

CHAPTER V

The Last Phase : Ruins and Visions ----- Collected Poems

“Of human activities, writing poetry is one of the least revolutionary,” Spender wrote in his 1933 essay “Poetry and Revolution.” He then went on for a decade to write radical political poetry supporting the Viennese Socialist revolt and the cause of the Left in Spain. “The poet, often a potential revolutionary, is able to escape the urgent problems of social reconstruction into a world of his own making,” Spender wrote. “This world is a world of the imagination only bounded by the limits of imagination” (NC, 64). Spender opted for that escape clause in the 1940s, having found the circumferential place of distant perspective.

World War II was part of it. The war became a paradigm of human contempt of human life. Spender says in *Poetry since 1939* that he and other poets wondered “whether the war, which was certainly against Fascism, was for a purified cause.” Therefore, he turned to “introspective poems in search of universal experience through subjective contemplation” (PS 39, 34). He was affected by what John Press calls “the 1940s . . . deliberate reaction against the previous decade. Nonproletarian poets, notably Edith Sitwell, Robert Graves, and Dylan Thomas, were attracting greater critical attention and public interest. But very little British poetry written during the war or the years immediately following, a period of continued rationing and shortages, reconstruction, and the empire’s disintegration, has proved enduring. Spender, like others, retreated into a self-sufficient poetic world of truth and peace, while paradoxically he became more and more and more a public figure. Thereafter, the subjects of his poetry change little: love, self, the horrors of war, pity, and personal sorrow. His propagandistic vein exhausted itself. His output slowed. The early tendency to write hastily and sometimes stumble on clichés passed. His imagery remained forceful and precise. But the energy waned, and seemingly, his

confidence began to slip. Spender went on the defensive as the attrition of time and diminishing will wore down his inspiration and dispersed his audience.

Of course, during the war Spender wrote about the war, but he wrote not a “war poet” ;but as a poet writing from a removed perspective. His struggle was with despair more than with the Germans, for he saw that human cruelty known no bounds and no nation monopolized it. As a romantic poet, he needed inner isolation, but the price for that isolation in wartime was costly to his psychological equilibrium. Like most humanists, Spender had hoped and believed that progressive humanism would provide moral structure in an era of growing religiously overwhelming problems of reality? The war was the mad triumph of irrationality and barbarism.

On the positive side, Spender’s sexual discomfort had subsided and his feelings of betrayal and abandonment at the loss of his first wife were assuaged by a successful second marriage. Ironically, the conflux of humanist despair and emotional peace was not especially conducive to the production of poetry.

Ruins and Visions (1942) contains 28 poems divided into four parts: the first three parts, “A Separation,” “Ironies of War,” and “Deaths,” constitute the “ruins,” and Part Four, the “Visions.” The first three parts depict personal, political, and universal disintegration and the last projects a path out of the ruins. Essentially, the poet is trying to comprehend the complex web of relationships that confuse and overwhelm him and, indeed, all of us.

The poems of “A Separation,” which express grief over a woman loved and lost, are very personal, almost painfully so. The poet despairs of his art ever being capable of diverting the force and direction of immutable reality. The section opens with “song,” a heartbreaking, sardonic exposure of love betrayed and suffering endured. It is the kind of poem that caused Auden to say that it was Spender’s

capacity for humiliation that made him a poet. Here the poet berates, but stills able to understand, the friend who has stolen his live:

Stranger, you who hide my love
 In the curved cheek of a smile
And sleep with her upon a tongue
 Of soft lies which beguile,
 Your paradisaal 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.

The persona is more angry with the woman who has left him, who (in his mind at least) is a person beyond trust, easily tempted by the novel:

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
Since compulsive needs of sense
 Clamour to be satisfied
 And she was never one to miss
 The plausible happiness
Of a new experience.

(RV, 11)

The ironically titled "Song" is an example of the emotional openness in Spender, a quality that provoked compliments from, among others, David Daiches: "His verse has a smoothness, a limped quality, that distinguishes it from that of his

contemporaries.” In that it is a direct and memorable expression of a poet’s deep mental and emotional experience, “Song” is an exemplar romantic poetry.

“ A Separation” indicates that there is no remedy for a lost love that cannot be forgotten. The persona is unable to accept the “stumbling stumps of consolations” (RV, 13), an awkward phrase for an unpleasant condition. The theme of pity, so important in much of Spender’s best poetry, degenerates into self-pity here and in the sonnet “The Vase of Tears,” (RV,17). It is not well that the persona calls his heart “a glass vase.” The metaphor does not have a credible analogical basis. Having cotranslated Rainer Maris Rike’s *Duino Elegies* (1939). Spender was trying to compete with his German model in profundity and symbolism. It was a mistake, for as Geoffrey Thurley points out, he strained to find “analogical correlates for phenomena which do not especially seem to have struck him, and his own natural metaphorical animism gives way to an increasingly literary symbolism.”

At first you did not love enough
And afterwards you loved too much
And you lack the confidence to choose
And you have only yourself to blame.

(RV, 16)

The poem illustrates spender’s strengths and weaknesses at the time. A soft center, hyperbole, failed metaphor, and symbols without clear referents mar it: “Pull down the blind and lie on the bed / And clasp the hour in the glass of one room / Against your mouth like a crystal doom” (R, 15). Yet Spender can it upon the apt metaphor, as in this excellent image of lost love: “And each empty dress cuts out an image / In fur and evening and summer and gold /Of her who was different in each” (RV, 15). Still, the poem wavers tonally between pathos and satire of love’s agonies. In the end, it seems somewhat tactless.

“ A Hall of Mirrors” employs the iterative mirror- glass images to common in Spender’s poetry. Entering “a hall of many mirrors, “ the persona is

Searching for that one face
Of innocence : amongst your many faces
Endlessly repeated in the empty spaces
Of your own eyes;
Suspended thinly on threads
Of your own self-admiring gaze.

(RV, 18)

But the face of innocence is lost and “truth . . . begs forgiveness” (RV, 19). The poem’s weakness lies in a technique of Spender’s at that time, referred to by Louis MacNeice In *Modern Poetry* (1938) as “the parataxis of early Chinese poets.” This stringing-together of disjointed images is exemplified in these lines:

Somewhere in the night, above the branches
Restless with tongues of leaves over the square,
Where you and I and all
The false play-acting puppets are,
In a high room, hidden in the darkness,
There lies your heart, the truly good,
Swathed in the flesh where all roses unfold.

(RV, 19)

The persona admits that he and his ex-love are not heroes of myth nor archetypes of lost love. As in “No Orpheus, No Euridice” the persona and loved one are far from immortals. He may be searching everywhere, “looking and singing for his wife, “but

She has truly packed and gone
To live with someone
Else, in pleasures of the sun,
Far from his kingdoms of despair

Here, there, or anywhere.

(RV, 22)

In “No Orpheus, No Euridice” and “A Wild Race,” the last poem in “A Separation,” Spender, the emotional autobiographer, attacks the excess of imagination that psychological stress engenders. The antiromantic positions of “A Wild Race” is based on the idea that for the poet it is ultimately the work that endures, not the pain. All lovers hurt each other and art is born of grief. If “the beloved, afraid. / Laughed and betrayed” (RV,224), and the persona “never knew : that his heart / Was torn apart / by loss large as a vulture” (RV, 25), then time would know his suffering through his verse.

The poems in One are of mixed success. The pity is too personal. One might say there is too much falling on the thorns of life and too much bleeding. Also, the literary affectation. Particularly in “The Vase of Tears” and “The Journey,” distracts from the possibility of empathic communication. When Spender denounces affectation and self-pity in “The Double Shame,” his work is more effective, and when he is direct, sarcastic, cool, and controlled, as in “Song,” his work is as judicious as Juvenal’s.

Part Two, “Ironies of War,” is reminiscent of the third part of *The Still Centre*, but the word “ironies” indicates that there will be no glorification of a “righteous” cause here as there was of Republican Spain in the earlier work. In “The War God” the poet is seeking peace without retribution:

Why cannot the one good
Benevolent feasible
Final dove descend?
And the wheat be divided?
And the soldiers sent home?
And the barriers torn down?

And the enemies forgiven?
And there be no retribution?
(RV, 29)

But hatred is interminably transmitted from generation to generation, and

The conqueror
Is an instrument of power,
With merciless heart hammered
Out of former fear,
When to-day's vanquished
Destroyed his noble father,
Filling his cradle with anguish.
(RV, 29)

Yet there is hope that hatred will disperse like oil befouling a self-cleansing sea. Spender is an idealist and believes in the future. Love can break the cycle of hate: "Though hidden under seas / Of chafing despair, / Love's need does not cease" (RV, 31). Here, however, infelicitous images, such as "Their dead teeth bite the earth / With semen of new hatred" (RV, 30), detract one more.

"The War God" and "To Poets and Airmen" indicate that, like Marxist dialectic, Spender sees war as inevitable until a utopia of peace is established. "To Poets and Airmen" is dedicated to Michael Jones, an airman (WW, 266). Airmen require "A bullet's eye of courage / To fly through this age" (RV,32) and in the desperate battle of Britain. They are importuned:

Before you throw away your childhood,
With the lambs pasturing in flaxen hair,
To plunge into this iron war,
Remember for a flash the wild good
Drunkenness where
You abandoned future- care,
And then forget. Become what

Things require.

(RV, 32, 33)

In an extended image of great beauty, "The air Raid across the Bay" offers searchlights in the mythic sky:

The shining ladders slant
Up to the god of war
Exalted on those golden stilts
And riding in his car
Of a destroying star.

(RV, 35)

At the end of the raid, nature struggles back and survives "in an elemental magic / Of ripeness, which mocks / The nails through flesh torn" (RV, 35).

"Winter and Summer" transcends the cliché of winter as the season of despair and summer as the season of hope, as the persona hears "the groaning of the wasted lived." In deeply moving lines the poet affirms his hope and even belief that "furious volleys of charioteering power" will fade away:

If my shadowed mind affirmed the light
It would return to those green foolish years
When to live seemed to stand nee-deep in flower:
There, winter was an indoor accident,
Where, with head pressed against the glass, I watched
The garden, falsified by snow,
Waiting to melt, and become real again.

(RV, 36-37)

"In Memoriam" rejects the humanistic optimism of "Winter and Summer" with a five-time-repeated refrain of war: "Where everything stops but the wishes that kill" (RV, 38). The "laughing lad Bill, "who is a "fine feather-head," is questioned in death:

Was your life, but a curveting arc of desire

Ricochetting in flames on your own funeral pyre
Instinctive as birds,
Where everything stops but the wishes that kill?

(RV, 39)

The poem is less a lament for the death of an airman than for the loss of civilized values caused by war, as humans, “driven by intolerance, . . . ,melt down the whirring bodies of boys / And their laughter distil / To plough metal hatred through the skies” (RV, 38). Perhaps the greatest evil of war is what it does to the human heart, inuring it to the fiercest cruelties.

The desire for peace reaches a crescendo in the most acclaimed poem in *Ruins and Visions*, “June 1940, “ that most despair-filled month of the war for the British, when the army was driven from Dunkirk and France fell. In the poem two old men, perhaps veterans of World War I, announce that “our minds must harden” (RV, 41). The poem mocks their patriotism and the attitude that in the end “of course, we shall win” (RV, 42). Win what? It was brave of Spender to have published “June 1940” in wartime, for its message is that “Victory and defeat, both the same,/ Hollow masks worn by shame”(RV,42-42)/ Spender had given up supporting any system with poetry, because all systems resort to barbarism and use the gullible to slay the innocent, making war on life itself.

In Part Three, “Deaths,” Spender is less self-obsessed than in Part One, even though he is describing failures, struggles, and sufferings, including the archetypal Oedipal battle between father and son and the wasting cancer of his beloved sister-in-law Margaret Spender. In “The Ambitious Son,” Spender tries to placate and finally bury the ghost of his father, a man who remained committed to the political process and social reform. Father and son had in effect competed for fame. Spender had become so egotistical that he searched the newspapers daily looking for his name. His father had searched for immortality too, but

Soon you lay in your grave like a crumpled clown
Eaten by worms, by quicklime forgotten,
Fake, untragic, pelted down
By a generation still more rotten.

(RV, 48)

However, the poet finds that he cannot totally forsake his father's vision, when "the prisoners and the homeless make me burn / With homesickness when I pass" (FRV, 49). No father ever fully leaves his son. The poem is so nostalgic that it even brings back Spender's old images of machinery: "How like an engine e do I PRESS / Toward the terminus of my last breath" (RV, 49). Shades of "The Express"! Of course, the terminus now is not high art but death.

"The Drowned" is a maudlin poem memorializing sailors who died in the war at sea. We are not surprised to learn that "no letter reaches wrecks; / Corpses have no telephone" (RV, 53). "Tod und das Maedchen" (Death and the Girl), the title from Matthias Claudius and Franz Schubert, and "Wings of the Dove," also the title of Henry James's 1902 novel about a dying woman, appear again, slightly altered and rattled as part of "elegy for Margaret" in *Poems of Dedication* (1974). They treat poor Margaret Spender's agonized decline. She was to die three years after the publication of *Ruins and Visions*. "Tod und das Maedchen" vividly depicts her suffering:

Where you are lying,
The strong tide of your limbs drawn back
By green tides of regret,
And the sorrowful golden flesh
Scorched on by disease,
How difficult is dying
In your living dying eyes. (RV, 51)

The poet is tormented in "wings of the Dove" because his sorrow can not help her:

It does not carry surgeon's knife

To cut the wrongly multiplying cells
At the root of your life.
It can only prove
That extreme love
Stretches beyond the flesh to hideous bone
Howling in the dark alone.

(RV, 56)

Margaret's suffering is symbolic of all the suffering in the raging war, but, finally, suffering is both individual and bipartite: there is the sufferer and there are those close ones who suffer vicariously because they love the bearers of the pain. Yet the poet's grief is only "thought, a dream," the "granite facts' are in the bed.

"The Fates," the last poem in Part Three, "deaths," is the longest in *Ruins and Visions*, 155 lines divided into three sections. In the first, as he is wont to do, Spender presents life as theater. The "actors act the ritual of their parts / Clowns, killers, lovers, captains" (RV, 57), and the audience watches, hoping that the catastrophe will not envelop it, but, of course, it does, for "which are the actors, which the audience? (RV, 58). The poet scorns the self-deceivers who ignore reality, like the aristocratic mother in the second third sections who raised her son in an atmosphere of isolation from the "poverty, adultery, disease" that surrounded their comfortable world, only to lose him on "a field abroad," where he finds the truth at last:

A whip of lead
Strikes a stain of blood from his pure forehead.
Into the dust he falls,
The virginal face carved from a mother's kisses
As though from sensitive ivory,
Staring up at the sun, the eyes at last made open.

(RV, 63)

Fate is terribly fierce to those who hide from truth. It is like a house cat turned into Blake's tiger: "As though the cat had turned into a Tiger / Leaping out of a world become a jungle / To destroy its master" (RV, 62). Thus, the catastrophe is reserved for those who attempt to avoid seeing the tragedy of war. "The Fates" is the finale of "Ruins."

Part Four, "Visions," grows from the ruins that have preceded it; it sorts out the disasters and seeks, along a personal path, poet's selfidentity. He must find in lover and friend a familiar landscape, and "Visions" details the search for it.

"At Night" describes how darkness, like a drug, can ease the pressures of the real, presenting the persona, the "I" alone and naked, as "the image of his own loneliness" (RV, 68). "Dusk," several poems nearer to the final "To Natasha," is less dark. Serenity and old verities prevail. It is as if Spender yearned to reverse time, to be Georgian poet like John Masefield, searching for the core of beauty:

On earth below
The knotted hands
Lay down their tasks,
And the wooden handles
Of steel implements
Gently touch the ground.
The shifting animals
Wrinkle their muzzles
At the sweet passing peace,
Like bells, of the breeze;
And the will of Man
Floats loose, released.

(RV, 79-80)

"Daybreak" is a bright love sonnet, immediately preceding "To Natasha." The word "darling" from the beloved's lips "feel, form a dawn of fountains," upon his heart like "the song of the first bird" (RV, 82). Ruins are far from the persona's mind in this

love lyric, the only one in the collection. Love for a woman consumes all fears, ambitions, and misgivings.

“The Barn” and “In a Garden” are tranquil pieces indicating a retreat to Wordsworthian contemplation. Like a nineteenth-century romantic, Spender, in “The Barn,” builds a mood with a houseful of sensual, descriptive images. The poem is atypically nondidactic, a beautiful sound, hushed by whispers of leaves, and bird song” (RV 70). And in “In A =garden” the persona is challenged to make poetry of nature:

Had I pen ink and paper,
I think that they could carry
The weight of all these roses,
These rocks and massive trees.

(RV, 72)

In “ A Childhood” the persona has met a girl “on the edge / Of your barbarous childhood” (RV, 73). He prays that with maturation “you may have have the strength to become you” (RV, 74). In “into Life” the beloved “never quite will learn / Too see your life as whole, / Your mirrors are too blind” (RV, 75), but she may learn the truth that “what you were, you are, / And what you will be, you are, too (RV, 76). In “The coast” the poet concludes that goodness continues to exist in the world: “Some acts of kindness wave their handkerchiefs;” and joy may come from “flesh and bone” (RV, 78).

“To Natasha” ends Ruins and Visions. Spender had married Nathsha Litvin in 1941. “Separation” ceased. He had found a love that would endure the seasons. Nathasha is the final vision. Like Years, Spender can believe in order only after there

has been disorder. It is the path and the proof. Second marriage brought closure to an open arc, although the future is always uncharitable:

Darling, this kiss of great serenity
Has cast no sheet anchor of security
 But balance upon the faith that lies
 In the timeless loving of your eyes
Our terrible peace, where all that was
Certain and stated, falls apart
 Into original meanings, and the words
That weighed like boulders on us from the past
Are displaced by an earthquake of the heart.

(RV, 84)

The finest poems in *Ruins and Visions* are a Part Two, "Ironies of War." Although the quality of the work in general evidences a slight falling off from *The Still Centre*, Spender's poetic ability and energy remain strong. Most of the poems in the collection are compressed and consistent, but some are soft in theme or execution. Spender takes chances and reveals himself in the best tradition of romantic poetry. His gifted personality emerges undaunted from the ruins of war and the battles of life. Life and death, love and war, betrayal and forgiveness, suffering and salvation, separation and union, and the existential being become the elements of the Spender cosmos.

Although some of its poems were composed late in the conflict, *Poems of Dedication* (1947) is essentially a product of the postwar era. Battle and politics have all but disappeared from the poems, and the personal, both tragic and joyous, has taken over. The collection is Spender's most intimate attempt to engage human consciousness, existence, love, and death. His approach to life grows even more positive because love is now the central factor in existence. *Poems of Dedication* contains 24 poems divided into four parts. Part One, "Elegy for Margaret," is a 6-

poems lament for the author's sister-in-law, who died of cancer on Christmas Day, 1945. Part Two, "Love, Birth, and Absence," is dedicated "to Natasha." Part Three, "Spiritual Exploration," is dedicated to Cecil Day Lewis, and Part Four, "Seascape and Landscape," has a poem dedicated to Edith Sitwell.

Two poems in "Elegy for Margaret," "From a tree chocked by ivy, rotted" and "Poor girl, inhabitant of a stark land" were previously published in *Ruins and Visions* as "Tod und das Maedchen" and "Wings of the Dove" (discussed above). The six poems demonstrate how the poet dealt with Margaret's death. His approach is platonic. The healthy hide in the dream of life, in which they unknowingly mimic the realities of the immortal, spiritual world. The poems are influenced by Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which Spender had cotranslated in 1939 and which he later said "were the work of the perpetual transformation of beloved and tangible things into the invisible vibrations and excitability of our nature, which introduces new 'frequencies' into the pulsing fields of the universe." In a sense, the *Elegies* chronicle Margaret's translation into the cosmos.

In "Darling of our hearts, drowning" the poet immediately engages the devastating fact of terminal illness: "The invisible vulture feeds on your flesh." But death is more important than

love, so the poet will "wear your death is also more important than love, so the poet will "wear your death / Next to my heart, where others wear their love"(PD, 12).

In "Dearest and nearest brother," Spender speaks to his grieving brother Humphrey to comfort him with the serene assertion that the sting of death can be assuaged by its meaning: it is a beginning, a confirmation, a marriage.

As she will live who, candle-lit,
Floats upon her final breath,

.
Wearing not like destruction, but
Like a white dress, her death.

(PD, 14-15)

Margaret its merging, as all must do one day, with nature in “already you are beginning to become.” Her body will be a “fallen tree trunk with sun-burnished limbs / In an infinite landscape” (PD, 20). Spender metamorphoses the dying Margaret, “Partly ghost,” into that piece for earth she shall become. “The final, act of love” fully and finally unfolds death criticism in the “Elegy.” In the Victorian manner, grief is visualized as a “deprived fanatic lover. The lovers “assume this coarseness / Of loved and loving bone / Where all are all and all alone” (PD, 23). Death bonds forever in the love of the universe. It is oneness and perfectibility.

“Elegy for Margaret” has a literary pedigree running from Theocritus down through the great elegies of English literature---Donne’s elegies, Milton’s “Lycidas, “Dryden’s “Mr. Oldham, “Shelley’s “Adonais,” and Tennyson’s “In Memoriam”--- all of which are faintly echoed in Spender’s carefully studied composition. Yet “Elegy for Margate” was probably Spender’s most emotionally exhausting work, a profound spiritual opportunity. It is also one of his most beautiful extended poems. The solace of art for the loss of a loved one has seldom been better presented.

The poems of Part Two, “Love, Birth, and Absence,” deal with the joy of love’s union and with recollections of ecstatic moments. The poems are resplendent with romantic imagery.” “Summer” ostensibly glorifies the season, but really declaims the charms of a lover:

The midsummer glow
Reflected in her eyes
Is colour of clover
In grass flesh where she lies.

Bid-shadow cloud-shadow
Draw a net of sighs
Over her from her sun-gold lover.

(PD, 27)

“Four Eyes,” two for each lover, see “ the light / of world” and try unsuccessfully to be “a mesh / To net the summer hours”)PD, 28. The lovers are ‘locked / Within the lens of their bodies rocked” 9PD, 29). Natasha and Stephen’s first child was born in 1945. The sis-line “Man and Woman” sees love between them as an ennobling force in the universe. They “naked new life fashion” (PD, 30).

In “The Trance” the momentary separation of the persona and his lover in sleep proves his philosophy of the of the transcendence of love over the physical: “Our bodies, stripped of clothes that seem, / And our souls, stripped of beauty’s mesh, / Meet out true selves, their charms outwitted” (PD, 31). The bed is also where the angel and the devil in lovers meet: “Our angel without devil meets / In the atrocious night” (PD, 31-32). But there is accommodation, forgiveness, and understanding until “love’s deep miracle” proves that physical union only prefigures true spiritual union.

“Absence” and “lost” are poems about the pain and anguish of separation from a loved one. “Absence has the quality of ice / On a high peak” (PD, 33). The trouble between lovers vanishes upon their reunion when the persona see “the pure you in your eyes” (PD, 33). The persona can feel lost and sad in the house his wife and child have vacated. The room where he saw the mother “watching a child starred in his nakedness” is the precious place where their eyes collect “the light which each form each reflects” (PD. 35). His “seeing unseen eyes” will bring his thoughts “back to that room where life was life most” (PD, 35).

Spender describes Part Three, "Spiritual Explorations," as "a parallel attempt to penetrate the very nature of human existence" (PS39, 37). It is the most philosophically profound section of *Poems of Departure*. He wants to examine the question of whether there is a meaning to human life, and he seeks a device with which to pursue that question. The structure of "Spiritual Explorations" is precise: a six-line prologue, seven sonnets, and a long freeform eighth section.

The prologue flags the points of exploration: observing the world and the cosmos, and recognizing that the cosmos is indifferent to human life. The stars speak only "a language of mirrors" (PD, 39). The sonnets are solid, formal vessels holding the heavy wine of speculation. The first focuses on human vulnerabilities: nakedness, hollow minds, "paper skulls." We play the game of meaningfulness, in life, but soon "the multitudinous loneliness of death' will cure us of our illusions. Sonnet II repeats the existential terror, reading like the synopsis of a Beckett play:

You were born; must die; were loved; must love;
Born naked; were clothed ; still naked walk
Under your clothes. Under your skin you move
Naked: naked under acts and talk.

(PD, 40)

And the sonnet ends with a danse macabre: "Harlequin skeleton, it / Strums on your gut such songs and merry dances / Of love, of loneliness, of life being death" (PD, 40).

Sonnet III tells us that our progress is in the effort "to narrow / The gap between the world shut in the eyes / And the receding world of light beyond" (PD, 41). Our relationship to the cosmos shifts in this poem. Now we are and shall never be more. This is the understanding that is the goal of exploration. We may build a city of stone, but we mortals have no old on it, for it serves only to prove our existence," our breath, our love" (PD, 41). In sonnet IV the poet reminds us again

that mortals “have only / Bodies, and graves,” and though we learn much in life, “knowledge and memory, are unfurled / Within each separate head” (PD, 42). Nevertheless, we grow more lonely until shed the world.

In sonnet V, however, hope emerges in traditional Christian form:

The immortal spirit is that single ghost
Of all time, incarnate in one time,
Which through our breathing skeletons must climb
To be within our supple skin engrossed.

(PD, 43)

But those who reject the Holy Spirit and repel humanity are lost: “Shut in himself, each blind, beaked subject kills /His neighbor and himself, and shuts out pity / For that one winging spirit which fulfils” (PD, 43).

In sonnets VI and VII the first-person voice now appears, as the persona steps in to assert his truth: “I am that witness through whom the whole / Knows it exists” (PD, 44). His knowledge then given meaning to the universe. The world may have its objective physical existence, but, paradoxically “ the stars outside / Glitter under my ribs. Being all, I am alone” (PD, 44). Furthermore, when he dies, “the And that which passes, passes away, is I” (PD, 44). Humans may be the measure of all things, but what does it matter if we are mortal? The knowledge of death makes the persona sigh with sadness as he sees “mirrored in my consciousness, the ill / Chameleonic harlequin who’ll die” (PD, 45).

Sonnet VIII seems extraneous. Spender omitted and VII from *Collected Poems*, 1928-1953. In *Selected Poems* (1964) he included only I, III and VI, slightly altered. Part Eight is also repetitious, as it calls for the unbandaging of eyes to reveal to someone “him as he is” and “show him your own existence as are” (PD, 46). Still, sonnet VIII summarized “Spiritual Explorations”. It presents a skeptic’s response to

the world catastrophes the persona has seen and endured, and the ratiocination brings him some way toward faith and hope. The persona is crying out for insight while weeping from the pain of existential loneliness. The parallel to “Elegy for Margaret” is clear. The “Elegy” is the response to the public tragedy endured; “Spiritual Exploration” is the response to the public tragedies of war, cruelty, suffering, and death.

Part Four, “Seascape and Landscape,” contains three poems linked by a central idea: the desire for freedom from prison, from authority, from the strictures of time, and from the distances that impede love. “Midsummer” creates a desire in the persona to listen “to a dynamo of summer that revolves / Generating what glistens” (PD, 51). But like all of us he “tied on strips of time? Caged in minutes” and “shut without pity / In a clock eternity” (PD, 52).

“Seascape” shows how the sea has its moods and how destruction lurks beneath the calm. The beautiful sea drowns butterflies and ships. There are some days the happy ocean lies / Like unfingered harp, below the land,” (PD, 53), when heroes have been “by sea engulfed, their coins and eyes / Twisted; by the timeless waves’ desires / . . . / While, above them, the harp assumes their sighs” (PD, 54). The sea is the symbolic ocean of eternity and of the unity of space, time, and eternity into which all energy flows and all matter merges.

“Meeting,” a love poem in five parts, expresses the oneness of lovers who are separated by great distance. Their eyes “see with each other’s eyes / Though half a world between us lies” (PD, 58). So powerful is their love that they are seemingly able to consummate it even when apart:

When we sleep, our separate dreams
Flow into each other’s streams

Wave over far wave slips
Out lips melt into our lips.
On my tongue your tongue
Rustles with your song my song.

(PD, 58)

They have grown so close spiritually that they seem to have one voice and their unity augurs union after death.

The limpidity and excesses notwithstanding, *Poems of Dedication* is a creditable collection of verse. In "Elegy for Margaret" and "Spiritual Explorations," Spender deals with complex feelings and eternal questions. He sets for himself the high-minded task, perhaps impossibly difficult, of reconciling existential loneliness and the search for traditional faith---the elusive goal of mid-twentieth-century philosophy. Also, he tries to assuage psychological pain in others and to gloss love and joy in himself. His new world is personal and braver than the old one. The Climaxes are emotional, not personal. As in the 1930s, Spender is here a man of his time, but the time is a lesser age.

Paradoxically, the 25 poems of *The Edge of Being* (1949) move Spender closer to positions of both faith and existentialism. Politics continues to decline as a subject, with the exception of "Returning to Vienna, 1947." Love is less central too. A philosophical poet emerges. The war is not over for Spender however, and there is much guilt to expiate. The book is a sampler, the pieces discrete and ungrouped. Spender, who was 40 when the collection appeared, had matured considerably as both poet and person, and could look back on a body of work of high quality and sizable quantity. In *The Edge of Being*, Spender shows that he has eased into his natural voice. He has adopted the political, social, domestic, sexual, and religious attitudes that would serve him for the rest of his working life.

The first poem in *The edge of Being*, "O Omega, Invocation," is a prayer to God, the Alpha and Omega. The letter O beginning the poem symbolizes the complete circle, the cycle of life, the unity of God. Also, O, as the last letter of the Greek alphabet, represents ending and zero, vanished where the eye / Springs through thee, O. All humans live, before eternity, on the edge of the O, the edge of being. The soul's progress in form the edge to, in Yeatsian terms, the unity of being.

The Angel,' "Madonna,' and "Judas Iscariot" are poems with a traditional religious content. The persona in "The Angel" would have us withdraw from the world of sense and to join the unity of humanity, for "each is involved in the tears and blood of all"(EB,27).Mortality is also shared. The angel warns us of the evil in rejecting God's charity and hope: "He is truth's own doom / Blowing news of evil on a golden trumpet" (EB, 27).

In "Madonna" the Virgin has a vision, while Christ is in her womb, of either a God-loving people of "heroes whose rays / Murder in the womb" (EB, 45). Her Son will later say to humankind, "Choose!"

"Judas Iscariot" is the most interesting of the religious poems in *The Edge of being*. The dramatic monologue presents Judas as posing himself as an heroic victim. In a flowing, conversational tone Judas speaks as a spirit addressing the modern world as one with "the eyes of twenty centuries. "He looks back to his life and is angered the he has been portrayed as the archetypal betrayer. Although he was not sinless, he argues the God, omnipotent and omniscient, is true betrayer, for He is the First Cause:

But who betrayed whom? O you,
Whose light gaze forms the azure corridor

Through with those other pouring eyes
Arrow into me-----answer! Who
Betrayed whom? Who had foreseen
All, form the first?

.
Who knew
I must betray the truth ,and made the lie
Betray its truth in me?

(EB, 16-17)

Those who denigrate Judas now, he argues, are hypocrites, the same king of people who once mocked Jesus. The sad truth is that hypocrisy and persecution live on in humankind. "Judas Iscariot" is one of the most searching and profound poems in *The Edge of being*.

Other dramatic monologues in *The Edge of Being* are "Faust's Song" and "Tom's A-Cold." In "Faust's Song" the power of love over knowledge is recognized by the scholar, who desires to be "reborn in the blonde landscape of a woman" and to die, in the Elizabethan sense, "in the river of eyes!" (EB, 15). In "Tom's A-Cold," Tom speaks in eighteenth-century rhymed couplets. Spender is successfully experimenting here with a form fresh for him. He proves that he can sustain classical distance from his material. Tom is like Tom O'Bedlam (Edgar in disguise) in *King Lear*, but Spender's Tom is a man of the twentieth century who has come to realize that when the world is demented, madness is as viable a way of life as saneness. The new Tom once went "clothed in herringbone tweed" (EB,37), but now he knows the true pain of the poor, bare forked animal that is man. He understands "the sick botched lives, / The drink, the whoring and the knives" (EB, 41). In death,

Where I lie in gravestone rhyme [like the poem],
My eyes are these two pools which climb

Through grey reflections to the sky----

My world asking your world: "Why?"

(EB, 42)

Why vanity, why passion, why struggle, why competition, when you know from the gravestones what the end is?

Besides "Faust's Song," the only love poems in *The Edge of Being* are "O Night O Trembling Night," "Epithalamion," "Ice," and "Weep, Girl, Weep." "O Night O trembling Night, "like a troubador's ballad, evokes sexual love through Christian symbolism. The persona's mouth was vague animal cry / Pasturing on her flesh" (EB,11). The loved one's body becomes the Host, and "her naked love, my great good news." The sexual act is the Gospel in this very erotic poem.

"Epithalamion" is a traditional wedding song, like Edmund Spenser's "Epithalamium" and Shelley's "Epithalamium" and "Bridle Song." Spender informs the marrying couple that their unity is beyond time space. It

Should be

Stretched beyond this sheeted space

Where curling limbs agree,

Into a timeless bodiless grace

(EB, 46)

The poet blesses and wishes will. His final prayer: "O love, be indivisible!"

"Ice" is a sensual reminiscence of a winter's day when the persona's kiss brought fire to a woman's frozen face as 'her smiling eyes / Shone with the health of the ice" (EB, 18). Hot-blooded poems like this and "Epithalamion" refute some present criticism of *The Edge of Being*, like A.T. Tolley's dismissal of the collection as a "depressingly lifeless book."

"Word" is a little rhyme game. "Empty House" finds the persona missing his absent son when he tries to tidy up the boy's room. "Weep, Girl, Weep" is a poignant

lament for a girl whose lover has been shot down and killed in war. Her sorrow “makes a great angel” (EB, 26). “Awakening” is a pessimistic, unmoving poem in which “the whole shy opens to an O” and “the clocks grow beards” (EB, 14). “On the Third Day” is a poem of summer in which on successive days the persona lies in the valley enjoying the sensuous world and then climbs to the timberline, from which the world is obscured and then climbs to the timberline, from which the world is obscured and then climbs to the timberline, from which the world is obscured and where, in an unfortunate cliché, he “could not see the wood for the trees”; but on the third day, he ‘sprang from the forest / Into the wonder of a white snowtide” (EDB, 12) which he finds perspective and spiritual renewal.

“Returning to Vienna, 1947” is a major work in *The Edge of being*. Poets, like the rest of us, enjoy revisiting places of early challenges and first lives:” “Vienna of my loving my first woman,” Vienna where “the flower of my first flesh unfolded” (EB, 20). But, for Spender, Vienna was also where in 1934 the fascists killed “the small empiric saints” who were “Shot down singing in their tenements” (EB, 21).

The poem is divided into seven parts (nine in the original version). Part I is a traditional invocation to the muse, “Femine Vienna,” and in the central “Graben Square” the persona recalls the wars and plagues that have ravaged the city. Part II invites the reader to the haunts of the persona’s love affair: the café in the city of music and the Vienna Woods. Parts II and IV, however, depict the ironic clash of passionate love and deadly politics: “Beyond the crystal bowl of our joined gaze-----/ There was reality” (EB, 21), for there they saw the ‘burning bodies like the spokes / Of cartwheels thrown down” (EB, 21) and there they endured “the tears and bloodshot vein of seeing / The outer world destroy the inner world” (EB, 22). In Parts V and VI the city falls in “one instant of one night” (EB, 23). Statuary imagery, introduced in Part I , reaches a highpoint in VI as “the staturesd angel falls upon her

knees” (EB, 23). Rubble and dust everywhere. In Part VII the poet has come “back to the fallen dust” (EB, 224) in shame for not having fought on the side of the dead Socialist martyrs, for having lived over “the edge of being,” and for not having loved enough too. He now knows that love is the mainspring of life. It “holds each moment to each moment / With architecture of continual passion”(EB, 25)

“Returning to Vienna, 1947” works well. It is more successful than its predecessor, *Vienna*, but then it is a much more modest endeavor. Here Spender properly balance the counterpointing themes of romantic passion and political struggle. He speaks with directness, clarity, and an authentic diction. He is no longer trying to be Eliot; he is Spender. But when *Vienna* had that never-reignitable fire of youth, when a sensitive young man knows how to hang his sympathies on the right hangers (the oppressed, the needy, the deserving, the human), when a young poet can take wild chances with poetry, people, and politics.

The Edge of Being contains six war poems, or, more precisely, postwar poems, for they are reflections in peacetime on the immediate violent past. “Epilogue to a Human Drama” powerfully evokes the bombing of London:

The City burned with unsentimental dignity
Of resigned wisdom: those stores and churches
Which had glittered emptily in gold and silk,
Stood near the crowning dome of the cathedral
Like courtiers round the Royal Martyr.

(EB, 28)

Here is a drama for the world’s stage, with “heroes, maidens, fools, victims, a chorus” (EB, 28). Spender is at his descriptive and imagistic best as he masterfully transforms his experience as a fireman in the Blitz into the “tragedy” of London.

“Rejoice in the Abyss” is a poem of grim hope. Like “Epilogue to a Human drama,” it has as its subject an air raid on London. Waiting in fear for the raid to cease, the persona imagines “the photograph my skull might take / Through the eye sockets, in one flashlit instant” (EB, 30) When the walls of his house smash down in him. “But the pulsation passed, and glass lay round me” (EB, 30). The persona imagines that the streets “were filled with London prophets, who called out, “Rejoice in the abyss!” and denied meaning in individual life, for “each life feeds upon the grief of others” (EB, 31). We are always glad and guilty when calamity strikes others and we are spared. We must accept that life is only the abyss between birth and death.

“ a man-made World” is a bleak poem arguing that humans have created this uncomfortable world, which pays us back in ‘money, steel, fire, stones, / Stripping flesh from bones.” (EB, 33). Industrial humankind has created a nightmare of machines and weapons. “Man-made toys” bring the “siren wails, “ and “while the gloom descends / . . . out means becomes our ends” (EB, 33). That end is loneliness, “with no saving star” (EB, 32).

“The Conscript” sees the ghost of previous armies and their skeletons. He cries out, “Farther! I come! (EB, 34). “Almond Tree in a Bombed City” employs heavy enjambment to disguise a strictly rhymed and tightly structured poem:

In the burned city, I see
The almond flower, as though
With great cathedral-fall
Barbarian rage set free
The angel of a fresco
From a cloister wall.

(EB, 35).

Although the city is burned, there is hope, heaven, and art----and “angel of Fra Angelico. . . To our world of ash will bring / Annunciation of Spring” (EB, 35). The persona is sure it will happen.

In “Responsibility: The Pilots Who Destroyed Germany, Spring, 1945,” Spender declares his lasting guilt, which “turns thoughts over and over like a propeller, for having willed the bombing of a German town: “My will exploded. Tall buildings fell.” Now the poet uses the past was as a subject for introspective writing: “I tie the ribbons torn down from those terraces / Around the most hidden image in my lines” (EB, 36). Had is ashamed. The just person cannot justify war’s murder, regardless of provocations.

“Memento” is for the other face of Germany, not as victim of bombings but as perpetrator of one of history’s greatest crimes: the Holocaust. In 10 lines Spender evokes the horror of the concentration camps filled with wretched humans whose “ eyes sunk jellied in their holes/ Were held toward the sun like begging bowls” (EB, 48). Man’s inhumanity to man shocks and perplexes the poet.

The last three poems in *The Edge of Being* are existential pieces. “Speaking to the Dead in the Language of the Dead” is a fine poem, a kind of *Rake’s Progress* of a romantic poet, in a five-part narrative. Parts I and II show the reader his dissipation. Part III presents the relationship between his creative work and his destructive life. Part IV invites wonder as to how such a person could leave posterity “thoughts like footprints across snow. Part V offers the existential answers: “We live on a plane / Where our life is the blurred and jagged edge/ Of all who ever died” (EB, 52). Moreover, e create the poet’s values in our minds: “Through us you enter into your ideal (EB, 53).

In "We Cannot Hold into the World" the persona describes two deaths: and athlete who has been shot and a woman writer, perhaps Virginia Woolf, who has drowned herself. There are no meaningful explanations for such deaths. Life is random: "A turning wheel scatters / Stars upon the win." It is hard for a poet to "regain / The concentrated mind / From blowing dust outside" (EB, 54). One cannot dwell on loneliness and emptiness and yet continue to work.

Spender's great concern for time passing and death brought him to "Time to Our Time." Existentialist believe that they can only be true to themselves if they accept the finality of death and live constantly with the thought of its approach. The persona acknowledges that he "was cast naked out of non-existence" and that he is "Moving form inconceivable beginning / To inconceivable end." The self is "cadaver planing and spiraling through the dark" (EB, 55). It is the phenomenal instant that matters, and love "which penetrates through falling flesh" (EB, 56). Spender's absorption with the nature of time recalls a well-known passage in Eliot's "Burnt Norton": "The present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past."

It is clear in *The Edge of Being* that some of the passion, intensity, and commitment has drained from the poetry of Stephen. At 40 the poet was not the idealist and visionary he had been at 20. His perception of life and his weltanschauung darkened, while his thoughts became more inward and personal. Yet Spender remained the romantic poet and his style continued clear and fluid. At their best, the poems of *The Edge of Being* are precise, often passionate, are frequently profound. They are not to be written off because they are different from what he had done previously and what others like W.H Auden, Edith Sitwell, and Dylan Thomas were then doing.

Spender added only seven poems to his canon when he published his first *Collected Poems* (1955), a fact that would seem to indicate that he then thought of himself primarily as a thirties poet. Spender made few changes in his poems, mostly minor---“no more than a discreet and almost unnoticeable minimum of technical tidying up. To his credit Spender did not attempt to tidy up or change his early political image from young Communist to young humanist by altering passages here and there in the 1930s poems.

The first new poems in *Collected Poems*, 1928-1953 are three pieces about Spender's daughters: “To My Daughter,” “Missing My Daughter,” and “Nocturne.” The first two show Spender's developing sensitivity to, and concern for, the very existence and the needs of other individual humans. Group interest fades. Spender now begins to focus on what G.S Fraser calls “the shining transparency of the single vision.” “To My Daughter,” only five lines long, defines the great and permanent love the poet has for his child. Her whole hand grasped his finger, and he will never forget that clutching grip: “All my life I'll feel a ring invisibly circle this bone with shining “ (CP 1955, 186). The tone, diction, and imagery of the piece are near perfect.

In “Missing My Daughter,” Spender employs conventional rose imagery to evoke the fragile beauty of his child, whom he misses as he sits at his desk trying to write: “The blank page stares at me like glass / Where stared-at roses with to pass / Through petalling of my pen” (CP 1955, 187). It is amusing to contemplate a poet writing that he cannot write. The child enters and becomes a “while poem. / The roses raced around her name” (CP 1955, 188). Like “To My Daughter,” “Missing my Daughter” is precision work, without a wasted word.

Written in the third person, “Nocturne” has two parents imagining that the cries in the night of their six-year-old daughter symbolized the world's suffering, which

they and other must strive to assuage, for they, like all humans, are capable of doing unspeakable things: “Parents like mountains watching above their child, / Envallied here beneath them, also hold / Upon the frozen heights, the will that sends / Destruction” (CP 1955, 190). The terrible weight, of the world is upon parents and child, whose screams of “primal life” remind her parents that in the dark night of the soul there are “men’s plots to murder children” and thus there is “no truth but that / Which reckons this child’s tears and argument” (CP 1955), 191). There is also a gentle, humorous spin to this grave poem in the thought of young parents universalizing their guilt because their infant is crying.

Three new poems in *Collected Poems, 1928-1953* portray foreign landscapes. “In Attica” begins by describing a landscape, but then move leisurely to a comment on how the gods have sculptured the land as the Greeks did their steles. Both gods and Greeks teach un immortality, “where the dying / Are changed to stone on a gesture of curded air,/ Lingerin g in their infinite departure” (CP 1q985, 191). “Messenger,” addressed to the Greek poet George Seferis, describes a runner traversing Greece to a temple where he “kissed the white stone”.

He lifts his eyes where
Grooved columns are quivers
From which the archer sun
Takes arrows to shoot
Through his eye-sockets.

(CP 1995, 183)

In the end, however, it is the poet who is the messenger and his message is that he exists. Ruined Europe has no message for ruined ancient Greece except to affirm the poet’s “I am!” As long as the poet survives, beauty and history survive.

“Sirmione Peninsula, “ a poem of lost love, takes its title from an old Roman site in northern Italy. The persona has returned with a new love to the place he had

visited with an earlier, still sorely missed lover. The new wife “seemed sad / Seeing me self-enclosed in my view of the view / That shut her out from me” (CP 1955, 192-93). The persona thus brings pain to his wife, but he cannot help himself. It is as if he were alone, “since she with whom I would be is not at my side, / With her hair blown back by the winds of the whole lake view, / Lips parted as though to greet the flight of a bird” (CP 1955, 193).

“Dylan Thomas, “ the last new poem in *Collected Poems*, 1928-1953, is an elegiac tribute to Spender’s commemorates and captures the essence of “this roaring ranter, man and boy,” the prolific poet whose “poems he shed out of his pockets” (CP 1955, 194). Spender presents Thomas as an effigy of Guy Fawkes set ablaze for popular entertaining but lighting up the sky as angels do. Spender was, and is, loyal to his friends to death and beyond. Thomas, like the poet in “The Messenger,” has said “I am!” and Spender generously places him among the great.

The new poems in *Collected Poems*, 1928-1953 continue the process of withdrawal from the political arena. Spender was struggling now to board, and grapple with, immediate moments and to explore the nature of time, consciousness, and the pain of mortality. The fewness of new poems included six years after his previous volume indicated a withdrawal from poetry as well as from politics.

The *Selected Poems* of 1964 was first published in America and reprints only a few poems from the *Selected Poems* of 1940. All but three 1964 poems had been published before in various volumes. Alterations are few. Spender notes in his introduction that much of his recent work has been “tentatively written.”

“Subject: Object: Sentence” is one of Spender’s is one of Spender’s most humorous poems, which of course is not saying a lot. It is clever but strained, a linguistic *tour de force* to be recommended to teachers of English grammar. The

narrative of puns in a word game begins, “a subject thought: because he had a verb / With several objects, that he ruled a sentence” (SP 1964, 77). He is “*having’s slave*” and means to “ free himself from the verb have” because his “objects were *wine, Women, fame and wealth.*” In the end, he realizes that language has tricked and betrayed him by means of a handbook full of teaching terms. Finally he understand” “A sentence is condemned to stay as stated ----/ As in *life-sentence, deathsentence,* for example” (SP 1964, 77). Spender is saying that what is written remains written and one is fated to live out his or her sentence.

“Earth-Treading Stars That Make Dark Heaven Light” is abstract and complex. Again Spender opposes darkness and light. Now, however, a new truth is revealed, and it is made of flesh, for when we make love we see “into each other’s night” and transcend to a fidelity that is like the “most brilliant star” (SP 1964, 79).

“One More New Botched Beginning, “ the last piece in the *Selected Poems of 1964*, is a poem of three memories: “Ten years age here in Geneva, / I walked with Merleau-Ponty by the lake. “ Now the philosopher friend has died and the poet selfishly but humanly has reacted with the exclamation “I’m still living!” The the Poet recalls seeing his son in Geneva, years before, as a child dancing “on one leg. Leaning forward, he became / A bird-boy” (SP 1964, 80). Then, in a great explosion of poetry, the persona vividly indicates the pressure and sweet pain of memory:

Such pasts
Are not diminished distances, perspective
Vanishing points, but doors
Burst open suddenly by gusts
The seek to blow the heart out.

(SP 1964, 81)

In the third recollection Spender comes to the main theme of the poem: the existential randomness of life and the reality of the death of two poet friends. He envisions.

Three undergraduates standing talking in
A college quad. They shows each other poems----
Louis MacNeice, Bernard Spencer, and I.
Louis caught cold in the rain, Bernard fell
From a train door.

(SP 1964, 81)

In the third recollection Spender comes to the main theme of the poem: the existential randomness of life and the reality of the death of two poet friend. He envisions.

There undergraduates sending talking in
A college quad. They show each other poems----
Louis MacNeice, Bernard Spencer, and I.
Louis caught cold in the rain, Bernard fell
From a train door.

(SP 1964, 81)

Finally, “their lives are now those poems” that identified them when they were living. Of course his “life” one day will be his poems, and he will join his friend back at Oxford where they “still stand talking in the quad” (SP 1964, 81). “One More New Notched Beginning “ is a particularly fine poem and a precursor of the strong, fresh poems that would appear in the next volume of poetry.

The Generous Days (1969), of which the second edition (1971) published by Faber in Britain and Random House in the United States, is the fuller, definitive edition, contains 21 new poems and 8 poems and 8 epigrammatic pieces under the rubric “Bagatelles.” Spender also republished “One More New Botched Beginning” of which he says in “Acknowledgements and Note” that he included it “because it

seemed to sum up the mood of elegiac reminiscence of the poems that precede it in this volume.” *The Generous Days* is a significant body of work. It appeared after Spender’s sixtieth birthday and was his first volume of new poetry in 20 years.

Although the number of new poems is few after so long a wait, the poetry in *The Generous Days* shows little falling-off in power, with Spender grown more controlled, disciplined, laconic, and spare, unlike his friend and foil Auden, who grew more relaxed, colloquial, and diffuse with time. The superior poems in *The Generous days* are those in which Spender strives to create a union of the spirit and the flesh. The unifying force is the consummation of passionate life by the acceptance of death. In this last substantial collection of new work, the wisdom of a full life is brought to bear on the sue of memory and the nature of existence.

The first poem in the volume, “If It Were Not, “ depicts brooding attitude toward the passing of time and then sets a toned for the collection. The poet sings of this love for the natural world, the individuality of living things, the beauty and the blessings of wife and child in a garden, how “clocks notch such instances / On time “ and how the artist chisels “memories / Within a shadowy room, / Transmuting gleams of light to ships / Launched into a tomb” (GD, 12). The poem, a sharp and poignant reminder of mortality, is typical late Spender----a poem of icy beauty.

“ Last Days, “ dedicated to John Lehmann, is the first of several reminiscences in *The Generous Days*. Lehmann, a poet and editor, was one of Spender’s oldest friends. Spender remarks on Lehmann’s reach and scope, as if they could embrace the entire globe, “Held in his arms, he felt the earth spin round” (GD. 13). “V.W. (1941)” is a reconstruction of “We Cannot Hold into the World” in *The Edge of Being*, a eulogy for Virginia Woolf, who along with her husband, Leonard, had helped Spender in his early career. She is presented sadly as a “wild-

eyed” suicide her tormented mind grew “ cold and silent as the stone” (GD, 19) with which she weighted down her dress.

Two poems eulogize Spender’s friend Peter Watson, the wealthy patron and are editor of *Horizon* magazine. “On the Photograph of a Friend, Dead” is an attempt to understand death in terms of memory and to resurrect a deceased friend’s image through photography.

To me, under my hand, in the Dark Room
Laid in a bath of chemicals, your ghost
Emerged gelatinously from that tomb;
Looking-glass, soot-faced, values all reversed
The shadows brilliant and the lights one gloom.

(GD, 24)

However the persona cannot reverse both the process of photography and his memory to recreate the person form the image. The photo “endlessly asks me: Is this all we have? (GD, 24). The resurrection of the photo is not enough.

The second Watson poem, “Voice form a Skull,” presents one nature symbol after another to infuse meaning in the Japanese fashion. An Oriental boat traverses the sea of life, and one man’s existence is turned into Japanese print. The voice form the poet’s skull comes from the world within world.

Two poems for old friends are friends are “Four Sketches for Herbert Read,” the poet-critic who dies in 1968, and To W.H. Auden on His Sixtieth Birthday,” which Spender commemorated in 1967. “Four Sketches for Herbert Read” show Read as a youth in “Innocence” and as a World War I “Young Officer” watching his soldiers as if they were grazing sheep. “Conferecier” has the poet sketching his friend on the speaker’s platform, and “Anarchist” locates the poet in France during the student rebellion of 1968, learning of Read’s death. “To W.H. Auden on His Sixtieth Birthday”

honors Spender's mentor, who, like his younger admired, converted industrialism to poetry by "scrambling madly over scrap heaps / To fish out carburetors, speaking plugs" and "rigged such junk into new, strange machinery." Spender still smarts over his older friend's critical barks directed at "the young Romantic": Your words lobbed squibs / Into my solemn dream"(GD, 31). But the wound did "blossom to a rose," and after all, is here repaid with admiration and love.

"The Chalk Blue Butterfly" is image-impacted. Like a child observing, the persona dwells on the details of the beautiful insect: "Opening, shutting, on a hinge / Spring at touch of sun and shadow" (GD, 14). But the miraculous world of childhood and butterflies cannot be retained, and "today I am alone." The poet's son is the focus in "Boy, Cat, Canary, in which the persona, in his mature wisdom, hopes the lad does not see the ruins of Ilium in the mature wisdom hopes the lad does not see the ruins of Ilium in the naming of his bird, Hector. In "A Father in Time of War" the poet recalls taking his wife to the hospital to give birth to a "human phantom," (GD, 16) as the bombardment raged around them. In peace, the world, like "dizzy spinning tilting upside-down flags," is reborn. "The Child Falling Sleep in Time of War" Floats on her boat-bed blessed by her father's kiss.

"Almond Tree by a Bombed Church" is dedicated to Spender's friend the sculptor Henry Moore. A "Jewel-wing almond tree," nurture's art, has grown through the tracery of a bombed church. Its "leaves and burning petals glow" (GD, 18) Where a stained-glass angel once flourished. The almond tree, as symbol of long life, is also a rebirth of "luminous new life." "Mein Kind Kam Heim (after Stefan George)" is a ballad in which "my boy came home/ The seasoned still curves through his hair" (GD,20) , and the happy father rejoices in his son's return and maturation. "Sleepless" is an insomniac's poem, a debility suffered by many writers. The persona hears a strange noise and wonders if the house is falling apart and what bills he will

now incur. Then he imagines “the walls / Crumbling away.” Finally all that gloom reminds the persona that he too will “disintegrate / With the plaster---but . . . at a faster rate” (GD, 21). The lugubriously amusing poem turns mysterious as the persona thinks a noise is “that friend once / I shut him outside / Sink or swim----well, he sank’ and like guilt-born ghost he cries, Let me in!” after “twenty years in the rain” (GD, 21). The poem indicates the significance of friendship in Spender’s life and the degree to which he strove to be loyal.

The title poem, “The Generous Days,” a four piece, is a poem of maturity, when one has come to “the generous days that balance / Soul and body” (GD, 22). It is a time to take up causes again, but it is also a time to cherish the mundane aspects of life and be “mindless of soul, so their two bodies meet.” Of course the fierce, tough world will make sure that one day the persona will “be taken, stripped, strapped to a wheel.” Worse, there is old age: “Then to himself he will seem loathed and strange” (GD, 23). Finally there is death. The poem’s carpe diem message is delivered with great power and conviction.

“Fifteen-Line Sonnet in Four Parts,’ Far from traditional sonnet, is a metaphysical conundrum. The persona, talking to his lover, sees her “second you,” after they make love. Time moves on, and “today, left only with a name , I rage, /Willing these likes---willing a name to be / Flesh, on the blank unanswering page” (GD, 27). Articulation, the poet’s craft, leads to frustration, because it cannot recreate a loved one gone. Another poem about love and writing is “What Love Poems Say,” where again the persona looks back, fusing the writing of the poem with the memory of the experience. Thus, as in so many Spender poems, the subject is bifurcated into the experience and the process. The persona speculated, “It is although I were / In all universe the centre / Of a circumference” (GD, 28). This is the central iterative image of Spender’s later poetry. The poet is surrounded by lights that have “eyes

watchful, benevolent, “ representing cosmic history, humanity in general, and his audience specifically. Most important, however, the poet, conscious of artifice, notes that his lover is a product of language: “You come with a word.” Through and in the process of poetry love binds time to a place and an action and, for a brief moment, holds the terrible universe at bay.

“Bagatelles” is a Selection of 12 epigrams, epitaphs, observations, and dedications. The poem “Matter of Identify” finds the poet trying to understand whether anyone has an individual existence or is merely a piece of history: “He never felt quite certain /Even of certainties” (GD, 34). “To Become a Dumb Thing” consists of three word paintings, like illustrations on a Japanese scroll: harbor scenes and a conversation at a café, salted with a proliferation of asterisks.

The last two poems in *The Generous Days* are fun pieces.”Central Heating System” was written while Spender was searching at the University of Connecticut at Storrs, and the central heating system kept him awake with its clanking. The noises were like the barking of watchdogs deterring” the ice-fanged killer” (GD, 42), New England cold. “Art Student” has the former young rebel of the 1930s confronting the young rebel of the 1960s who thinks that dumping offal from the slaughterhouse in a college exhibition is art. “Anyway, he thinks, / Art’s finished” (GD, 43). But in the end the poet is sympathetic to the student’s inarticulate attempt to “send people back / To the real thing--the stinking corpse” (GD, 44). The satire is effective and partially self-directed, for after all, the young, sensitive, outraged Spender had once called for attention to the “real things” of his time.

The image of the poet emerging from *The Generous Days* is that of an artist who now, in advancing age, sees and portrays himself as a merchant of memories. The days have indeed been generous, and he is grateful. They have passed. On the

whole ,the poems of *The Generous Days* do not contain the passion, the power, and the energy of the earlier volumes ,such as *The Still Centre*, that made Spender's name. Nevertheless, they are mainly profound, fresh, and original. One critic, Victor Howes, described them a 1971 as crystal clear in their imagery, resonant in their song, as fine as any lyric being written in the present. *The Generous Days* indicated continual intellectual growth and artistic maturation. The poems are new wine in old bottles and are worthy of more attention than they have received.

Recent Poems (1978) contains only four poems and was published by the small Anvil Press in a limited edition of 400 copies. "From My Diary" is another memory poem. The poet recalls his father speaking of an elderly woman as having been " a great beauty, forty years ago." Now the poet is older than his father was at the time of the remark and "parties sometimes change to funerals." A striking image tolls the passing of the lovers of his decades: "Faces we've once loved / Fit into their seven ages as Russian dolls / Into one another" (RP, 4). He can will him memory back to the young face, "shining through all," of the older woman he now loves.

"Late Stravinsky Listening to Late Beethoven" is dedicated to the poet Sacheverell Sitwell and was written after Spender had visited Sitwell's deathbed. It is a particularly fine and moving pieced in which language struggles to express the inexpressible, the epiphany of great music played by a great musician,. Sitwell " the end . . . listened only to / Beethoven's Posthumous Quarter" (RP, 5). The persona at the bedside sees his friend " weightless as a feather, ecstasy / Shining through pain" as death approaches. He has been "purged of very sense but the transparent / Intelligence." Finally, Sitwell will come to be "one with the thing perceived," the existential end. He will become "Beethoven / Released from deafness into vision, / Stravinsky in that music from his dying" (RP, 6) Despair is manageable with the perspective of wisdom, age, and belief in the unity of life.

“Winter in may” recalls a blizzard in Cincinnati in May 1953 in which the beauty of the snow is quickly trampled underfoot. The poem is another Japanese-style word painting. “A Gill Who Has Drowned Herself Speaks” is a morose poem in which the persona wished that her drowned body had not been dragged from the river. Left to rot, her “skull would stay---/But change to crystal” and fish” would swim into / Eye-sockets that looked at them. Thus, “phosphorescent fish,” the reality, would live where before “there had been / Ideas of them only, in the brain” (RP, 8). The poem pleads to let bodies be , to let flesh return to a comprehending nature where all is one.

In making a new collection of his poems in 1986, Spender reorganized his canon into 14 categories, ignoring chronology to some extent and imitating many poems previously included, like “The Funeral” The categories are “I Preludes,” his early 1930s poems; “II Funeral.” The categories are “I Preludes,” his early 1930s poems; “II Exiles.” III Spain”; IV A Separation”; “V Elegy for Margaret”; VI Ambition”; “VII” Spiritual Explorations”; “VIII War Poems”; “IX Home”; “X Landscape and Seascape”; XI Diary Poems”; “XII Word”; “XIII remembering”; and “XIV Choruses form the Oedipus Trilogy,\,” his translation-adaption of Sophocles.

In *Collected Poems, 1928-1985* (1986) Spender indulged in some unfortunate revisions, “for clarity has always been my aim,” but instead of clarifying he obfuscated, changing some homosexual love poems to make them seem less overt and toning down other early poems to make them seem less radical. The result is generally poetic loss. Readers should go to *Collected Poems* to make them seamless radical. The result is generally poetic loss. Readers spied go to *Collected Poems, 1928-1953* or to original volumes for the best readings of earlier poems. *Collected Poems, 1928-1985* provides handy and unhampered access to Spender’s poetry from *Selected Poems* (1964) on.

It is the half dozen new poems written since *The Generous Days* that make *Collected Poems, 1928-1985* important to readers of Spender's poetry, and it is "Auden's Funeral" that is the most moving and significant. The Governess-like mentor and friend dies on 28 September 1973 in Vienna and was buried in the village of Krtchstetten,, where he had lived his last years. Spender attended the funeral. He produced a eulogy evoking "At the Grave of Henry James.' The setting is simple and the language direct."Auden's Funeral" is a public poem, as the funeral was public event, but the poem is warm and personal too. In the first section, Spender envisions Aiden's face in the coffin as he "cast a cloud of earth . . . / Down on the feat brass-handled coffin lid./ It rattled on the oak like a door knocker" (CP 1986,184). Spender cannot call his friend back, but Auden, "confidingly sly," is still with him.

The second, third and fourth sections of "Auden's Funeral" recall student days at Oxford and youthful days in Germany and elsewhere. Like a ghost, Auden's image keeps coming into view. It is "Buster Keaton" face. Spender is unable to leave Auden. The fifth section is a farewell, as "your funeral dwindles to its photograph" (CP 1986, 188). The impression left is that Spender still loved and greatly missed his lifelong friend, now "happy to be alone, his last work done" (CP 1986, 184)."Auden's Funeral" will remain an historic poem.

An earlier poem about Auden," Auden in Milwaukee," is almost more of an elliptic diary entry than a poem : Auden and Spender are at a student gallery, where Auden is enjoying adulation, but he is really seen "As an object, artifact" (CP 1986, 179). Spender realized this and implies that he, too, an ageing poet has also become one. Two other poems also memorialize deceased friends. "Louis MacNeice, " who died in 1963, "looks down form high heaven / The mocking eyes search-lighting / My ignorance again" CP 1986, 178). Besides graciously praising MacNeice's

intelligence, Spender reminds the cognoscenti that he and MacNeice saw many a searchlight when they both served as fire fighters in the Blitz.

“Cyril Connolly,” in memory of Spender’s coeditor of *Horizon*, is, like “Auden’s Funeral,” a superior piece, a taut eulogistic sketch only 10 lines long. Spender employs his statuary imagery once more. Death and the poem “make you your statue” and, alas for Connolly, the great conversationalist and gourmet, “deep in the mouth’s crevasse / The silent tongue savors / Only the most of dying.” Spender has chisled unflattering truth: “Finally, the head is Roman” (CP 1986, 181).

“Driving through Snow,” written in Connecticut in 1971, finds the poet again encountering “twin Circumferences, “ but his time they are merely on the windshield where the wipers have cleaned. It is a dangerous trip, and the poet is afraid of dying, for there is “the work that must not end before begun” (CP 1986, 157). “Grandparents” is forgivable. Spender’s son Matthew asks a nun in the hospital, “Is our baby a and find the paintings of other babies ugly.

Spender the romantic poet has remained true to himself. From the beginning he refused to be a parrot for communist cant or a purveyor of poetic fashions. He, not Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Thomas, or even the formidable Auden, has pulled Spender the poet from his own orbit around the still center of his small but bright star. In the last thirty years the flow of his poetry has diminished from torrent to trickle because the poet has been distracted by his need to earn a living in letters, diverted by his strong interest in criticism, and by his personal commitment to a more just society, and perhaps, too, as a result of the dislike for his work by F.R. Leavis and the Scrutiny establishment, which may have discouraged Spender.

Also, as noted by A.K. Weatherhead, Spender’s later poems “are detached from the everyday things of the world and cannot be approached in the workaday

frame of mind in which one comes in from the street to read the headlines and throw away the bulk mail." The poet has been truer to his aesthetic than to the requirements and demands of the phenomenal world in which all art must seek to thrive. Yet he has left a luminous record of an era. And like his century in the West, Spender's poetry evolved from the idiom of social struggle, laced with his individual lyric impulse, to implosion and personal expression. Ideology failed and individuality thrived. If , in his early years, the poet was disappointed when he found that his exuberance could not remake the world, his hurt was assuaged when, in his later years, he came to know that he did not have to.