by the fascists at the very end (WW, 238-39). Spender employs the key image of *The Still Centre* in “To a Spanish Poet”----the glass mirror----as he has the Spaniard stand absurdly in the ruins of his bombed home:

Everything in the room was shattered;  
Only you reminded whole  
In frozen wonder, as though you stared

At your image in the broken mirror  
Where it had always been silverly carried.

(SC, 105)

Both Spender and Altolaguirre have “ started out the window on the emptiness of a world exploding.” Spender reminds us of the individual’s powerlessness in the fact of the egotism of states that create “ these comedies of falling stone” (SC, 106). Spender is so moved by the suffering of Altolaguirre and his compatriots that he reached back into his cultural heritage to employ Jacobean imagery by way of Eliot:

Unbroken heart,  
You stare through my revolving bones  
On the transparent rim of the dissolving world  
Where all my side is opened  
With ribs drawn back like springs to let you enter  
And replace my heart that is more living and more  
cold.

(SC, 107)

Yet the poem ends on a note of hope. The song goes on. It may be night but the stars still shine:

With your voice that still rejoices  
In the centre of its night,  
As, buried in this night,  
The stars burn with their brilliant light.

(SC, 107)

I have left the first poem in Part Four, “Darkness And Light,’ until last because, like’ “The Uncreating Chaos,” it is a crucial piece in the poet’s struggle “to break out of the chaos of my darkness / Into a lucid day” (SC, 77). His words have become “eyes in night” trying “ to reach a centre for their light” (SC, 77). He must find a place in the center of his will, but also, somehow, in the center of life and society. Paradoxically, the poet’s conflicting postulates meet and artistic requirement: to have distant vision, to seek perspective, to stand aside and witness. He must stand “ on a

circumference to avoid the centre."Thus the dilemma that "centre and circumference are north my weaknesses" (SC, 77). Spender has located the source of modern artistic and intellectual paresis.

Finally, the persona in *The Still Centre* reveals the ambivalence and anxiety that confront modernism. The poet seeks strength of will to become a person of truth and integrity, and yet he knows, and reminds us, that human weakness is ever present, creating an inertia that leads to dangerous illusions. The "still centre" symbolizes that quiet, eternal place "from which the poet can stabilize his values and then come to terms with his world." He has returned to the "edge of being." It is not surprising the Spender chose "Darkness and Light" as the epigram for *World within World*. How better could he summarize and preface the Manichaean conflict between freedom and determinism that structured the first half of his life?