

## CHAPTER-III

### The Budding Poet (Nine Experiment-Twenty Poems)

This Chapter discusses the earliest phase of Spender's poetic career, that is between 1928 and 1930, the years which saw the publication of *Nine Experiments* and *Twenty Poems* respectively.

The nine 'experiments' encompass a variety of subjects, but the major theme of the 1928 book is the redeeming power of love in relation to social problems. Right from his juvenilia, Spender was interested in using and transforming the apparently prosaic material of life in an industrial society. The din and bustle of the world of technology must be reconciled with the quiet beauty and majesty of natural world, "Reconciliation of the opposites has always been a significant mark of Spender's poetry" (Hubert: 1951: 29)

"Come, Let Us Praise the Gasworks !" may be regarded as a Wordsworthian way of making the common uncommon:

And Man, the grimmest, starkest  
Of all those intimate machines; the harshest  
Grate .... I'd love  
In an archaically perfect machine to move  
With clock-work limbs.  
(Spender: 1928: 13)

The romantic trait here is unmistakable. Shelley's 'song' to the workers in England, Wordsworth's common men, even Lamb's chimney sweeper belong to the same tribe. Anyway, Spender can't be equated with the Georgians:

...while the belated Georgians were still invoking  
literary lute rocks, lonely lambs, and traditionally  
deathless nightingales, Spender was hailing  
the advent of another order.... (Hazard:1966:32)

As a poet of the 'circumference', Spender can give us the details in telling  
way:

Walking beside a stench black canal,  
Regarding skies abstrusely animal,  
Contemplating rubbish heaps, and smoke,  
And tumid furnaces, obediently at work (Spender:1928:14)

"Appeal" anticipates Spender's later sympathies with the poor:

The voices of the poor, like birds  
That thud against a sullen pane,  
Have worn my heart. (Ibid:8)

Auden had warned Spender against the chances of being 'Kelley and  
Sheats', but Shelleyan echoes are inescapable in the early Spender. The very first  
poem of *Nine Experiments* titled "Invocation" smacks of Shelley's "Ode to the  
West Wind":

Blow for ever in my head!  
And ever let the violins, tempest-sworn,  
Lash out their hurricane (ibid:7)

The romantic vocabulary and imagery of some of the poems look like  
having no connection whatsoever with the poet's social responsibilities:

Beauty cometh: See how gently  
Graven in the Water, play  
The lazy whorls, which, whirl absently  
Round the prow, and glide away (ibid:17)

Looking at such verses, critics often charge Spender of a retrograde movement bordering on even 'anti-modernism':

It is curious to note that Spender,  
even as the most effective poetic  
voice of the thirties, should slip  
into what might be called an  
anti-modernist mode (Leeming  
:1999:34)

But, then, "Ovation for Spring" speaks of loss of romantic illusion as well:

[Spring] cannot stir me with her sound,  
Her light no longer makes me burn:  
I only see earth wake, and turn  
Again in penitential round (Spender:1928:19)

This is nothing but another version of the problematic of the centre and circumference.

Much more durable than *Nine Experiments*, Spender's *Twenty Poems* (1930) drew the critical attention that a budding poet desires and should be happy with. In these poems "the Spenderian conflict between his basic romanticism and his growing understanding of the harsh realities of society grows more evident. The man behind the book must be affected by the outer circle around him" (Whitehead:1992:38)

Romantic afflatus is questioned and checked by a strong contemporary impulse which was the product of contemporary politics. It is this duality, this thesis – antithesis interface that lies at the centre of Spender's early poems.

The beginning of *Twenty Poems* has so significant a statement for Spender that he used a phrase from it twenty years later as the title for the volume *The Edge of Being*(1949).

The poem “At the Edge of Being” begins with a problematic--- “Never being, but always at the edge of being”. The persona has decided to separate himself from full participation in life:

Though the Spirit lean outward for seeing,  
Observing rose, gold, eyes, an admired landscape,  
My senses record the act of wishing  
Wishing to be  
Rose, gold, landscape or another--  
Claiming fulfillment in the act of loving. (1930:2)

As is usual with the Spender canon, the self is split: part is in the world of the will and part remains what Spender would later call “the still centre”. The spirit in the centre can only lean out and touch the world: a journey from the centre to the circumference. Yet the “act of loving” tempts the persona toward oneness, the convergence of world and self.

One of the finest poems of *Twenty Poems* is “I can never be a great man”. In this poem Spender comes out strongly against egotism as the proper motivating force behind great people. The interior and the exterior are contrasted: ‘I’, the centre and ‘We’ the circumference. The problematic is once again highlighted:

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

It can never claim its true place  
 Resting in the forehead, and secure in its gaze-  
 The "great I" is an unfortunate intruder  
 Quarrelling with "I tiring" and "I sleeping"  
 And all those other "I"s who long for "We dying". (Ibid:17)

The inherent paradox is that although not immortal, the "great I", like a personified superego, has an energy and love for life that can pass for immortality. It tolerates all the weak, indolent, death-directed attitudes of body and mind, while making uncomfortable all the little "I"s, the people who recognize that their drifting lives are wasted. Ultimately, "The first person singular can no longer be central; now the one who would seek fame must sink his personal identity in the first person plural". (Smith:65)

The most typical is "The Port". Arguably, a part of the "Marston" poems, it is really independent, describing the industrial hub where sea, seashore, factory and people meet. The port is where "the sea exerts his huge mandate" and where men work in "furnace" and "shipyards". As a collective image, the port is an objective co-relative for the poet's frustration and unhappiness, revealed in the images of groves, caves, hard faces lightning, confusion and turmoil. In the port

...The pale lily boys flaunt their bright lips,  
 Such pretty cups for money...  
 ...rat-toothed into the dark outdoors. (Spender:1930:14)

"Beethoven's Death Mask" shows how Spender distances himself from a great person: "Then the drums move away, the distance shows". The persona

remains fascinated by genius and the creative process that transforms experience and sound with dissociation of sensibilities. Spender explores the possibilities of spiritual aspiration through the achievement of Beethoven. Spender's latent preoccupation, however, is the music and meaning of poetry: music is the circumference, and meaning the centre.