PROBLEMATIC OF

`CENTRE AND CIRCUMFERENCE' :

A STUDY OF STEPHEN SPENDER'S POETRY

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SUBMITTED BY

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DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

I hereby declare that in writing down my Ph.D. thesis titled "Problematic of `Centre and Circumference ' : A Study of Stephen Spender's Poetry", submitted to North Bengal university under the supervision of Dr.ChandanashisLaha , I have abided by the norms and ethics of Ph.D. , including those of avoiding plagiarism .

I further declare that no part of this thesis has formed the basis for the award of any degree or fellowship previously .

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I certify that Sri Sujit Kumar Acharjee has prepared the thesis entitled "PROBLEMATIC OF 'CENTRE AND CIRCUMFERENCE': A STUDY OF STEPHEN SPENDER'S POETRY" for the award of PhD degree of the University of North Bengal , under my supervision. He has carried out the work at the Department of English, University of North Bengal.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE

This is an attempt to see how ` centre ' and `circumference' have always remained as both topos and trope in Stephen Spender's poetry .The two phrases had special fascination for him ,as he has been made clear in the introductory chapter(ch-i).Whatever his subjects –love ,war,politics ,poet's responsibilities –Spender seems to have been more a poet in crisis than a poet of crisis .It becomes clear that the `crisis' is due to his navigating between a still centre and its circumference.

Like Eliot ,Spender was both a critic and poet. The interface between the two identities has been highlighted in chapter ii.Chapter iii-chapter-vi deal with different phases of Spender's poetic career form the angle indicated in title of the thesis itself .I humbly claim that not much –not even an article or a paper-has been written on his last book of poems titled Dolphins .But i have tried to do justice (as best I could)to the work which Spender published just a year before his death in 1995.

I am grateful beyond measure to my supervisor ,Dr.C. Laha for kindly helping me in more ways than one . I express my sincere gratitude to the department of English,N.B.U ,for allowing me to have the research affiliation ;and to the university library for allowing to consult relevant material.

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DATE : 15.02.2016.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NE	***Nine Experiments***
TP	***Twenty Poems***
NS	***New Signatures***
P	***Poems***
V	***Vienna***
SC	***The Still Centre***
RV	***Ruins and Visions***
PD	***Poems of Dedication***
EB	***The Edge of Being***
CP	***Collected Poems***
SP	***Selected Poems***
GD	***The Generous Days***
RP	***Recent Poems***
D	***Dolphins***
DE	***The Destructive Element***
CE	***The Creative Element***
WWW	***World Within World***

CHAPTER-I

The Problematic

[…`Problematic' as noun came into the vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon theorists through Althussar's*For Marx* (1969)…(It means) any complex of beliefs which (whatever their implicit or explicit contradictions)hangs together in a self-supporting unity.]

Jeremy Hawtharn, *A Glossary Of Contemporary Literary Theory* , Fourth Edition (2000)

Sir Stephen (Harold) Spender (1909- '95) – poet, translator, fiction writer, co-editor of *Horizon*and *Encounter*and academic – is more hailed as a poet of the thirtiesthan as a poet of the century. Generally, he is remembered either for his autobiography*World Within World* or as `the Pylons poet'. It is true that for a quarter of a centurycritics neglected him as rather unfashionable owing to his ardent but prematurecommitment to and quick loss of faith in communism, to his some such crass andnebulous poetic utteranceas "Our program like this, yet opposite;/ Death to the killers,bringing light to life" (Not Palaces) as well as to his apparently quirky poetic beliefsabout his own vocation as poet. However, a balanced rehabilitation of Spender wasattempted by Geoffrey Thurley in 1974. I quote Thurley at some length.

> "If Spender is not the most unfashionable poet in the world at the present time, it is certainly difficultto think of a more un-fashionable one. He is known universally as a poet, and as a

> Social poet. Yet there are reputable anthologies of middle twentieth century verse which exclude him altogether, and in the universities he is likely to be scorned. Contempt rather than oblivion has been Spender's lot-contempt for the lapsed fellow-traveller, for the vegetated poet, for the confessor who never quite came clean [….] Yet Spender was, I believe, Auden's superior as poet, and, […] the most powerful English poet of his time […] His poetry assumes greater significance today : if we turn to Spender, to David Gascoyne and Dylan Thomas, ignoring both the more facile Pylon verse and the more gaseous New Apocalypse writing, a different picture of English poetry emerges from the Thirties, one that suggests a new future and avoids the poverty of New Lines and The Movement […] In such a re-casting of a poetic […] tradition, then, a just appraisal of Stephen Spender assumes considerable importance."
>
> (Thirties Poets: 'The Auden Group' : 152-53)

By and Large, Spender is evaluated as a disillusioned social poet with a strong centralizing (i.e. individualizing) tendency. It has also been pointed out that the lyric in his poetry is grossly marred by the propaganda in it. The uncertain nature of his poetic voiceis generally related to the uncertainties of the time that he sums up in his *WorldWithin World* in the followingway:

> "[…] We were divided between our literally 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" (WWW : 174)

When he is explaining the case of Hamlet, he is probably talking about struggle of the modern :

> "We are the spectators of the fluctuations of the drama of the inner life of a prince, with the outward circumstances which do not merely condition but also have actually become in part his inner life."

("The Connecting Imagination", Saturday Evening post, April 1, 1961 : 23, qtd. In Carter)

The binaries of ‘to be / not to be’ and inner / outer find expressions in Spender’s *The Destructive Element*and *The Creative Element*as well. For him, the word ‘destructive’ signifies the outer world, the circumference, while ‘creative’ stands for the inner vision of the poet. These two elements, so to say, produce the poet’s crisis.

It is almost a truism to say that Spender was a poet of crisis. The subtext amply supportsthiskind of historicist reading of his poetry. Here isMichael Roberts summarising the subtext :

> “Those of us who grew up to manhood in the post-war years remember how, in that period, it seemed to us there was no finality. We learned to question every impulse until we became so self-conscious, so hag-ridden by doubts, indecisions, uncertainties that we lost all spontaneity, and, because we learned to a account for the actions of others, we learned neither to praise nor blame them. It was not any one thing which caused this skepticism : it appeared in various guises – the theory of relativity breaking up our neat mechanical world, science learning to doubt whether it could approach any finality, psychoanalysis discovering how many actions, apparently spontaneous, were rigidly determined; and beyond at this a feeling that the middle-class world, the world of the nineteenth century, was definitely breaking up, and that it would be replaced in the future by a world of communismor business.” (Thirties Poets : 13)

What much of traditional criticism has failed to do is that it has not attempted a full – length study ofSpender’spoetry viewing him as ‘a poet INcrisis’

rather than ‘a poet OF crisis’. Only professorH.B.Kulkarni, a friend ofSpender’s ,has movedalong that line ; but he has sought to resolvethe issues in terms of the love –hate ,communism –individualism ,primitivism –progress ,I - Thou, We — They binaries –with the inevitable reliance on ‘thesis – antithesis – synthesis’ formula.No-one has hitherto attempted an expose of the slippage, the *difference*, the continual decentering of /in Spender’s *World Within World .*

Now here is Spender poetically more explicit about his crisis than in the seminal poem “Darkness and Light” first anthologized in *The Still Centre*.This poem may well be viewed as a Spenderian Quest poem or Theory poem ,and needs to be quoted in full :

To break out of the chaos of my darkness
Into a lucid day,is all my will.
My words like eyes in night, stare to reach
A centre for their light :and my acts thrown
To distant places by impatient violence
Yet lock together to mould a path.
Out of my darkness,into a lucid day

Yet ,equally ,to avoid that lucid day
And to preserve my darkness, is all my will
My words like eyes that flinch from light, refuse
And shut upon obscurity; my acts
Cast to their opposites by impatient violence
Break up the sequent path;they fly
On a circumference to avoid the centre.

To break out of my darkness towards the centre
Illumines my own weakness,when i fail;
The iron are of the avoiding journey
Curves back upon my weakness at the end;
Whether the faint light spark against my face

Or in the dark my sight hide from my sight,
Centre and circumference are both my weakness.

O strange identity of my will and weakness!
Terrible wave white with the seething word!
Terrible flight through the revolving darkness!
Dreaded light that hunts my profile!
Dreaded light covering me in fears!
My will behind my weakness silhouettes
My territories of fear,with a great sun.

I grow towards the acceptance of that sun
Which hews the day from night .the light
Run from the dark, the dark from light
Towards a black and white total emptiness
The world ,my life ,binds the dark and light
Together ,reconciles and separates
In lucid day the chaos of my darkness.

The phrase 'Centre and Circumference' and its variants echo and re-echo across Spender's poetry ,criticism and auto-biography alike .Here is his confession in *World Within World:*

> "Throughout these years ,I had always the sense of living on the Circumference of a circle at whose centre I could never be" (www:192)

And here are some excerpts from his *The Struggle Of The Modern*:

> "Every poet begins again from the beginning that is himself, andoutside experience meets in the centre that is his unique sensibility" (P.54)

> "Itsextremely important ,Ithink ,to insist that the poetic Imagination in centripetal, a bringing together of experiences

froma circumference which could theoretically be enlarged to includeall pasts and presents [.....] (P.55)

"While ,from the outside, the centre of consciousness is acted uponby impressions attacking it from the circumference of the environment,reaching into the whole world ,it also contains withinitself another universality [.....]" (P.117)

And to turn to his poetry ,here are some snatches:

"Leave your gardens, your singing feasts,
Your dreams of suns circling before our sun,
Of heaven after our world
Instead ,watch images of flashing brass
That strike the outward sense,the polished will…" (Poems:1933:56)

[This is one of the earliest intimations of what he later calls "that margin of freedom which no system can deny where there is room always for pure states of being".("insidethe cage" in *The Making Of A Poem*,1955)]Six years later, the fugue returns:

"Shuttered by dark at the still centre
Of the world's circular terror,
[…] where love at-last finds peace
Released from the will's error" (The Still Centre :1939:85)

The poem " *At The Edge Of Being"*(1928) begins thus :

"Never being ,but always at the edge of Being
Though the spirit lean outward for seeing".

For thenext twenty years the phrase 'edge of Being ' haunted him until it became the title for his volume of poems published in 1949.These illustrations, I believe make it clear that 'centre and circumference' might be re-read as

disseminating topos and trope in Spender's poetry. It is important to remember that 'Metaphor is not only Spender's most natural mode of expression ;it is partof his conceptualapparatus-everything isseen in terms of somethingelse"(Thurley).The proposedwork thus intends to explore the problematic of the Spenderian 'centreand circumference' traceable in his poetry right from the 'romantic gropings" (G.S Fraser's phrase)of his early poems though *The still Centre* (1939),*Ruins and Visions*(1942),*Poems of Dedication*(1947),*The Edge Of Being*(1949),to *Selected Poems*(1965),*TheGenerous Days*(1971) and,ultimately to,*Collected Poems*(1985) and *Dolphins*(1994).I hope at a time when 'decentering' has almost become a neo-canonical tool for firing the old(er) canon(s),the kind of study I have ventured to undertake will be neither superfluousnor trite.In supportof my claim I would just quote a few words from Ronald Carter's introduction to the Cashbook on the Thirties Poets:

> "[…] each member of the Auden group responded to the various voicesheard in the Thirties in his own unique and individual way. It is not surprising that paradoxes and tensionsemerge which are not easily explained . A start has beenmade , but in certain areas some of the critical tools required […] have still to be developed.The poetry of the thirties is very much a fertile ground for further exploration".
>
> (Thirties Poets: 'The Auden Group":1984)

The specific aim of this study is to revisit the putative world within world that Spender has sought to construct in his poetry. In critiquing his ideographic structure of the Centre and the Circumference, the three models to be deployed are:

A) The Concentric Circle Model

B)The Venn Diagram Model

[A (mathematical) diagram representing sets as circles,with their relationships to each other expressed through their overlapping positions,so that all possible relationships between the sets are shown.]

C)The Helical(or 'decentric') Model.

It will be seen whether (B)profitably critiques(A) and whether (C),in turn,

interrogates both(A) and(B),in our re-reading of Spender's poetry.

The praxis of the models can be illustrated with references to the key-poem "Darkness and Light".The poet understands the tenor of his life in terms of the metaphor of centre-and-circumference relationship which suggests both centripetality and centrifugality,or for that matter,reality and illusion,truth and desire .It suggests both an urge toward the centre which is light /truth and an uncontrollable move along awide(and wider) circumference which is the realm of desire:``Centreand circumference are both my weakness".

It seems that the poet sums up hislife's journey in terms of this unbreakable dialectic. This picture of concentricism implies an unchanging, still centre, given once and for all, and what only changes or moves is the circumference in ever-wideningcircles.In this case,the move towards truth means a move towards the centrewithin.This wasreally for a long time the philosophical mode of conceptualizing the problematic of being and meaningin terms of the trope of still centre and widening circumference, metaphor andmetonymy.The Venn diagram model can be deployed to show a variant of essentialism of foundationalism which speaks of the "Divided Worlds"

of a “Divided Generation” without acknowledging the problematic of the overlapping area and often seeking stabilization in It.The helical model duly interrogates these modes in that it de-ciphers in the Spenderian ‘centre’ a “point at which the substitution of contents ,elements, orforms is no longer possible,”“which while governing the structure, escapes structurality” and offers “a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude”, on the basis of which “anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset” (Derrida : *Writing and Difference : 1978)*. At the pragmatic level, the Spenderian anxiety finds fine expression in the first two pages of *World Within World:*

> “I grew up in an atmosphere of belief in progress curiously mingled with apprehension. Through books we read at school, through the Liberal views of my family, it seemed that I had been born on to a fortunate promontory of time towards which all times led. [..] Yet there was also, paradoxically, a feeling that the best times were over. This was not stated in history books, but it was conveyed by the tone of existence surrounding me.”

The conceptualizationof the relation of being and meaning in terms of metaphysics of presence has been thoroughly rethought and reworked on two grounds : first, it belies the process at work that shapes the relation between being and meaning;secondly ,it causes Angst by creating a sense of rupture between the` given ‘ meaning and the outward proliferation of being. Post-structuralist thought in general andDerrida in particular viewsthe scenario differently through the concept of *difference.* The supposed centre cannot know itself outside the system of difference and cannotescape the logicof displacement

and substitution through a carrier of endless slippage. Subservience to a ‘given’ centre is gone. The scenario of the relation between

being and meaning is now envisaged in terms of production (creativity) of ever –

increasing, concatenated centre – and – circumferences. In fact, as Derrida has it, the centre thus conceived has “always already been exiled from itself into its nonsubstitute” so that “the centre could not be thought in the form of a present being, that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed focus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” *(Ibid)*.Indeed, this isthe moment when language enters and in the absence of a centre or origin, everything becomes discourse, “a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of significationinfinitely” *(Ibid)*

Along an existential axis the shifting centres are the points/ cross sections wherebeing and meaning meet through projects that being takes (or, cannot but take), inits life of creativity. If this conceptualization is valid generally, it can also help articulate the problematic of Spenderian ‘centre and circumference.’

Book length works on Spender’s poetry are rather small in number, and one hasto rely mainly on the articles, reviews and chapters on him in the books on the thirties poets in particular and modern British poetry in general.

Anyway, it transpires from H.B. Kulkarni’s *Stephen Spender : Works and Criticism; An Annotated Bibliography (1976)* that the problematic of Spender’s ‘Centre and Circumference’ has not received a detailed, systematic

and analytic attention from the Spender critics. The position remains the same during the last thirty years or so although*Thirties Poets : 'The Auden Group' (*ed. Ronald Carter :1984) envisages a renewed interest in Spender's poetry.

Meanwhile, the nineties and the turn of the century have seen three important books on Stephen Spender, probably belying the detractors' claim that he is a minor figure of the last century. These are : David Hugh's *Stephen Spender : A portrait with background (1992),* David Leeming's *Stephen Spender : A Life in Modernism (1999),*

and John Shutherland's *Stephen Spender : The Authorized Biography (2004)*

CHAPTER-II

THE POET-CRITIC / CRITIC-POET

Stephen Spender's fame as aliterary critic always ran parallel to his career as a poet .When a poet is also a critic ,it becomes natural that his or her critical works will discuss poetry in general .This too happened with Spender,and his navigation between thecentreand the circumference is best reflectedin his*TheDestructive Element*(1935) and *The Creative Element*(1953) .

The title "The Destructive Element" is lifted form Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim:

> The ways is to the destructive elementsubmit yourself ,
> and with the exertions of your hands and fact in the water
> make the deep ,deep sea keep you up.
>
> (Conrad:1982:149)

The purpose of Spender's title is to alert one that human nature and values areprecarious,not immutable, and that the forces of destructive facing them are enormous .

The embodiments of the destructive element for Spender in 1935 were WorldWar –I,the Great Depression ,and the rise of fascism .The famous writersdiscussed in *The Destructive Element*are Henry James,T.S.Eliot,W.B.Yeats,and D.H.Lawrence. According to Spender ,they were all " faced by the destructive element ,that is ,by the Experience of an all pervadingPresent ,which is a world without belief" (Spender:1935:14). Spender insists that great literature must be re-read in terms of thepresent,and thekernel of the presentissocial revolution.Reality is –destructive ,but the artist must not reject it,even though it is frightening or appalling.The'centre'(that is,the

self) should reach out to the ‘circumference’(that is,the‘other’) in order to avoid destruction.

Spender’s reading of Henry James is perceptive rather than a homage.According to him, James

> …revolutionized the method of presentationin the novel, altering the emphasis fromthe scene to that intellectual and imaginative activity which leadsto the scene,so that his scenes aresymptoms,not causes… (DE :16)

Spender,however,at the same time rebukes him for his belief that

> …the only values which matteredat all were those cultivated by individuals who had escapedfrom the general decadence of Europe. (ibid:17)

The result,in Spender’s opinion was that James removed his art

> …from the objective world, until he had created a world of his own, in which it waspossible for that reality to appear either in a form in which it was beautifullyaccepted … or in which itwas ‘shown up’ in its fullest horror. (ibid:36)

Eliot’s *The waste land,*according to Spender,is the best description of a worldwhere there is no belief.But he argues that Eliot paradoxically wanted to take shelter in James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough ,* in a Christianity of his own creation and in a diehard “belief…in the possibility of personal salvation”(ibid:135).Eliot,for Spender,thus became “blinded to the existence of people outsidehimself”.(ibid:146)The despair was due to thecentre’s inability to reach out tothe outer sphere,and that was Spender,as a poet ‘*of*’ crisis,repudiated.

For Spender, Yeats anchored to (magical) 'system' was not very different from myth and orthodoxy.The perpetual problem of Yeats's reader, according to Spender is that

> …at every stage[he is]perplexed….He imagines that
> all is to be mystery andtwilight and that he dare hardly
> listen,he must be so silent, for fear lest disturb the fairies. (ibid:127)

Although remarkablein the domain of realism,Yeats "has found as yet,no subject of moral significance in the social life of his time". (ibid:131). Arguably Spender is here privileging 'circumference' over 'centre'.Spender views D.H.Lawrence in the contest of a wider circumference.

> [For Lawrence] sex…is life,it isthe very opposite of death…and
> it is the means of escape for the individual from the living death
> of the modern world. (ibid:178)

In Spender's opinion,Lawrence's greatness lies in his taking the whole of civilization into his artistic ambit.Not only did he recognize the intrinsic value ofexternal nature,but wasinterested in contemporary politics and morality. He wasthus "revolutionary and preacher".And the idea of the revolutionary must have chimed well With the Spender orbiting along the 'circumference'. *The Destructive Element*isa committed but not obdurate wettest view of the 'mattering' of literature and art in the twentieth century.Although thework has been interpreted as a call for some curb on artistic freedom for the sake of service to society,it would be judicious to regard it as an appeal to the man behind a book to be alive to the outer concentric circle of social and political whirlwind and ultimately to accept the truth of the existence of their personal heart of darkness.

The Creative Element(1953) is based on the lectures Spender gave at the

University of Cincinnati where he held the position of the Elliston Chair of Poetry.The focus here is on the aesthetic processes.In a way,to move from *TheDestructive Element*to*The Creative Element*is to move from the 'circumference' to the 'centre'. Whereas the destructive element consists of the external forces chaos and the internal forces of corruption, the creative element brings back the poet to his 'still' centre.Spender writes :

> …the creative element is the individual vision of the writer whorealizes in his work the decline of modern values while isolating his own individual values from the context of society. He never forgets the modern context, In fact he is always stating it, but he does so only to createthe more forcibly the visions of his own isolation. (CE:11)

The contrastive position of the poet's individual self and his social responsibilities,that is , the battle between the 'self' and the 'other' becomespronounced in *The Creative Element*:

> So perhaps the 'destructive element' was not, as I thought, capitalism,fascism, the political mechanism which produced wars and unemployment.It was simply society itself.Genius had renounced,or moved outside,society, and any acceptance of a social concept which threatened individual isolation was destructiveto its unique vision. (ibid:12)

In *The Creative Element*,therefore, Spender has sought to remedy the 'blunders' of his youth and revealed hissense of guilt thatthe privileged society,the 'circumference' , over the role of the creative self of the artist, that is 'centre'.

In *The Destructive Element* ,Spender argued that artists /poets can find the way out of the destructive abyss of modern society by aligning themselves with

some kind of'ism' that could cater to the healing of the ills—moral, social, political—of the world. In *The Creative Element* ,moves away from that critical position and argues that artists Must lookwithin themselves to indicate answers to the problems of society, without beingPartisans.

Spender holds that modern society is not only uncongenial to creativity but also responsible for its devaluation. The threatening and dehumanizing role of progress and modernization renders the poet's imagination rather helpless:

> Modern man in the industrial city is like a mouse who has given birth to a litterof mountains,mountains which are not like natural mountains because they don't stay put. They don't become scenery ,the background of the human drama.Theyare mountains, so to speak,which work on their own steam,and function beyond the control of their inventors .They are mountains which may fall on us.
>
> (ibid:38)

Groping for a true connection between the 'centre' and the 'circumference',Spender envisages the poet as one who will transcend the modern artist's needfor isolation and political purity ('neutrality'?),who will not die with a dying society because he or she will give society a new life born out of his own creativity and a forward-looking "new system which will give meaning to the world"(ibid:52). Politics, therefore, needs to behumanized , 'Christian'.

The process of history does not inevitably comeout of the binaries of thesis andantithesis,and individual rights need not be subordinated to the so-called greater good.Here is Spender, the revisionist:

> "The answer to Marxism is to accept the challenge of the necessity of worldwide social change,but at the same time to regard the individual with Christian charity and justice" (ibid:199).

Naturally, Shelley becomes Spender's hero:the paragon of artists as individual and rebel. For Spender, Shelley's social vision was all-encompassing, and although he did not change the world appreciatively, he kept his ideals fresh and clear in his mind and passed them on to human kind unspoilt . Shelly,forSpender,is still relevant because his vision is still true to "a Conceivable future because it is true of man's feeling about his own nature" (ibid:28).

Since, Spender's 'Creative' vision sees poets as the unacknowledged legislators of the world, he is well aware of the mattering of poetry:

> Poetry could not become a substitute for religion, but it could draw or create a picture of the blank of religion and describe the modern human experiences to which the religions no longer seemed to apply.It could…show that it is not enough to have sensibility and the imagination. It is necessary imaginatively to systemize the world of the imagination. (ibid:177)

To sum up,the word 'creative' signifies for Spender the inner vision of the poetconceived in imagination and isolation, and the word 'destructive' stands for the out world of objective reality fallen into disorder and decay.The relationbetween these two elements is suggestive of the poet's predicament in an age of anxiety. Spender uses the metaphor of a cage to describe the conditions in whichthe poet is compelled to carry on his creative activity:how to get out of the cage of meaningless existence ,Spender suggests,is the momentous question facing the poets of our times.Spender,the poet-critic andcritic-poet registers the bewildering navigation between the centreand the circumference--- a 'crisis' that is part and parcel of the struggle of the modern.

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, "Reconcilement 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.Shelly's 'song'to the workers in England,Wordsworth'scommon men,even Lamb's chimney sweeper belong to the same tribe.Anyway, Spender can't be equated with the Georgians:

…while the belated Georgianswere still invoking
literary lave 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,
> evenas the most effective poetic
> voiceof the thirties,should slip
> intowhat 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 atthe 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 centrecan only lean out and touchthe world:a journey from the centre to the circumference .Yet the “act of loving” tempts the persona toward oneness ,theconvergence 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’,thecentre 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-relativefor 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.

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 live 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, aeriel 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 wars manifestly with political statement. It is vintage spender, as is “The L:andscape near an Aerodrome” written a short while later. Spender is fascinated with the processes and product s 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)

Latter 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 imagistically 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 towardsthe 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 insong.(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.14 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 publican 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 form 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 b y 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 drams 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 significant 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 our 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. They 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” form 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 change 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 bunt accommodate. After all, if Marx saw change as predicated on material forces in society, Freud believed that 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 e motional 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 panaces" 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 a 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 *panen 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

and smiles." "The stranger cries out like Hamlet, "How now! A rat? Dead for a ducat"(V, 20). The city of Vienna is as rotten as the state of Denmark.

The third part, "The Death of Heroes, " describes the barrage attempt and tragic failure of the workers and students who fought the fascists at Karl-Marx-Hof. This section of the poem is most powerful and stirring as it describes the suffering of the besieged. The slaughter is appalling: "Life seems black against the snow." A sniper fires and "the vivid runner falls / Form his hare-breathed anxiety: his undisputing / Hold on terror. O gently, whitely buried" (V, 25). In the end the beaten and burrowing survivors without "tasks fit for heroes" must find new roles and "change death's signal honour for a life of moles"(v, 30). The dead are lucky; they are not dehumanized by the loss of freedom.

In the fourth part, "Analysis and Final Statement," the persona, the stranger, like a Prufrock, listens to coffeehouse voices, trying to understand, excuse, exculpate, and somehow assimilate what has happened around him. The persona, however, loses his frayed journalistic objectivity, his voyeuristic perspective, and turns inward to "I, I,I" and the love of a woman in order to heal his psyche:

> I think often of a woman
> With dark eyes neglected, a demanding turn of the
> head
> And hair of black silky beasts.
> How admirable it is
> They offer a surface bright as fruit in rain
> That feeds on kissing. Loving is their conqueror
> That turns all sunshine, fructifying lemons.
>
> (V, 33)

The heterosexuality that has been repressed in the persona, but leaks out in the description by elderly ladies in the pension of their gray loves, In the proprietor's lust, and in order sexual reference, blossoms into the conscious

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 while 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 in 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 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
> whichthe yellow
> Sun blasts above, respond to that day’s doom
> With a headache. Let your ghost follow
> The young men to the Pole, up Ever3est, to war: by
> love, be shot.
>
> (SC, 30)

But always “the uncrating 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
> evera 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 uncrating 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 Uncredating 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 a 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 peot 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 form 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 though a glass:

On the chalk cliff edge struggles the final field
Of barely smutted with tares and marbled
With veins of rusted poppy as though the plough
hadbled.
The sun is drowned in bird-wailing mist,
The sea and sky meet outside distinction,
The landscape glares and stares----white poverty
Of gaslight diffused through frosted glass.
(SC, 41)

"Thoughts during and Air Raid" really belongs among Spender's poems of the Spanish Civil War in Part Three, the strongest, most significant, and most famous section of *The Still Centre*. These was poems show the strong influence of the soldier poet of pity, Wifred Owen. Unlike Owen, Spender was an observer of war, not a participant, and thus in his war poems he balances emotional reactions with his lifelong antiwar commitment. The sheet honesty of these was poems is compelling. "Some of them are among the most celebrated poems of the war." "Thoughts during an Air Raid" finds the persona, "the great 'I,'" in a hotel bed" (SC, 45). The persona, truly and reasonably frightened, tries to be flippant when confronted by the thought of imminent death. He generalizes his experiences into the terror most humans have at the thought of their own ending, but "horror is postponed / For everyone until it settles on him (SC, 45). Solipsism is, after all, a defense against the anonymity of death. Even a Stalingrad is for one participant an individual experience. One wonders how many thousands of Londoners recalled this poem during the Blitz?

Part Three, mislocated in the Contents, really begins with "Two Armies, " a recollection of the bitterness of war in winter wherein "two armies / Dig their machinery" and "men freeze and hunger" (SC, 55). Yet, in war there is also much serenity between battles. The imagery borders on the erotic in a scene reminiscent of Shakespeare's Henry V:

Clean silence drops at night when a little walk
Divides the sleeping armies, each

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 may 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” (CS, 63). Perhaps to avoid the Capa connection, Spender changed the poem’s title to “In No Man’s Lan d” 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 ca not solve the troubles of the world, but he can drown in the life of his love.

“Fall of a City” depicts the despair of a city that falls to the fascists. Although probably about Madrid, the poem prophesies the fall of Prague, Warsaw, and Paris in World War II. Perhaps the greatest loss is to culture:

> All the names of heroes in the hall
> Where the feet thundered and the bronze throats
> roared,
> Fox and Lorca claimed as history on the walls,
> Are now angrily deleted
> Or to dust surrender their dust,
> From golden praise excluded.
>
> (SC, 65)

While for the poor children “all the lessons learned, [are] unlearnt” (SC, 66). Finally, though, the next generation must find the “spark from the days of energy.” It did Spain is now free. It may by because the Spanish child of the late 1930s hoarded liberty’s energy “liked a bitter toy” (SC, 66).

“At Castellon” (referring to a large Mediterranean port 50 miles north of Valencia) evokes the desperately tense atmosphere of a city about to be bombed. A worker is asked to drive the poet to the nest village. They leave behind them what “the winged b lack roaring gates unload. / Cargoes of iron and of iron and of fire” (SC, 68). “The Bombed Happiness” presents and extended metaphor of the result of a bomb burst on children, who are turned into dancing harlequins by the force of the blast. Their flash is stripped and “their blood twisted in rivers of song” (SC, 69). The state has played cruelly with these children. Its “toy was human happiness” (SC, 70). “At Castellon” and “The Bombed Happiness” are both rhymed pieces, unusual for Spender, who recognized that rhyme was not his forte. The delicacy of rhyme seems inappropriate for these violent poems.

“Port Bou,” which takes its title from the small Spanish port that was Spender’s entry point from France (WW,199) and that had been bombed before he

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 ion 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 Spenders most accessible and powerful poems. The poet stands there, almost asking to be wounded. He ca n 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 descanting on “fundamental ideas about freedom and liberty,” Spender’s “poems expound upon death, suffering, fear and concern over the fate of the inn 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 and 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 be 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 prefect 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 to 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 beensilverly 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 would
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 forint 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 and intertia 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?

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 this 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 form 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 l=believed that progressive humanism would provide moral structure in and era of growing religious whelming 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 conductive 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 paradisal ecstasy
Is justified is justified
By hunger of all beasts beneath
The overhanging cloud,
Who, to snatch quick pleasures run,
Before their momentary sun
Be eclipsed by death.

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 istoo 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 is 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 form 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, eve 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 po9litical 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 be 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," growns form 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 fist bird" (RV, 82). Ruins are fat 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 form 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 sin the collection are compressed and consistent, but some are soft in theme or execution. Spender takes chances and reveals himself in the best traction of romantic poetry. His gifted personality emerges undaunted form 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 treetrunk 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 form 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 hbis 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 form 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 form *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 form 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 form prison, form authority, form the strictures of time, and form 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 / Ina 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, out 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 augers 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 aman 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 compete 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, whale 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 posting 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 in books in recognized by the scholar, who desires to be “reborn in the blonde landscape of a woman” and to die, in the Elizabethan sense, 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 life 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 limb s 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 statured 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 deal 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 is 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 and 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 form 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 disguised 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 form young Communist to young humanist y 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 tow 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’II feel a ring invisibly circle this bone with shining “ (CP 1955, 186). The tone, diction, and imagery of the piece are near perfect.

In Mission 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 p[age stares at me like glass / Where stared-at roses with to pass / Through petalling of my pen” (CP 1955, 187). It is amusing to contemplare 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 imaging that the cries in the night of their six-seek-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,/ Lingering 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 form 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, main 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 form poetry as well as from politics.

The *Selected Poems* of 1964 was first published in America and reprints only a few poems form 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 post 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 painof 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)

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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 / Lauched 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. “Conferencier” 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 m achiness." 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 Mom bed 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 s strange noise and wonders if the house is falling apart and what bills be 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 form 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 be 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 if 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 n un in the hospital, “Is our baby a and find the paintings of other babies ugly.

Spender the romantic poet has remained true to himself. Form the beginning he refused to be a parrot for communist cant or a purveyor of poetic fashions . Ho one, not Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Thomas, or even the formidable Auden, has pulled Spender the post form 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 form torrent to trickle because the poet has been distracted by his need to earn a living in letter, 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. Levis 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.

CHAPTER – VI

EPILOGUE : DOLPHINS

In spite of the turmoil , Spender had to face during his last five years , he did manage to complete a final book .In 1994 Dolphins was published by Faber and Faber , who also hosted an eighty – fifth birthday party ,which Spender rightly thought of as a drawing of the curtain , and St. Martin's reissued *World Within World* . In October Spender made his last trip to America .He read at the 92nd Street Y and at Brandies , and delivered a speech on art and literature at a dinner in his honor at the New York Public Library .In November he fell as he was leaving a New York City restaurant and broke a hip .Treatment included the implant of a pacemaker ; for sometime Spender had suffered from congestive heart failure . It was not until the end of the year that he was able to return home ,but he did manage to regain his ability to walk . Back at Loudoun Road ,he lived a quieter version of his old life . A hospital stay became necessary during the summer of 1995 and became frailer , but he continued to write the occasional review and to enjoy lunches at his clubs or at home .As a writer , he knew he had done what he could do .

Dolphins was dedicated to Auden ,Day-Lewis , MacNeice , and Isherwood , Spender's closest and oldest literary friends .It is a small book ,containing nineteen poems , a few reworked from earlier versions .To some extent , *Dolphins* continues what had become for Spender a process of recollection .Three of the new poems – " Letter from an Ornithologist in Antarctica " , " Farewell To My Student ," and " Laughter " – are ,in effect ,elegies to "B",

whom he identified by name and described as “one of the best people I have ever met “ in an interview with Ian Hamilton for the *New Yorker* profile.

The “Farewell” poem is almost conversational in tone but contains the by now familiar Spender penchant for delicate , almost romantic , nature imagery .It begins :

For our farewell ,we went down to the footpath
Circling the lake .
You stood there , looking up at
Egrets nesting in high branches

--White ghosts in a green tapestry.
And I stood silent , thinking of
Images to recall this moment .
(D:9)

“Air Raid “ is a World War II memory :

In this room like a bowl of flowers filled with light
Family eyes look down on the white
Pages of a book , and the white ceiling
Like starch of a nurse , reflects a calm feeling .

The daughter , with hands outstretched to the fire ,
Transmits through her veins the peaceful desire
Of the family tree , from which she was born ,
To push tendrils through dark to a happier dawn .

In the ancient house or the glass – and –steel flat
The vertical descendants of the genes that
Go back far in the past , are supported by floors
And protected by walls from the weather outdoors .

In their complex stage settings they act out the parts
Of their bodies enclosing their human hearts
With limbs utilizing chairs ,tables , cups,
All the necessities and props . (D ; 5)

“A First War Childhood “ looks back t 1916.

Wrapped in my blanket
--A chrysalis
Wings not yet sprouted –
I stared up at
The ceiling skylight
Where , mile on mile ,
Tons of dark weighed
Pressing on glass,
And stars like jewels
In cogs of a watch
Divided time
Into minutes and seconds .

Out of that Nowhere
Surrounding all
So that any point anywhere
Was at the centre,
There fell a voice
Like a waterfall
Speaking through space

I AM I AM I AM (D : 35)

“Room” describes a space in memories :

This room’s electric with those memories
Which ,when he enters their invisible
Unanticipated zone ,galvanize
His spirit to a shape his body had
Centuries ,it seems ,ago .
Open the door –
The room’s ablaze with children
In their sloop made of two chairs

Where they play pirates .
Points of fire ,their hair,
Their eyes of ice ,their laughter
The clashing swords of angels guarding Eden .
`Come in !' they shout ,and mean to say `Get out !'

Then ,standing at the window ,seeing
Dusk absorb the green particulars
Of grass and trees , and make intenser
The glow of bricks and roses , he hears
Calling from the shrubbery ,the voice
Of one long dead ,
Poignant through the dark ,that when she lived
He dared not answer . (D : 30)

"Worldsworth,"a favorite Dolphins poems of Spender's ,is one inspired by the memory of the poet's discovery of Wordsworth in the Lake District as a child .The inspiration came during the 1979 visit to Skelgill Farm with Natasha .He remembered his father reading Wordsworth to his mother , with his play on words that brings together Spender's earliest and primary poetic inspiration and his life long commitment to the establishment of a better world .

`Worldsworth,'I thought ,this peace
Of voices intermingling –
`Worldsworth,'to me ,a vow. (D:41)

In *Dolphins* one feels that the poet has found his own voice , that he is no longer concerned , for instance , with modernism or his art in it . *Dolphins* is a relatively conscious farewell from a man who has little time to live and who quietly expresses feelings that are inevitably colored by the approaching end .The last poem in the volume ,a poem called "The Alphabet Tree, " dedicated to Valerie

Eliot , the wife of his own literary “father ,“foreshadows the end of the voyager’s quest .In the poem a voice urges on the poet :

“Today you must climb
Up the rungs of this ladder …” (D:45)

So the poet climbs and strikes the letter Z and reads a poem in his head .But the voice , true to Spender’s own tendency to deprecate himself ,sees only “a flower /Whose petals will scatter /On the breeze in an hour .”

The last stanza is Spender’s final celebration of greatness .The voice cries out ,

“But behold where on high
The entire ink –black sky
Is diamonded
With stars of great poets
Whose language unfetters
Every Alphabet’s letters …” (D:46)

One afternoon in July 1995 , the Spenders had lunch ,as they had so often before , with a group of accomplished friends .Spender was quiet during the lunch but obviously happy to be where he was , in his natural element .From time to time he said something amusing .The next morning , July 16 , when Natasha called him to a meal ,there was no answer , and she found her husband dead on the bedroom floor .

A “Service of Thanksgiving to Celebrate the Life and Work of Stephen Spender” was held on March 20, 1996 ,at St. Martin- in – the –Fields .

The people at the service – representing a wide spectrum of ages and social classes – came to pay homage to a consummate man of letters and a

witness to his age , a man who was sometimes so quiet and gentle as to go almost unnoticed but who , like Virginia Woolf ‘s Orlando , was always there .As Spender was so much a representative of the turbulent age of modernism ,they came to homage not only to him but t that age and to all of its “greats,” those voyagers who as painters , as poets , as progressive social and literary thinkers , had broken through the barriers of mediocrity and narrow-mindedness and “wore at their hearts the fire’s centre .“The title poem of Dolphins epitomizes Spender’s life long journey between ` outside ‘ and ` within ‘,between `centre’ and `circumference’ :

Happy ,they leap
Out of the surface
Of waves reflecting
The sun fragmented
To broken glass
By the stiff breeze
Across our bows .

Curving , they draw
Curlicues
And serifs with
Lashed tail and fin
Across the screen
Of blue horizon –
Images
Of their delight
Outside , displaying
My heart within .

Across this dazzling
Mediterranean
August morning
The dolphins write such
Ideograms :

With power to wake
Me prisoned in
My human speech
They sign :
` I AM !’ (D :1)

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