

## *Abstract*

### STEPHEN SPENDER : THE LANGUAGE OF IMAGINATION AND INQUIRY

Hailed more as a poet of the thirties than as a poet of the century, sometimes dismissed as a 'Pylons poet' who thrived in the penumbra of Auden, Stephen (Harold) Spender (1909-1995) has long been remembered chiefly for his autobiography *World Within World* (1951) or as a critic and an academic in his own right. In the last quarter of the last century a rehabilitation of Spender as a poet started taking place.

In spite of this forty-odd years old critical acclaim, the traditional view of Spender as a social poet, a poet of crisis, persisted. The reason is not far to seek. His brief romance with Marxism / Communism, his retrospective self-analysis that "We [the Auden Group] were the Hamlets of the Thirties" and the huge popularity of his poem "The Express" on both sides of the Atlantic contributed to this indelible image of Spender as poet of social / political enquiry. In fact, people who had interest in the poetry of the 1930s almost habitually neglected the language of emotion in Spender's poetry and were happy with the rhetoric of inquiry evident there. A proper rehabilitation, however belated, of Spender should be inclusive, and not exclusive in nature so that the two voices – one of emotion, and the other of inquiry – can be explored and juxtaposed with a view to understanding the interplay of aesthetics and politics in his poetry. This, it may be argued, is necessary for a comprehensive evaluation of Spender, for viewing him not simply as a poet *of* crisis, but also a poet *in* crisis. Hence, a work along the line of what is indicated in the title of this research is neither trite nor superfluous.

A traditional and quite popular approach to literature is : behind a book there is a man, and around that man there is the society he belongs to. This 'model' may in geometrical terms be called the concentric circle model where more than one circle has a common, single center. While viewing Spender as a social poet, a poet of crisis, this model does work to a considerable extent – at least as far as his language of inquiry is concerned. Across his works he has revealed

a preoccupation with what he metaphorically calls 'the center and the circumference'. But the point is that when he concedes that 'Both center and circumference are my weakness' ("Darkness and Light"), we are led to suspect that he is rather engulfed in more than one overlapping circle. And this calls for a second model for a proper evaluation of his poetry. Borrowing from the domain of Mathematics and Logic, we can name this second model as Venn diagram in which a set of circles exist intersectionally. At least two intersecting circles can then be observed in Spender's oeuvre: one registering the language of imagination and the other, that of inquiry.

Spender's concerns, often disharmonious in nature, of individual and the social color, divided the world of Spender into that of imagination and inquiry. In his early writings Spender shared with others of the Auden group two common features :

- 1) a move away from early individualism towards Marxism, and ,
- 2) conflicting emotions and intellectual contradictions that stemmed from the move taken.

In most of the pieces in *Poems*, Spender voices forth the inhibitions and inadequacies of himself and humanity as denizens of a world listless to the needs of man. He, therefore, seems to grapple with ambivalent motives : a search for absolute certainties, and acceptance of the ruptures in human experience. As Justin Replogle puts it: "The conflict is between the body and the mind, the world and the absolute" ("The Auden Group" in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 5, No.1, (1964). This dichotomy well surfaces in such lines as 'An "I" can never be a great man', and 'Never being, but always at the edge of Being'. It is not surprising that in *The Still Centre* (1939) his great interest in the individual, nebulously present during his rendezvous with Marxism, resurfaces to claim that personal and social health, heavily relies on private love, on the tangent of individual still centres. As a matter of fact, Spender was less temperamentally fitted for Marxism than the other members of the Auden group, and he could never discard the romantic disposition which actually permeated his whole being. He could not get away from demonstrating a veritable record of concern for his own experience as well as for the innate nature of man; and the result was that for him the individual was at the center of the social. Even in *Vienna* (the most 'Marxist' of his works), he tried to integrate the

public events in the city into his private experience. The predicament of being caught between two circles is well revealed in his play *Trial of a Judge* where the Judge is portrayed as the only noble human figure with liberal, anti-Marxist precepts. No wonder, then, that right from *Nine Experiments* (1928) to *Dolphins* (1994), Spender leaves traces of the Venn diagrammatic worlds where the language of imagination and that of inquiry converge.

The proposed study will try and answer some such questions as the following:

1. How was the poetics of Spender's early works shaped by his politics?
2. What, in fact, Spender meant by the 'Destructive' and 'Creative' elements that constitute a poet's engagement with the self (the 'still centre') and the society (the 'other' / the 'circumference')?
3. How did Spender's poet-critic and critic-poet roles reflect the interface between the language of imagination and that of inquiry?
4. What was the impact of Spender's disillusionment with Communism on his later works?
5. Was it a 'world-within-a world' or a Venn diagrammatic world that Spender as a poet was a denizen of?
6. How far does Spender's last work, *Dolphins* (published in 1994, just a year before his death) differ, if at all, from his earlier works in terms of the language of imagination and that of inquiry?

The **Introductory** chapter of the thesis will first outline the project undertaken, and then take a generalized look at the Auden group and Spender's position in it-the second section of the first chapter is an overview of the Auden group. The **Second** chapter focuses on the subtext of Spender's Socio-political poems. In so doing, it primarily falls back on his autobiography, *World Within World*, which still remains an authoritative expose of the times between the wars. The prevalent incertitude has nicely been summed up in this little master piece: "[...] We were divided between our literary vocation and an urge to save the World from Fascism. We were the Divided Generation of Hamlets who found the world out of joint and failed to set it right"

(174). The language of imagination and that of inquiry in his poetry of the period were tinged with a deep sense of crises. Before we enter the world(s) of Spender's poetry, the **Third** chapter tries to understand what he actually meant by the 'Destructive' and 'Creative' elements, and also how these two elements were in operations in his use of language of imagination and also in that of inquiry. Hence, the third chapter tries to adumbrate the ideas contained in his *The Destructive Element* (1935) and *The Creative Element* (1953). In 1935, Spender privileged inquiry over imagination; eighteen years later he was happy to invert his quondam critical stance. What could be the poet's steady ethics amidst so many diversions? This question probably plagued him always in his treatment of political events, of man as a social being, of progress as a necessary evil, and of different kinds of love that binds man to man sexually and asexually. If he failed to find a satisfactory answer, his failure generated a constant dialogue, an interconnection, between the overlapping worlds. Chapter **Four** tries and traces the tangents that connect the Spenderian worlds in which imagination and inquiry co-inhabit. Published just a year before the poet's death, *Dolphins* (1994) is yet to receive an adequate critical attention. The last years of Spender's life were not very congenial to the octogenarian poet, although he was anxious to bring out a final volume of poems, however tiny, to call it quits. What kind of inquiry and imagination, and what corresponding language, does this valedictory volume offer? The **Concluding** chapter centers around this important question. Spender's inclination for delicate romanticism returns, it appears, not with inquiry but with recollection.

Now beyond the center and circumference, beyond the tiring navigation between the circles of a Venn diagram, beyond any struggle of the modern, the aged poet can bring imagination and inquiry together as the pranksters of the sea and humans play out their mutual friendliness.