CHAPTER VI

STEPHEN SPENDER — A STUDY IN THE POET’S SEARCH FOR

INTERIOR INTEGRITY THROUGH CONTEMPORANEITY.

(Arguments: Stephen Spender’s poetry written in the Thirties was a mission of fulfilling the aspiration of his soul. He as an idealist, was intent upon honestly realizing the objective existence into the fibres of his own personality. He wrote poems by way of imaginatively sharing a duty in the cause of Eros or welfare of the masses of Western humanity. He was restless, uneasy and anxious not simply on account of a romantic temperament, but mainly because he understood the implications of the typical 'dread behaviour' in the social, economic and political fields in England as well as the Continent. People were acting like reckless individuals on account of anxiety. The nations of Europe were pursuing a path that was sure to end in disaster. Spender could foresee how the neglect of love, sanity and caution would push European peoples in the catastrophe of war. He cherished active pity in his social attitudes because, whether it was the question of economic injustice or fascist tyranny, the unhappiness of man's condition moved his sincerest emotions).
CHAPTER VI

STEPHEN SPENDER - A STUDY IN THE POET'S SEARCH FOR PERSONAL INTEGRITY THROUGH CONTEMPRANEITY
"The problem before poetry to-day is not to escape from life on to the snowy peaks, nor to escape into itself, but to accept the life that is around us and, in the deepest sense, to enjoy it." 1

Such a well-defined attitude on the part of a budding poet just come out of university implied fine sensibility and unclouded vision. Stephen Spender, dreaming dreams of glory, had a restless heart seeking to be true to itself ever since he was a boy. It is interesting to note that Oxford Poetry 1929 (of which he was a co-editor with MacNeice) bore the words "Dedicated Neither to 'Poetry', Nor to the Zeitgeist". This implied that the young man was going neither to write 'escape' poetry nor to emulate those who thought of the human world and life as hollow, ugly and meaningless. 2

1. p. 10, The Bookman, October 1932 — from an article entitled 'This Age in Poetry' by Stephen Spender.

2. cf. "Perhaps, after all, the qualities which distinguished us from the writers of the previous decade lay not in ourselves, but in the events to which we reached. These were unemployment, economic crisis, nascent fascism, approaching war .... It amounted to meaning that we had begun to write in circumstances strikingly different from those of our immediate predecessors and that a consciousness of this was shown in our writing."

(vide Spender's autobiography World Within World, p. 13).

Stephen Spender felt seriously disturbed at the crisis in the life of Western society in the Thirties. There were sinister political events. These were overshadowed by the cruel economic misery; an ever-present political debacle i.e. World War II. This chilling with the post-lessness. He had a frightening awareness of that nightmare. His generation had been exposed to a horrible agony of ruin and frustration:

At first, growing up in us more nakedly than our own nature, Driving us beyond what seemed the final choking swamp, Ruin, the all-covering illness, to a new and empty air; Singling us from the war that killed ten millions; .... Then sending us to lean days after the fulfilment; Dropping us into the lunar crater of the dead.\(^1\)

He felt uneasy at the seemingly helpless state of human existence.

The boy Spender, dreaming dreams of glory and ambition, would often regret the paucity of great causes for which one could exert or struggle. This betokened a restless heart emotionally quivering to sound the measureless depths of the soul and the aerial heights of life. Once the seed of poetry was planted in him, his imaginings would not allow him to be enmeshed in mere tendrils of pure poetry. Thus even since his adolescence he was noted for his passionate idealism, though surrounded by such a tone of existence (i.e. post-war misery and frustration) that did not at all

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\(^1\) Stephen Spender, 'Collected Poems'1928-53', Faber 1955, p.33. from poem No. 34.
make for it. It could be traced to his romantic nature and attitude: "Thus in all my attitudes I had already, at the age of nineteen, arrived at a point where fulfilment meant a compromise, and compromise meant an escape from the real. In love, I wished for a transcendence of physical terms, an escape from the real. In politics, I wished for a social revolution which would achieve justice without introducing new injustices into the methods used to make the revolution. In poetry, I wished to achieve a purely inspirational kind of writing which rejected the modern life of day-to-day living."  

After coming in contact with Auden at Oxford, however, the young Spender who had previously felt happy with his lyrical inspiration and sensuous imagery began to crystallize his native instinct into clearer and more purposeful shapes. That is to say, the exulting note of modish


2. Compare with the ideas expressed in the Autobiography quoted above. The book opens with the lines 'I grew up in an atmosphere of belief in progress curiously mingled with apprehension' (page 1). The following lines about his Oxford period are worth being noted: "When I was at Oxford, I changed my view of poetry. I ceased to think of it creating a special word in which the poet enjoys Keatsian imaginings shutting the real world. ..... Instead, he was now a translator of the world which man projects around him through the actions of his will back into language of the inner life of dreams and phantasy which has projected this materialitic activity." (pp. 94-95).
passion,

Time is a thing
That does not pass through boredom and wishing,
But must be fought with, rushed at, over-awed,
And threatened with a sword ....

Let heart be done, shut close the whining eyes,
And work, or drink, or sleep, till life defies
Minute, month, hour and day
Which are harrowed, and beaten and scared away.

gave way to the upsurge of a heartfelt sentiment as that
of pity at contemplating the hopeless and deadening misery
of prisoners. The symbolism used was deeper and more
suggestive:

Their Time is almost Death. The silted flow
Of years on years
Is marked by dawns
As faint as cracks on mud-flats of despair.

My pity moves amongst them like a breeze
On walls of stone,
Fretting for summer leaves, or like a tune
On ears of stone.

When have their lives been free from walls and dark
And airs that choke?
And where less prisoner, to let my anger
Like a sun strike.

The dominant tone, however, was one of moving idealism befitting a sincerely well-meaning but worried young man:

No, no, no,
It is too late for anger,
Nothing prevails
But pity for the grief they o vie-

Spender's idealism made him dissatisfied with commonness, squalor, inadequacy and anxiety in the changing life but it also served to reinforce his conviction that the living poetry of his age was to be built out of that very stuff. The budding poet reminded himself and his generation that contemporary situations, besides being topics which could be of the greatest appeal to the people of the time, were especially meant for the imaginative writers of that period: "Our poets should stop worrying about Poetry (Is it dying ?), and about Science (Is it killing Poetry and about Books (There are so many of them; how can we keep pace ?), and, above all, about themselves (Does Poetry really express my personality ? Am I not overwriting myself ?); perhaps then they would have time to reflect that we are living in one of the most remarkable ages it has ever been people's fortune or misfortune to live in. They might not like the age; the struggles of the men who represent a system which is now being overthrown might appear to be as sinister and unscrupulous as the actions of characters in "The White Devil" .... On the other hand, they might be anxious to hail a new era; they might feel that scientific discovery

1. Ibid.
was as exciting as the discovery of a new world; and both these things were full of material for poetry. Think too of the lives of people today. To see the life of the unemployed significant; to see the lives of rich people and even their lives officials can all be seen now as being insecure, ready to fall into disaster or to form a new alignment. 3

The time was full of possibilities for one whose innermost emotions could be touched by what he observed. Any thing could very well be a significant subject if it sincerely fired the imagination and by passing through it became a 'felt thought': "As artist, what is most important to writers today is their freedom. The warning of Germany is clear enough to show them that the enemy of that freedom is fascism." 2

This is amply borne out by the warm emotion of the poet:


2. Spender, 'Politics and Literature', The Bookman, December 1933. Also compare: "What a writer writes about is at every moment related to what he believes, what he writes about also implies an attitude to the time in which he is living". Spender, "A Modern Writer in search of a Moral Subject", 'The London Mercury', December 1934, p. 128.
In this time when grief pours freezing over us,
when the hard light of pain gleams at every street corner,
when those who were pillars of that day's gold roof
\[\text{film t:: who wars-}
\]
in their clothes; surely from hunger,

The poet must not wax sentimental while portraying the
sharp misery of life. But he evinces courageous idealism
in hoping for a bright future.

Idealism in an imaginative artist shows that he is
dissatisfied with the existing model and actively aspires
for a better state of things, confident in the conviction
that a regeneration is possible. Thus it was that Spender

1. "After they have tired ...." (1933): 'The Sacred Fire'
edited by W.B. Honey, pp. 462-63.

2. cf. There are two main reasons why the thought of an
idealist is not a danger to poetry: first because this
thought comes from interior conviction, not from external
evidence, and must be expressed, secondly because it implies
a belief in the harmony of the world and helps to conceive
the world as a unity which resembles the rhythmical unity
of a symphony. Thus the disintegration of culture; which
threatened European civilization in the sixteenth century
and seems to be an even greater danger in the present
century, finds a solution in poetry."

(Raymond Tschumi, 'Thought in Twentieth Century English
disapproved of the mere purposeless painting or derisive comments of the previous generation of poets: "The fault of those poets who first attempted to break away from the Georgian tradition was obscurity .... T.S. Eliot's poetry, depressing as it may seem, is full of the enjoyment of experience .... The fault is that it does not go far enough. More and more of the life around us has got to be enclosed in the area of enjoyment. Only when the poets have left their own cultured society, their starry nights, their mountain-tops and their shadowy caves will it be possible to create a new poetry that is popular .... in the sense that it is comprehensible to every one in the whole of our society who has a true appreciation of poetry.¹

He was alive to the unhappy state of affairs but would not agree to be bullied by it into frustration, defeatism or escapism. He would rather invoke the spirit of optimism because of his conviction that a brighter turn was already on its way:

Oh young men oh young comrades
it is too late now to stay in those houses
your fathers built where they built you to build to breed money on money. It is too late
 to make or even to count what has been made.

¹ Vide 'This Age in Poetry' by Spender, from 'The Bookman' October 1932.
Count rather those fabulous possessions 
which begin with your body and your fiery soul 
... and remember what you no ghost ever had immured in his tomb 
... 

Man does not live by economics and politics alone but these in their term live by him alone and never in a vacuum. Spender, as pointed out, was fully alive to the economic misery and political uneasiness prevailing in the ranks of Western humanity. He could visualize and express it with a feeling appreciation granted only to those who were sensitively awake and imaginatively responsive to the implications of the human scene. The economic condition had provided him with a self-accusing conscience in view of the consideration that he was a member of the 'old gang' i.e. a product of that capitalist system which had produced slums, unemployment and degradation.

1. 'Oh Young Man', in 'New Signatures' (1932), edited by M. Roberts, 4th Edn., 1935, p. 86. Spender's verse drew significant comments: "It has a certain curly haired innocence. It almost blushes. It is naively enthusiastic for a new order... The call of 'Oh Young Man Oh Young Comrades' is not all Mr. Spender has to provide. The emotive power of his verse, through skilful rhythm, is sometimes strong; and such a poem as 'The Prisoners' is an achievement of value". (G. Grigson, The Bookman, May 1932, p. 107).

2. "...it should be remembered that the young writers argued with their eyes stared into by the eyes of the unemployed, to whom there were later added the eyes of the victims of the concentration camps, and all the dead of the coming war". (Spender, 'Creative Element', Hamish Hamilton, 1953, pp. 143-144).
Political bungling, which had upset the fate of every European nation, filled the poet with a foreboding of more anxious times to come. Germany, a brutal France, a revolution-minded Spain, a designs on Italy and above all an England busily ignoring the essentials for the sake of fruitless talk on economic measures, Reparations, Disarmament and stable peace — what else could all this create but insecurity and anxiety in the very air? Spender like any intelligent man realised that it was the logical consequence of the 1914-18 Great War, but he apprehended more. The economic misery and the political uneasiness were twin outward symptoms of a serious disease developing in the European body politic:

Who live under the shadow of a war
What can I do that matters?
My pen stops, and my laughter, dancing, stop
Or ride to a gap.¹

'Riding to a gap' suggests the extreme worry which Spender felt even in 1930. He was surely the first to express this premonition so sharply. He could not ignore 'the realer passions of the earth' insistent as they were to every one who realised what was happening in that part of the world.

The Great War had solved nothing: Nations had only sown seeds of wind and were going to reap whirlwind: "Whatever else is true of the Great War of 1914-18, this is true -- that it settled nothing, composed nothing, and satisfied nobody. On the contrary it disturbed conventions that had rested unchallenged for many generations, opened new problems and gave self-consciousness to new national moods of dissatisfaction.... It was a war to relieve Europe of the menace of unbridled ambition in Germany and Russia, and already the eyes of Europe are again fixed anxiously upon Moscow and Berlin." 1

I am so close to you
I will confess to you
I do all you do.
At night I'm flooded by a sense of future
The bursting tide of an unharnessed war,
Drowning the contours of the present. 2

In his unassuming but distinct manner the poet had put his finger on the painful nerve throbbing with anxiety 'the grave lecher', 'the globe trotter'. There was an attempt to show and forewarn:

All I can foresee now — more I shall learn —
Is that these fears invent their opposites.
Our peace causes war. 3

3. Ibid.
With the rise of different forms of Dictatorships in Europe, the indication of the general weather could be ignored by man at his own peril. It should be of interest to note here Spencer's views given under the title "War or Peace."

"The form of internationalism in which most of the world lives today is war ... Nor is the European conflict ended. ... The state of war is being continued economically by tariffs which might turn into a blockade. There is and there will be many shifting of alliances, but as long as the peace treaties exist there will be the same fundamental condition of economic war leading eventually up to an outbreak like the last Great War."

... ... ...

The publication of Poems (1933) saw Spender emerging as a major contributory force of the New movement in English poetry. Spender had before that attempted two private publications, viz, Nine Experiments and Twenty Poems (1930). Even critics who had till then ignored significant and original

1. (The Bookman, May 1934, p. 114). Also compared "Fifteen years after the last war Europe talks of nothing but the danger of new wars .... Everywhere in Europe there is unemployment and social hopelessness. Everywhere in Europe we find empty larders and filled ammunition dumps.... The hypocrisies of today seek to blind us to the fact that very soon the whole of Europe will stand in flames. They will engulf us all. Even the nicest yellow fog will not be able to isolate England from the continent."

approach of the new poets began to acknowledge the advent of the group of younger poets, Spender being the last to complete the list.¹ Whereas Auden had compelled their attention by his fluency and satiric faith and urgent appeal, Spender came as a man of idealistic sincerity which also evidenced the poets' integrity of purpose i.e. trying to be true to his own personality vis-à-vis the contemporary facts of life.

Sincerity may not be a very helpful term for the critics², but it is of utmost importance to the imaginative writer out in search for a vision which has been imperceptibly disturbing him, but which he tries to grasp and communicate because it answers the deepest chords of his personality. The following definitely suggests the existence of genuine personal response and consistent feeling:

No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament To make them birds upon my singing-tree;

1. Vide R.R. Leavis' remarks in Scrutiny, June 1933 (p. 65 et seq. He has called the general acclaim a blurb of uncritical enthusiasm, though he concedes impressiveness to Auden and signs of a genuine impulse and personal sensibility to Spender: "The reception they have had .... certainly evidences a fairly widely shared sense that to have a poetry that should be a significant part of contemporary life" (p. 67) '.... for there really is a movement' (p. 68). Also compare the remarks of Times Literary Supplement, July 6, 1933, p. 463 and The Bookman, December 1933, p.147.

2. "Sincere? One does not doubt it; but 'sincere' is not a very useful term in criticism". F.R. Leavis, Scrutiny, June 1933, p. 61.
Time merely drives these lives which do not live
As tides push rotten stuff along the shore.¹

The poor blind beggars were no decorative topics for in-
sincere poets to use as material for moral indignation in a sincere
man's heart:

--- There is no salvation, no none,
In the curving beauty of that line
Traced on our graphs through History, where the oppressor
Starves and deprives the poor.²

The raw wounds of economic misery portended evil of a threat-
ening order because they had gone septic due to mishandling
by politicians, 'the tide of killers'. The 'disintegrating'
patterns' matched 'the program of the antique Satan'. The
poet could palpably visualize the terrible ordeal—a series
of attacks of death on life—as war was but the:

.......... Drive of a ruining purpose,
Destroying all but its age-long exploiters.³

If one had sincere and selfless pity, it was naturally supple-
mented by a holy courage to see and show in order to register
one's effort:

Meanwhile, where nothing's pious
And truth no longer willed,
Nor the intellect conscious,
Holy is lucidity
And the mind that dare explain.⁴

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¹. Spender, 'Collected Poems', Faber 1953, p. 59; from Poem No. 32.
². Ibid.
³. 'Not Palaces, And Era's Crown', The Pocket Book of Modern Verse, edited by Oscar Williams, p. 510.
⁴. The Uncrating Chaos' quoted above.
Spender, moved with his humanitarian idealism, hoped fervently that Communism would soon relieve the economic misery of the masses because no amount of stale capitalist manoeuvres could gainsay the 'palpable and obvious love of man for man'. Willy-nilly, things would turn out well since good forces were active:

. . . . . . . . No man shall hunger; Man shall spend equally Our goal which we compel: Man shall be man.

With what genuine eagerness he exhorted his comrades to advance to rebuild and to rebel for 'bringing light to life'! How enthusiastically he would assure his friends that the old capitalist system was doomed to fail ('it is too late for rare accumulation'). At times he was mighty indignant too, prescribing 'Death to the killers'.

But Spender's search for integrity would not let him be. He had incorporated Communism in his poetic vision because it agreed with his first-born emotions of communal and social welfare. The world had been rendered out of joint by inhuman violence on the part of man -- it could be vivified by human action based upon love and fellow-feeling. He was

a humanist, not of the letter but of the spirit. Spender was an idealist in respect of communism too. The reason for his energetic sympathy for this political creed, and the smouldering uneasiness of his sensitive soul at the prospect of humanity marching towards fatal extremes.

But he was definitely uneasy and angry with anxiety which, he felt, augured ill for Europeans. His long poem 'Vienna' (1934) was a crystallization of that sentiment. The conflict between the Fascists and Socialists roused deepest sympathy and indignation in his heart, and he completely identified his anti-Fascist views with his whole being and integrity. It was an admirable and effective effort because he could plainly visualize what witches' cauldron had been set a-boiling in Europe. He felt genuine pity at the fate of the common man. Towards the close of the poem he declared:

There is no question more of not forgiving
Forgiveness become my only feeling
To understand their lack of understanding
Has absorbed my entire loving
Yet sometimes I wish that I were loud and angry
Without this human mind like a doomed sky
That loves, as it must enclose, all.

1. Compare: "They believe that a new order of society must emerge out of the present muddle, and the basis of the new society must be communistic, but they exasperate the working communist by having definite ideas on the form and purpose of life in that society ...." (Michael Roberts: 'Poetry and Propaganda', London Marsary, January 1935, p. 234).
William Plomer, himself a sensitive soul, did rightly remark:

"It is in poetry that we may expect to find the most accurate and advanced forecasts of emotional and intellectual weather, angles of vision and expression. One is likely to become familiar in the near future with in poetry this year I know of nothing more admirable than Stephen Spender's 'Vienna'."

Spender's lyricism, sensuousness and poetic sensibility took on a deeper hue as the decade advanced. His young-manish social consciousness (i.e. the active dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, and constructive hope for better times) became the urgent concern of a mature man worried, even 'sore perplexed', over the course of events, now more than ever plainly leading towards a bottomless chasm. The Spanish war showed point-blank which way the wind was blowing. Spender actively identified himself with the Republican cause and his profound sympathy was movingly expressed in the poems of that time. Besides the drama 'Trial of a Judge', his only other poetic publication, "The Still Centre" (1939) dealt with the prospect of violence and Fascist brutality that was going to give Europe a blood bath.

There was darkness within and without, the soul of the poet being busy in scaling manly heights and plumbing measureless caverns of struggles and weakness:

0 strange identity of my will and weakness!
Terrible wave white with the seething word!
Terrible flight through the revolving darkness!
Breaded light that hurts my profile!
No, my flight, covering me in fears!
Oh, amid my weakness silhouettes
On territories of fear, with a great sun.¹

His sense of justice continued to be pained with the reign of economic inequality. He was angrily disgusted:

For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes
From fog to endless night? On their slag heap, these children
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.
All of their time and space are foggy slum
So blot their maps with slum as big as doom.²

But this had grown secondary in view of the darker and fiercer signature of War or Death writ large across the Western sky. His usual impersonal terror merged with a tender personalized emotion of tragic pity.

And although hundreds fall, who can connect
The inexhaustible anger of the guns
With the dumb patience of these tormented animals;³

This pity had been prompted by a god-like vision:

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1. From 'Darkness and Light', The Still Centre (1939), 2nd imp., 1941, p. 78.
2. From 'An Elementary School Class Room in a Slum', Still Centre, p. 29.
3. From 'Two Armies', Still Centre, p. 56.
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 others arms.  

Stephen Spender had started his poetic career with
a heart beating with the premonition of War (which is the
cause as well as the result of economic and political in-
security). His famous poem 'In 1929' was prophetic as his
shorter lyric 'Who live under the shadow of a war' (1930).
His vision took firmer and clearer outlines as the threat
of war increased sharply. The lyrical pathos with which he
sincerely tried to interpret the politico-economic malaise
only added overtones of meaning and suggestion.  

1. Ibid.; Also see 'Bombed Happiness', p. 70.
2. For example, look to the sentiment expressed by Spender
in person of the ill-fated Judge in 'Trial of a Judge':

   Always through my life I heard
   Behind the music of the summer hills
   The measuring distance of a drum,
   How often all night I would lie awake
   Too anxious for love, whose map
   Is narrow as the bed or tomb,
   My spirit's map growing to Europe, gnawed
   On her spirit's face by winds of space.

*The poem has been analysed in the opening pages of Chapter II
of this study.
end of the decade his concern for the fate of fellow
human beings ennobled Pity itself:

Oh let the violent time
Cut eyes into my limbs
As the sky is pierced with stars that is
The map of pain,
For only when the terrible river
Of grief and indignation
Has poured through all my brain
Can I make from lamentation
A world of happiness . . . .

This was the voice of the hero of a Shakespearean
Tragedy snatching victory out of death. The poet standing
on the edge of life (going to be manacled by violence) had
been granted a tragic calm resulting from an all-embracing
vision. The fervent expressions — neither sentimental nor
stylish — search our hearts with rays of courage and sanity:

O utter with your tongues
Of angels, fire your guns — O save and praise —
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.

1. From 'To a Spanish Poet', The Still Centre, p. 107.

2. From 'Exiles From Their Land, History Their Domicile',
The Still Centre, p. 25.
SUMMING UP

Spender's activities in the Thirties was an illustration of his integrity of personal purpose. He was all these engaged in deciphering and facing the anxiety and fear bred by the rise of Fascism and the threat of War. So truly were his deepest sensibilities touched by the contemporary actualities of life that he could prophetically visualize the course of the unhappy years ahead. He had a sharp premonition of the World War II. He rose to heights of poetic flight by dint of his sincere idealism and deep love for his fellow men. *

* "Poetry witnesses that the individual is not just the individualist exploiter. That there should be a rebirth of a pious and sacrosanct concept of the individual as millions of single lives, which are in some sense beyond the good or evil workings of society, is most important, for there can be no sane and unfanatical politics without this." (Spender, 'On Poetry', Highlights of Modern Literature, Mentor Book, 1954, p. 154).