Stephen Spender: Critical Epitomizing of Experience

Stephen Spender (1909- ), a liberal humanist, was, like most socially conscious intellectuals of the nineteen thirties, much afflicted by the prevailing social iniquities of the time. He felt profoundly the social claims, specially the claims of the suffering people, upon him and his art. Like Auden and Day Lewis, Spender, too, hoped for the creation of a society where men might live in closer contact with one another. Thus he wrote in the poem 'After they have tired of the brilliance of cities',

Readers of this strange language,
We have come at last to a country
Where light equal, like the shine from snow,
strikes all races.

Here you may wonder
How it was that works, money, interest,
building could ever hide
The palpable and obvious love of man for
man.

As mentioned earlier, Spender, too, like Auden and many others, went to Spain during the Spanish Civil War, to enthuse the Republicans in their fight against fascism. However, his social outlook lacked the fire that one notices in Auden and Day Lewis. He himself explained his outlook in the Preface to The Still Centre (1939):

As I have decidedly supported one side - the Republican - in that conflict, perhaps I should explain why I do not strike a more heroic note. My reason is that a poet can only write about what is true to his own experience, not about what he would
Spender attempted to adopt a political position left of liberalism. But there were in this stance, both convictions and uncertainties, all of which are recorded in his book, *Forward from Liberalism* (1937). He perceives that the ineffective political workings of the democratic nations have led to disastrous results:

Democracies are passing through a stage of acute disappointment with the very limited and ineffective political power which they enjoy. In England, this disappointment takes the form of apathy, not enthusiasm, which produce, or rather permit, fascism and war, although, when they are whipped up by propaganda, these tired emotions can be raised to an angry vehemence.

His extensive observation on communism should serve as a base for our comprehension of his poetry of the thirties:

The propertyless nature of the classless society is a political fact at the very centre of communist life, shared by the whole people. This gives the communist faith a significance which so far has only derived from the ways of life laid down by religion. Yet it is a mistake to call communism a religion, for whereas the very essence of religion is that its aims are realizable in this life, communist faith is inseparable from the action that will achieve the classless society. ... If you require a phrase, it would be better to call communist morality a "way of life" rather than a religion.

The middle section of the reviews of *Forward from Liberalism*, however, reveals the author's misgivings about making a total commitment to leftist politics. To the question whether communism will destroy the values which he cares for, Spender thus replies:

... if the values of civilization are the highest values of life, and if art is itself
a life which affects one's whole being, and not merely a series of 'fragments I have shored against my ruins', then it is necessary that the energy of that life should go into the classless society.  

But he explains his predicament of trying to reconcile communism and individualism in poetry thus:

... the liberal individualist who turns towards communism is in a peculiar isolated position: because, in order to insist that the values of his life are living values, he may have to meet with a great deal of criticism from the communists themselves. There are two things for him to keep in mind; firstly, that "no political creed except communism offers an intelligent man any hope," secondly, that he demands the right to exist within the classless society which he is prepared to live for. And his existence is inseparable from the values of his life. So that his doubts must not be turned against himself: they must be criticism. The fight in which he is involved is more difficult than the merely political struggle. For, on the one hand he is fighting on the side of the communists for a just and secure society; on the other hand, he is fighting for disinterestedness and spiritual freedom within that society: and here he may find that political dogma is against him. Essentially, he is using political weapons in order to attain an unpolitical world.

Regarding his own political stance, Spender makes the following statement:

Liberalism seems to me to be the creed of those who, as far as it is possible in human affairs, are disinterested, if by disinterestedness one understands not mere passivity but a regard for objective truth, an active will towards political justice. During an era of peace and progress, the liberal spirit is identical not only with political discussion, but also with scientific inquiry, speculative thought and the disinterested creation of works of art.
According to Randall Swingler, *Forward from Liberalism* reveals its author valuing freedom "as an emotion". Spender, he says, "has not come to understanding that most concise of Marxist aphorisms, 'Freedom is knowledge of necessity'". This is a pointer to Spender's almost tenacious holding on to individual freedom, which as a liberal, he was not prepared to renounce. In the front flap of his book *The Thirties and After*, the following words appear:

> The thirties was the decade of the Spanish Civil War and pre-war crisis, when writers could no longer be non-political. But personal commitment to one ideology brought with it an awareness of the dangers, particularly acute for a writer, of surrendering individual freedom of choice and expression.8

It is this fervour for individual freedom that underlies most of Spender's pronouncements on poetry and poets.

In *The Destructive Element* (1953), Spender takes into consideration the question of what is going to be the social or political subject of writing. Its text is that the artist must not reject the outside reality in favour of a beautiful past; he must not escape from social reality, but must plunge right into the heart of it, in order to produce an art that is modern, revolutionary, and relevant. He says:

> If the subject of writing is political justice and political freedom, it is no longer possible with consistency to be a writer who satirizes a small clique of literary dilettanti; who insists on regarding only the surface of his characters, who prides himself only on the eye; and on having an eye which ignores the more emotive centres. Literary fascism goes with political fascism. ... The emphasis of our realistic tradition is entirely on the reality of externals: of nature, of
mechanics, of acts. If one speaks of any other kind of reality one is suspected of a kind of idealism.

In the following passage from the same book, Spender prepares the reader to build the right perspective towards left-wing literature:

The reader, in judging left-wing literature, must not judge it in the same way as he argues about Communism. It is not a question of whether he thinks the premises are false, but of whether the premises are about realities, in the sense that there are political and moral realities which are more enduring than the external world of literary realism. What he should ask is - Does this Communist approach lead to a greater and more fundamental understanding of the struggle affecting our whole life today?

His emphatic statement on the idea of justice that art should illustrate, brings to light his social sense and convictions:

The Socialist artist is concerned with realizing in his own work the ideas of a classless society; that is to say, applying those ideas to the life around him, and giving them reality. He is concerned with a change of heart.

Spender advocates writing to the public and not to form cliques with a private language and private jokes. Indeed, from the very beginning 'MacSpaunDay' took upon themselves the responsibility of writing for the people and their poetry always emphasized the community. Their poems were pervaded with a social sense, and they preached that poetry divorced from life was of no value. As Spender says,

When one considers the position of artists in a Socialist state, it is ... to remember that the art which has 'roots in the masses' must be free to tell the truth and to criticize life. Lenin said, 'Art belongs to the people. It ought to extend with deep roots into the very thick of the broad toiling masses. It ought
Spender's concept of human justice is not an abstract one; he feels for human beings basically as individuals. But, whenever he takes upon the wide canvas of the affairs of humanity, he draws himself out from within his private shell to give expression to the kind of serious social commitment of himself that is characteristic of the poets of the thirties. In 'The Prisoners', he expresses his compassion for men jailed in an inimical environment all their lives:

They raise no hands, which rest upon their knees,
But lean their solid eyes against the night,
Dimly they feel
Only the furniture they use in cells.

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.

His sympathy for the unemployed of his time finds expression in 'Moving through the silent crowd', with a somewhat Audenesque use of social imagery:

Moving through the silent crowd
Who stand behind dull cigarettes,
These men who idle in the road,
I have the sense of falling light.

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.
The last stanza, however, is typically Spenderian; the poet leaves behind the objective scenes to dwell on his inner world:

I'm jealous of the weeping hours  
They stare through with such hungry eyes  
I'm haunted by these images,  
I'm haunted by their emptiness.

In the matter of conveying a pathos, this poem has surpassed many of Auden's very impressively ingenious social poems. Emotionally, it is certainly more refined than Auden's poems on comparable themes.

The sickness of a bewildered and decaying society, with widespread unemployment, poverty and squalor, psychological and moral disorders, coupled with the complacence of the 'white-collar' class, was understandably a deep wound inflicted upon the sensitive writers of the thirties. In his play Trial of a Judge, Spender describes decaying cities, overgrown grass between rusting suburban railway tracks, the unemployed lying idle on canal banks, sitting in cafes, and fighting in slum alleys. It is a world of deprivation, violence, and disgust, which can only breed prejudice and hatred towards the upper class:

Their cities began to decay; green summer flooded  
The last houses and factory yards; the tall sword grass  
Cut at the steel rails of suburban lines,  
Like rusting cogs, the tanned, naked unemployed  
Lay on canal banks bathed in sun's white wilderness.  
In cafes, in darkness, in tenements, in slums, at street corners,  
Voices grew sharp as knives and lives cut their moorings.  

A feeling of general disgust with the whole trend of his civilization was the base of Spender's discernment of the present, and his pre-
mise for the future. This mood of disgust was of a kind that eventually led to despair, similar to that expressed by Matthew Arnold in 'Dover Beach':

... the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

In Spender's 'What I expected', the anticipation was "Thunder, fighting, / Long struggles with men / And climbing;" but the poet admits that what he had not foreseen was

... the gradual day
Weakening the will
Leaking the brightness away,
The lack of good to touch,
The fading of body and soul
- Smoke before wind,
Corrupt, unsubstantial.

The wearing of Time,
And the watching of cripples pass
With limbs shaped like questions
In their odd twist,
The pulverous grief
Melting the bones with pity,
The sick falling from earth -

In the poem 'In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic', the poet wants no quietism of despair, no transformation of art, no peace of religion, but the outburst of the poor in railway stations and on street corners where they dwell:

- There is no consolation, no, none,
In the curving beauty of that line
Traced on our graphs through History, where
the oppressor

Starves and deprives the poor.
Paint here no draped despairs, no saddening clouds
Where the soul rests, proclaims eternity.
But let the wrong cry out as raw as wounds
This time forgets and never heals, far less transcends.

'Exiles from their Land, History their Domicile' is about the symbolic significance that some achieve only after their death. Death, therefore, is the determining factor of the purposes, acts, and ends that endow men with symbolic significance. However, this significance is also the product of the will:

Waves now acclaim the truth
Of names that proved their bodies lies,
And books are galleries
Where they become the statues of their wills.

Death has nothing else to do
But state and stay and make
Them one with what they willed--
(Their lives
Were exile from their being)

The poet then points to the predicament of the present day men who, unlike the heroes of the past, are doomed to know only "distraction" and "wavering uncertainty":

Oh, in lineaments of immense simplicity
Where is there similarity
With my own wavering uncertainty?
What divides
Their death my purpose, from my life my weakness?
Their clear dream, from my clear distraction?
Within the eye where is the vision
Within the hands, configuration?

Spender's concern at the social malady finds expression again in 'The Bombed Happiness'. Disillusioned with the political creed, and angered at the corruption that power inevitably assumes, he describes the fate of innocent children who are deprived of ever
knowing their own identity:

Children, who extend their smile of crystal,
And their leaping gold embrace,
And wear their happiness as a frank jewel,
Are forced in the mould of the groaning bull
And engraved with lines on the face.

The tyrannical world corrupts their trustfulness, drowns their rivers
of song, and tramples their joviality:

Their harlequin-striped flesh,
Their blood twisted in rivers of song,
Their flashing, trustful emptiness,
Are trampled by an outer heart that pressed
From the sky right through the coral breast
And kissed the heart and burst.¹⁴

And finally the "expanding State" annihilates all gaiety, jest, play,
and human happiness.

In his 'Sonnet', Spender holds up to view the blundering
judgement that a myopic society makes of the inside from a preconceived idea of the outside:

The world wears your image on the surface
And judges, as always, the looks and the behaviour
Moving upon the social glass of silver.¹⁵

'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' is full of insinuations of
the dangers of exposing slum children to the culture of the upper classes:

Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal -
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 slums as big as doom.

'An 'I' can never be great man' shows Spender's sense of social commitment for the deprived masses, and his indignation and sarcasm at the priggish bourgeoisie:

An 'I' can never be great man.  
This known great one has weakness  
To friends is most remarkable for weakness:  
His ill-temper at meals, dislike of being contradicted,  
His only real pleasure fishing in ponds,  
His only real wish - forgetting.

...  
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'.

Spender's social discontent is evident again in 'The Landscape near an Aerodrome', which presents the contrast between the beautiful descending sweep of the fragile airliner and the sordid industrial outskirts of the city. His protest against the squalor of the suburbia is aptly expressed:

... chimneys like lank black fingers  
Or figures, frightening and mad: and squat buildings  
With their strange air behind trees, like women's faces  
Shattered by grief. Here where few houses  
Moan with faint light behind their blinds,  
They remark the unhomely sense of complaint, like a dog  
Shut out, and shivering at the foreign moon.

When Spender regards the life and work of the common man, he sincerely acknowledges the tremendous power, speed, and convenience of modern transportation. For him, the aeroplane symbolizes man's conquest of great heights; it symbolizes the advance of science for the
creation of a better world. However, his social outlook in this poem shows a conflict between faith in progress and a romantic nostalgia for a utopian future. The description of the beautiful airliner, gliding down gently, its motion leaving a soothing effect on the travellers, invites our attention to the poet's illusion of a beautiful world. Soon, however, the dream-like descent of the airliner is to touch down upon the landscape of hysteria, with its ugly chimneys and factories. This is a parallel to Spender's own optimism that is pitched upon the social realities of his time. Peering down at the suburbs, the travellers see industry showing "a fraying edge". Then, as the plane lands, they hear the "tolling bell", which, for the poet, is a symbol of authority and repression, of outworn creeds which blot out the hopes of the common masses to lead meaningful lives. The poem ends with the "church blocking the sun".

The poets of the thirties believed that urban progress would lead to the birth of a new world. Hence the charming countryside is rejected as unreal in preference to an industrial surrounding. In this poem, the plane, symbolizing the modern world of advancement, is glorified above the church. In 'The Pylons', Spender praises the hideous steel towers of a rural electrification system installed at the expense of the country landscape. The secret of the hills, the cottages made of stone, the crumbling roads, the "valley with its gilt and evening look / And the green chestnut", are all "mocked dry" by the concrete pylons trailing black wire where, "Like whips of anger / With lightning's danger / There runs the quick perspective of the future." Thus, it is to the pylons that the future is
granted. Spender glorifies them for their momentous social value, in helping to make a new world of quality for all. This "perspective" of a better world for all

... dwarfs the emerald country by its trek
So tall with prophecy:
Dreaming of cities
Where often clouds shall lean their swan-white neck.

In 'The Express', the engine which "plunges new eras of white happiness" is given a higher place than nature in terms of contribution to the life of man:

Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced,
Wrapt in her music no bird song, no, nor bough
Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal.

In 'Variations on My Life', Spender considers the human body to be "Less swift and soaring than the aeroplane / Rather a clipped domesticated thing / Incapable of flying". It has to learn to "accept its dirt its fleas its little sins" and much to learn ("explore its mysteries").

'At the end of two months' holiday there came a night', is yet another poem in which modern industrialization is given an edge over the traditional concept of the beauty of the countryside. The poet imagines that he is on a train, watching the landscape pass by:

I watched hasten away the simple green which can heal Sadness. The signpost painted FERRY TO WILM And the cottage by the lake shone, vivid, but unreal.

Thus, the countryside, the healing resort of the bourgeois, is de-
clared unreal. So are the "cows", the "wave-winged stork", the "lime/
Painted on enamel behind the moving glass". To the poet, only those things which symbolize progress, are real:

Real were iron rails, and, smashing the grass,
Real these wheels on which I rode, real this compelled time.

For the poets of the thirties, it was indeed, a compelling time, in the sense that they felt an urgent need for a remedy for the situation of their time.

Spender's initial faith in the common masses as the builders of a new world prompted him to address the "young men" and "comrades" of his time to desert their houses their fathers built, and "advance to rebel". He does not lose sight of the struggle that will have to be put up to rebuild a moribund society. Thus he declares in 'Oh young men, oh young comrades':

it is too late now to stay in those houses
your fathers built where they built you to breed
money on money it is too late
to make or even to count what has been made

... 

It is too late now to stay in great houses
where the ghosts are prisonsed
--those ladies like flies perfect in amber
those financiers like fossils of bones in coal
Oh comrades step beautifully from the solid wall
advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill
advance to rebel and remember what you have
no ghost ever had, immured in his hall.

The atmosphere of this poem is rather Audenesque, and brings to
mind the lines in Poem XXXI, Poems 1927-1931, where the poet warns
the bourgeoisie to change their life styles. Spender's poem also
leaves a forceful impact with lines such as "advance to rebuild" and
"advance to rebel". A similar atmosphere pervades 'Not palaces, an
era's crown' where the speaker exhorts the reader to turn away from
his heritage, and all the bourgeois habits of indulging in the beau-
ty of culture and the arts,

It is too late for rare accumulation,
For family pride, for beauty's filtered dusts;
to develop energy "As from the electric charge of a battery" and
"will" to bring about a change in society, whereby

... No one
Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally.
Our goal which we compel: Man shall be

man.

The existing "programme" of war and oppression that destroys all
but its "age-long exploiters" will be replaced by another:

Our programme like this, but opposite,
Death to the killers, bringing light to life.

'Easter Monday' portrays the richly-clad bourgeois focussing on the
velvety far-off mountains. But it is the working men, who hold up
the future world of justice and brotherhood:

The bourgeois in tweeds
Holds in his golden spectacles'
Twin lenses, the velvet and far
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.15a

In Trial of a Judge, Petra's brother asks his sister-in-law not to
lament over his life of martyrdom as unhappy. He has moulded his
life for a great cause — that of laying the foundation of a new
world of brotherhood, happiness, and peace:

Do not say
I was unhappy. I built my mind
In the foundation of that world
Which grows against chaos and will be
happiness.
My mind's own peace and my material
interest
Centred in a philosophy of unfearing
crystals
Whose radius is the peace of cities, and
brilliance
Lack of jealousy between men.16

The communist ideal is further expressed in the argument of the
Third Red (ActV) who is confident that the combined efforts of the
innumerable working people can swamp their few oppressors:

... our world is built upon
The freedom of the peoples, when
Those who dig the minerals for their own
fetters
And build the implacable aeroplanes
The enemy aeroplanes which terribly,
Ignominiously, clutch their children;
Those who are common as the chafing seas
Equal in having nothing throughout the
world,
With no nation except their poverty
And their manifold exploited powers —
Will use their mountainous strength of their
own arms
Which now pile down against them, to dis­
possess
Their destructive few oppressors.17

In the final confrontation between the Black Fascists and the Red
Communists, the Red Chorus voice their claim of a free and peaceful
future:

We shall be free.
We shall find peace.18

'The Funeral', which is a celebration of the approaching
triumph of communism, describes the funeral of an anonymous worker, who "excelled all others in making driving belts". For the workers, "Death is another milestone on their way" and hence they maintain a joyous mood, "With laughter on their lips", even as they bury the dead worker. The gathering is a festive time of statistics, when the hero's comrades "record what one unit contributed" to the cooperative whole. After the burial, they walk home exulting in dreams of a utopia that communism will usher:

They walk home remembering the straining red flags,
And with pennons of song still fluttering through their blood
They speak of the World State
With its towns like brain centres and its pulsing arteries.

Comparing this poem with Auden's 'A Communist to Others', it can be seen that Spender's conception of a post-revolutionary situation lacks the vitality and direct revolutionary mood of Auden as reflected in the curses invoked upon the capitalist. However, keeping to the communist dramaturgy, Spender makes the individual a part of the larger whole:

They think how one life hums, revolves and toils,
One cog in a golden singing hive:
Like spark from fire.

When its "task is happily achieved, / It falls away quietly". Thus, individual grief is of no consequence. The contribution of the individual to the realization of the ideals of world communism is all that matters. The comrades are "glad as they lay him back in the earth /
And thank him for what he gave them."

A few of Spender's poems such as 'The Funeral', 'The Py-
Ions', 'Not palaces an era's crown', 'What I expected', 'After they have tired', and 'Landscape near an Aerodrome', which have expressions of leftist sentiment, and which, while they were received by the doctrinaire Marxist without enthusiasm, have somewhat coloured Spender's political reputation. In his Introduction to Collected Poems 1928-1953, he says that in preparing the collection, he felt under "an obligation to 'own-up' to those poems, like 'The Pylons' and 'The Funeral', which, when they were written, provided a particular label for some of the poetry of the 'Thirties: an embarrassment to [his] friends' luggage more even than [his] own."

Spender's long poem Vienna (1934), celebrates some of the details of the struggle of socialism. The hero's wanderings through Austria and Germany, and his witnessing of the oppression of workers, make him join the communist party, and he resolves to remain a socialist all his life.

The contrast between Wallisch (the hero) and the unhealthy patron of the Pension Beaurepas, points to the paradox that the life of the patron is decadent while the wounds and death of the hero are an opening to a fresh renewal of life. This idea is an epitome of that developed later in the poem 'Exiles from their Land, History their Domicile'. Again, in the Introduction to his Collected Poems, Spender says:

The important (to me) subject of this poem is the legend of their unity of being which such exiles have imposed on the imaginations of those who come after them.

Therefore, in Vienna, he wishes to keep the past rooted in order that the dead may appear in the "unity of being" with which death
has endowed them. The present is one of loneliness and drab reality. Although the revolution has failed, the poem clearly asserts that the revolutionaries are in fact the true ancestors of the people. However, it retreats into the inner world of the poet, and becomes a fusion of personal and political data. It reveals the poet's desire for the strength of will as he sees it in powerful men. A similar situation is presented in *Trial of a Judge*, where the judge regrets his inability to respond to things with a strength of will - an inability which he considers characteristic of the liberal:

> I envy, I envy
> Those who had faith in the past to work
> the good
> Or evil which they willed.21

According to T.W. Wintringham, Vienna had a "remoteness" and a "coldness of image" which weakened both the texture of the verse, and the whole structure of the poem. Spender, he felt, was unable to "associate himself with the living stuff of the revolution". He thought that this inability on Spender's part was owing to "a difficulty as to the relation between art and propaganda: the revolution seems to threaten a loss of liberty." Spender, however, repudiates the idea that a communist's poetry is necessarily propagandist:

> If one is on the side of the greatest possible degree of freedom, if one insists that one should write as one chooses and about what one wishes, one is not a traitor to the cause of world socialism.23

Further, in 'Poetry and Revolution', he stated that poetry was "certainly counter-revolutionary in the sense that it contained an element of pity". It was indeed not possible for Spender, Auden, and all
those with middle-class sensibility to transfer themselves deliberately to the working-class. As C. Day Lewis observed, if one became a worker, one would not have any time left for writing. This attitude, however, drew considerable criticism, specially from Christopher Caudwell, who felt that the bourgeois artists had no constructive theory, and that, as artists, they could not see the new forms of an art that would replace bourgeois art. In his Illusion and Reality (1937), he insists that what ensues in contemporary poetry is a separation of art and life, and that the artist's "proletarian living"

Bursts into his art in the form of crude and grotesque scraps of Marxist phraseology and the mechanical application of the proletarian theory - this is very clearly seen in the three English poets most closely associated with the revolutionary movement.26

...

The conscious proletariat would tell the bourgeois revolutionary that his concept of freedom is wrong ... He would insist that thought is inseparable from concrete living; and whereas the bourgeois hoped, by segregating thought from life, to preserve a part of man's freedom, "freedom is not a substance to be preserved and isolated but a force generated in an active struggle with the concrete problems of living." 27

Spender, the liberal, asserts the right of the poet to work upon his own ground and to write whatever he wishes. According to him, when poets deliberately cut themselves off from the roots of their sensibilities, they fall into a kind of self-exile, and cease to be writers. He was always trying to get at something behind the facts as they simply appear, to arrive at the particular facts that would help him give expression to his own mind. He wrote:
No system is complete in itself as a solution of the bad system which it supersedes. If there is to be any sort of freedom or improvement, one has got to push and even sometimes fight the systems one most approves of.\textsuperscript{28}

In *The Creative Element* (1953), he remarked that the poetic development of Auden, Day Lewis, MacNeice, and himself "was largely a matter of struggling with the views of the side they were supporting."\textsuperscript{29}

Spender scrutinized the events of the thirties as symbolizing the elements of his own inward life. This is the reason why there is, in his poetry, an imposition of private matter upon the public. Comparing him with Auden and Day Lewis, Francis Scarfe thus observes:

There is a basis of acceptance of a social outlook in Auden and Lewis which is much stronger in them than in Spender. Spender has his own drama: a struggle to adapt his individualism to his social views, and a struggle to understand and perfect his individuality.\textsuperscript{30}

Spender's attempt to resolve the conflict between the private life and the public, finds expression in most of his work. In his autobiography he wrote:

... public events had swamped our personal lives and usurped our personal experience.\textsuperscript{31}

During the thirties, Spender recognized that, owing to the pressure of the external events of the time - the social and economic disorders, the violence, and the subsequent urgency of radical action - poets had a tendency to write on things outside their own experience. He, however, held on to his private life, and strongly felt that if his poetry rejected his private experiences, it would be untrue to
him. About Vienna, he said that although it was intended to express his indignation at the repression of the socialists, it was also concerned with a love relationship:

I meant to show that the two experiences were different, yet related. For both were intense, emotional and personal, although the one was public, the other private. The validity of the one was dependent on that of the other: for in a world where humanity was trampled on publicly, private affection was also undermined.

Spender was indeed the most introspective of the 'New Country' group of poets. Although he adopted the fashionable Marxism of the thirties, he has always been a liberal romantic in the tradition of Shelley. For him the communist myth was a liberation of the individual spirit.

It is to be noted that the images of the social scene in Trial of a Judge have a private meaning for the poet. Thus, he makes the Judge champion private life against its total subordination by public politics. The city is the public place and the natural world, the "greenness" is a metaphor for private life. The Judge says:

*Petra's murder*  
*Printed in a million newspapers*  
*Torn and carried by the wind,*  
*Tugs like entrails on the blackthorn*  
*And fouls the edges of the city*  
*Where greenness first begins.*

As in Vienna, here, too, Spender insists on preserving the tradition of the past. To him, the traditional vision of absolute justice is part of private life. In the words of the Judge:

*Then, for the sake of such a peace*  
*As still does mantle sunset villages*  
*Where the heart may love and rest,*  
*Which still to Europe I may restore;*  
*And for the survival of a vision*
Within the human memory
Of absolute justice accepted by consent.  

He disclaims the argument of the fascists that all citizens of the nation are "Embossed beneath an iron will". So he is against the policy of the reds - the policy of answering violence with violence, of having resort to lies and hatred in their struggle to prove that the end justifies the means. Submitting to the means of the communists would betray

The achievement in ourselves; our truth
Becomes the prisoner of necessity
Equally with their untruth, ourselves
Their stone and stupid opposite.  

In his World Within World, Spender has remarked that "public passion can make a stone of the heart", a concept already formed by Yeats.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.

- 'Easter 1916'

Spender's communism thus shows a man rather in discordance with its ideals. Kenneth Allot's review of the Trial of a Judge is that it is a morality play in which the communists have a verbal victory over the fascists:

A verbal victory is awarded to the Communists with their party line of tit-for-tat against the Fascists and the notion that finally power (the power of the proletariat) is right. But all the best arguments and all the feeling speeches go into the mouth of the Judge with his defence of abstract justice.

... Spender may have intended one moral for his play and diffidently suggested another. The only moral I could find was that Stephen Spender ought not to be a Communist. As a result of this contradiction in the play the
Judge walks out of the mosaic and becomes a character. 38

Edwin Muir's review of the play presents the Judge in quite another light. He says that the Judge

is an embodiment of the spirit of man at a particular stage of history; he is a representative figure ... Every one needs such a figure, as an embodiment of itself and of what it wants to be. 39

This review establishes Spender's true nature, revealing itself through the awkward role of a propagandist.

Spender always concludes his poems by presenting only the idealism of a political outlook - a general humanitarian outlook that seeks to preserve the basic human values away from the antics of party politics. He always reacted strongly against the distortions of reality that propaganda required. It is this liberal attitude to life that is reflected also in his poems on the Spanish Civil War. In these poems, he makes no distinctions between the two opposing sides; there is no clear cause, no enemy, no hatred; nothing even of the people's idealism. The overall impression is one of total compassion for the suffering individuals. 'Ultima Ratio Regum' is one such poem where the death of an innocent boy has no consequences upon the powerful world of money and arms:

The guns spell money's ultimate reason
In letters of lead on the Spring hillside.
But the boy lying dead under the olive trees
Was too young and too silly
To have been notable to their important eye.
He was a better target for a kiss.

When he lived, tall factory hooters never
summoned him
Nor did any restaurant plate-glass doors
revolve to wave him in
His name never appeared in the papers.
The world maintained its traditional wall
Round the dead with their gold sunk deep
as a well,
Whilst his life, intangible as a Stock Ex-
change rumour, drifted outside.

In the last stanza of the poem, there is the poet's sense of irony of
the waste of youth and idealism:

Consider his life which was valueless
In terms of employment, hotel ledgers, news
files.
Consider. One bullet in ten thousand kills a
man.
Ask. Was so much expenditure justified
On the death of one so young, and so silly
Lying under the olive trees, O world, O death?

No abstractions have been brought in. The boy has no knowledge of
the cause of war. He dies for no principle, like any natural thing
that is destroyed. He does not support any side in the battle. One
cannot even tell whether he was Spanish. Nothing changes after his
death, for he was neither a comrade nor an enemy. The pathos lies
in the realization of the destruction of the boy's innocence and
youth.

The Spanish Civil War afforded Spender a profound view of
reality, which, when compared with Auden's vision of the crisis,
transcends partisan differences to achieve a classic staidness. 'To a
Spanish Poet' is an example in point, which deals with the survival
of the poet, Manuel Altolaguirre, during an air raid. Everything in
the room was destroyed, but Altolaguirre remained unharmed. The
poem concludes with the sentiment that even if the poet were dead,
his "steadfast corpse" would be built into a more lifelike structure
of society than the world spinning towards decadence:
Perhaps it is we—the living—who are dead
We of a world that revolves and dissolves
While we set the steadfast corpse under the
earth's lid.
The eyes push irises above the grave
Reaching to the stars, which draw down nearer,
Staring through a rectangle of night like black
glass,
Beyond these daylight comedies of falling plas-
ter.

Your heart looks through the breaking ribs—
Oiled axle through revolving spokes.
Unbroken blood of the swift wheel,
You stare through centrifugal bones
Of the revolving and dissolving world.

In 'Who live under the shadow of a war', Spender points to the
utter helplessness of men living in a war-torn world. They are deaf
to the sensitivity of things; their ears are "Stuffed with the realer
passions of the earth / Beneath this hearth."

In 'Thoughts During an Air Raid', Spender attacks the com-
placent attitude of the bourgeoisie, who are little affected by the
ravages of a war. In such a time, their trick is to ignore the statis-
tics of those lost in battle, and to avoid the obituary columns at
home:

Of course, the entire effort is to put oneself
Outside the ordinary range
Of what are called statistics. A hundred are
killed
In the outer suburbs. Well, well, one carries
on.

So long as this thing 'I' is propped up on
The girdered bed which seems so like a hearse,
In the hotel bedroom with the wall-paper
Blowing smoke-wreaths of roses, one can ig-
more
The pressure of those names under the fingers
Indented by lead type on newsprint,
In the bar, the marginal wailing wireless.

Spender projects the individual feeling on a wide level in 'Two
The men who fight the war hate it, but are kept fighting only by the iron discipline of being under strong command. The poignant moment is the point at which

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.

Although Spender had gone to Spain as a propagandist, he was certainly uneasy in that role, for, temperamentally he was not at all inclined towards history and abstractions. This detachment became more pronounced in later years, as his initial faith in communism as the only means for the abolition of the class system gradually gave way to disillusionment.

The fascist chorus in Trial of a Judge refers to the communists as "Machines without a nation", and as "Millions of bodies all the same: millions of minds / Colourless as the Asiatic plains."

Vienna reflects a world which is not only sick but also moribund. The Judge in Trial of a Judge recognizes that his city is a place where death is highly esteemed. 'The Dead Island' ('The Burning Cactus, 1955) shows not only the sickness of a city but that of a whole world revealed through that of the hero.

Not only was the world sick, but the good will of liberalism was without any healing power. Trial of a Judge reveals the weakness of justice, as victory goes to the most unjust, the most violent. The Judge declares that even love is not strong enough unless it can
supply power to run a whole country:

If there is love or any dancer's art
To restore symmetry now, it must be stronger
Than small brass wheels—I must have cranes
To lift stone weights, or love
Powerful enough to run a country on. 41

In 'Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing', the poet concludes:

I must have love enough to run a factory on,
Or give a city power, or drive a train.

Thus there developed in Spender an awareness of the futility of politics and of socialism, and specially of the fact that "however interested the writer may be as a person, as an artist he has got to be indifferent to all but what is objectively true ... The real objection to the Communist ideology in writing is that it is not self-critical. All it demands from a writer is that he should be a good and explicit exponent of Communism: if he is that, it not only shields him from criticism: there is positively no ground on which it can criticize him." No doubt, Spender believed with the communists that the future of individualism lay with a classless society, but at the same time, he could not accept as ideal a society which suppressed individual personality and allowed freedom on its own terms.

The closing years of the thirties mark out Spender's final position. He veered round to the belief that in his preoccupation with society the artist must not be indifferent to the problems of the individual as such. In his own words,

The answer to Marxism is to accept the challenge of the necessity of world-wide social change, but at the same time to regard the individual with Christian charity and justice. 44
It can now be easily seen that in Spender, more than in Auden or Day Lewis, there is a greater subtlety of experience which his poems epitomize, and that the individuality of his perception in the social context is the positive outcome of a discerning critical power.
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