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Self-consciousness and the image of self in the poetry of Stephen Spender, 1928 to 1934.

M.A. March 1991.

The purpose of this thesis is twofold. First, to demonstrate the value and significance of Spender's early poetry in terms of its vision and technique. Through a series of close readings the thesis traces the ways in which Spender's early poetry not only shows itself to be self-conscious but also manipulates images of self. Presenting images of self, Spender achieves a balance between engagement with and distance from the self, and the reader shares in the process of poetic self-awareness. Secondly, to demonstrate the broader value of the poetry. Spender's poetry presents a distinctive exploration of the possibilities of self in relation to the external world. The resolution of Spender's questioning and selection of both personal and public values, rooted in his contemporary situation and private circumstances, in his poetry takes the form less of historical document than of human record.

The period on which I focus, 1928 to 1934, represents Spender's first, and arguably most significant, poetic phase. The thesis is specifically concerned with four texts: Nine Experiments, Spender's contributions to Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930), Twenty Poems and Poems (1933 and 1934). Nine Experiments marks the beginning of a particular approach and lyric style which finds its culmination in Poems (1933 and 1934). The earliest poetry is interesting largely insofar as it looks forward to later themes and techniques. In Nine Experiments and Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930) we see Spender's often successful struggle to achieve effective forms in which to explore issues of self and value. Twenty Poems and Poems (1933 and 1934) concentrate on themes of love and friendship and the pressure on the poet of the contemporary political scene. The poetry does not reconcile the demands of the external, public world with his inner desires and aspirations, but presents a series of fascinatingly unresolved tensions. The thesis explores the way these poems strive for certainty. This striving stems from the tension between Spender's desire to politicize poetry and his tendency to the lyrical, personal statement.

SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE IMAGE OF SELF IN THE POETRY
OF STEPHEN SPENDER, 1928 TO 1934

Thesis submitted for the M.A. Degree
in the University of Durham.

March 1991.

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21 APR 1992

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a particular debt of thanks to Dr. Michael O'Neill for his patient, thoughtful, and above all helpful supervision. I would also like to thank Richard Povey, Steven Ragg, Charles Brotherton and Peter Tomson for their help and opinions.

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INTRODUCTION

Stephen Spender, W.H.Auden and Cecil Day Lewis not only pioneered new developments in poetry during the nineteen thirties but "were celebrated almost before they were published because they seemed to offer new responses to new problems" ¹. The association of these three writers, their numbers sometimes expanded to include Christopher Isherwood, Edward Upward and Louis MacNeice, has, for the sake of convenience, been variously labelled as The Auden Group, The Oxford Poets, The New Signatures Group and The Pylon Poets ². Although their backgrounds, education and concerns, both political and literary, were similar, they were not a literary movement, as Spender has remarked:

Movements have meetings, issue manifestoes, have aims in common. The thirties poets never held a single meeting, they issued no manifestoes...Each of them wrote a different kind of poetry from the others without feeling that, in doing so, he was letting the side down. ³

Spender's association with Auden, though initially productive, became something of a liability when "those who had bracketed him with Auden first realized how far he was from fulfilling the Auden norm" ⁴. In the same way such comments as Herbert Read's acclamation of Spender as "Another Shelley" ⁵ and the sneering remark, attributed to Norman Cameron, that Spender was "the Rupert Brooke of the Depression" ⁶ mitigated against Spender being taken on his own terms. In this study I hope, in some part, to redress this injustice.



Spender's poetry presents an exploration of the possibilities of self in relation to an external world. Such an exploration, rooted in Romanticism, is given a distinctive, individual slant by Spender as he approaches what Finch has called "the problem of his poetry". Spender's poetry not only involves the "selection of personal values" ⁷ which may serve as a creed "in a time of the general breakdown of traditional values" ⁸, but also a questioning of those traditional values - of his upbringing and culture. One contemporary critic indicted the nineteen thirties as a period of "mass unemployment through the world, worker's poverty and homes, humbug from famous people, the importance of money in worldly estimates of worth, the lack of meaning in accepted creeds" ⁹, and Spender has remarked: "We were aware of a gulf but not of any new values to replace old supports" ¹⁰. Spender's concern with the confusion of values, evident in many of his poems, is rooted not only in his contemporary situation but also his private circumstances, and resolves in his poetry less into historical document than into, as Waller has noted, human record ¹¹. Moreover, Spender's awareness is rooted in the tension between an external, public world and the private world of the individual, poetry being "a use of language which revealed external actuality as symbolic inner consciousness" ¹².

James Granville Southworth, in an attentive and sympathetic article, has remarked that:

The value of Mr. Spender's poetry lies in the force of its communication of the reactions of a sensitive person to the present-day unsettled world conditions. Although autobiographical, it is not narrowly egocentric. Objective though he attempts to be, subjectivity is the result. ¹³

Spender's poetry, although grounded in personal experience, is not so much autobiographical as the record of "an autobiographical personality; the 'egotistical sublime', from which the reader is able to deduce a picture of the author; a unity in which all the different phases of his development meet" ¹⁴. Furthermore, the more accomplished poems, notably "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing" and "Not to you I sighed", are characterised less by subjectivity, though they clearly demonstrate personal significance, than a sympathetic distance, a self-consciousness at once reflective and engaged. The dense texture of the poetry reflects these rich complications.

The poems often present an "I" who though engaging is abstracted and observing, full of tensions, both disarming and disarmed. At times the stilted, even clumsy, rhythm and syntax ironically prove an effective means of conveying powerful lyrical sentiments. My emphasis is placed on the poet's self-consciousness - on his attitude towards the presented images and ideas - and the depth of personal

conviction is expressed in the intensity of self-consciousness rather than in the circumstances or the "memory of the circumstances from which the poem arose" ¹⁵. The reader is invited to join the poet in the process of his becoming aware of himself, and in many respects what is shared is not so much what the poem is saying as the reading of the poem.

The poet's self-consciousness is revealed less through the presentation of the self *than* through, as the title of this study states, an "image of self". The poet is present as a pervasive influence, and is not only implicit in but betrayed by the language. The poet has become the property of each poem rather than an external force. A comparison of earlier and later versions of nominally the same poem, for example "Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man" (Oxford Poetry (1930)) and "Moving through the silent crowd" (Poems (1933 and 1934)), does not disclose, as Spender claims, a return to "exactly what I was setting out to do" ¹⁶ but a revision, even re-creation, of the image of self.

Ezra Pound has perceptively remarked that:

In the "search for oneself", in the search for "sincere self-expression", one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says "I am" this, that, or the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing. ¹⁷

Spender's answer to the problem of "'sincere self-expression'" was to create images of self; not only identifying himself with the poetic "I" but also, and I would suggest more importantly, granting that poetic "I" a substantial degree of autonomy. Spender, like Pound before him, in the "search for the real" is "casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem" ¹⁸. In this study I have adopted the term "image of self" in order to convey the double sense of both personal significance and poetic technique. In presenting images of self the poet achieves a sympathetic distance from his poetry, and the reader becomes a partner in the process of the poet becoming aware of himself. Furthermore, significance is granted not simply to the process of self-revelation, but directly to the images of self when they embody the unresolved tensions which the poet seeks to illuminate.

The contrast between various poems, between various images of self, not only reflects Spender's "struggle to adapt his individualism to his social views, and a struggle to understand and perfect his individuality" ¹⁹, but also the means whereby that struggle is fought as well as the way in which images of self grant the sympathetic distance needed to effectively explore possibilities of self.

This study is an attempt to trace the ways in which Spender's early poetry not only shows itself to be self-conscious but also manipulates images of self. The period 1928 to 1934 broadly defines Spender's first, and perhaps most significant, poetic phase; the publication of Poems, the first edition in 1933 and a revised version in 1934, established Spender as a significant poet with a "defined role in the dramatis personae of his generation"²⁰. I have chosen to study Spender's early work because it includes both his worst and some of his most beautiful poems - and certainly the most anthologized - thereby clearly demonstrating his maturing poetic talent. Auden has described four classes of any author's work, and Spender's early poetry readily embraces them all:

In the eyes of every author, I fancy, his own work falls into four classes. First, the pure rubbish which he regrets ever having conceived; second - for him the most painful - the good ideas which his incompetence or impatience prevented from coming to much...third, the pieces he has nothing against except their lack of importance; these must inevitably form the bulk of any collection since, were he to limit it to the fourth class alone, to those poems for which he is honestly grateful, his volume would be too depressingly slim. ²¹

The first chapter is divided into two sections: the first deals with Spender's earliest published collection, Nine Experiments, while the second looks at his contributions to Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930). Although Nine Experiments is more than "pure rubbish", it is interesting largely insofar as it looks forward to later themes and techniques. Indeed,

Spender felt ashamed of it and "later retrieved and destroyed as many copies...as possible" ²². Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930), on the other hand, contains both poor and very accomplished verse. In Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930) we see Spender's struggle to achieve effective forms by which to approach "the problem of his poetry". Furthermore, in poems such as "Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing" he is successful, achieving the tentative self-reflexivity, sympathy, sensitivity and polished technique typical of his best work.

Chapter two analyses Twenty Poems - a collection spanning the period 1928 to 1930, containing poems Spender considered "worth preserving" ²³. These poems are broadly divided into two areas: lyric celebrations of a homoerotic friendship, and introspective and political poems. The former tend to glorify an awesome and godlike figure, identified as Marston, whose splendour contrasts with the unworthiness of the poet. The latter either explore the notion of "I" in broadly introspective terms, or tentatively locate the "I" within a political and social context. Twenty Poems, like Spender's contributions to Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930), includes both poor and accomplished poems. However, it also includes some of Spender's best poems, including "Beethoven's Death Mask", in which Spender achieves a finely controlled sympathetic distance by which

to address himself to issues of self. Twenty Poems clearly outline Spender's central concerns, look back to Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930) and forward to Poems (1933 and 1934).

In the third chapter Poems (1933 and 1934), Spender's first major collection, is analysed. These poems concentrate on themes of love and friendship and the pressure on the poet of the contemporary political scene. Indeed Spender's awareness of public events shapes his exploration of both his sense of self and personal relationships. However, in these poems he does not reconcile the demands of the external, public world with his inner desires and aspirations, but presents a series of unresolved tensions. The value of poems such as "The Funeral" and "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages" lies in the way they strive towards certainty. This striving stems from the tension between his desire to politicize poetry, to "Make action urgent and its nature clear" ²⁴, as Auden would later put it, and his tendency to the lyrical, personal statement. Although Spender often refuses to grant public values personal significance, his insistence on personal significance leads us to trust him as a poet, especially in such confessional poems as "My parents kept me from children who were rough".

This study focuses both on the role of self-consciousness

and the image of self in Spender's early poems, and on the conflict of values which characterises his search to reconcile inner and outer worlds and establish some form of certainty. Spender was strongly influenced by T.S.Eliot, W.H.Auden, D.H.Lawrence, John Keats and Wilfred Owen, and I have only referred to such influences where they seem pertinent to specific poems. Nine Experiments is flawed by a crude dependence on literary allusion, especially Shakespeare. However, other early poems demonstrate the maturing of a lyrical romantic temperament struggling with an apparently valueless, modern, industrial world.

The issue of Spender's self-consciousness is complicated by the self-conscious way he re-presents in his prose both himself and his approach to poetry. I have taken a sometimes sceptical view of these self-representations. Fryer has pointed out the contrast between Spender's and Isherwood's accounts of their first meeting ²⁵, and Cunningham has noted that Spender's homoeroticism often appeared furtively; as an embarrassment:

It wasn't until the mid-1960s that Spender publicly confided that the line of his most famous of poems "The Express", about the railway engine "gliding like a queen", carried in part a memory of "an Oxford queen called M- gliding down the High when I was an undergraduate". ²⁸

However, one notes that Spender is here not simply admitting but sending up his embarrassment. Indeed, in such poems as "For T.A.R.H." he subverts rather than avoids the

homoerotic, and in "The 'Marston' Poems" (Twenty Poems) it is Spender's adoration rather than its object which is significant. In "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing" and "Not palaces, an era's crown" Spender maintains a lyrical pitch which allows him to successfully transform seeming weakness into actual strength, to resolve embarrassment into significance.

Doubts about the value of Spender's criticism of his own work do not, however, affect the value of his poetry. In my analysis of "Written whilst walking down the Rhine" (Twenty Poems) I have quoted from The Temple because Spender succeeds in illuminating in his autobiographical novel the poem's achievement. I have, for the most part, shied away from using Spender as a critical authority. Indeed, in my analysis of "The Landscape Near an Aerodrome" (Poems) I highlight discrepancies between Spender's stated and actual poetic practice.

This study attempts not to impose a pattern but discover and trace one. I am mindful not only of Eliot's warning to Spender about constructing a system and bringing it to the "object" under discussion ²⁷, but also of Spender's observation that:

With all its virtues, the danger of critical analysis is that in tracing the graph of a writer's development it arrives at a pattern which looks like a rigid plan. ²⁸

The poetry is not an account of a pre-planned development, but a record of the changing relationship between inner and outer, personal and public, worlds; a collection of images of self united not only by a search for certainty but also by a self-conscious exploration of the possibilities of self. Spender's early poetry is informed by a series of unresolved tensions which not only grant it a unique tone but also convey an intense personal significance.

The purpose of this study, then, is threefold. Firstly, to take Spender's early poetry on its own terms. Secondly, to demonstrate the value and significance of the poetry in terms of its vision and technique, the way it uses self-consciousness and images of self. Thirdly, to thereby demonstrate the broader value of the poetry in its "communication of the reactions of a sensitive person to the present-day unsettled world conditions" ²⁹. Although world conditions have changed, Spender's exploration of possibilities of self framed by the changing relationship between inner and outer worlds remains valuable. In a thoughtful retrospect Geoffrey Thurley has noted that "Contempt rather than oblivion has been Spender's lot", and his "poetry assumes greater significance today" ³⁰. I am very much of Thurley's mind, finding in Spender's early poetry an engaging and sensitive lyricism and openness.

CHAPTER ONE

EARLY WORKS

Part One: Nine Experiments.

Unachieved in many ways as the early poems are, they can be seen as both the bedrock of and background to Spender's later and better work. The title of the earliest collection, Nine Experiments is self-protective yet illuminating.

Experiments are explorations of new areas, activities or abilities: one who experiments is not required to excel or be perfect or harmonious, it is enough that one has tried. Furthermore, one senses in Spender's choice to style himself S.H.S. on the title page a desire not to be directly and personally involved, but to be present in an oblique and discreet way. In these ways the poet has defended himself and this earliest collection against adverse criticism; later, in his foreword for the facsimile edition, he explained: "I was still in the stage of putting my money on an appearance of madness in my poems". The emphasis in Nine Experiments on "appearance" stresses the nature of the technique used over and above what that technique conveys.

Although Nine Experiments certainly deals with new subjects in an experimental way, Spender's handling of this material tends to combine boldness and passion with a typically

Georgian deftness and delicacy, notably in "Epistle (Near the Canal)". The influence of the contemporary external industrial world is balanced by a lyrical romanticism most clearly expressed in such mood poems as "Ovation for Spring" and "Appeal". In the intertwining of a lyrical individualism with public values and images such early poems as "Appeal" and "Epistle (Near the Canal)" foreshadow later and better poems such as "Not palaces, an era's crown" and "The Funeral". Moreover, in Nine Experiments Spender begins to use images drawn from industry and science; a technique more confidently and evocatively used in such poems as "The Pylons" and "The Express" from Poems (1933 and 1934); and for which Spender was popularly labelled a Pylon poet.

The first and the last poems provide a formal beginning and end to Nine Experiments. However, this earliest collection possesses only a very loose structure. Spender presents an uncertain self framed between the lyric and the prosaic, between the industrial and the romantic; this sense of uncertainty is largely a product of a technique which lacks confidence and conviction and of a confusion of values informing the poems. I shall discuss Nine Experiments in terms of these areas of uncertainty and confusion, attempting where appropriate to suggest the way this collection looks ahead to Spender's later work.

The first poem, "Invocation", both introduces and sets the tone for subsequent poems and is in many ways typical of the whole. The poem presents a picture of the emotional storm within the poet working its way out into the written text (ll.1 and 8), and ironizes the seriousness of its subject with a mock-serious style. Spender's interest in technical devices is here most clearly revealed by his use of repetition (a technique one notes throughout the entire Spender canon):

Then let the exciting blood
The outrageous blood, & yet again the blood
Make heaven & music, and most self & savage:
(ll.5-7).

Spender repeats "blood" here for emphasis; later, repetition subtly serves to indicate a change of mood, as in the transition from "smile" to "smiled" in the closing lines of "My parents kept me from children who were rough". In "Invocation" the emphasising of "blood" is compromised by the poem's high rhetorical style. This impression is strengthened by the poem's allusion, in the lines "Lash out their hurricane:/ And let the Heavens splinter, and tear and rage" (ll.3-4), to the storm scene in King Lear (III.2). By echoing the storm scene from King Lear, and pulling in the imaginative world of that play, the poem only illuminates its own weaknesses: lack of shape, emotion and evocative language.

That said, "Invocation" appears to have been intended as a

humorous piece with the Shakespearean allusion and pretentious title thrown in as satirical trimmings. However, while Lear is berating "ingrateful man!" Spender is crying:

Then let all burn beneath my printed page!
(1.8).

The effect is bathetic. Spender is too technically unaccomplished to parody Shakespeare, while the Lear allusion runs against any hopes of satirizing prayers to the Muses. Although the fact of introspection looks forward to later, more accomplished poems (shown in "Moving through the Silent Crowd") the bombastic and rhetorical style (the concern with "my head!" and "my printed page!" (1.1 and 8)) is centred on an image of self composed of nothing but bombast and rhetoric. Lear's words rage against the world, while Spender's piece introduces a slim collection of poems. The title "Invocation" indicates that the poem is intended to be an introduction, a call for inspiration from a Muse or a god. However, the poem is not so much a prayer as a burst of high-sounding rhetoric, its dominant effect that of an uncertain self.

"Invocation" not only echoes Shakespeare but looks forward to some of Spender's later, better poems, notably "Beethoven's Death Mask". There are certain similarities between the two poems; one notes the superficial similarity between the phrase "BRAY TRUMPETS" (1.1) from the former

poem and the final line of the latter:

Blotting our lights, the trumpeter, the sun
("Beethoven's Death Mask", l.25).

However, "Invocation" comes across, perhaps deliberately, as the crude braying of trumpets whereas "Beethoven's Death Mask" finely mimics the "transition from Scherzo to Finale of the Fifth Symphony" ¹.

In the later, better poem Spender uses imagery in a more sensitive, mature and evocative manner. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, in the later poem Spender discusses both himself and his poetry by addressing himself to a subject with whom he identifies yet distances himself from, whereas in "Invocation" he adopts a pose which is at once extreme, awkward and unconvincing.

The braying "Invocation" is followed by and counterpoints the gentle mood poem "Appeal". However, "Appeal" also suffers from an ungainly, even cumbersome technique. In particular one notes the clumsy rhyming, notably "rage", "savage" and "page" (ll.4, 7 and 8). But beneath the awkward exterior one sees again the roots of later themes; a self-conscious pity for the poor and an awareness of the importance of poetry:

The voices of the poor, like birds
That thud against a sullen pane,
Have worn my heart, as in each street,
They fall, in soft, fatigued refrain.
(ll.1-4).

In later poems such as "Moving through the silent crowd" we see these themes more carefully and coherently developed, and the emotion which informs both poems more sharply expressed.

The rhythm of this first stanza of "Appeal" is slow and regular, catching the pity of the poet, and perhaps even echoing the sound of the "birds/ That thud against a sullen pane" (ll.1-2). The second stanza introduces an "I" (ll.5 and 8), briefly mentioned in line three of the first stanza, whose pity is rooted not in the actual "voices of the poor" (l.1) but in the image of the "birds/ That thud against a sullen pane" (ll.1-2):

And must not I then pity them,
To feel that winged & perfect cry?
(ll.5-6).

The image of birds strongly echoes Blake sentiment that:

He who bends to himself a Joy
Doth the winged life destroy; ²

However, whereas Blake's words are informed by a psychological complexity which vitalizes their apparent simplicity, Spender's words are, in ironic contrast to Blake's, just simple. The stylised, seemingly symbolic language of "that winged & perfect cry" (l.6) undermines the force of the pity, while the choice of the word "perfect" (l.6) undercuts the attempt to pity by implying that the poor live in an abstract if not acceptable state.

The poet proclaims that he must "pity them" (l.5) but fails utterly to do so; he declares concern with both the poor and "your heart" (l.11) yet the poem reveals only a narrow, even vain, concern with his own posturing. This undercutting of the poem's stated position by the language (an irony which defines the poet's position), although here resolving into an affected self-regard, anticipates the confusion of values which informs such poems as "The Funeral" (Poems (1933 and 1934)).

The rhetorical question of lines five and six establishes the reader as an accessory to the poet's emotion, a passive role which is directly addressed in the third stanza when the reader is accused of complacency and a lack of compassion:

Yet not their grief, again again
Can beat so hard as I

Upon one stone, sepulchered gate
With dumb temerity:
It is upon your heart, your heart
That knows not charity.

(ll.7-12).

The use of italics not only separates the third stanza from those which precede it, but suggests that it is acting as a commentary on the poem, albeit, through the running on of the second into the third stanza, an ungainly commentary. In this way the poem appears, crudely, not only as "one stone, sepulchered gate" (l.9) which the emotional poet has beaten into shape (l.8), but also as "your heart" (l.11) - the

heart primarily of the reader but also weakly and self-reflexively of the poet - which the poem is beating upon. That the poet may be addressing himself creates a sense of a ponderous, cumbersome self-consciousness. However, the self-consciousness of "Appeal" looks forward to such later poems as "Landscape near an Aerodrome" in which Spender expresses an acute and tortured self-awareness.

Throughout Nine Experiments we see Spender's image of self framed by larger concerns or references. In this connection it is appropriate to consider the penultimate poem, "Made sober", which briefly presents a detailed and sensitive portrait of an emotional situation:

And at that blow, I could not have been so appalled
By an awful instrument to wither the plump flesh,
To jag the goose-skin, as seeing your eyes pulled
Wide in amazed horror: to feel lust flee
Sobered by such reproach: as blank as these
Distended drunkards might drop their gaiety
To Christ-like eyes, or scorned by Socrates.
("Made sober").

The vivid imagery of the first five lines is centred upon an instance of being sobered by reproach, while the closing two lines extend this instance to encompass brief social, religious and historical references. The force of the opening images, reflecting the horror of both the implied observer (l.3) and the poet reviewing the experience, suggests that the reader's eyes will also be "pulled/ Wide in amazed horror" (ll.3-4).

Having engaged the reader, however, the poem fails to make it apparent why the references of the closing lines are necessary, even though their presence indicates that Spender felt the need to see the "you" of the poem in such terms, to qualify the personal instance by framing it within such terms of references. Rather than focusing its emotion the poem opens out in its last two lines to encompass more material than the first five lines either need or imply.

The comparison between "your eyes pulled/ Wide in amazed horror" (ll.3-4) and "Christ-like eyes" (l.7) and between their sobering effect and being "scorned by Socrates" (l.7) seems forced, too ingenious. Yet the framing of the situation with such references broadens the poem's scope and reveals new aspects of the situation; aspects not simply previously left implicit but previously absent.

In "Epistle (Near the Canal)" we see more clearly the way in which a self-regarding technique creates a sense of the poet's uncertainty. The poem is concerned with love, its mood an awkward mix of sardonic reproach, wistful repression, flippancy and unhappy sarcasm. In each of these moods the choice of language and literary allusion undercuts the stated intention or position. One's final sense of the poem is of an experiment with phrasing rather than the

expression of conviction.

In section 4 we have a bold, even brash use of industrial imagery combined with a Romantic dislike of machinery. Such deliberate incongruity not only pervades the poem but starts it as well. In the opening lines of the first section the reader is asked to participate with a sardonic and disillusioned "I" in a conflict between pretence and actuality, a conflict which might be resolved by accepting the possibility of the improbable or miraculous:

Let us take beauty frankly, as though the sun
Were not a thing that had shamed us: as if anyone
Might accept wealth, and plead for a more open sky.
(11.1-3).

This possibility of resolution is, however, discredited the moment it is articulated. The instruction to "take beauty" is not only ironized by the word "frankly" (1.1), but also by the admissions of shame (1.2) and poverty (1.3).

Furthermore, although the reader is intimately associated with the poet (11.1 and 2), the plea for "a more open sky" (1.3) is deeply personal. The poet's resentment of his isolation is pointed up by his need to involve others, not simply "us" but "anyone" (11.1 and 2).

The conflict between pretence and actuality, which qualifies the rest of the first section, becomes attached to a personal attitude to love. However, in the same way that the need to love is balanced by an affirmation of brutality and

horror (11.4-7), the desire for tenderness is balanced by a strong sense of disgust (11.6-7). The poet's disgust, however, is tempered by self-indulgence: he stares at "these worn things...like hams" (11.6-7), lingering on their being "grotesque in butchery" (1.7) with a grotesque indecency:

Nor yet treat love so brutally as I
Who stared again upon his old old limbs,
Touched lips and quiver, as though these worn things
Were not like hams, grotesque in butchery.
(11.4-7).

The "I" is trying to dissociate himself from this vision of a vividly physical and impersonal love, to disengage himself from his disenchantment, yet also revelling in its horror. He is trying to disengage himself from his previous attitude of observing non-involvement while, implicitly, enjoying the squalor of its vision:

Let us abandon praising chastity
And all this metaphor: because there are stones
Less cruel than we: because dead bones
Preach like the streams, sermons in everything.
(11.8-11).

The wish to "abandon...all this metaphor" (11.8-9) rings false in the light of the poet's relish in his situation. The profession that there are "stones/ Less cruel than we" (11.9-10) simultaneously condemns and lends force to the poet's self-indulgence, while the dislike of preaching and sermons (1.11) points up the narrow, almost sermon-like nature of the poet's self-confessions.

The allusion in line eleven to Duke Senior's first speech

from As You Like It draws an ironic parallel between the narrow, dirty, brutal and urban world of "Epistle (Near the Canal)" and the honest, secure and rural world of the Forest of Arden:

Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a jewel in his head;
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.
(As You Like It, II.1.12-17).

However, the vision of the first section of "Epistle (Near the Canal)" does not rejoice in the uses of adversity but relishes its cruel horrors, does not reflect upon the underlying goodness, usefulness or beauty of the world but dwells upon weakness, hypocrisy and ugliness.

But the poet is obdurate, enjoys his prejudices although recognizing their limits (II.1.12-18), and resolves not to change:

I shall reproach the day,
Because the sun has brightness; I shall turn
And pluck the rose, because its colours burn
As hot as lips: lips spotted and condemned.
There is no flesh that is not vilely stemmed,
Ludicrously boned, a stone to charity,
Reproach to vigour, its celerity.
(II.1.18-24).

The act of plucking the rose (II.1.20), though clichéd and thereby suggesting a lack of conviction, is oddly appropriate to the poet's affirmation that he will "turn" (II.1.20), will return, perhaps with a vengeance, to how he

was. The mention of lips (l.21) looks back to line six - "Touched lips and quiver" - and proposes itself as the resolution of the tension there between horror and love. Yet the poet's newly-asserted love of the grotesque, of "lips spotted and condemned" (l.21), is in itself presented as horrible. Horror is recognised for what it is, but perversely, is not only accepted but apparently welcomed. Unfortunately, the rhyming of "condemned" and "stemmed" (ll.21 and 22) is forced, the statement that there is "no flesh that is not vilely stemmed" (l.22) too bold, and the phrases "a stone to charity" and "Reproach to vigour" (ll.23 and 24) seem less to condemn than to recall wistfully positive virtues. Moreover, the final phrase of this section, "its celerity" (l.24), asserts a positive value in negative qualities. This confusion of values points, again, to the uncertain poet. The clichéd act of plucking the rose (l.20) provides an antidote to this uncertainty, resolves it into the predictable:

I shall turn
And pluck the rose, because its colours burn
As hot as lips: lips spotted and condemned.
(ll.19-21).

That Spender has here resorted to stock effects points to a lack of faith in his own imagination. Spender reveals an awareness of such faults in his dismissal of "this pleasant tinkling" (l.26), a dismissal based on life going "too madly" (l.26) and his own technical inability (l.27). He singles out for particular criticism the imperfect rhyme

of "limbs" and "things" from lines five and six, but immediately attempts to justify this poor technique because he is "nauseous sick/ Of all, but a harshly-perfect music..." (ll.27 and 28). Although the poet looks forward to "a harshly-perfect music" (l.28) there is no indication of what that music is or might be. Indeed, the formlessness of the poet's vision, together with the awkward technique, makes "Epistle (Near the Canal)" itself not so much "harshly-perfect" (l.28) as harsh and flawed.

Spender's manner in this poem is overtly sardonic, self-deprecating and abstracted, but covertly uncertain, image-conscious and embarrassed. The covert pulls directly against the overt in a way which undermines the credibility of both. In the closing lines of the first section the poet shows himself to be both self-conscious within his poetry and about his poetry (ll.25-26), an awareness which centres on a knowledge of his own failings (a characteristic theme of Spender). But this awareness fails to transform weakness into strength, as occurs in "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing", because there is no sense of a engaged personality informing or communicating through the poem. The over-bold demand that "all this metaphor" (l.9) be discarded undercuts itself; the assertion that "I am sick of rhyming" (l.26) is refuted by the insistent rhymes; the poet's self-disgust is revealed as self-indulgence (ll.20-25).

"Epistle (Near the Canal)" does not, as poems such as "The Landscape near an Aerodrome" do, present a complex personality riven with tension but a pose characterised by inconsistency.

The different aspects of the "I" which are revealed in each of the four sections of "Epistle (Near the Canal)" tend to obscure and undercut rather than illuminate; for example, the brutal and jaded figure in the first section reproaches the sun whereas the wistful and tentatively homoerotic figure in the second section accepts that the sun has shamed him. This second section is a new and different development rather than a continuation of the self-image of the first section. The "I" of the second section is embarrassed (l.29) but nevertheless feels the need to confess:

I must repress
This nakedness,
Or there's no doubt
That that will out
Which cannot pay
To give away.
And then must he,
The lovely youth,
The gooseboy he,
Vanish so,
Vanish away?
O, o, o,

o!

("Epistle (Near the Canal)", ll.30-42 (section two)).

The spareness of these lines counterpoints yet simply conveys the wish to "repress/ This nakedness" (ll.30-31), while the sexual implications of repression (ll.30-31) and

"That that will out" (1.33) off-sets the ardent tenderness connected with the departure of the "lovely youth" (1.37). Furthermore, the closing series of "o"s both ridicules and strengthens the love expressed in these lines; the ridicule seeking to pre-empt their serious intent from being ridiculed. However, the third section takes the emotion thus established and further trivializes it; the awkward rhymes compounding the absurdity of the situation described:

Boiling the desperate coffee, I
Am crushing love immoderately;
O raise the tepid cup, and see
How passion yields before strong tea:
But more distraught, now must I find
A straighter straightner for the mind;
What will induce my heart to say:-
"Then take those lips", etcetera?
("Epistle (Near the Canal)", 11.43-50 (section three)).

Furthermore, both the technical concern and the mocking humour - perhaps most apparent in the word play of "straighter straightner" (1.48) - reveal Spender's self-consciousness. The last line of this section alludes to the first line of a song in Shakespeare's Measure for Measure (IV.6.1); a song which both briefly describes a beautiful but unfaithful person (sex unspecified) and despairs at the singer's forlorn love for him or her. However, the stated desire of this section, to be able to crush love more effectively (1.44), runs contrary to the allusion to a forlorn and malingering love. The song is followed by Mariana's exclamation:

Break off thy song, and haste thee quick away:
Here comes a man of comfort, whose advice
Hath often still'd my brawling discontent.
(Measure for Measure, IV.I.9-11).

But the third section of "Epistle (Near the Canal)" is not followed by advice which calms the poet's own "brawling discontent", but ironically by a sarcastic damnation of man:

COME, LET US PRAISE THE GASWORKS!
Let us praise man, who shirks
All but this beauty: like cranes
Stygian upon the sewage of horizon,
Fogbound and fogbound sky; that lies on
Grim land. And man, the grimmest, starkest
Of all those intimate machines: the harshest
Grate grate.

(11.51-58).

The poet's initial desire to "take beauty frankly" (l.1) here becomes the sardonic acceptance of "this beauty" (l.53); the beauty of "GASWORKS", "the sewage of horizon" and the "fogbound sky" (11.51, 54 and 55). No "man of comfort" enters; rather man is seen as mechanical and impersonal (11.56-57), incapable of love. The poet's isolation, underlined by the repetition of "fogbound" (l.55), is here a general condition of man. This grim vision incorporates the poet's desire to be otherwise:

I'd love
In an archaically perfect mechanic to move
With clockwork limbs. Out out, brief love!
(11.58-60).

The phrase "Out out, brief love!" (l.60) alludes to Macbeth's lines:

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
Then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(Macbeth, V.5.22-28).

The poet, like Macbeth, is coming to an end typified by despair. But whereas Shakespeare's candle image is concrete and symbolic, the phrase "brief life!" (l.60) is so vague as to be meaningless. Moreover, the desire to "move/ With clockwork limbs" (ll.59-60) not only records the poet's vision of his world but also his fear of responsibility. The poet's reaction, in contrast to Macbeth's, is wistfully retrospective and cowardly.

Unsurprisingly, "Epistle (Near the Canal)" lacks both the emotional depth and sturdy rhythm of Shakespeare's Macbeth; the allusion does not so much reinforce the poet's position as reveal its shallowness: an impression which grows with the poet's attempt to fuse together love, hate, melancholy and passion -

Love being hate
Being this melancholy, stronger impulse
Which has swept me: has made the fierce blood pulse
(ll.64-66).

- terms whose opposition formed the basis of the attitudes to which these lines are presumably the climax and conclusion. The closing lines follow this inadequate attempt to unify with a scene of unequivocal urban squalor:

Walking beside a stenchy black canal,
Regarding skies obtusely animal,
Contemplating rubbish heaps, and smoke,
And tumid furnaces, obediently at work.
(ll.67-70).

These lines, particularly "Walking beside a stenchy black canal" (l.67), are strongly reminiscent of "The Fire

Sermon", the third section of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land:

A rat crept softly through the vegetation
Dragging its slimy belly on the bank
While I was fishing in the dull canal
(The Waste Land, "The Fire Sermon", ll.187-189).

Although both poems contemplate a fierce and stark industrial landscape, in "Epistle (Near the Canal)" the landscape is not decaying but "obediently at work" (l.70). Moreover, in "Epistle (Near the Canal)" the poet regards "skies obtusely animal" (l.68) rather than musing upon the death of others; he is distantly involved rather than detached. Indeed, the industrious landscape counterpoints the contemplative poet; the "skies obtusely animal" (l.68) points up his vigorous sense of futility.

The mock-evangelical opening of the fourth section, "COME, LET US PRAISE THE GASWORKS!", together with phrases such as "the sewage of horizon" and "a stenchy black canal" (ll.54 and 67) seem designed to shock and might even be considered to be Audenesque. Furthermore, such phrases as "fierce blood pulse" and "Love being hate" (ll.66 and 64) seem to reveal the influence of D.H.Lawrence. However, the various allusions obscure one another, Macbeth's final and total condemnation of life hangs uneasily with the references to Lawrence's vision of a rich and vibrant life-force. But here and there, beneath and between the elements of the pose, the reader occasionally glimpses something special and original;

dominant impression is of superficial glamour and little else; both poem and poet appear slight.

"Ovation for Spring" reveals a quite different awareness of other literature. In this poem we see a self-consciousness which seems to spill over its natural boundaries:

The nineteenth time, from bough to bough
I see the mocking fires of spring;
And twice I've rhymed the name with 'king',
But I am grown more blasé now.

(ll.1-4).

The phrase "nineteenth time" (l.1) would seem not only to refer to the fact that this poem appears on page nineteen, but also to the fact that the poet's in his nineteenth year - even though the title page declares "Being Poems Written at the Age of Eighteen" - connecting the poem with the maturing and disillusionment of the poet. Indeed, the assertion "But I am grown more blasé now" (l.4) apparently refers to a perceived development in vision, if not technique, from the first or an earlier poem to this one. In this way "Ovation for Spring" seems to refer to previous attempts to write a spring poem - during which process he presumably twice "rhymed the name with 'king'" (l.3) - and certainly throughout his career Spender exercises the right to re-write, even re-create, his poems.

The admission that "I am grown more blasé now" (l.4) proposes both a dulling to pleasure and, conversely and more

strongly, a heightened sensitivity. This double sense, suggested either by a vigorous or an ironic reading of the italicised "blase" (l.4), gives the poem a cumbersome ambiguity, and, perhaps more importantly, looks forward to the complex word play of later poems such as "My parents kept me from children who were rough" and "Your body is stars whose million glitter here".

The second stanza pursues the idea of spring, not with rejoicing and enthusiasm (as the poem's title would suggest) but dull observation:

She cannot stir me with her sound,
Her light no longer makes me burn:
I only see earth wake, and turn
Again in penitential round.

(ll.5-8).

Spring is personified as a woman who once allured and inspired the poet; but who is now drained of significance and divorced from the waking earth which turns again "in penitential round" (l.8). Indeed, the poem itself may be seen as turning "Again in penitential round" (l.8); the poem being the latest, perhaps final, moment of the poet's struggle to write a spring poem. In this way the poet is also seen as turning "Again in penitential round" (l.8); as struggling with his technique and subject in order to write the poem. This slight self-awareness looks forward to the self-reflexivity of such poems as "Abrupt and charming mover".

"Enshrinement of the Ideal, Part iv" is an early effort to embody the deeply personal in an attempted impersonality. The individual use of the stock image of snow, which looks forward to "After they have tired" (Poems (1933 and 1934)), is enlivened by religious references:

The snow has explored the very heart of innocence.
The people are all children plunged in Christ.
Toboggans, ark-like
Spluttering a white surrender,
Cleave a winding sheet.

(ll.1-5).

The transition between the different aspects of snow is smooth and seamless, effortlessly moving from a scene of winter games to a sense of mortality. From the impersonal first stanza we move to talk of "I", "we" and "you". The serious tone of the second stanza, with its confession that "I am dizzy looking at their faces" and its assertions that "Here, we will bury him" and "we will bury you", is balanced by the humour of the third stanza which declares: "Roll up the carpet!" The rhyming of the first line of the third stanza with the last line of the second stanza serves to lighten the tone, while another confession, this time to "an almost sadist pleasure", adds a touch of brutality to an otherwise sympathetic and sensitive poem. But rather than trivializing the poem, the third stanza adds a touch of coarse humanity and increases the depth of feeling by way of being a comic interlude. The fourth stanza returns to the "I":

I am weak with their eyes' brightness,
My hair is plunged into the skies:
O kill the eagle, the keenness of eyes!
(ll.13-15).

The word "plunged" - used in both penultimate and second lines - tenuously connects the opening and closing stanzas; while the brightness which one associates with the snow in the first stanza (an impression which is strengthened by the poet's dizziness) in the closing lines becomes a quality of eyes, whose piercing stare inspires a need for darkness.

The various elements of "Enshrinement of the Ideal, Part iv" balance one another rather than awkwardly cohabit because the poem careful progresses through imagery centred on a single idea and rooted in a coherent and credible "I". The poem starts with brightness and "innocence" and people who "are all children plunged in Christ", and ends with an isolated "I" who calls for darkness and killing. The poem moves from the attempted impersonality of the first stanza to the very personal demands of the last, with the two linked by the easy transition of images through the central stanzas. However, the two are not united but unequally balanced, with the emphasis naturally falling on the closing stanzas because of their position in the poem. The closing lines suggest that the possibility of the enshrinement of the ideal is remote, and that the only resolution to the attempt is the negative one of killing the eagle (l.15). However, the allusion to the burial of Christ which informs

the movement of ideas through the poem points to a later and miraculous resolution.

In "Enshrinement of the Ideal, Part iv" one sees the enshrinement of traits which one would call characteristic of Spender; notably the attempt to embody the personal in the impersonal, the tangential revelation of the "I" through engagement with a subject and the effective management of one image through the whole poem, traits which I shall be studying in greater depth in my discussion of his later poems.

The last poem, the sonnet "The farewell", provides a formal ending for Nine Experiments. This poem is framed by myth:

As Ulysses, and those old voyagers do,
Seeking to clutch, and only passing by
Their mammoth isles, soon lost in memory;
(ll.1-3).

"The farewell", like the first section of "Epistle (Near the Canal)" reveals an awareness both in and of the poem:

(Passing them by, lovely & coral-veined,
Too perfect, too immense, fronzed like a dream;
Unreally visioned, only a poem to seem
Shining across the wreckage where they stand):
(ll.4-7).

The range of words which refer to "those old voyagers" also seems, given the use of brackets to isolate material, to refer to the "thee" (l.13) to whom the poem is loosely addressed. If we equate the "thee" with Spender, then one

his poetry. These poems are characterised not so much by "an appearance of madness" but rather the impact of fear and the impression of embarrassment. Spender is afraid of the strength of his own feelings, and thus hides them behind humour, clichéd imagery and pretentiousness. Nine Experiments mix a cumbersome self-awareness with a concern with technique, and the dominant impression is of an uncertain self experiencing a confusion of values.

Part Two: Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930).

Spender's contributions to Oxford Poetry mark a significant change in approach from the one revealed in Nine Experiments. Spender is now exploring the self in relation to other people, notably Marston, but also the poor ("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man"), his parents ("Souvenir de Londres") and his friends ("The Faces of Living Friends I See on Water"). In these poems his technique grows more competent and confident.

The four poems Spender published in Oxford Poetry (1929) centre on his homoerotic love for Marston, a love which was the cue for Spender to:

...write poems different from any others I had done. A concrete situation had suddenly crystallized feelings which until then had been diffused and found no object. ¹

Although the situation which inspired these early love poems may have been "concrete", the situation they describe is intangible and indefinite. Moreover, while they may have been inspired by "crystallized feelings" they at times record a hazy and indulgent sentimentality. Spender's opinion of these poems appears to reflect a personal significance rather than their artistic merit.

The third poem, "Hearing from its cage", is a glorification of "he", whom one takes to be Marston:

For he was constant April
All times and everywhere;
Like the straight, cherished deer
By pride fenced from the people.
(11.5-8).

The richness of the natural imagery, reinforced by the short pithy lines and light measured rhythm, conveys the purity and strength of both the beloved and the poet's adoration. That Marston is conjured by the noise of the "Lion that roars the traffic down" (1.2) or the sight of the dispersing fog (11.3-4) aligns him with natural forces, but he not only represents a power surpassing vibrant natural forces but also something of the eternal:

And seeing a new god
Dropped from the sky, no less
Calls out on timelessness
Than seeing where he trod.
(11.9-12).

The observation that seeing where Marston trod calls "out on timelessness" (11.11-12) communicates a sense of personal revelation which is absent from both the tone and the lyricism. The strong personal significance of Marston to the poet is counterpoised by the poet's distant and unresponsive adoration, suggesting an unexplored and unfulfilled yearning in the poet.

The phrase "seeing a new god/ Dropped from the sky" (11.9-10), which echoes Classical myths such as the fall of Icarus and the casting of Vulcan out of Olympus, develops Marston's natural potency into a religious significance.

However, the tone remains light and bouyant even as the descriptions of Marston become more extreme. The final line asserts Marston's absolute quality in the undying nature of the written word, a sentiment that one finds in many of Shakespeare's sonnets:

And where his form passed by
Grass would have tongues for truth,
Stones would speak words of truth.
And these words cannot die.
(11.21-24).

The religiosity of the description frames the naivety of the sentiment; Marston is seen in almost mythic terms yet his significance appears highly personal. Marston's passing, which grants grass "tongues for truth" (l.22) and stones "words of truth" (l.23), appears to leave the poet untouched. The poet observes others possessing truth rather than possessing it himself. His relationship with Marston is one-sided and indefinite; he records rather than experiences; values yet is not valued, and this one-sidedness is reflected in the poem being lightweight though superficially glamorous.

The second poem, "Lying awake at night", which also sees Marston in supernatural terms, explores the implicit relationship between lover and beloved suggested in "Hearing from its cage":

Lying awake at night
Shows again the difference
Between me, and his innocence.

I vow he was born of light
And that dark gradually
Closed each eye,
He woke, he sleeps so naturally.
(11.1-7).

The poet's nature is defined in terms of contrast with Marston. The poet sees himself as a creature of corruption and darkness (11.3 and 4), whereas Marston, who is "born of light" (1.4), is apparently pure, untouchable and absolute. Marston is gradually cocooned in darkness, and then, like Jesus Christ, is:

born of nature, amongst men most divine,
He copied, and was our sun.
(11.8-9).

The smooth movement of the rhythm reflects the smooth transition between ideas, while the simple, short phrases assert a significance which the image of "our sun" (1.9) roots in traditional symbolism of life and divinity. However, the poet's gushing adoration is submerged beneath religious connotations in the same way that the personal significance of Marston is submerged by the claim of a collective significance (1.9). The final impression of Marston, however, is not messianic but pleasantly ironic:

And his mood was thunder
For anger,
But mostly a calm, English one.
(11.10-12).

Spender here sees himself in terms of his relationship to others, and although his self-image is a tainted one, it is nevertheless a confident and coherent one. Moreover, the tension between the poet and his circumstances in "Lying

awake at night", evident in the interweaving of broad claims with personal significance, looks forward to such later poems as "The Funeral" and "In Railway Halls".

The first poem in Oxford Poetry (1929), "Marston", is remarkable for imagery which proclaims itself to be arbitrary:

Marston, dropping it in the grate, broke his pipe.

Nothing hung on this act, it was no symbol
Prophetic for calamity, but merely ludicrous.
(ll.1-3).

The entire poem spins out from the first line, with each part qualifying, illuminating and judging the others. The initial image is of Marston breaking his pipe, but the following lines tell us that "Nothing hung on this act", that this action was "merely ludicrous", being neither symbolic nor meaningful. The image is given purely as an image. However, the poet has decided to present us with this image; thus it must be worth considering for its own sake. The arbitrariness of the image places the emphasis on the poet's judgement, on the decision to record that particular arbitrary image rather than any other. In this way the subject of "Marston" is not Marston's pipe, but the poem about Marston's pipe. The poem is both subject and object. This again is an extension of the poet's self-consciousness.

The third stanza develops the image of the now broken pipe:

That heavy-wrought briar with the great pine face
Now split across like a boxer's hanging dream
Of punishing a nigger, he brought from the Continent.
(11.4-6).

The violent overtones of "split" and "punishing" (11.5 and 6) emphasise the violence of the act of "dropping it in the grate" (1.1); an impression heightened not only by the comparison between the pipe's "great pine face" (1.4) and the human face of a "nigger" (1.6) but also by the association of Marston with racist fantasies. Although the poet is reluctant to concede any sense of value, the line "nothing hung on this act" (1.2) clearly implying that judgement should be suspended, the choice of words such as "absurd" (1.7) and "punishing" (1.6) tentatively confirms a sense of significance. The third stanza finishes by disclosing the personal value of the broken pipe, a value not shared by the poet:

It was his absurd relic, like bones,
Of stamping on the white-faced mountains,
Early beds in huts, and other journeys.
(11.7-9).

The absurdity of the relic (1.7), which parallels the ludicrousness of the initial act (1.3), is heightened by the pipe's putative significance; both as one of presumably few mementoes "brought from the Continent" (1.6) and as a symbol of privations endured while travelling:

To hold the banks of the Danube, the slow barges down
the river,
Those coracles with faces painted on
Demanded his last penny,
A foodless journey home, as pilgrimage.
(11.10-13).

The image of the face, introduced as descriptive of the pipe (1.4) and picked up in the phrase "white-faced mountains" (1.8) and the observation that the coracles had "faces painted on" (1.11), besides indicating that Marston's pipe had a carved face, and together with the single subject and tone, by its repetition helps provide a structural coherence which balances the arbitrariness. The tension between arbitrariness and coherence is reflected in the poem's varied structure; from the irregular rhythms of the opening lines to the echoing of formal metres in the last stanza (lines eleven and thirteen are iambic pentameters), and is rooted in the duality of the poet's attitude to the poem; combining the specific choice of images and words with a stated indifference to those choices. This duality obscures while indicating the poet's self-consciousness.

In "Marston, dropping it in the grate, broke his pipe" the attempt to deny certain values tentatively indicates others, whereas in "Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing" the revelation of the love is circumscribed by hesitancy and uncertainty. The contrast between the two suggests an uncertainty as to the importance of determining value; an uncertainty which resolves into a search for value in later poems such as "The Express" and "The Landscape near an Aerodrome".

"Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing" is discreetly homoerotic; talking in terms of "you" and "I" and never once disclosing the sex of either partner. In later versions of this poem (Twenty Poems and Poems (1933 and 1934)) the word "thrust" in the first line is changed to "passed", a change presumably informed by the same sexual discretion. The immediate, vigorous connotations of the word "thrust", which implies physical, even sexual action, perhaps seemed out of keeping with the quiet potentiality of the image of "tricklings through a dam" (l.15) and the meditative, reflective nature of the poem.

In "Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing" the poet's intense yet embarrassed love is counterpoised by surprise at the possibility of another's love for him. The possibility of being loved is framed by a singular adoration in the same way that the brief outline of a concrete situation (ll.4-6) is framed by poet's self-consciousness:

These blundering, heart-surrendered troopers were
Small presents made, and waiting for the tram.
Then once you said "Waiting was very kind"
And looked surprised: surprising for me too
(ll.3-6).

The martial image of "heart-surrendered troopers" (l.3), which looks forward to the images of a "chance deserter from my force" (l.12), "the whole rebel" and "mutiny" (l.13), conveys both the poet's embattled emotions and his desire for a resolution. However, the poet desires yet fears a

resolution; his acts exceed "the boundary of mere wishing"
(1.1) yet his looks are "privy" and his words "hedged"
(1.2).

"Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing" exhibits two characteristics of Spender's poetic technique, both informed by the tension between fear and desire; firstly, the emotion of the moment merges into the contemplation of that moment:

Then once you said "Waiting was very kind"
And looked surprised: surprising for me too
Whose every movement had been missionary,
A pleading tongue unheard. I had not thought
That you, who nothing else saw, would see this.
(11.5-9).

The surprise of the actual moment is submerged by the contemplation of that moment as a revelation of the nature of the relationship between "you" and "I". The actual moment has been refined to the extent that the original emotions no longer dominate, but rather serve the contemplation.

Secondly, the poem illustrates Spender's need to elaborate on an image. This need sometimes, as with the image "the small vivid longings/ Like minnows gnaw the body" (11.14-15) from "For T.A.R.H." ², produces absurdity and destroys the lyrical pitch, yet sometimes, as here, transforms a seeming weakness into a strength:

Thinking, if these were tricklings through a dam,
I must have love enough to run a factory on,
Or give a city power, or drive a train.
(11.15-17).

Although the image in the last phrase appears less impressive than the ones that build up to it, in that driving a train requires less energy than powering a factory or a city, this final image is appropriate because of the wistful humour it adds. The train-driving image gently ironizes the logical progression of power implied in the previous lines. The impersonal grandeur of the previous images are brought down to a more human level, by means of associations with schoolboy dreams of becoming an engine-driver, revealing the poet as vulnerable and embarrassed. This transformation of a seeming weakness into an actual strength is also typical of Spender.

"Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing" also illustrates two more fundamental characteristics of Spender. First, the re-coining of language, the sudden creation of a phrase which not only describes but captures the thing within itself (one thinks of "his nostril's curved adventure" (l.16) from "Hearing from its cage"), which occurs in these lines:

Then once you said "Waiting was very kind"
And looked surprised: surprising for me too
Whose every movement had been missionary,
That you, who nothing else saw, would see this.
(ll.5-8).

It is interesting that the phrase "Waiting was very kind" surprised them both: it suddenly acquired an independent life, existed between them as symbolic, as a revelation, of

their relationship. In the revelation of the phrase both Spender and Marston are illuminated, revealed, made aware. The assignment of the phrase "Waiting was very kind" to Marston seems to indicate that, for Spender, the self is most clearly defined through relationships with others. The selection of the phrase records and presents a reflective self-awareness. Moreover, the use of "you" tentatively associates the reader with Marston, and thus by implication we also said:

"Waiting was very kind"
And looked surprised:
(11.5-6).

and saw at times:

Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing
Not privy looks, hedged words,
(11.1-2).

Indeed, the poem itself might be considered to be an act thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing, to be a confession of love rather than a collection of privy looks and hedged words. In this way the "blundering, heart-surrendered troopers" which Spender presents to Marston are also the words of the poem which Spender gives to us, and in the same way that "very kind" was "merest overflow/ Something I had not reckoned in myself" (11.10 and 11), so is the poem a revelation and record of the emotion which it contemplates, another missionary movement (1.7) and another utterance of the "pleading tongue unheard" (1.8). Furthermore, Spender's realization of the strength of

his emotion, which is the dynamic behind the poem's last lines, resolves itself not into the powering of a factory or city or driving of a train but into the writing of a poem; a contrast which underlines the wistfulness of the idea of driving a train. This tentatively self-reflexive perspective includes the reader as a partner in, as well as an observer of, its intimacy.

Marston's phrase "'Waiting was very kind'" (l.5) voices for Spender "Something I had not reckoned in myself" (l.11). The connotations of counting and calculating in the word "reckoned" ³ suggests an attempt to analyse coldly rather than to absorb openly the revelation of Marston's phrase. This impression is reinforced by the word "Something", signifying significance yet indeterminacy ⁴, and by the poet's need to turn away (l.14). Spender records his weakness in coping with the revelation and fear at its potent though undefined force.

Secondly, we see illustrated in this poem the accidental revelation of the self in the non-self:

So very kind was merest overflow
Something I had not reckoned in myself,
A chance deserter from my force. When we touched hands
I felt the whole rebel, feared mutiny
And turned away,
Thinking, if these were tricklings through a dam,
I must have love enough to run a factory on,
Or give a city power, or drive a train.
(ll.10-17).

a young adult but a child, and the relationship presented is not a hesitant yet intense adoration but his parents' suffocating relationship. However, "Souvenir de Londres" is also characterised by a self-consciousness which ultimately becomes isolated and self-regarding.

The poem initially presents a conversation between a father and a mother; but their images are less conversational than evocative of states of mind:

My parents quarrel in the neighbour room:-
"How did you sleep last night?" "I woke at four
To hear the wind that sulks along the floor
Blowing up dust like ashes from the tomb."

"I was awake at three." "I heard the moth
Breed perilous worms." "I wept
All night, watching your rest." "I never slept
Nor sleep at all." Thus ghastly they speak, both.
(11.1-8).

The parents vye with one other, each claiming to be disturbed and disturbing; a purely private exchange enclosed by "the neighbour room" (1.1) but nevertheless overheard by the son, who reports, questions and judges them:

How can these sleep who eat upon their fear
And watch their dreadful love fade as it grows?
Their life flowers like an antique lovers' rose
Set puff'd and spreading in the chemist's jar.
(11.9-12).

The parents' relationship, which has formed the son, appears morbid, tormented and paranoid, stilted and stultifying. The poem moves from the parents to the son, who arises "from bad dreams" (1.13), the direct extension of his parent's fear. He is dying as they are dying:

I am your son, and from bad dreams arise.
My sight is fixed with horror, as I pass
Before the transitory glass
And watch the fungus cover up my eyes.
(ll.13-16).

The final line looks back to the image of the preserved but decaying "antique lovers' rose" (l.11), confirming the slow decay of the lives of the parents and the wasting imprisonment of the son. However, the son seems disengaged from his condition; watches "the fungus cover up my eyes" (l.16) from a position of impersonal horror which starkly contrasts with the horror of what is happening. This ambiguity reflects that of the poem's title, "Souvenir de Londres", which seems to locate the poem's emotions in a particular place and time, yet leave such details unspecified while focusing on the inner drama.

In "The Faces of Living Friends I See on Water" impersonal horror is combined with a cold religiosity. The poem places the inner drama of the "I" between "living friends" (l.1), who are associated with water, and wicked parents (ll.6-10), associated with "dust and death" (l.10). The focus on the "I", together with the immediacy of the use of the present tense, conveys a sense of personal significance. The poem's tone is not one of bitterness, anger or hate, but rather one of reflection and acceptance. Although the poem appears to be personal and intimate, one senses in the religious affectation and uncompromising judgements, notably the

almost Biblical sentiment "I am of the dust" (l.12), a failure of sympathy. The poet condemns his parents yet does not judge himself; he punishes himself yet confesses no sin; damns himself yet portrays himself as a martyr:

Therefore therefore at the last I am sorry.
I am of the dust, and parched dry:
(11.11-12).

The speaker accepts that his "parent's sin" (l.6) has tainted him; that although the "faces of living friends I see on water" (l.1) he does not see himself with them. The dissociation both from his friends "Laughing in the sun" (l.2) and from the sorrow and dry lust of his parents is emphasised by the assertion that "therefore at the last I am sorry" (l.11); the apology serves to establish his individual position of reflection and acceptance. The tone is partly a product of the words, and partly a product of the slow rhythm and tight rhyme scheme. However, the concluding lines are unsatisfactory, even unnecessary:

O living hearts, O flowers of eternity,
Laugh with me for my short day.
(11.14-15).

What are these "flowers of eternity" and what part do they play? Are they his parents? If so, why should they "Laugh with me for my short day" (l.15) when the second stanza says the "mother's sin was to conceive in sorrow" (l.7), and says of the son, the poet, that:

I was not born from the laughter
But from the dry lust, the dry falling
Through dust and death of my father.
(11.8-10).

Are they, as seems more likely, his friends? The transition back to his friends seems too sudden, although the word "flowers" harks back to the line "From laughter they were plucked forth like lilies" (l.5) which refers to the poet's "living friends"; the use of "living" in connection with both "friends" and "hearts" confirms this. Yet the "living hearts" and "flowers of eternity", coming as they do after a series of dots, seem rather to be an intrusion from beyond the world the poem creates within its first thirteen lines. The final lines, which appear to be an afterthought or appendage, portray a sentimental and melancholic pose which not only changes the mood abruptly but gently ridicules the poet. However, the final two lines could be seen as a new eruption of the emotion which informs the poem, although the rather blunt and even clichéd rhyming of "away" (l.13) and "day" (the poem's last word) destroys much of the subtlety built up in previous stanzas. The last two lines seem simply to be a means of providing the poem with a conclusion, of fulfilling the formal need for three verses of five lines each.

There is also some confusion of values in the way the poem employs religious language: the use of the word "sin" in the second stanza may indicate Spender's need to fix himself and his work in a larger scheme of values, notably his parents' values. The phrase "my parents' sin was to sin" (l.6)

excludes the poet, although the poet bears the consequences of that sin (ll.12 and 13). In the same way, although he was not "born from the laughter" (l.8) which is associated with water and friends, the poet is associated with water and friends through his dreams:

And as children too they were born from the small waves
On which the babe floats in our dreams-
(ll.3-4).

Spender here seems to be purely defined as a space, a malleable form, shaped by external forces and only having sufficient internal integrity to express that condition.

"The Swan", which appeared second in Oxford Poetry (1930) also appears to be informed by Spender's hesitancy in portraying himself as a shaping, deciding force. This sexually charged poem centres on an image of a ballerina which merges ideas of a woman and a swan, yet the eroticism is only tentatively, even obliquely, present. The poem is highly descriptive within a very formal structure, but the description, which is sympathetic and full, takes place inside the poet's mind:

The trumpets were curled away, the drum beat no more.
Only the Swan the Swan danced in my brain:
(ll.1-2).

The interiority of the poem makes the ballerina's dance a private performance; the eroticism this suggests is tempered by the frail, even ephemeral grace of the dance:

All night she spun; drooped, lifted again;
Bent and arched her arms; sunk on the frore
Snow-brittle feathers skirting her; reclined on hands
Buckling her waist, where the moon glanced.
(ll.3-6).

Furthermore, the formality of the ballerina's dance parallels the formality of the poem's structure, while its elegance and dignity reflect the restrained, even fragile desire of the poet. The poet's fascination with the ballerina is conveyed through words that suggests passivity, such as "drooped", "skirting", "reclined" and "glanced", or words which suggest an almost fracturing strain, such as "arched", "Snow-brittle" and "buckling". The poet seems content to observe, although there is a slight sexual responsiveness which culminates in the unobtrusively half-rhymed final couplet:

Sometimes she bent back, and a breeze fanned
Her hair that touched the ground, and, shown
Between her Swan's legs, feathers and white down.
(11.8-10).

The ballerina, whose identity seems to serve and be an extension of the poet's desire, seems to dance out her submission:

All night she spun; drooped, lifted again;
Bent and arched her arms; sunk on the frore
Snow-brittle feathers skirting her; reclined on hands
Buckling her waist...
(11.3-6).

The ballerina's dance climaxes in a posture of exhaustion and exposure, a position whose overt sexual overtones momentarily transforms the poet's careful observations into a strong, yet unfulfilled, desire. The closing phrase, "feathers and white down" (l.10), is confident and delicate, and the control of the language in general ensure that the eroticism is delicately shaded.

four, and although there are many phrases kept from the first version, they are so altered in context and word order that they have a completely different impact. The poet is no longer vaguely absurd: one thinks of the line "For fear my tears should fall like rain" ("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man", 1.8) where the internal rhyme of "fear" with "tears", the repetition of sounds, and the final clichéd image, all work against the sharp expression of strong and forthright emotion. That line has been cut, as have the lines which characterise the "I" as a vaguely absurd and melodramatic figure, namely:

Your pockets gape with wry dismay,
Turned inside-out we find them funny...

I give you my quick hand of comfort-
We know our sentimental poet.
Yet have I bought my heart no ease,
("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man", ll.5-6 and 13-15).

Other lines have been altered to express more sharply the scene and its emotion, as can be seen if one compares stanzas two and three of "Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man" with stanza two of "Moving through the silent crowd". Many images have been kept, but their significance is quite different; compare, for example, these two extracts:

I have the sense of falling lights
And lively fires which suffocate.
("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man", ll.19-20).

I have the sense of falling light.
("Moving through the silent crowd", 1.4).

In the second, later poem this line, which bears such an outward resemblance to the earlier lines, is compressed with

meaning and emotion. It isolates and focuses upon the poet's reaction, and strongly conveys the feeling of that reaction. The change from "lights" to "light" is part of this compression, as is the loss of the accompanying line, but also there is the moving of the line from the middle of the poem to the first stanza. Such changes are added to new lines (such as the first line of "Moving through the silent crowd") to produce a tighter and better poem. Furthermore, emotion and ideas undergo change. For example, instead of the lines -

Now you've no work, like a rich man
You'll sleep long hours and rise at ten.
("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man", 11.1-2).

- which compare the unemployed to the rich in their lack of gainful employment, implying a causal relation between the two (a communist interpretation one might say), Spender gives us:

Now they've no work, like better men
Who sit at desks and take much pay
They sleep long hours and rise at ten.
("Moving through the silent crowd", 11.9-11).

The replacing of "a rich man" with "better men" not only maintains the rhythm but transforms the idea: the unemployed are now seen as being less good than "better men", as somehow lacking in necessary qualities which thereby prevents them from working. Or, if one reads the phrase "better men" ironically, the unemployed are still seen as lacking that which gave the "better men" their position in

life, although they may in many other respects be superior. Indeed, the "better men" seem to be better merely by virtue of their having jobs. Whichever, it is no longer a one to one comparison between the addressed "you" and a "rich man": the move to the plural has subtracted Spender from the equation: he is no longer there, talking to a man, but is abstracted, meditating upon issues larger than the immediately personal. This sense of abstraction is also there in the emotion; one notes the transition from:

I'm jealous of your weeping hours
Spent staring with such hungry eyes.
("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man", ll.9-10).

to:

I'm jealous of the weeping hours
They stare through with such hungry eyes.
("Moving through the silent crowd", ll.13-14).

In the first extract the phrase "your weeping hours" is the focus of the staring "hungry eyes" and the poet's jealousy, whereas in the second extract the focus is "They". The balance of the lines is very different. The overall effect of such alterations and modifications has been to express more accurately emotions common to both poems; emotions which in both cases are rooted in the poet's self-consciousness:

For on my brain I felt impress
That white, appalling emptiness.
("Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man", ll.27-28).

I'm haunted by these images,
I'm haunted by their emptiness.
("Moving through the silent crowd", ll.15-16).

In the second extract Spender conveys the personal significance of his reaction without compromising or caricaturing his feelings, as occurs in the first extract, by attempting to directly convey the quality and nature of his feelings.

In the last stanza of "Moving through the silent crowd" the poet's perverse jealousy of "the silent crowd" (l.1) and their "weeping hours" (l.13) is accompanied by a numbing horror:

I'm haunted by these images,
I'm haunted by their emptiness.
("Moving through the silent crowd", ll.15-16).

The repetition of "I" and "haunted" conveys the intense personal significance of moving "through the silent crowd" (l.1), yet the experience is one characterised by distanced observation. The poet is "haunted" but wants to be "hungry" (ll.15, 16 and 17); wishes to "stare through" (l.14) but only stares at. Although the prefixing of "the" to "weeping hours" (l.13) grants the possibility that the experience of "the silent crowd" (l.1) might include the poet, his individual loneliness is but a pale reflection of their collective desolation. The poet speaks through the poem but the crowd is "silent" (l.1); the poet is moving whereas the crowd "stand behind dull cigarettes" (l.2); the "poor" (l.8) simply "watch the hours that drain away" (l.12) but the poet watches both them and himself (l.15). The contrast between

the prefixing of "these" to "images" (l.15) and the prefixing of "their" to "emptiness" (l.16) indicates that the phrase "these images" (l.15) refers not only to the street scenes which inspire the poem, but also to the poem itself. Moreover, it is "these images" (l.15) rather than the street scenes which ultimately contain significance for the poet.

In "Moving through the silent crowd" the poet's isolation is framed by his awareness not only of his circumstances but also his self-conscious reaction to them, whereas in "Now You've no Work, Like a Rich Man" the poet is presented as the almost absurd caricature of "our sentimental poet" (l.14).

In the last of these five poems, "Because I Love You So", the theme of self-consciousness is entangled with the poem's ambiguity, which is rooted in the lack of definition of the "I" and the "you" with whom the poem is concerned. As a result, one could read this poem as being about a love affair, an allegory about the poet's relationship with Christ, or a poem about writing.

In the last interpretation the "god-like" poet, who is associated with air which is traditionally symbolic of the imagination, struggles to capture the memorable,

non-linguistic experience in and with language:

What are you that I love? I cannot know:
When I am with you, you are far from here.
(11.5-6).

However, because the experience and the language are essentially inimical, only the most tenuous and tentative connections and contacts can be established. The poem, in striving to capture the non-linguistic experience, becomes obscure and ambiguous, thereby emphasising both its failure and the courage of the attempt:

Because I love you so
I cannot taste, even the taste of care.
(11.1-2).

Furthermore, the evidence and fact of the poem confirm the poet's courage and the worthiness of the attempt. However, the nature and shape of the attempt imply the experience; and the distance between that experience and its language is significant:

Is this love good? Then I must answer, no.
Yet am I god-like and who ride on air;
I trample common features, as on shadow,
And see you walk to meet me everywhere.
(11.9-12).

Moreover, if the "common features" are associated with accepted forms of expression, the attempt also acquires value by virtue of its originality which modifies the gap between the experience and its expression.

If one read the "you", to whom the poem is addressed, as the reader rather than a non-linguistic experience, then the "I"

of the poem assumes a double significance: first as a limited and ignorant "I" within the poem addressing a loved one, and secondly, as the omnipotent author talking directly to the reader about the nature of his poem. In this second case the poet is aware that he can only have an image of rather than actually know the reader:

What are you that I love? I cannot know:
When I am with you, you are far from here...
(11.5-6).

Furthermore the distance between the image and the actuality of the reader means that the poem can only act as the most tenuous of communications between the poet and the actual reader, even though the poet strongly desires to communicate:

Like the continual fever
My love burns, meaningless and hollow.

Is this love good? Then I must answer, no.
(11.7-9).

The desire to communicate cannot be truly fulfilled because of the weakness of the means of communication. In contrast to this apparent weakness is the complete control the poet exercises over the creation of his poem, including the creation of an image of the reader:

Yet am I god-like and who ride on air;
I trample common features, as on shadow...
(11.10-11).

The final line of the poem seems to merge both the poet's apparent weakness and his absolute control, resolving into a conclusion which seems less a paradox than a compromise:

And see you walk to meet me everywhere.
(1.12).

The attempt to reconcile contraries looks forward to such poems as "Darkness and Light" (in The Still Centre (1939)), where opposites are accepted and understood by the "I", and marks a need in Spender to achieve a position of security and calm.

The final line of the poem affirms that the poem is a meeting ground for the reader and poet, both in actuality and in image. Interpreting the poem in this way, one not only accepts that an image is made of oneself, but that one makes an image of the poet. We are made conscious of our role in the poem, and thus made self-conscious.

The allegorical interpretation, which is perhaps the most unlikely, runs along these lines: the poet is suffering because of his love for God or for Jesus:

Because I love you so
I cannot taste, even the taste of care.
(11.1-2).

However, this love is based on paradoxes: the poet cannot know what it is that he loves (1.5) and yet loves, he cannot achieve communion with the absolute (1.6) and yet he loves; he can see no purpose nor value in his love (1.9) and yet he says:

Yet am I god-like and who ride on air;
I trample common features, as on shadow,
And see you walk to meet me everywhere.
(11.10-12).

The poet's inability to justify his emotion becomes in itself his justification. But the object of his emotion might be human rather than divine (or the fusion of the human and the divine in Jesus Christ), thus allowing us to interpret the poem as concerning a love-affair. In this interpretation the poem revolves around the poet's inability to comprehend the loved one (l.5) - his only chance of understanding resting on his memory of the relationship rather than the relationship itself, his only chance of contact resting on imagination:

What are you that I love? I cannot know:
When I am with you, you are far from here...

Yet am I god-like and who ride on air;
I trample common features, as on shadow,
And see you walk to meet me everywhere.
(ll.5-6 and 10-12).

Whichever interpretation one chooses to pursue, it is significant that the lover and the loved, the emotion and its object, never meet. The poem's ambiguous subject serves to highlight the means by which the reader confronts and understands a poem, and to suggest that the search for a core around which to explain the words is fallacious. The poem's ambiguity illuminates the search for meaning, reveals the reader's role in the poem and the need to be self-conscious. In doing so, it looks forward to Spender's more impressive achievements in his first major published work, Poems (1933 and 1934).

CHAPTER TWO

In the foreword for the facsimile edition of Nine Experiments Spender wrote "I did not publish anything 'worth preserving' until Blackwell issued my TWENTY POEMS in 1930". The poems in this second collection were written between the winter of 1928 and May 1930; they overlap and encompass Spender's contributions to Oxford Poetry. Indeed, the poems "Marston, dropping it in the grate, broke his pipe" (first line), "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing" (first line), "Hearing from its cage" (first line), "Lying awake at night" (first line), and "The Swan" from Twenty Poems all initially appeared in, and are discussed in the section on, Oxford Poetry.

Twenty Poems is divided into two sections, "The 'Marston' Poems" and "Other Poems"; the former explores a homoerotic friendship as a corollary to the exploration of the possibilities of self, while the latter tends either to meditate on the purely introspective or tentatively to locate the self within a political and social context. This chapter discusses these poems in terms of these areas, highlighting the poetry's movement from a centre of introspection, through a concern with personal relationships, to a circumference of political and social issues. The poems are discussed individually because they do

not compose a coherent and logical argument; rather, they illuminate discrete aspects of a quest for certainty, a quest whose nature is reflected in the inconsistencies of attitude and belief between poems.

The first poem, "At the Edge of Being", presents Spender's struggle to define himself in terms of the division between his spirit and his senses:

Never being, but always at the edge of Being
My head, like Death-mask, is brought into the Sun.
(11.1-2).

The blunt and abrupt assertion of "Never being" (1.1) contrasts with the elaborate assertion "always at the edge of Being" (1.1), reinforcing the distinction made by the use of capital letters between "being" and "Being" (1.1). The second line initially appears to resolve this general philosophising into the specific and concrete: "My head" (1.2). However, the phrases "My head" and "the Sun" (1.2) do not so much convey personal significance, although the language is idiosyncratic, than a sense of the symbolic and mythic. The poem proposes an "I" (1.4) who is a representative rather than an individual figure:

The Shadow pointing finger across cheek,
I move lips for tasting, I move hands for touching,
But never am nearer than touching
Though the Spirit lean outward for seeing.
(11.3-6).

The "I", the self, is here neither "being" nor "Being" (1.1) but is stretched between the two; rests within a neutral

state affected by anonymous external powers who bring the head "into the Sun" (1.2) and engender the moves toward sensation. Furthermore, the link between the Spirit and the senses is the "I" (1.4), consciousness recording its self-observations. This "I" is aware of and connects the two and yet cannot unite them.

The "I" thus appears to cohere various fragments, to focus various tensions. Moreover, the use of capital letters to emphasise "Shadow" (1.3), "Spirit" (1.6), "Death-mask" and "Sun" (1.2), and to distinguish between "being" and "Being" (1.1), suggests that even though these terms overlap, they are inimical. Furthermore, the "I" is distinct from yet influenced by their interplay:

Observing rose, gold, eyes, an admiring landscape,
My senses record the act of wishing
Wishing to be
Rose, gold, landscape or another-
(11.7-10).

It is unclear whether the "admiring landscape" (1.7) is the subject or object of admiration, and the word "Observing" (1.7) might refer either to "My senses" (1.8), to the "I" or to the objects listed. The impersonality and cold precision of the words "Observing" (1.7) and "record" (1.8) reinforce this sense of fragmentation and emphasise the detachment of the "I". The repetition of "wishing" (11.8 and 9) stresses the desire to be something different, either "Rose, gold, landscape or another" (1.10), but it is unclear whether this

desire springs from or is imposed on the "I". The uncertain role of the "I" counterpoints the clear force of the "wishing", and the poem concludes:

Claiming fulfilment in the act of loving.
(l.11).

The senses seem to respond when the Spirit leans outward (l.6), but fulfilment is not claimed for this reaching out or for this seeing, but "in the act of loving" (l.11). The position of the word "loving" at the end of the poem emphasises "loving" as the means of fulfilment. However, fulfilment appears to have been claimed rather than achieved. The last line is framed between two verbs, conveying a sense that while the poem has been concluded the process that informs it still ongoing. The "I" remains in a state of uncertainty up to and beyond the end of the poem.

Spender's stated position in this poem echoes Keats's idea of Negative Capability. There are many similarities between the two poets: their lyricism, sensitivity, love of nature, distrust of rational forces, belief in the world as mysterious. But the philosophies that inform their work are different. Keats saw himself in these terms:

As to the poetical Character itself...it is not
itself-it has no self-it is everything and nothing-it
has no character...A Poet is the most unpoetical of any
thing in existence; because he has no Identity-he is
continually infor- and filling some other Body. ¹

In "At the Edge of Being" Spender sees himself in terms of a Spirit which is continually striving to inform and fill some

other body (11.7-10) but never achieving that state of being. In poems such as "The Eve of St. Agnes" Keats continually demonstrates his affinity with what he observes:

The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;
The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass,
("The Eve of St. Agnes", 11.2-3) ²

In the second line the hare is closely, vividly and sympathetically presented, the limping rhythm of the line reflecting the hare's trembling limp. Spender, on the other hand, seems to be continually striving not for Negative Capability but a sympathetic distance:

I move lips for tasting, I move hands for touching,
But never am nearer than touching
Though the Spirit lean outward for seeing.
(11.4-6).

In World Within World Spender reports this observation of himself, which he ascribes to a certain Tristan, concerning his undergraduate days:

You never look at anything. You don't become a tree or a field when you are in the country. You just go on thinking your own thoughts while you are absorbed in your inner world. Or else, when you do look at something, it becomes a description of itself in your mind. ³

This observation is critical but illuminating. Spender does not so much explore the world as allow the world to explore him; he is passive yet recording. His passivity is not the result of a lack but a cornerstone of his personality. In poems such as "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing" this passivity is revealed as a self-conscious embarrassment, a turning away from the possibility of love,

whereas in "At the Edge of Being" it is tempered with the urge to love (l.11) to create a sense of uncertain fulfilment:

Claiming fulfilment in the act of loving.
(l.11).

The poet's desire to claim fulfilment betrays a lack of fulfilment, the demand is unsupported and too assertive. However, the significance of the view that fulfilment can only be claimed in the attempt to love remains clear.

In "At the Edge of Being" the "I" seems to be defined in terms of what is desired but is unachieved or unachievable, of love unable to come into being. The "I" is shaped by the pressure of the Spirit upon the senses. In World Within World Spender has proposed such a notion:

Within each of us there is a world of his own soul as immense as the external universe, and equally with that, dwarfing the little stretch of coherent waking which calls itself "I".⁴

Furthermore, one could define the poem as the shape created by the pressure of this "I" working through the impersonal medium of literature. The concept of the "I", of Spender's self, certainly dominates the poem.

"At the Edge of Being" appeared in Poems (1933 and 1934) under the title "Never being but always at the edge of Being" (first line) and with a series of alterations. The most important of these concerned the use of capital letters

in connection with certain words; a technique which may have granted an unwanted pseudo-mystical quality to the poem. In the later published version the words "Sun" (1.2), "Shadow" (1.3) and "Spirit" (1.6) are spelt without capital letters. However, the crucial distinction implicit in the use of a capital letter for one of the two spellings of "being" in the first line is maintained. The replacement of "act" with "fact" in the last line changes the nature of the loving from something which is capable of attempting to contact others ("act") to something which is isolated, concrete and perhaps impersonal but also quietly affirmative of the possibility of achieving fulfilment. The replacement of "admiring" with "admired", in line seven, makes it the landscape which is admired rather than the observer, while the replacement of the dash at the end of line ten with a full stop, rather than emphasising the relationship between penultimate and ultimate lines, makes the closing line a product of all of the previous lines. Each of these changes seems to clarify, even slightly to modify, the position of the "I" outlined in the opening line ("Never being, but always at the edge of Being"). Moreover, it is a position which, because of the prefatory position of the poem, overshadows the remaining poems in the collection.

The fourteenth poem, "'I' can never be great man" (titled "An 'I' can never be great man" in Poems (1933 and 1934)),

as its title suggests, also proposes the unfulfilment of "I". Moreover, rather than expounding a general philosophy, the poem extends the struggle for meaning and value introduced in "At the Edge of Being". The poem relates the concept of greatness to a meditation on the fragmentation of identity; it explores greatness in the context both of a "Central "I"" (1.8), which might be identified with the objective self or ego, and of the "composite self" (1.7), a phrase which suggests that the subconscious is a plurality. In both cases greatness is qualified by weaknesses, as the first line states: "An "I" can never be great man". The social "I" of the first stanza is idiosyncratic, awkward and unsociable:

This known great one has weakness
To friends is most remarkable for weakness:
His ill-temper at meals, dislike of being contradicted,
Only real pleasure fishing in ponds
Only real desire forgetting. (11.2-6).

The "known great one" (1.2) appears to be great yet is revealed as "remarkable for weakness" (1.3). The repetition of "weakness" (11.2 and 3) counterpoints the repetition of "real" (11.5 and 6), suggesting that the "great one" (1.2) is only anchored, only secure, in the unremarkable pleasure of "fishing in ponds" (1.5) and the desire of "forgetting" (1.6). Moreover, the phrase "real desire forgetting" (1.6) allows for the desire to forget to be forgotten; a possibility which looks forward to the closing words of the

poem: "'We dying'" (l.16).

The notion of the "real" (ll.5 and 6) contrasts the external image (l.2), the opinion of friends and the great one's urges (ll.5-6). Furthermore, in the first stanza quiet assertiveness (notably l.1) is balanced by detailed knowledge (ll.4-6), establishing the poet's sympathetic judgement and suggesting an understanding, if not an identification, with the situation.

The second stanza advances "from friends to the composite self" (l.7), and surrounds "greatness" with more practical concepts:

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 these
(ll.8-11).

The straightforward presentation and analytical style counterpoint the turmoil described. The almost prosaic notion of the "'great I'" being "planted in him" (l.10) suggests gardening rather than a jostling for position. Furthermore, the poet's sympathetic judgement, reinforced by the lack of images, conveys less a sense of "would-be sophisticated knowingness", as Geoffrey Thurley states ⁵, than a distanced yet observing concern.

The torment of the "known great one" (l.2) is rooted in the

concept of greatness being misplaced:

Can never claim its true place
Resting in forehead, secure in his gaze-
"Great I" is an unfortunate intruder
Quarrelling with "I tiring" and "I sleeping"
And all those other "I"s, who long for "We dying".
(11.12-16).

The concept of greatness is perceived to be out of place as a result of the structure of the "composite self", at whose core is the concept of the "Central "I"" (1.8), the ego, around which has accrued a framework of actions, friends, social and physical norms. The "composite self" can be identified as self-as-doing, while the "Central "I"" can be considered to be self-as-being. The "Central "I"", although associated with ""great I"" (1.10) through the structure of the second stanza, is not invalidated by the demands of the "composite self".

The ""great I"", which refers to a quality of being rather than an activity, appears to be a misplaced aspect of the "Central "I"" (1.8) which has been relegated from its "true place/ Resting in the forehead" (11.12 and 13) by known public weaknesses (11.2-5). Furthermore, ""great I"" appears to be a possibility of being which has been planted in and is associated with the "Central "I"" (1.10), a possibility which can never be realized (11.12 and 13).

The "Central "I"" (1.8) ultimately desires "forgetting", the loss of awareness of potential greatness, and retreat from

the public to a private world (l.5 and 6), while the "composite self" longs for "'We dying'" (l.16), for a cessation of doing. Ironically, these two desires could accomplish one another: withdrawal and isolation from the world could create, and be created by, a cessation of action in the world. The abstract "Central "I"", however, neither cares for nor considers such issues. Furthermore, although the "'great "I"" remains an unrealized but vital possibility, greatness is not considered by the "Central "I"", which appears to be both the intersection of the axes of social and composite selves and the holding structure which perpetuates them through time.

The analytical style of "An "I" can never be great man", involving a relative lack of images and an almost prosaic assertiveness, effectively portrays both the situation of this "known great one" (l.2) and the poet's sympathetic yet judging attitude. Lines such as "'Great I" is an unfortunate intruder" (l.14) combine almost everyday language with a rather complex model of a mind, and this combination makes the poem seem at once elaborate and straightforward. The bold, almost easy assertiveness allows the reader to be closely associated with the poet, to share in the judgements made.

In "Always between hope and fear", in contrast to the

careful and considered introspection of "At the Edge of Being" and "'I' can never be great man", Spender presents an extreme state of being which apes a stereotypical Romantic temperament:

Soul, swaying between hope and fear,
First radiant and leaping, then pallid and trembling,
Always plunging the future
Always indifferent to what is near;
(11.1-4).

The Soul's agitation is conveyed by the extremity of the opposed positions and reinforced by the use of participles. The ridiculous and unwarranted nature of these positions, indicated by the triteness of the language, is confirmed in the second stanza:

Now now be at peace,
Cancel that heaven and that abyss
Whose blues and reds roar back to madness,
Avoid these chasms and steep gaps in space.
(11.6-8).

A position of peace and stability is proposed as an alternative to the wild and dangerous fluctuations of the Soul: an alternative which should be rooted in an immediate and rudimentary acceptance of experience:

Sense should grope on all fours, not driven
By pleasure or horror assailing like the wind,
Not giddied by stars, but touching the ground,
Not struggling through flame to the imagined heaven.
(11.9-12).

However, the poem's closing line concedes the power and attraction of living to extremes; a concession reinforced by the lack of development of the alternative. This final alloying of mistrust with fascination is indicative of a

deeper conflict within the poetry and the poet, as Fraser has accurately observed:

There is a deep inherited wish in Mr. Spender to yield to the romantic afflatus; there is also a strong contemporary impulse to question it and check it. ^B

The fascination with, but mistrust of, the Romantic in "Always between hope and fear" is in contrast to the adoption of a stereotypical Romantic position in "I hear the cries of evening" (first line): a poem which explores the tension between the city and the country, between the natural and the civilized. The poem crystallises the reactions of the "I" to the conflicting demands of the two:

I am inconstant, yet this constancy
Of natural rest twangs at my heart;
Town-bred, I feel the roots of each earth-cry
Tear me apart.

(ll.5-8).

The "I" is ignored by "this huge sphere" and "the great wheel" (l.13), or the beasts who "move to their ease". Although the "I" feels himself to be made insignificant - "These fingers grip my soul and tear away/ And pluck me like a harp" (ll.11-12) - the poem both focuses on and starts with the "I"; in doing so, it refutes the sweeping away of the "I" that is the poem's recorded experience. The regular rhythm and rhyme of the poem contradict the irregular nature of the experience described. The point where these contradictions meet is the "I" itself; but no resolution is proposed. The "I" pervades, judges and articulates. Furthermore, although he is strong enough to feel "this huge

sphere turn, the great wheel sing", and sensitive enough to "feel the roots of each earth-cry", he declares his insignificance. Perhaps it was such unresolved questions which, together with the lack of stylistic maturity which is evident in Spender's better pieces, led Spender to leave this poem out of the 1934 collection Poems even though it had appeared in the 1933 version.

Spender's introspection combines with his awareness of other people and of himself as a poet in the never re-published poem "The Dust Made Flesh". In this poem, whose title is drawn from Genesis 2:7, the poet creates four characters and neatly captures each one in a series of images. Weatherhead observes that it "is a creation somewhat in the manner in which Yeats created his characters, and Spender's lines recall the rhythms of Yeats" ⁷. In this poem Spender does not see his self in terms of other people, but sees other people as poetic creations possessing significance because he has given them life and because they thereby reflect his consciousness. The "I" in the poem comes into existence at the point between the inner space outlined in the poem and the external forces which have helped mould the poem's shape.

The first character created is Marston:

First made I Marston the superb boxer
More than with men who dealt with death,
Marston who skied through snow,
Curved through the whiteness, ran,
Helmeted drove through air,
-A balanced winner backed by all the crowd,
Often portrayed in travellers' photographs.
(11.2-8).

Second came "Helen, the astonishing hostess,/ Dark-eyed,
words piercing night like stars" (11.9-10), while third
came Catherine:

who despised me even when in womb,
Too insolent for the earth she sprang in sky,
Along the ice-fleeced rocks shot chamois down.
(11.12-14).

Fourth came Ainger, the poet:

severe, voiced raucous-reed,
With fascinating facets of crude mind,
An enormous percipient mass on the plain.
(11.16-18).

The first character, Marston, is rooted in a real person and one suspects the same to be true of the other three. For example, Weatherhead has postulated that "Ainger, indeed, might for some features be Auden, briefly sketched" ⁸. The references to "Europe" (1.20) and "Athens" (1.26) also help establish that the inner space occupied by these characters is rooted in and reflects an external world. However, the poem does not deal with the four created characters as if they were real people, but presents them as purely imagined figures:

These made, these loved I: the four fixed like rocks
On Europe.
(11.19-20).

The characters are extreme but static in terms of both

personality and response to the poet. They merely act out the implications of this stasis, for example:

Marston his brows bound up with Athens
-A runner still is running past my house.
(11.26-27).

Marston can only box or ski or run because that is what the poet has created him to do and allows him to do. This simplicity appears to appeal to Spender, as Weatherhead has rightly commented:

The characters are more likely to be coveted because each of them seems all of a piece: each can be briefly summarized in one or more swift studies of imagery. In this respect the poem anticipates a later expression of Spender's qualified admiration for people whose personalities were so unified that they could be summed up in a single phrase or image: the "truly great", for example. ■

However, this simplicity and stasis also indicate the sterility of the inner world which the poem describes. Although the "I" is defined in terms of his relationship with each of the four archetypal characters who stand at the corners of this inner world, the "I" has already defined them and maintains an absolute control over them:

These made, these loved again their souls arise,
(1.25).

The relationship between the "I" and the created characters is two-fold. The assertive verb "made" (1.25) establishes the poet's absolute responsibility for their existence, whereas the verb "loved" (1.25) grants a measure of independence, even of "otherness". The poet's love of his creations appears to have created, in its turn, a separation

from the creator. Nevertheless, the created characters give significance to the "I" because they define a seemingly inviolable inner space against external forces:

Across the frozen map
Winters weave frost, the old dust-patterns change.
A lake cracks its surface. The winds
-Black bears-haunt dreadful corners.
Cataract in our eyes, the vultures come.
(11.20-24).

However, the resurrection of the characters through love in the third stanza reveals that the inner landscape which the poem sketches is also subject to change, although the sedate if not static quality of the characters retains significance to the poet:

Ainger reports
With sullen voice the growth of other graves,
But there...

These are not grass or thrust into a furnace.
(11.31-34).

Spender's fascination with a sedate and apparently sterile inner world, and his omnipotent and omniscient position within that world, seem indicative of a fear of an engagement with the external world. The sterile introspection and concern with his own creations in "The Dust Made Flesh" are in contrast to the sympathetic engagement, and even identification, with another artist in "Beethoven's Death Mask", a poem whose title is an important key to unravelling the thread of ideas in the poem.

In "Beethoven's Death Mask" the poet constructs an image of

Beethoven in life through meditation upon the composer's death-mask:

I imagine him still with heavy brow.
Huge, black, with bent head and falling hair
He ploughs the landscape.

(11.1-3).

The poet holds in his vision both the imagined living face, which is "this hanging mask transfigured" (1.4), and the stark and horrid "mask of death which the white lights make stare" (1.5). Indeed, the vital strength of the poet's imaginings (1.1), reflected in the strenuous rhythm, is disturbed and even tainted by this awareness of death. The second stanza describes the horror and ugliness of the death-mask, and also implicitly of death, by association with musical instruments:

The beast squat in that mouth, whose opening is
The hollow opening of an organ pipe:
There the wind sings and the harsh longing cries.

(11.8-10).

The harshness and hollowness of the instruments not only grants a hollowness and "harsh longing" (11.9-10) to Beethoven's music, in contrast to the beauty and vitality normally associated with it, but a rugged texture to Spender's concept of death. The death-mask is symbolic of both the death of Beethoven and his relationship with life:

He moves across my vision like a ship.
What else is iron but he? The fields divide
And, heaving, are changing waters of the sea.
He is prisoned, masked, shut off from being;
Life like a fountain he sees leap-outside.

(11.11-15).

The easy movement and immediacy of the verse reinforce the way the images coalesce and build on one another, seemingly just by association: "he" (1.12) is "like a ship" (1.11), then a ploughman (1.12), then a prisoner (1.14). He moves (1.11), then divides (1.12), then simply observes (1.15). He travels through the "waters of the sea" (1.13); "Life like a fountain he sees leap-outside" (1.15). The images are linked by their pertinence to "he" (1.12) and their significance to the poet. Poignancy is introduced by the revelation of human value in a mechanical image, a poignancy explored in the fourth stanza in terms of a world within corresponding to the world without:

Yet, in that head there twists the roaring cloud
And coils, as in a shell, the roaring wave.
The damp leaves whisper; bending to the rain
The April rises in him, chokes his lungs
And climbs the torturing stairways of his brain.
(11.16-20).

The interweaving of natural imagery, linked to inspiration (11.16-20), with mechanical imagery, linked to changes wrought in the external world (11.11-13), looks forward to such poems as "The Express". The growing pressure of the interior forces is conveyed by the reference to spring and the details which seem to prelude a storm, while their growing pain is conveyed in the words "chokes" and "torturing" (11.19 and 20). The pain and pressure of the interior forces increase until they spill over into the external world:

Then the drums move away, the distance shows;
Now cloudy peaks are bared; the mystic One
Horizons haze, as the blue incense heaven.
Peace, peace...Then splitting skull and dream, there
comes,
Blotting out lights, the trumpeter, the Sun.
(11.21-25).

Images and ideas are here piled on one another, creating a sense of significance so intense that language begins to fracture and fragment:

the mystic One
Horizons haze, as the blue incense heaven.
(11.22-23).

This fragmentation powerfully conveys the force of the emotion while obscuring the specific nature of the moment. The poem does not so much speak with a voice "that is not the poet's own, one possessed of a felicitousness unknown to the waking man" ¹⁰, as Geoffrey Thurley claims, as speak with the poet's voice charged with intense significance.

The repetition of "peace" (1.24) rounds off the gentle, almost melodic, preceding lines (11.21-23), counterpointing the abrupt interruption of "Then splitting skull and dream" (1.24) and the revelation of the poem's conclusion. Inspiration and product are united in the "splitting" of "skull and dream" (1.24), in the overpowering force of "the trumpeter, the Sun" (1.25). The creative transformation and mystical revelation of these interior forces becoming external, forces springing from within and uniting both inner and outer worlds, are captured in words which might describe a piece of music.

Experience is transformed into art, and this act unites both Spender and Beethoven through the fact of the poem. As Thurley notes, the poem allows Spender to "explore the possibilities of the spiritual aspiration through the actual achievement of Beethoven-the transition from Scherzo to Finale of the Fifth Symphony in this case" ¹¹; it also grants Spender the opportunity indirectly to address himself to issues of self without losing his perspective or our interest through an overbearing self-consciousness.

The penultimate poem in Twenty Poems, "That girl who laughed and had black eyes" (line one), serves to bridge the gap between Spender's introspection and his concern with personal relationships. The poet's memory of a girl who is now dead (1.5) both grants a purely personal and internal significance to the girl and stresses the importance of the root of that memory in the external and public world. Furthermore, the poem's closing lines assert a dialectical relationship, rather than the mutual exclusiveness implied in poems like "I can never be great man" and "At the Edge of Being": a dialectical relationship between internal and external worlds.

The first stanza explores the ability of memory seemingly to defy death:

That girl who laughed and had black eyes
Spoke here ten days ago. She smiles
Still in my thoughts; the lip still promises
The body lives, and the quick eye beguiles.
(11.1-4).

The memory of the girl is still vivid even though she is dead (1.5), and that memory over-runs and underpins the present scene with tender yet potent associations:

Although death plays its tricks, and the earth's crust
Swallows her up in the enormous tomb,

I meet her every turn; the muffled part
The stilled applause, the pageant to appal,
Startle her shade to take birth in my heart:
I see her dancing through the solid wall!
(11.11-16).

The straightforward delight of line sixteen, emphasised by the exclamation mark, grants the poet a poignant, even disarming, charm. The poet, and the reader with him, are caught up in the insistent yet lovely haunting. The references to "part", "stilled applause" and "pageant" (11.13-14) establish a sense of the theatrical which looks back to when she "Spoke here ten days ago" (1.2). The "here" is now "my heart" (1.2) whereas earlier it was, presumably, "the room" (1.10). When the poet meets "her every turn" (1.13) he is meeting her at his every movement, seeing her every movement and seeing her every performance. The reader, however, only sees the poet's startled reaction rather than her startled shade (1.15). The memory of the girl is inspired by external facts which it then transforms:

She lives beneath our common objects, dust
And chairs, and her few poems about the room.
(11.9-10).

The regular rhythm and rhyme create a light yet emotionally strong tone, which, together with the ingenuous description, both disarms and engages the reader. The first line, "That girl who laughed and had black eyes", is potentially absurd. The girl, it might seem, has badly bruised eyes yet can still, somehow, laugh. But the line comes across not as absurd but charged with powerful feelings, an impression confirmed, even strengthened, by the rest of the poem.

This poem is similar to "Not to you I sighed" (line one) in its exploration of memory, and its presentation of that exploration. Although it is the penultimate poem, "That girl who laughed and had black eyes" (line one) seems both to prefigure and underline the concerns and tone of "The 'Marston' Poems" which occur earlier in the collection.

Marston figures in "The 'Marston' Poems" both as an aspect of Spender's consciousness, notably in "The Dust Made Flesh", and as a real person. Spender's relationship at Oxford with "an undergraduate, whom in several poems I called Marston" ¹² was immensely significant though also immature and often one-sided. In his autobiography World Within World Spender describes at some length the significance of Marston to him:

He was not talented or intellectual or even strikingly intelligent. What was extraordinary about him was the purity of his ordinariness. In the Oxford world, where

even athleticism had to a great extent become self-conscious, here was a person who quite simply was what he was, unaffectedly pursuing his interests in games and flying...He was like someone islanded within qualities supposedly common to many people but which with him had acquired such a purity that they actually isolated him from everyday life. ¹³

Although, as Spender admits, "Marston was someone with whom I had few interests in common" ¹⁴, he provided a contrast and a corollary to Spender's sense of self in terms of that ordinariness:

...my "extraordinariness", if I had it, did not lie in my being exceptionally clever or even gifted. It lay in a strong grasp of my uniqueness in time and space, in my simplicity. I was aware that I was different from everyone else in the same sense in which everyone is different from everyone else. ¹⁵

Moreover, Marston was a poetic source and model; Spender notes that "there was a kind of innocence and integrity in him which was present also in my poetry" ¹⁶. His relationship with Marston helped Spender focus upon and discuss a series of issues, including hero-worship, love, "identification of my own aims with those of another man" ¹⁷, homoeroticism and friendship, together with the opportunity to challenge his poetic technique with lucid and forthright emotions:

My poems were all attempts to record, as truthfully as I could, experiences which, within reality, seemed to be poetry. ¹⁸

However, in the light of the unquestioning glorification in many of "The 'Marston' Poems", one doubts the truth of Spender's assertion that:

I frequently abandoned love poems because I felt that perhaps after all I was exaggerating and not stating the truth about my feelings, ¹⁸

The reality of Marston becomes confused or allied in many of "The 'Marston' Poems" with awesome and godlike figures who bear little resemblance to a remarkably ordinary Oxford undergraduate.

The subject of "Discovered in Mid-ocean" is identified as Marston since this poem is the first in the series headed "The 'Marston' Poems" (this identification is not apparent in later appearances of the poem):

He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye
Or pitifully;
Nor on those eagles that so feared him, now
Will strain his brow;
Weapons men use, stone, sling, and strong-thewed bow
He will not know.
(ll.1-6).

The "he" also combines ideas of the poet, a bird, an aeroplane, an airman, and the Icarus-Daedalus myth. Even in Twenty Poems, then, the "he" is generalized into an archetypal heroic figure from the past. Spender's admiration for the "he" is only superficially fixed on an individual; more deeply it is rooted in what that individual signifies to Spender:

This aristocrat, superb of all instinct,
With death close linked
Had paced the enormous cloud, almost had won
War on the sun;
Till now, like Icarus mid-ocean drowned,
Hands, wings, are found...
(ll.7-12).

In his flight and fall this "aristocrat" either deigns not to "strain his brow" (l.4) or watches with "an indifferent eye/ Or pitifully" (ll.1 and 2). The word "pitifully" (l.2) suggests both the pity "he" looks with and, more importantly, the pity "he" will be regarded with. The "aristocrat" (l.7) is both pitying and pitied, heroic yet a failure. In conjunction with the word "indifferent" the aristocrat's pity is initially directed at "the hawk", "those eagles" and "men"; those who have not attempted what he has. This isolates and abstracts him from his plight and grants him heroism rather than folly in attempting "War on the sun". However, the injuries recorded in the last line, together with the immediacy of "now" (l.11) and the futurity of "will" (ll.1,4 and 6), suggests that the poem describes someone either dead or close to death; someone whose pity is turned inward through the realization that the dangers and risks of pacing "the enormous cloud" (l.9) and the proximity of success (ll.9 and 10) have finally come to nothing.

It is certainly characteristic of Spender that the poem deals with failure. The auxiliary "will" (ll.1,4 and 6) conveys not only a determination to "watch with an indifferent eye/ Or pitifully" (ll.1-2), but the sense that this action is characteristic of the "aristocrat" (l.7) though rooted in the poet's observation of him. Furthermore, the volition implicit in the word "will" (ll.1,4 and 6),

together with the confident, assertive tone, suggests that Spender understands and sympathises with the situation of this "aristocrat" (l.7). Indeed, one could see the heroic "he" as Spender's alter-ego, the mythic but tragic hero whom Spender can never be and yet who he yearns to be.

Ideas of the heroic and of failure colour the remaining poems in "The 'Marston' Poems", which outline moments in a relationship, either describing emotions of sadness and loss associated with failed love or an ecstatic joy in the company of a regal and god-like man.

"His Figure Passes" is a seven line lyric which, like "At the Edge of Being", is concerned with a love which exists in isolation from that which it loves; but here the emotion is framed not by psychological notions but by a credible situation which gives the poem greater immediacy and intensity:

His figure passes, and I confess
No suddenness of pain, but an old pain
More constant in the heart that heart lives by
Again revived:

(ll.1-4).

The poet's emotions flow from the initial observation that "His figure passes" (l.1), swiftly moving from concrete circumstance to the poet's inner world. The word "confess" (l.1) reveals the poem to be a confession, while the intimate tone not only conveys a sense of the poet's

self-absorption but makes the reader a virtual eavesdropper. The plain statement of situation is vitalized by an allusion to martyrdom and vivid natural imagery:

as though from happiness,
Freshness of mind and the cloud-breathing sky,
All happiness rolled away - again revealed
That sore and flaming wheel I must live by.
(11.4-7).

The final image broadens out the personal into the general, with the "I" (11.1 and 7) becoming both individual and representative. His suffering finds meaning in the wider context of martyrdom. Although the "flaming wheel" (1.7) is predicted by the words "rolled" and "confess" (11.6 and 1), it appears as an abrupt conclusion. This sense of abruptness counterpoints the earlier confession of "No suddenness of pain, but an old pain" (1.2), but strikingly confirms the agony of that "old pain" revived (11.2-3).

"Not to you I sighed" (line one) also describes emotions of sadness and loss, though here the language is more vigorous. The rural setting of the first stanza is in contrast to the urban scene of stanza two. It presents a lack of communication between an "I" and a "you" in contrast to their physical proximity and shared activity (1.2). The feelings of the "I", and perhaps also of the "you", are unfocused and vague but nevertheless reach out for communion, although they tentatively conjoin only with the hills:

Not to you I sighed. No, not a word.
We climbed together. Any feeling was
Formed with the hills. It was like trees' unheard
And monumental sign of country peace.
(11.1-4).

The second stanza presents the consequences of that lack of communication. Although the emotion is now forthright and precise it is directed inwards, exists as a tension between described physical things drawn into the poet's mind:

Oh empty walls, book-carcasses, blank chairs
All splintered in my head and cried for you.
(11.7-8).

External circumstances are internalised; solid objects are transformed into emblems of emotion and thought. The external here corresponds to the internal, one especially notes the pun "book-carcasses" (1.7), and the matching of the rhythm to the described physical action:

But next day stumbling, panting up dark stairs,
Rushing in room and door flung wide, I knew.
(11.5-6).

The regularity of the rhythm and the use of the past tense and such words as "monumental" and "peace" (1.4) in the first stanza help to create an impression of solemn content, whereas in the second stanza the urgent rhythm and use of participles and the present tense help to create an impression of immediate and active discontent. The movement between stanzas not only describes the change in the relationship between the "you" and "I" but also the poet's awareness of its significance, which transforms an inability to communicate into a poem which can.

The duality in the poem's structure parallels the division between the inner and external worlds which frames the poem's emotion and thought. The internalisation of physical objects suggests the poet's need to enclose and absorb rather than, as is implied by the word "Formed" in line three, to merge with or dovetail into the external world. By the end, the external world is seen as being given rather than intrinsically possessing significance, as having value only as it is symbolic of the poet's consciousness:

Oh empty walls, book-carcasses, blank chairs
All splintered in my head and cried for you.
(ll.7-8).

The introversion of the poet has created the conditions for a lack of communication, has forced the dissociation of the inner world from the external.

The "you" in "Not to you I sighed" (line one) is briefly glimpsed and unnamed, whereas in other personal lyrics such as "Constant April" the "you" is identified as Marston. The naming of the loved seems to allow Spender not only to be enthusiastic but also unguarded. The glorification of Marston in "Constant April" is an extension of sentiments expressed in "Hearing from its cage" (line one) and "Lying awake at night" (line one). Indeed, the first line, "You that were constant April", picks up on two lines from "Hearing from its cage":

For he was constant April
All times and everywhere;

("Hearing from its cage", 11.5-6).

"Constant April" records the poet's feelings when his beloved received him for five days (1.2); these feelings are centred on a celebration of the "you" couched in rich natural imagery and vivid language. The lyricism is enhanced and intensified by the tight rhyme structure and controlled rhythm. The second stanza goes on to describe an abundant happiness:

And, when you laughed, your laughter
Was like the bright cascade
The sun sheds on a cloud,
With its faint shadow after.

(11.5-8).

However, this vision is marred by the mention of the "faint shadow after" (1.8) which hints at an awareness of the shortness of time, an awareness reinforced by the repetition of "five" in the first stanza. The third stanza neatly introduces a light-hearted depression in gentle contrast to the opening mood:

And, if you frowned, your frowning
Was knit as light as these
Slight showers, that shake the trees
And gleam across the morning.

(11.9-12).

The poet's delight in the "you" is over-shadowed by the one-sidedness of the relationship typical of many of Spender's early love lyrics. The mention of "five days" (1.2) and the closing reference to "morning" (1.12) creates a sense of limited time, reinforcing the ominous

overshadowing of the poet's delight by his adoration's charming simple-mindedness and the relationship's implicit one-sidedness. The end of the poem, perhaps reminiscent of the "faint shadow after" (l.8), mirrors the expected end of the five day visit and the relationship. The warm, celebratory tone is pierced with an unhappy uncertainty in the same way that the poem is a "bright cascade" (l.6) shed by the poet's love yet also a memento.

The awareness of limited time, and thus also by implication the inevitable end of the relationship, hinted at in "Constant April", is realized in the lyrical sonnet "Saying 'Good morning' becomes painful" (line one). In this poem the words not only express intense feeling but also emphasise the importance or uselessness of words within the relationship:

Saying 'Good morning' becomes painful
And talking at meals, since slight words
Fall cumbrously about our feet, like swords.
(ll.1-3).

The clumsy addition of the metaphor "like swords" to line three points up the awkward rhyming of "words" with "swords" (ll.2 and 3), while the appending of "And talking at meals" (l.2) to "Saying 'Good morning'" (l.1) not only is graceless but detracts from the simplicity of the opening line. The poem uses words "cumbrously" (l.3), conveying a stumbling, even crabbed, eloquence. Such slight words as "'Good morning'" (l.1) do not express emotion but only social

pleasantry, in contrast to words used vibrantly and vigorously as part of a relationship:

Hours we've braved out together through a lull
And then word for word we've faced the storm;
At such times I have made conversation,
Speaking across tables, a form of procession
Like taking your wrists and feeling your lips warm.
(11.4-8).

The "slight words" (1.2) ignore emotion whereas "Speaking" (1.7) is a form of making love, of answering desire. Moreover, the poem modulates effectively between the two. It is rich and poetic when describing actual, even tactile, contact, but awkward, slight and prosaic when reporting "slight words" (1.2):

Like taking your wrists and feeling your lips warm.

But chance 'Good mornings', seeing you in the street,
Talking at the door, or when each starts
Looks eye to eye and then breaks eyes away,
Is more than I can stand.
(11.8-12).

However, the poem concludes with the idea that if words cannot communicate emotion, they certainly should not express polite irrelevancies:

We should not meet
So lightly. Let us break our hearts
Not casually, but on a stated day.
(11.12-14).

The poem closes by tenderly yet seriously proposing an end to the relationship. Moreover, the "stated day" (1.14) will presumably be marked by "Speaking" (1.7): that which characterised the relationship at its most intimate will presumably also mark its end. "Saying 'Good morning' becomes

painful" is modelled on the Petrarchan sonnet form; the constrictions imposed by this form, together with a fine control of words, forcibly mirror the frustration and need for resolution of the poet.

It seems significant that the last of "The 'Marston' Poems", "The Port", does not outline a moment in an often one-sided relationship or express hero-worship or overflowing love, but develops a picture of a townscape. One could see "The Port" as indicative of the poet's mind after the collapse of the relationship outlined in "Saying 'Good morning' becomes painful", and, as Weatherhead has noted, "perhaps the sinister imagery of graves, caves, skewed faces, lightning, and so on are an objective equivalent for the poet's feelings of frustration and grief" ²⁰. However, a copy of the twelfth poem, "The Port", held in the Plomer Collection (Palace Green Library, Durham) has a hand-written emendation by Spender which places the title "Other Poems" above this poem rather than above the subsequent one. Although the poem's relation to Spender's relationship with Marston is unclear, its broadening out from the immediately personal to encompass political and social issues is apparent. The opening lines introduce ideas of despair, being lost, and sinister but alluring danger:

Hopelessly wound round with the cords of street
Men wander down their lines of level graves.
Sometimes the maze knots into flaming caves
Where magic-lantern faces skew for greeting.
(ll.1-4).



The use of such words as "cords", "lines", knots" and "skew", together with the tight rhyming of "wound" and "round" in the opening image, conveys a sense of harsh and rough imprisonment. The poem slowly moves from a general overview to specific details of the life on the streets. The images and instances are ugly and unpleasant:

Smile dawns with a harsh lightning, there's no
speaking,
And far from lapping laughter, all's parched and hard.
Here the pale lily boys flaunt their bright lips,
Such pretty cups for money, and older whores
Skuttle rat-toothed into the dark outdoors.
(11.5-9).

Passion is not here a thing of clean emotions or stuttering expression, but a question of prostitution (11.8 and 9). The "I" of the poem is disillusioned and disheartened, and condemns what he sees. He is sympathetic towards "lapping laughter" (1.6) and "speaking" (1.5) - a word which recalls "Saying 'Good morning' becomes painful" (line one) - but horrified by the "parched and hard" (1.6), the gaudily painted (1.7), the ugly "older whores" (1.8). A possibility of sympathy appears in the smile (1.5), whose nature associations combine tenderness with a violent urgency. However, the smile is isolated and overshadowed by the imperviousness of the phrase "there's no speaking" (1.5). Furthermore, without laughter the mouth that smiles remains "parched and hard" (1.6), and is associated with the inviting but uncaring "bright lips" of the "pale lily boys" (1.7). In the second stanza this detailed but disillusioned

vision, which is focused by the image of a mouth, is qualified and framed by what surrounds the port:

Northwards the sea exerts his huge mandate.
His guardians, candles stand, the furnace beam,
Blinking pharus, and ringing from the yards.
(11.10-12).

The sea, which seems in the word "mandate" to be representative of a greater power, is linked with laughter through the word "lapping" (1.6) and is seen as immensely potent in the phrase "exerts his huge mandate" (1.10). The vast power of the sea, whose "guardians" (1.11) seem both to contain and to protect it from the implicit threat of "ringing from the yards" (1.12), is balanced by an ironic contemplation of the smug and secret corruption of the rest of the city:

In their fat gardens, the merchants dwell, Southwards.
Like oak vast-rooted in the centuries,
Well-fed, well-lit, well-spoken men are these,
With bronze-faced sons, and happy in their daughters.
(11.13-16).

The cold irony of the closing lines implicates the "Well-fed, well-lit, well-spoken men" (1.15) in the corruption represented by the "pale lily boys" and "older whores" (11.7 and 8). The concept of salvation is associated with "lapping laughter" (1.6) and the sea; but the sea is bound by his "guardians" and represents an unknown although potent force. The poet, although he condemns the port, is nevertheless hopelessly trapped within the "cords of street".

"Different Living" combines Spender's introspection and concern with social and political issues; it suggests that the internal and external worlds, though not identical, are analogous. The opening stanza, in a manner suggesting a scientific hypothesis rather than a personal conviction, states that different living is a question of one's state of mind rather than physical situation:

Different living is not living in different places
But creating in mind map
Creating in mind desert
Isolated mountain or kinder health resort.
(11.1-4).

The quiet assertiveness of the opening line is heightened by the abruptness of the second and third lines, particularly the insistent rhythmic stress, reinforced by the lack of definite articles, on the words "map" and "desert" (11.2 and 3), and broadened out by the softer rhythm and fuller descriptions of the fourth line.

Physical locations here correspond and relate to internal states of being. The second stanza pursues this distinction between the internal and external, which are united and comprehended by a desire or will to create (11.2 and 3), but, like "At the Edge of Being" and "'I' can never be great man", the poem hints at much but offers no answers. The parallel between the poet who "frowned" (1.5) and "Ape" who "with furrowed hand/ Grabbed at stone" (11.7 and 8), although potentially absurd, forcefully suggests that all

time is simultaneous, that all actions are archetypal. However, the line "Putting a notch against the mind's progress" (l.9) implies the need to record one's development, thereby assuming a sequential time. The final line - "Shaking Time, but with no change of Place", which might refer to either poet or Ape - forces the distinction between space and time, with space being an absolute, a constant, against which time is seen as forever unstable. These ideas are not neatly worked out, but are enmeshed in imagery and spoken by an individual voice. The poem is no neat philosophical diagram: the second stanza does not attempt to prove or disprove the assertive near-hypothesis of the first stanza, but explores the significance of "Different living" (l.1) to a briefly introduced but frowning "I" (l.5). The apparently corresponding situations of the "I" and "Ape" (ll.5 and 6) are examples of rather than proofs that "Different living is not living in different places" (l.1).

In "Written whilst walking down the Rhine" Spender addresses himself directly to his position in history. He connects themes which had preoccupied his examination of personal relationships - homoeroticism, love and friendship - into political and social issues. However, the poem ultimately seems to declare the necessity of keeping the public and private, the internal and external, separate and distinct.

The title of the poem (the thirteenth), "Written whilst walking down the Rhine", echoes the Romantic convention of locating an emotion within a specific area or event, and thereby raises the expectation of personal significance, an expectation which is fulfilled in the poem (l.5) and substantiated by Spender's fictionalized biography The Temple. The later title, "In 1929", generalises this personal significance, which is identified with a political meaning that includes friendship:

A whim of time, the general arbiter,
Proclaims the love instead of death of friends.
Under the domed sky and athletic sun
The three stand naked: the new, bronzed German,
The young communist, and myself, being English.
(ll.1-5).

In The Temple Spender unravels, accurately and concisely I think, the thread of thought in these lines:

The "whim of time" in the poem is not really a whim, it is human history, "the general arbiter", which may seem whimsical, though, in deciding that in 1917 young Germans like you [Joachim] and young English like me [Spender] must be occupied in killing each other: whereas in 1929, it permitted us to be friends. Perhaps in 1929 we loved each other all the more, because in doing so, we unconsciously felt ourselves to be the resurrected bodies, the fleshy ghosts of those killed in 1917 or perhaps as they will be killed in 1939. 21

The first two stanzas of the poem attempt to define a space free from both the envy and revenge of the past and the blood and sacrifice of the future; a space in which the three young men can be united and equal in their love and nakedness (ll.2 and 4). The first two stanzas also emphasise

the preciousness of this space and imply pressures which would obliterate it. The poet's position is shaped by an unresolved tension between love and death which is centred on an awareness of encroaching public events and the preciousness of the intimate and personal. The poem weaves political meanings around the three friends, who are simultaneously individuals and yet representative, and who are fleetingly glimpsed as framed in what Hynes has called the "Myth of the [Great] War", the "Myth of the Next War" and the "Myth of Revolution" ²². The poem looks back to the Great War and sees two of the three taking arms against one another (presumably Spender and "the new, bronzed German" (1.4)), then looks forward ten years to find the "young communist" (1.5) building "his heaven" out of "our bones" (1.10):

Yet to unwind the travelled sphere ten years
Then two take arms, spring to a ghostly posture.
Or else roll on the thing a further ten
And the poor clerk with world-offended eyes
Builds with red hands his heaven; makes our bones
The necessary scaffolding to peace.

(11.6-11).

The conjunctions "Yet" and "or" (11.6 and 8) are informed by an urgency which points to the poet's desire not simply to either "roll on" or "unwind the travelled sphere" (11.8 and 6), but mainly to escape the present moment. The tender present seems too precious to be sustained, to contain the seeds of its destruction (11.9-11). The past and future seem to represent, even possess, the safety and certainty which

the poet desires. The colour of the "poor clerk's" hands conveys the colour of blood and the communist (red) revolution. The concept of revolution and the sacrifices and deaths it will demand are only briefly mentioned. The second section of the poem, the last four stanzas, is a meditation on the dead. The sentence "Our fathers killed" (l.18) gravely and emphatically includes both the slain fathers and those whom our fathers killed:

Now I suppose that the once-envious dead
Have learnt a strict philosophy of clay
After these centuries, to haunt us no longer
In the churchyard, or at the end of the lane
Or howling at the edge of the city
Beyond the last bean-rows, near the new factory.
(ll.12-17).

The word "Now" (l.12) reveals a solemn concern which, underlined by the long vowels and rolling rhythm, cuts across and restrains the urgent wish that "the once-envious dead" shall "haunt us no longer" (ll.12 and 14). The closing, brief mention of "the new factory" (l.17), which looks back to the "edge of the city" (l.16), adds an awareness of an industrial future in counterpoint to the small but homely "churchyard", "lane" and "bean-rows" (ll.15 and 17). However, both the churchyard and the factory, the emblems of the past and future, are haunted. Only the present appears to be free of ghosts, and thereby to be the link between yet disjoined from what was and what will be. Because there "yet lives no feud" (l.18) there can be "our blank of peace" (l.20). The poem goes on to consider briefly

the beliefs which inform these deaths; once again
revolutionary considerations are avoided:

Our father's misery, the dead man's mercy,
The cynic's mystery, weaves a philosophy-
(11.23-24).

The repetition of the "y" sound mocks the apparent
seriousness of the lines, suddenly resolving into a cold and
harsh tone informing a surreal and morbid image:

That the history of man traced purely from dust
Is lipping skulls on the revolving rim
Or posture of genius with the granite head bowed:
(11.25-27).

The poem resolves into a geological image of man's
mortality, an image which picks up and expands the "strict
philosophy of clay" (l.13) besides evoking scenes of
war-weary soldiers collapsing into the battlefield mud to
die:

These, risen a moment, joined or separate,
Fall heavily, then are always separate,
A stratum unreckoned by geologists,
Sod lifted, turned, slapped back again with spade.
(11.28-31).

In The Temple Spender calls our attention to "Strange
Meeting" by Wilfrid Owen as a comparison with "Written
whilst walking down the Rhine" ²⁹. Both poems consider the
futility, suffering and waste involved in war, and both
poems contain hints of homoerotic love. "Strange Meeting" is
consistently informed by sadness, pity and resignation,
whereas "Written whilst walking down the Rhine" mentions but
thereafter avoids the human costs implied in the line "The
necessary scaffolding to peace" (l.11).

Although the poem proclaims "the love instead of death of friends" (l.2), and implicitly praises the young men's values of naturalness, freedom, equality and fraternity, these values are seen as the accidental result of the murder of their fathers, an accident to be swiftly curtailed by revolution. Furthermore, the revolution appears not to be a common property or the culmination of the values of the young men's friendship, but rather will be built by and belong to the communist clerk (ll.10 and 11). The imagined revolution is seen as the murderer of the friendship and its values:

And the poor clerk with world-offended eyes
Builds with red hands his heaven; makes our bones
The necessary scaffolding to peace.
(ll.9-11).

The poet's sympathies are with the fleeting preciousness of "walking down the Rhine" (title) with his friends, although he concedes the necessity of sacrifice, including his own death, to the revolution (ll.10 and 11). Indeed, the poet allows his joy in the friendship (ll.2-4) to be emasculated by his fear for the future and the burden of the past.

Spender's joy in the freedom from the demands of feud (ll.18-22) is discredited and suffocated by the imagined possibility of revolution. Indeed, it appears that only in death will the friends be united and reconciled not only to their fates but to the demands of their past.

CHAPTER THREE

The publication of Spender's first major collection, Poems, by Faber and Faber in 1933 revealed him as a significant poet with, as Hynes suggests, "an established reputation and a defined role in the dramatis personae of his generation"

1. The dust jacket, probably written by Eliot, proclaimed that: "In his work the experimentalism of the last two decades is beginning to find its reward...Technically these poems appear to make a definite step forward in English poetry" 2. M.D.Zabel thought this collection "should establish him as a writer not only of immediate values but of permanent and convincing truth" 3. Indeed, many of these poems not only establish immediate values, to borrow M.D.Zabel's phrase, but also question them in a search for a personal "permanent and convincing truth". Herbert Read praised the volume in these terms:

Mr. Spender is conscious of his social heritage of chaos and despair...perhaps the book's most notable quality is its social consciousness, and the perfect fusion of this too often intractable material with the poetic idiom. 4

Although in this volume Spender certainly demonstrates a potent "social consciousness" and an awareness of "his social heritage of chaos and despair", in these poems he rarely fuses his personal concerns with the demands of his "social heritage". In poems such as "The Funeral", "The Landscape near an Aerodrome" and "In railway halls" the

stated intention is contradicted by the language; a tension which grants us an opportunity to look at the decisions and tensions informing the poem. Many of these poems record, as Francis Scarfe has observed, "a struggle to adapt his individualism to his social views" ⁵.

Poems, which contains many of the poems which appeared in and are discussed in my chapter on Twenty Poems, represents the totality of Spender's work up to 1933 which he considered, to borrow a phrase from his foreword for the facsimile edition of Nine Experiments, "'worth preserving'". The inclusion of poems from Twenty Poems helps establish a framework of ideas in which to locate the new poems. The new poems extend earlier concerns, concentrating on themes of love and friendship and the pressure of the contemporary political scene. Spender's awareness of public events shapes his exploration of personal relationships, as he observes in his autobiography: "From 1931 onwards, in common with many other people, I felt hounded by external events" ⁶. Yet Spender's political vision, either in protest or of a revolutionary utopia, focuses on the immediately personal.

In 1934 Spender re-considered the selection he had made for Poems to produce a revised collection, also entitled Poems. Spender did not amend any of the poems from Poems (1933) for Poems (1934), and the sequence of poems remains largely

unchanged. However, two poems were cut: "My parents quarrel in the neighbour room", the eleventh poem in the 1933 collection (and discussed in the section on Oxford Poetry (1929 and 1930) and "I hear the cries of evening", which was replaced in the sequence by "At the end of two months' holiday". Spender also added another eight poems, turning the original total of 33 poems into a total of 40.

Poems (1933 and 1934) appears to be loosely organized according to the chronological order of the writing of the poems; Spender's earlier concerns forming the basis of new poems. The decision to place "He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye" at the beginning of this and later collections suggests that the poem's desire for a heroic but tragic saviour, tempered with ironic self-knowledge, informs the exploration of ideas in the subsequent poems.

The new poems in Poems explore widening circles of concern, from personal relationships to politics. The poems concentrating on personal relationships explore the possibilities of self through an exploration of remembered experiences and of an overtly homoerotic friendship, Marston having been replaced in Spender's affections by T.A.R.Hyndman. The poems focusing on politics proclaim revolutionary fervour while covertly recording personal doubts, locating the self within yet defining it against a

political and social context. I shall discuss these poems in terms of their exploration of personal and political concerns.

In "My parents kept me from children who were rough" Spender evocatively explores the personal significance of a remembered experience which not only illuminates his past but also his present self. The combination of the past tense and the immediate force of the emotions creates a double-sense of the poet both as an older man who is recalling the experience and as the child who is directly experiencing.

There is a half-wish implied in the first stanza that his parents had let him play with the rough children; a thread of homoeroticism is bound up with an envy of their naturalness and freedom, together with resentment toward his parents. These complex emotions are effectively captured in simple language which relies on direct statement rather than adjectives or metaphors for its effect:

My parents kept me from children who were rough
And ^{with} threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes.
Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the
street
And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.
(ll.1-4).

The linking of "streams" with "the country" baldly points up the association of the rough children with natural forces; an association which reinforces the poet's desire to join

them. The poem's homoeroticism is more apparent in the second stanza, where the scene described could either be of a schoolboy scrap or of a more sexual nature:

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron
And their jerking hands and their knees tight on my
arms.

(11.5-6).

But Spender is embarrassed by his class, by his lack of everything which characterizes the rough children. The only means by which he can bridge the gap is to forgive them, which, with the naivete of the child, he assumes to be his prerogative to extend:

They threw mud
And I looked another way, pretending to smile.
I longed to forgive them, yet they never smiled.

(11.11-13).

The last line may echo Jesus's prayer "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" ⁷. But Spender is no messiah, and he cannot forgive them because they do not want to be forgiven; their honesty throws his own hypocrisy into sharp relief.

The possible allusion to Jesus may indicate a desire to be like Jesus; to be someone who redeems the world through the living sacrifice of himself. Indeed, one recalls that Louis MacNeice said of the young Spender that: "He was already taking upon himself the travail of the world, undergoing a chronic couvade. Redeeming the world by introspection" ⁸. However, in the poem this desire is no more than indicated;

the poet is an ineffectual observer of others rather than one who transforms.

The muscular force of the rhythm, which reflects the muscular strength of the "children who were rough" (l.1), asserts the confidence and certainty with which Spender is re-encountering this fragment of his past. Spender's fear (l.5) is not his own creation, but has been instilled in him by his parents. The poem is thereby not only an expression of his desire to forgive and be accepted by the rough children, but also, and by way of a contrast, a condemnation of his parents who kept him "from children who were rough" (l.1). Spender is encumbered by imposed expectations and inhibitions, shut out from a comradeship he longs to be part of.

The poem does not ask us to judge the experience, or Spender's desire to forgive and condemn, but presents us with an insight into the poet, asking us to join with the poet-as-older-man in coming to terms with and understanding his past whose significance is confirmed by the precision of the language.

Spender's exploration of remembered experiences finds a special focus in personal relationships, particularly with his homoerotic friendship with T.A.R.Hyndman, the

glorification of whom serves to define Spender's own position. T.A.R.Hyndman, like Marston before him, provided Spender with an opportunity of "identification with another man...identification of our situations, not that I wanted to find someone identical with myself" ⁹. The poems concerned with personal relationships tend to stress the difference between Spender and those with whom he is involved.

"My parents kept me from children who were rough" uses apparently simple language to explore the complexity of the poet's background, whereas "After success, your little afternoon success" uses often complex imagery to portray an apparently simple relationship. The relationship in "After success, your little afternoon success" is based on lack of communication; on illusions cast to enmesh another in oneself. The poet initially appears to be detached from the situation he describes, merely recording the emotions which the "you" provokes in the "I":

After success, your little afternoon success,
You watch jealous perplexity mould my head
To the shape of a dark and taloned bird
And fix claws in my lungs, and then you pass
Your silk soothing hand across my arm
And smile;

(11.1-6).

The image of "a dark and taloned bird" (1.3) conveys the raw vicious animality of the "I"'s "jealous perplexity" (1.2) whose savage strength threatens them both (1.4). However,

this reaction is seemingly quelled as easily as it was inspired (ll.4 and 5), although the detachment of the poet, who is identified with the "I" in line six, allows him to judge both his reaction and its provocation:

I look at you, and through as if through glass,
And do not say "You lie". There is something in you
Less visible than glass or else it is
A void imagination fills with pities.
(ll.6-9).

However, the poem's final judgement is that one is unable to judge. There is something in both the "you" and "I" which is "Less visible than glass" (l.8); in the "you" it is the hint of an outline while in the "I" it is his demonstrated detachment; both are ultimately unknown quantities. This invisibility relates to the uniqueness of the internal world of each individual. Moreover, because the "I" is jealous he feels unable to speak:

I look at you, and through as if through glass,
And do not say "You lie".
(ll.6-7).

He pities the "you" (l.9) but does not express his opinion, allowing his condemnation of the "you" to separate them further:

You and that famous whore and the thief
Are simple still, I think: you trust belief
Of the lean spectator living on illusion.
(ll.6-12).

The phrase "lean spectator" (l.12) is reminiscent of "the lean solicitor/ In our empty rooms" (ll.409-410) from Eliot's "What the Thunder Said" (The Waste Land), from a

passage which earlier asked "what have we given?" (l.402) and asserted that nothing had been given through fear of the danger and abandon of the act of giving:

My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
(The Waste Land, II.403-405).

In "After success, your little afternoon success" neither the "you" nor the "I" has given anything; neither communicates; each is invisible. The qualifying phrases "I think" (l.11) and "your truth's" (l.14) reinforce the lack of communication between the "you" and "I". The invisibility of each to the other is in contrast to their ability to provoke responses in one another. Although neither party can talk to one another, they shape images around the other, prejudge and devalue the other.

This relationship is captured, encapsulated and dismissed in fourteen lines. The last lines are charged with hostility but accept the power of the "you"; they assert the "delicate" but powerful hold over the "I":

This delicate smile that strokes my arm I cannot
Break. It is your truth's invisible creation.
(ll.13-14).

"After success, your little afternoon success" vividly presents a relationship and an image of self created by the interaction of invisible interior truths (l.14) and the external influences of other people. However, the detachment of the poet bleeds the poem of personal significance and

distances our own involvement; one is no more than intrigued by the situation portrayed.

By way of a contrast "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" portrays an apparently failed relationship with an immediacy and emotional intensity which charges the poem with personal significance. "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" describes an idyllic pastoral scene captured in a photograph with a lyrical elegance and emotional vulnerability which centres around the loved "figure leaning over a map" (l.10). In The Temple this figure is identified as Marston. Spender is looking back with a tender and introspective sentimentality (l.1) to a tentatively homoerotic relationship characterised by his silent adoration and the passive acceptance of such by the figure:

I remember my strained listening to his voice
My staring at his face and taking the photograph
With the river behind and the woods touched by Spring;
(ll.4-6).

The photograph, which both inspires and to some extent symbolises the poet's memory, links the past and the present together through the poet's love of the "figure leaning over a map" (l.10). The poet's growing awareness of the personal significance of the relationship is paralleled by the gradual emergence and resolution of the scene in the photograph:

Till the identification of a morning-
Expansive sheets of blue rising from fields
Roaring movements of light observed under shadow-
With his figure leaning over a map, is now complete.
(11.7-10).

The specific details of the scene are of relative insignificance; the word "morning" is prefaced by "a", the "Expansive sheets of blue" and "Roaring movements of light" (11.7-9) are broad and general descriptions. The importance of the detail of "his figure leaning over a map" (1.10), which the other details bear upon, is confirmed by its position at the end of the stanza. The second stanza reflects upon the changes which followed the event depicted by the photograph, both for the one loved and the lover:

What is left of that smoke which the wind blew away?
I corrupted his confidence and his sunlike happiness
So that even in his turning of bolts or driving a
machine
His hand will show error. That is for him.
For me this memory which now I behold,
When, from the pasturage, azure round me in rings
And the lark ascends, and his voice still rings, still
rings.

(11.11-17).

Corruption and error are associated with "driving a machine" and the "turning of bolts" (1.13), whereas the loved one's happiness was "sunlike" (1.12) and the poet's present joy is associated with "the pasturage", "azure" and "the lark" (11.16 and 17). The awareness of the disaffection of the loved one has increased the significance of the surrounding and supporting details; the poet no longer talks of "fields" but of "pasturage", of "azure" rather than "blue". Moreover, the repetition of "rings" (in connection with both sound and

colour) emphasises that it is no longer the loved one who is framed and focused by the details but the poet:

For me this memory which now I behold,
When, from the pasturage, azure round me in rings
And the lark ascends, and his voice still rings, still
rings.

(ll.15-17).

The lack of communication between the lover and the loved in the first stanza was a prelude to the separation disclosed in the second. Furthermore, the error and fluidity of relationships are in contrast to the revisionary yet celebratory nature of both the poem and the past.

Spender's continual desire to review and re-write his sense of self in his poems, indicated by his revision of the phrasing and the title of poems, is demonstrated by comparing "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" with one of its later versions, "The Photograph" (Collected Poems (1928-1985)).

The awareness which informs both poems is, as it were, moving forward while looking back, living in a present transfigured by and in contrast to a memory of a seemingly idyllic past. "The Photograph" not only conveys a need to save and savour something of personal significance, but combines and balances this with a desire to express impersonally. A comparison of the opening lines of the two poems reveals not only different emphases but also different

perspectives:

How strangely this sun reminds me of my love!
("How strangely this sun reminds me of my love").

How it reminds me of that day!
("The Photograph").

The earlier opening line introduces the personal and singular significance of a memory of a loved one, while the later opening line introduces a memory of a significant day. In both poems memory is provoked by an external power; in the first poem by "this sun" and in the second by "it". However, the choice of the word "strangely" in the first poem suggests that the memory has come to the poet unbidden; that the process of remembering has an unpredictable and mysterious side. "The Photograph" possesses the same engaging and immediate emotion of "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" but combines this with a feeling that the details of the scene presented are quite arbitrary, are important only in so far as they were chosen and are details. In "The Photograph" the poet's feelings are more general and the text is more autonomous, generating a distance between the poet and his poem which we can perceive and to some extent enter:

The river curving behind branches,
Mist expunging the dark water,
Fragments of sun like shattered mirrors
Scattered through ditches, and you leaning over
The map of everywhere we'd been.
(11.5-9).

The choice of the word "expunging" in line six affords a

glimpse into the awareness informing the poem. To expunge is "to wipe out; to efface; to mark for deletion" ¹⁰, and the implication is that Spender treasures the photograph because without it he fears that he will forget. This personal significance is in contrast to the arbitrary feeling of the choice of details, which seem, like the mist of line six, to obscure what is precious. The word "expunge" serves to highlight the purpose of the photograph:

How it reminds me of that day!
Walking alone without you,
Remembering your voice
And looking at your face, to take this photograph:
(ll.1-4).

The lyrical elegance of "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love", though more vulnerable to mockery, is more emotionally sophisticated than "The Photograph", which is notable for its simpler emotion and simplified structure.

However, although "The Photograph" seems to capture a personal value, one is largely left watching the poet in the act of treasuring without knowing why or when or whom. In "The Photograph" the loved one is a blank figure, even the gender of the "you" is not mentioned, whereas in "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" the loved one is identified as "he", and the development of the relationship is outlined.

In The Temple, in another version of the same scene, Spender

describes the loved one as "like an English Great War pilot in France studying a map of the Western Front" ¹¹, which impression is certainly not conveyed by either "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" or "The Photograph". The contrast between this prose extract and the poems, and their contrast with one another, sheds light on Spender's attitude to the expression of self. The modification and re-evaluation of the informing emotions and the changing distance of the writer from his work suggests that Spender is not going "back to first intentions and to memory of the circumstances from which the poem [or prose] arose" ¹² as he claims, but creating and re-creating images of himself and his past.

"How strangely this sun reminds me of my love" was one of Spender's last poems concerned with his relationship with Marston, a relationship which served as a precursor and a prototype to his relationship with T.A.R. Hyndman. Hyndman, or Jimmy as he is called in World Within World, was both a source of inspiration and "symbolized a psychological factor within" ¹³ which related to Spender's upbringing and background:

...the differences of class and interest between Jimmy and me certainly did provide some element of mystery which corresponded almost to a difference of sex. I was in love, as it were, with his background, his soldiering, his working-class home...When Jimmy talked of such things, I was perhaps nearer poetry than talking to most of my fellow poets. At such moments, too, I was very close to certain emotions awakened in

childhood by the workers, who to us seemed at the same time coarse, unclean, and yet with something about them of forbidden fruit, and also of warm-heartedness which suddenly flashed across the cold gulf of class, secret and unspoken. 14

In many of Spender's poems the loved, whether Marston or Hyndman or someone unnamed, embodies qualities of natural potency and an earthy emotional warmth which the poet lacks. The contemplation and glorification of those loved often point up the poet's isolation and need. Poems such as "Abrupt and charming mover" examine a one-sided relationship from a position of detached observation. However, "Your body is stars whose million glitter here" celebrates a communion which fine celestial imagery suggests is both physical and spiritual:

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 our vast arms like streams of fire lie.
(11.1-4).

The beautiful opening line conjures a double-sense both of an intimate tactile immediacy and a gleaming vastness. The second stanza adds an awareness of time and timelessness, of distant "worlds I cannot near" (1.6). The poet is stretched between such extremes, has become the focus of all things and all times:

How can this end? My healing fills the night
And hangs its flags in worlds I cannot near.
Our movements range through miles, and when we kiss
The moment widens to enclose long years.
(11.5-8).

The act of loving has broadened out the specific into the

universal (l.7-8). The powerfully direct appeal to the reader in the use of "you" is strengthened by the poem's exuberant, encompassing emotion.

A series of asterisks breaks the poem into two distinct sections each possessing two stanzas. The third stanza, in the second section, uses images of discovery to ruminate upon the experience introduced in the first:

Beholders of the promised dawn of truth
The explorers of immense and simple lines,
Here is our goal, men cried, but it was lost
Amongst the mountain mists and mountain pines.
(ll.9-12).

Rather than discovery, however, the poet encounters loss. Not only is "the promised dawn of truth" (l.9) lost, but also any reference to the "you" and the "I". The answer to the question "How can this end?" (l.5) is provided in the fourth and final stanza:

So with this face of love, whose breathings are
A mystery shadowed on the desert floor:
The promise hangs, this swarm of stars and flowers,
And then there comes the shutting of a door.
(ll.13-16).

The "promised dawn of truth" (l.9) here shines from the poet's "face of love" (l.12). There is the hint of revelation within this ecstatic communion, and "then there comes the shutting of a door" (l.16). The last line concludes the rich and evocative imagery of communion with a commonplace action: "the shutting of a door" (l.16).

This final image seems to refer primarily to the relationship between the "you" and the "I". The prefixing of "a" to "door" (l.16) allows for a multiplicity of interpretations, which extend backwards from the last line to include the whole poem. In relation to the concept of memory implied in line eight, "the shutting of a door" (l.16) might postulate that communion between the present and the past is momentary and often abrupt. The final image effectively shuts the door on the parade of images which precede it and which constitute the poem.

The final image might pertain to a failure by the poet to express and thus to evoke love. But in this interpretation one encounters the paradox of the poet communicating to us his inability to communicate. Moreover, if the line "explorers of immense and simple lines" (l.11) refers to the reader then one could see the final image, in connection with the loss of the "dawn of truth" (l.9), as referring to the fallibility of any attempt to finalise an interpretation.

One also notes that in his poems Spender commonly addresses "you" rather than specifying a gender or giving a name. This ambiguity suggests a degree of embarrassment concerning those loved; a fear of indicating homoeroticism except indirectly. Cunningham, borrowing a phrase from George

Orwell, has suggested that good poems like good novels "are written by people who are not frightened" ¹⁵, and that Spender is frightened because in Poems he only directly acknowledges T.A.R.Hyndman in the initials of the twenty second poem's title, "For T.A.R.H". However, the poems do not so much avoid as subvert the homoerotic.

In the same way that the homoerotic subverts the statement of love, so for Spender memory often overturns the present with unbidden recollections. In "For T.A.R.H." Spender's love is "soaked in memory" (1.4), and he wears "All pasts and futures like a doomed, domed sky" (1.6). The poem presents a scene which, like "That girl who laughed and had black eyes" and "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love", is transfigured by and in memory; past and present co-exist in the scene:

Even whilst I watch him I am remembering
The quick laugh of the wasp gold eyes.
(11.1-2).

The image of the "quick laugh of the wasp gold eyes" (1.2) conjures not only the wasp's yellow banding but also its rapid, darting flight and excited buzzing. Spender's immense concerns are pressed into this small observation in the same way that his memories are being pressed into the present moment.

Spender's thoughts revolve around the transcending of time;

in the first stanza his love wears "All pasts and futures" (l.7); all things and times exist simultaneously within him. The poet's awareness transforms this knowledge of the limitless into a fixed aspect in a fixed space and time; the eye again becomes the emblem of immense things:

Thus I wear always the glint of quick lids
And the blue axel turning; these shall be
Fixed in a night that knows and sees
The equable currents.

(11.8-11).

In the second stanza his life "lies with no past nor future/
But only space" (11.12 and 13), all things being small and static, watching:

Hope and despair and the small vivid longings
Like minnows gnaw the body. Where it drank love
It lives in sameness.

(11.14-16).

The idea of life being worried away as if by small freshwater fish, although sustaining the thread of natural imagery introduced with the wasp, seems inappropriate and even absurd. In "For T.A.R.H." the imagery focuses the broad concerns of the poem, and although the phrase "small vivid longings" (l.14) might suggest small darting fish seen through clear water, the elaboration of that suggestion in the image of gnawing minnows reduces rather than enriches

18.

Where "my life" (l.12) drank love it exists in sameness and static timelessness (l.15-16) distinct from the tranquil appraisal of the lover in the opening lines. This calm

stasis, a balancing of inner and outer worlds, is centred on and presumably achieved through the image of his lover who is described in touching but brief detail:

Here are
Gestures indelible. The wiry copper hair
And the mothlike lips at dusk and that human
Glance, which makes the sun forgotten.
(ll.16-19).

The word "indelible" (l.17) signifies a desire that this instant of love be preserved, the answer to this desire is memory and the poem itself. The poem ends by enclosing itself purely in space; the internal, enclosed world of love achieving pre-eminence over the world of external relationships and objects. The vibrant image of "mothlike lips" (l.18), which concludes the thread of natural imagery, adds a tender beauty to the human face of love which has shaped both the informing memory and the poem. However, the poem says nothing of the feelings of the loved one beyond the presumed affection implied in "quick laugh of wasp gold eyes" (l.2) and "that human/ Glance" (ll.18-19). The poet in isolation has granted that the gestures (l.17) are indelible; giving the gestures a profound but nevertheless purely personal significance.

In "Abrupt and charming mover" Spender explores the one-sidedness and detachment involved in such adoration. The poem is intimately addressed in the present tense to the "Abrupt and charming mover" (l.1), and describes both the

"mover" and Spender's relationship to him. The first stanza describes the loved "you", whom the poem makes clear is male (ll.16-17), with slight but sensitive observations:

Your pointed eyes under lit leaves,
Your light hair, your smile,
(ll.2-3).

The second stanza counterpoints present-tense night-time tenderness with past-tense daytime unkindness:

Beneath the ribs, in Jonah's whale,
All night I hold you: from day
I have recalled your play
Disturbing as birds' flying
And with the Spring's infection
And denial of satisfaction.
(ll.7-12).

The phrase "Spring's infection" (l.11) draws together the poet's love and the rich natural imagery used to describe the "you". The upbeat rhythm and the two rhyming couplets (ll.8 and 9 and 11 and 12) emphasise the idea of "your play" (l.9) and grant the poet a certain jauntiness. However, the words "Disturbing" (l.10) and "denial" (l.12) add a sombre note which points to the third stanza and the self-contained, self-supporting joy of the dancer. It is in dancing that the harshest unkindness of isolation occurs. The "mover" (l.1) does not answer the lover's need; the dancer does not need the lover although the lover needs the dancer:

We have no meeting place
Beneath that dancing, glassy surface:
The outward figure of delight
Creates no warm and sanguine image
Answering my language.
(ll.23-27).

The poet's yearning love finds form within his yearning language, whereas the dancer's self-contained joy finds form within a self-contained dance. There is no answer to the poet's language (l.27). The poet desires an answer but knows there will be none: the poem is followed by the empty space of the unprinted page. The tension between the unprinted page and the vital poem, which unsuccessfully calls for a creative dialogue, reinforces the self-reflexiveness of the closing half-rhyme of "image" and "my language" (ll.26 and 27). The poem calls for more poetry, and the lack of a reply reflects the one-sidedness of the relationship between the lover or poet and the mover, and an acute awareness of the role of language, and its lack, within the relationship.

In "Abrupt and charming mover" and "Alas, when he laughs it is not he" Spender's concern with personal relationships turns from the joy and beauty he records in such poems as "For T.A.R.H." and "Your body is stars whose million glitter here" to a contemplation of the suppression of joy and beauty in the lives of others. "Alas, when he laughs it is not he" is particularly interesting for its vision of the divided self and the possibility of salvation; a vision shared by and underpinning other poems. Indeed, the poem's central figure, the "shopwalker" (l.2), might be seen as the opposite of the mythic but tragic hero portrayed in "He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye". The shopwalker

represents another important image of self in Spender's mythologised world.

In "Alas, when he laughs it is not he" the implicit image of the poet is in contrast to the lucid and vivid character portrait of "a shopwalker" (l.2) whose social aspect does not correspond with his inner feelings. Although the poet, who is glimpsed in such phrases as "I think" (l.9), pities and judges the shopwalker, his concern is sympathetic. Indeed, the poet's vision of possible salvation (ll.6-13) bespeaks a sympathy rooted in a vision of the shopwalker as an alternative, perhaps earlier, image of his own self. The shopwalker is a hypocrite professionally, "out of hours" (l.4) and to himself. The expressive, albeit clichéd, interjection "Alas" (l.1), together with the high-sounding generality of the assertion that "when he laughs it is not he", clashes with the sordid and drab description of the shopwalker. Moreover, the shopwalker's drabness is captured in graphic and compelling language:

Alas, when he laughs it is not he:
But a shopwalker who scrapes his hands, and bows,
Seller of ties and shirts who shows his teeth
Even out of hours.

(ll.1-4).

Adjectives such as "too-generous" and "ruined" (l.5) clearly and forcefully carry the poet's judgement. The poet's pre-occupation with a love and freedom which overcome divisions shapes the presentation of the shopwalker's

self-awareness. The shopwalker is aware, though only occasionally and only fitfully (1.4), of his lack of social and self-esteem. His self-awareness borders on self-pity: he is neither valued by others nor does he value himself:

Sometimes a flickering regret
For these damp, too-generous ruined gestures
Burns in his eyes.

(11.4-6).

The vision of the poem is vital and vividly realized. The shopwalker seems unwilling to change himself or allow himself to be changed. He is almost the personification of the rural-urban opposition. He is made up of the masks and gestures of his profession and formed by the harsh pressures of the city. Within him is a momentarily glimpsed hint of immense potential, of a raw and vital being visualized in terms of "the jungle" (1.8) which if released might make the outer world correspond to the inner world, make urban sterility rich with natural force:

If he himself could laugh
To match his light and naked hair
And the jungle still glimmering beneath his lashes,
I think that obdurate cliff
That shuts out all our sky and always grows
Black between us and the silent pools of the will
Would fall: and that the rocks
Would burst with German streams again.

(11.6-13).

The chance of salvation is suppressed by divisions within the self (11.9-11); divisions which can only be overcome within the self rather than by external power. If the shopwalker could laugh "To match his light and naked hair/ And the jungle still glimmering beneath his lashes" (11.7

and 8) then he would realize the immense natural potency which lurks within him.

The last line contains a notable personal and historical reference. During the period prior to the publication of Poems (1933) Spender had lived at intervals in Germany, which was his mother's country ¹⁷. Spender explained the attraction which Germany held for him in the introduction to

The Temple:

1929 was the last year of that strange Indian summer—the Weimar Republic. For many of my friends and for myself, Germany seemed a paradise where there was no censorship and young Germans enjoyed extraordinary freedom in their lives. ¹⁸

The phrase "German streams" (l.13) in "Alas, when he laughs it is not he", coming as the final and presumably most categorical expression of a raw and vital potentiality, seems to bubble over with this sense of freedom and excitement. It is ironic that the contemporary Weimar freedom would be smothered and stamped out in 1934. The shopwalker in "Alas, when he laughs it is not he", who is held back by divisions within himself, presents an interesting corollary to Spender's divided sensibility sympathising with the poor yet conscious of his own privileged position - a division whose roots are explored in "My parents kept me from children who were rough".

The "German streams" (l.13) embody an effusive enthusiasm

for liberty and love, for an overcoming of divisions, untrammelled by broader concerns such as relationships or society. The poem has a Romantic, idealistic view of the individual and personal salvation, and its unguarded celebration of "German streams" (l.13) reveals a glorification, even a mythologisation, of the Weimar Republic. The "German streams" (l.13) possess a significance which, although rooted in the Romantic adoration of the countryside and a contemporary interest in the Weimar Republic, is quite personal. The shopwalker moves in a world, framed between damnation and salvation (ll.6-13), created by the poet.

In "At the end of two months' holiday" the symbolic world, such as the one in "Alas when he laughs it is not he", becomes a dream landscape. The poem explores the suppression and disappearance of the natural through a dream sequence triggered, like the memories in "How strangely this sun reminds me of my love", by external details:

At the end of two months' holiday there came a night
When I lay awake and the sea's distant fretless
scansion
By imagination scourged rose to a fight
Like the town's roar, pouring out apprehension.
I was in a train.

(ll.1-5).

The first four lines establish a waking world characterised by anxiety (ll.2-4) which frames and inspires the subsequent dream. The dream seems to try to establish fixed values, an

anchor, which will answer the waking anxiety. The phrase "I was in a train" (1.5) suddenly yet blandly introduces the dream of being in a train (1.5), whose flow and unreality is associated with the cinema. The dream revolves around a typical Romantic opposition between Nature and the city:

Like the quick spool of a film
I watched hasten away the simple green which can heal
All sadness. Abruptly the sign Ferry to Wilm
And the cottage by the lake, were vivid, but unreal.
Real were iron lines, and, smashing the grass
The cars in which we ride, and real our compelled time:
(11.5-10).

The impressions, though dealt with as if concrete and tangible, possess the abrupt poignancy of a dream. However, their significance is concrete and certain. The opposition between Nature and the city resolves into a fear that certain values, associated with the countryside and Nature and embodied in and including poetry, will be lost:

Painted on enamel beneath the moving glass
Unreal were cows, the wave-winged storks, the lime:
These burned in a clear world from which we pass
Like rose and love in a forgotten rhyme.
(11.11-14).

In the dream Nature is seen in terms of art, as film (1.5) and painting (1.11), and then forlornly dismissed as "unreal" (11.8 and 12). Conversely, the relentless mechanisms and urgent progress of the train are seen as remorselessly "real" (11.9-10). The words "real" and "unreal" unite the worlds of dreaming and waking in a search for values; reveal a need to establish values which are true, sincere and fixed. In the anxious confusion of "the

sea's distant fretless scansion" (l.2) and "the town's roar" (l.4), the poet wants to anchor himself. In his autobiography Spender observes of his younger Oxford self:

We [Tristran and Spender] thought that perhaps being a working man, or perhaps even making love with a prostitute, was to be real. We wanted to write poetry, we wanted to believe, we wanted to love, we wanted to live without excuse or evasion, and we felt that the power to do these things was being taken from us. 18

The poet, like the younger Oxford Spender, simplistically questions the self and the external world in terms of conflicting extremes. His concern with time/memory, Nature and poetry is revealed by the rhyming of "compelled time" (l.10), "lime" (l.12) and "forgotten rhyme" (l.14). Although the poet wistfully prefers the "cottage by the lake" (l.8) and "the wave-winged storks" (l.12) to the "cars in which we ride" (l.10), he is required to choose the "real" and reject the "unreal" in the same simple way that the dream presents them. It is ironic that this simple, seemingly insensitive, choice arises from a complex interplay of dreaming and waking, self and world, poet and poem, and that it is captured in sensitive, expressive language.

While the use of the words "real" and "unreal" reveal the poet's need for a secure anchor, whether supplied by poetry or broader values such as love or liberty, which will fix his sense of self, the poem is insecurely anchored in unreliable memory. "At the end of two months' holiday"

closes with an allusion to an earlier poem:

These burned in a clear world from which we pass
Like rose and love in a forgotten rhyme.
(l.13-14).

The "we" (l.13) to whom the poem refers includes the poet, who patently cannot have forgotten the "rose and love" (l.14) because he is recording the memory, and the reader, who is not in a position initially to know let alone remember the "forgotten rhyme" (l.14). The contradiction of knowing what is forgotten indicts memory as unreliable and insubstantial. Indeed, memory seems to be discredited as a possible anchor for the poet.

Although the poem introduces itself as a dream sequence, it does not end with the poet coming awake but with the significance of the dream impressing itself upon the poet and poem in terms of poetry (ll.13 and 14). The reference to "rose and love in a forgotten rhyme" in the last line might refer to the poem "Epistle (Near the Canal)" from Nine Experiments, perhaps marking the loss of an innocence and idealism which the poet has progressed beyond but nevertheless treasures.

Nature, another possible anchor, passes as the pictures on a cinema screen or as the scene through the window of a moving train. With the passing of Nature is lost the chance of salvation embodied in Nature:

Like the quick spool of a film
I watched hasten away the simple green which can heal
All sadness.

(ll.5-7).

Although its vision is pessimistic, the poem does not inspire any sense of nightmare or despair but recognizes the demands made on the poet by "our compelled time" (l.10). The poet is observing and disengaged, as one would expect of someone watching a changing landscape from a moving train. The intimate, even informal, tone betrays the vividly imaged sense of horror. The poem presents an image of self based on a sense of failure and inadequacy qualified by an inability to act, an impression reinforced by the last lines:

Painted on enamel beneath the moving glass
Unreal were cows, the wave-winged storks, the lime:
These burned in a clear world from which we pass
Like rose and love in a forgotten rhyme.

(ll.11-14).

The Romantic idyll of the "clear world from which we pass" (l.13) is paralleled by the Romantic cliché of "rose and love" (l.14). Both the phrase and the "clear world" (l.13) have been drained of their meaning and reality. The poem closes with a vivid impression of a past idyll and an unclear sense of a rushing, urgent future. The poem describes a direction, a continual movement between values, but implies no ultimate goal. The poet's desire for fixity is contradicted by the poem's vision. Ironically, the poem itself, although subject to the unreliability of memory and possible loss of meaning, represents a form of fixity. The fixity of the poem, the legacy of the search for fixity of

self, appears as the final and closing chance of certainty.

Spender's romantic concern with the modern suppression of the individual, for example the shopwalker in "Alas, when he laughs it is not he", and the loss of contact with Nature, evinced in such poems as "Passing men are sorry for birds in cages", resolves into a political sympathy with Communism in poems such as "Not palaces, an era's crown" and "New Year". Communism provided a structure within which Spender could understand his personality, which excused his self-doubts as class-conditioning ²⁰ and established a purpose within the public world: "The writer who grasps anything of the Marxist theory feels that he is moving in a world of reality and in a purposive world" ²¹.

Spender's politics were no narrow dogma but a reaction to "a fatality which I felt to be overtaking our civilization" ²². The focus of his politics were not the impersonal historical forces which Marx predicted would overthrow capitalist society, but the role and significance of the individual and, more particularly, poetry. Spender's poems attempt to define for himself an image of self through an exploration and selection of values.

The significance of the individual, which is the first strand in Spender's political commitment, is explored in

"Who live under the shadow of a war", whose title echoes the premonition of a forthcoming major war in the poem "In 1929" (ll.6-11). "Who live under the shadow of a war" poses the question of the significance of the individual, especially the poet, in a time of crisis:

Who live under the shadow of a war,
What can I do that matters?
(ll.1-2).

This sense of insignificance is compounded by an inability to act or a futility of action:

My pen stops, and my laughter, dancing, stop
Or ride to a gap.
(ll.3-4).

Although the poet claims that he is brought to a standstill by the pressure of events, the half-rhyming of "stop" with "gap" (ll.3 and 4) neatly suggests the word stop-gap and a sense that the standstill is temporary. Indeed, the stopping affords the time to meditate upon the poet's present situation; to consider the question "What can I do that matters?" (l.2).

The second stanza adopts and finely develops this state of hesitant insignificance; employing natural imagery to signify internal forces:

How often, on the powerful crest of pride,
I am shot with thought
That halts the untamed horses of the blood,
The grip on good.
(ll.5-8).

The images of "the powerful crest of pride" (l.5) and "the

untamed horses of the blood" (1.7) re-work traditional symbols which, although suggesting a combination of the parable and the aphorism and recalling both the religious symbolism of William Blake and the celebratory and sensual writings of D.H.Lawrence, exude an intense personal significance.

The third stanza picks up the lively image of "the untamed horses of the blood" (1.7), exploring their shackled and "realer" power:

That moving whimpering and mating bear
Tunes to deaf ears:
Stuffed with the realer passions of the earth
Beneath this hearth.

(11.9-12).

The improper suffixing of -er to "real" (1.11) combines intense significance with a touch of unreality. The need for the real, which Spender also explores in "Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars" and "At the end of two months' holiday", here asserts the supremacy of the inner life over the external, even though the inner life is restrained and oppressed by the external. In the pessimistic vision of "At the end of two months' holiday" unreality pertained to a past Romantic natural idyll whereas reality pertained to an urgent and compelling technological future. In "Who live under the shadow of a war" reality is not opposed by unreality but is qualified by degrees into less real or realer (1.11). This shift of usage reflects a change

in Spender's appreciation of the problem of fixing his self in the external world, and reflects an uneasiness with the notion of reality:

If we [Tristran and Spender] put the problem of being real to the students of philosophy, they answered: "What do you mean by "real"?... Why is it realer to be a worker than to be an undergraduate? Surely there is nothing realer about living with your body than with your mind? And it is just as "real" to think as to act", etc. These considerations persuaded us that perhaps we should dismiss the word "real" from our vocabulary, but they did not remove our uneasiness. 23

Spender felt that Oxford, together with his background and upbringing, had cut "away the connections of activity within ourselves with the world outside, had deprived us of the convincing sense of our own identity outside Oxford" 24. The word "realer" acknowledges but rejects the reality of Oxford life and his class situation; choosing instead the "passions of the earth" (l.11). The reality of the individual's inner world of thoughts and feelings is held to be more real than the external world of actions and events. Nevertheless, the external must at least be valued for its effect upon the internal.

The second strand to Spender's political commitment, the injustice and oppression of the individual by the public world, is explored in "Van der Lubbe", which is presented as the thoughts of the man who was convicted of burning down the Reichstag in 1933. The poem consists of a loose collection of almost-surreal images revolving around ideas

of justice and death which are half-addressed to characters named "Sombre Judge" and "dear movietone", but are largely interior monologue:

Why do you laugh? Sombre Judge asks.
I laugh at this trial, although it shall make
My life end at a dazzling steel gate,
Axe severing a stalk.

Yes, no, yes, no. Shall I tell you what I know?
Not to Goering, but, dear movietone, I whisper it to
you.

I laugh because my laughter
Is like justice, twisted by a howitzer.
(11.9-16).

The phrase "dear movietone" (1.14) refers to the American Movietone newsreels, named after a vision-with-sound recording process ²⁵, which globally reported world affairs. The "I" appears to speak, in a manner at once conspiratorial and confessional, to a mass audience which in its turn can only listen as it would listen to a newsreel. The "I" revels in a welter of fragmented images; feels intense pleasure in his madness (1.7). The "I" appears to be aware of himself as a series of impressions whose value rests in their shocking horror:

I throw you these words, I care not which I tear,
You must eat my scraps and dance.
I am glad I am glad that this people is mad:
Their eyes must drink my newspaper glance.
(11.5-8).

Moreover, the mention of "searchlight disks" (1.1), "an inhuman channel" (1.3) and "a dazzling steel gate" (1.11) locates the "I" within a world of shocking and horrific impressions. The mention of a town with a "notorious mast"

(1.4) might refer to Movietone City, "a talking-picture town nearly a mile long and half as wide, containing 108 acres of property" ²⁸, which was built in California by the Fox Film Corporation at the same time "Van der Lubbe" was written. The horrific, surreal world portrayed in the poem is rooted in realities of Spender's own time.

The combination of various fragments of different material, from the nursery rhyme and rhythm of line thirteen to the modern vocabulary, create an image of an obsessed and infirm mind. The external has invaded the internal, has shaken the senses "from the judging heart" (1.20) and turned the senses backwards and inwards into the self. The "outside world" (1.21) has rolled into "the grave of the skull" (1.22). This perverse self-absorption is as deadly as the shopwalker's lack of selfhood in "Alas, when he laughs it is not he". The final stanza associates this inversion of justice with childishness and childhood games, with pleasure which is as pure as it is perverse:

The spitting at justice, the delight of mere guns
Exploding the trees, where in their branches
Truth greenly balances, and what I am
Who die with the dead and slobber with fun.
(11.24-27).

In the same way that the "justice" meted out to Van der Lubbe is represented as unjust, so the truth which the poem conveys is deeply false. The poem's vision of confusion is communicated through a complex, coherent technique.

Confusion is, ironically, envisaged very clearly. Furthermore the reader, like the poet, does not eat Van der Lubbe's "scraps" (l.6) nor drink his "newspaper glance" (l.8), but judges distantly yet sympathetically. The poem is presented as an antidote to the distortion it presents. This treatment of a controversial and contemporary political issue is as remarkable as its unusual idiom.

The search for personal significance in a oppressive and confused world - which represent the intertwining of the two strands of Spender's political commitment - ends in failure in "Van der Lubbe", but in "Perhaps" resolves into the possibility of salvation. The title of the poem suggests that chance, fortune or accident may be the deciding and controlling factors in history. The opening stanza balances seemingly arbitrary juxtaposition of factual detail against a concern for placing responsibility:

The explosion of a bomb
the submarine-a burst bubble filled with water-
the chancellor clutching his shot arm (and that was
Perhaps
a put-up job for their own photographers)
(ll.1-4).

The opening line, which proposes an event uncoloured by interpretation, introduces a simple and apparent objectivity which is blurred by the succeeding lines. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the first two lines suggests a causal relation between the events they propose. The wounding of the chancellor (l.3) also appears to be caused by the

"explosion of a bomb" (1.1); though presumably a different explosion and a different bomb. The poet's voice, tentatively introduced in "our party" and "I hope" (11.6 and 7), comments on the facts presented and suggests causality:

the chancellor clutching his shot arm (and that was
Perhaps
a put-up job for their own photographers)
the parliament their own side set afire
and then our party forbidden
and the mine flooded, an accident I hope.
(11.3-7).

The criticism of "a put-up job" (1.4) is qualified by the revelation in the phrase "our party" (1.6) of the poet being partisan. However, the involvement implied in "our party" is discredited by the detachment of "I hope" in response to the disaster of "the mine flooded" (1.7). This sense of confusion is reinforced by the seeming arbitrariness of the items and their order in line eight:

motorcycles wires aeroplanes cars trains
converging at that one town Geneva
top-hats talking at edge of crystal healing lake
then mountains.
(11.8-11).

The confused and urban world of lines eight and nine, which is populated not by people but by symbols of social status (1.10), contrasts with the pure and healing rural world which it borders (1.10). In the third stanza this welter of impressions is given a root in the world of newspapers:

We know this from rotating machines
from flanges stamping, cutting, sicking out sheets from
paper rolls.
The newsmen run like points of compass: their arms are
gusts that carry sheets of mouldy paper:
our eyes mud those scraps rub on.
(11.12-16).

The information which the newspapers convey, like the paper the news is printed on, has been spewed out from "rotating machines" (1.12), is "mouldy" (1.15) and scrappy (1.16). "We" (1.17) are only aware at second hand, through the press, of decisions and events which will not only shape history but also immediately affect their lives. Furthermore, the information is merely shapes which have been stamped and cut (1.13), then indiscriminately spread across a readership who are malleable and impressionable. The lack of individual self-determination is confirmed in the fourth stanza by questions relating to the uncertainty of knowledge about one's fate:

In his skidding car he wonders
when watching landscape attack him
"is it rushing (I cannot grasp it) or is it
at rest with its own silence I cannot touch?"
(11.17-20).

The "he", whose passivity seems to indicate that he is a passenger rather than the driver of the "skidding car" (1.17), appears to be a figure representative of the condition of common humanity in this time of confusion and crisis. The "he"'s detached contemplation and even prediction of his fate starkly contrasts with that fate; a sudden and violent collision with the landscape. The use of the passive verb "skidding" (1.17) reflects the "he"'s calmness while also avoiding the placing of blame or responsibility. His detachment from his situation parallels the detachment of people reading about their own lives in

the newspapers. The wondering of the "he" asserts a desire for certainty, which the poem never satisfies, in contrast to the monumental certainty of the attacking landscape and the inevitable death.

The fifth stanza sustains the blend of certainty and wondering. Here the poet's questions are based upon a certain knowledge. The poet's need for certainty and stability, asserted by the use of "final" in the first question, encompasses both private and public worlds and is framed between "that war" (l.21) and "that revolution" (l.23):

Was that final when they shot him? did that war
lop our dead branches? are my new leaves splendid?
is it leviathan, that revolution
hugely nosing at the edge of antartic?
(ll.21-24).

The uncertainty of the poet is rooted in a desire for stability. If indeed it was "final when they shot him" (l.21), the "him" presumably being "the chancellor" (l.3), then the question need not be asked. The poet's second question implies that healthy branches were lopped by "that war", leaving only dead wood which valiantly attempts to bring forth new life. The vitality of this new life is challenged in the third question. However, the poet's questions stretch from hope that the past has purified to hope that the future will be just.

The questioned comparison between "leviathan" and "that revolution" is only partly a comparison of size, after all "that revolution" is "hugely nosing" (11.23 and 24). The comparison is important for the allusion to The Book of Job, makes out "that revolution" to be as indestructible, unaccountable and terrible as the Biblical leviathan:

His heart is hard as a stone, hard as the nether millstone.

When he raises himself up the mighty are afraid; at the crashing they are beside themselves.

Though the sword reaches him, it does not avail; nor the spear, the dart or the javelin.

He counts iron as straw, and bronze as rotten wood.

...Upon earth there is not his like, a creature without fear.

(61.24-27 and 33).

It is ironic that a Biblical allusion is used to question the might of the atheistic Communist revolution. In the sixth stanza the poet's uncertainty resolves into acceptance of the fact that uncertainty is inevitable; it incorporates references to the "skidding car" and "sheets from paper rolls" (11.17 and 13) into a general image of being ruled by random probability:

only Perhaps. Can it be that we grow smaller
dronish and bony shut in our racing prison:
headlines are walls that shake and close
the dry dice rattled in their wooden box.

(11.25-28).

In the fifth and sixth stanza each statement superficially appears to be a question; although prefaced with "Can" (11.25 and 29) they do not end with question marks. The statements thus uneasily combine certainty with uncertainty, reflecting the tension between the uncertainty and

imprisonment of "we" (l.25) and the suggestion of the purposive "growth of humanity" occurring "Out there" (ll.30 and 29). Furthermore, the lack of certainty of the "we" might result not from lack of knowledge but from accurate knowledge of a situation which is no longer the same:

Can be deception of things only changing. Out there
perhaps growth of humanity above the plain
hangs: not the timed explosion, oh but Time
monstrous with stillness like the himalayan range.
(ll.29-32).

The "growth of humanity" is associated with "that revolution" (ll.30 and 23) both through their respective sizes, the former being "monstrous" and the latter "leviathan" (ll.32 and 33), and through their great potential for change. The last line is reminiscent of part of T.S.Eliot's "What the Thunder Said", not only in the references to "stillness" and "the himalayan range" (l.32), but also in the suggestion of the possibility of salvation and healing:

Then a damp gust
Bringing rain
Ganga was sunken, and the limp leaves
Waited for rain, while the black clouds
Gathered far distant, over Himavant.
The jungle crouched, humped in silence.
(The Waste Land, ll.395-399).

In "Perhaps" salvation will presumably be delivered by "that revolution" (l.23). However, the poet's hope, like his certainties and uncertainties, is framed as a possibility.

The coherence and integrity of "Perhaps", rooted in the

sophistication of its vision and reflected in the complexity and subtlety of its expression, represent an advance from the Romantic simplicity of such poems as "Alas, when he laughs it is not he". "Perhaps" indicates the significance of the doubts which Spender attempts to answer in many of his less sophisticated poems.

In "Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars" Spender relates the complex and oppressive modern world to his need for certainty, exploring the tension between an inner significance and the significance of an implied external value system. The poem moves very quickly from "Europe" (l.1) to "us" to the individual. The first stanza describes an abstract, even symbolic, landscape:

Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars
Below us: above our heads the night
Frozen again to stars: the stars
In pools between our coats, and that charmed moon:
Ah, what supports?

(ll.1-5).

The use of words like "on", "below", "above" and "between" seems to locate the "us" in a kind of limbo peppered by stars somewhere between "Europe" (l.1) and "that charmed moon" (l.4). The question "Ah, what supports?" (l.5) reinforces the sense of being in mid-air. This idea, which implies that the "us" can be identified as airmen, is reinforced by the further question:

What cross draws out our arms,
Heaves up our bodies toward the wind
And hammers us between the mirrored lights?
(ll.5-7).

The word "cross" (1.5), whose shape might be that of the wings and body of an aeroplane, places this limbo within the context of the crucifixion; associating the situation of the "us" with Christ's agony and doubt and death. The association with Christ is light yet telling, indicating, as it did in "My parents kept me from children who were rough", a desire to absolve the world through the living sacrifice of the self; a wish to redeem "the world by introspection" 27. The questions concerned with "us" and the religious overtones of the first stanza are answered by a series of certainties which centre on an I in the second stanza:

Only my body is real: which wolves
Are free to oppress and gnaw. Only this rose
My friend laid on my breast, and these few lines
Written from home, are real.

(11.8-11).

The use of the word "us" in the first stanza implicated the reader, whereas in the second stanza the use of "my" and "My friend" (11.8 and 10) excludes the reader from direct involvement. Furthermore, the language of both stanzas points inwards rather than outward, suggests an internal, symbolic landscape corresponding to the confusion and complexity of the external, modern world.

The fact that the rose is "laid on my breast", together with the idea that his body is free to be gnawed (1.9), suggests that the poet is already or nearly dead, granting a greater significance to the associations with the crucifixion and

the use of the traditional symbols of the "wolves" and the "rose". The "wolves" (l.8) seem symbolic of an untamed and destructive force, while the rose, which parallels the body and the "lines/ Written from home" (ll.10 and 11) in its reality, weaves connotations of love, beauty and perfection around the poet. The meaning of the natural image of the rose as a "lament for the brevity of joy; moreover emblem of Elysium, the hereafter" ²⁸ reinforces the notion that the poet is already or nearly dead. The traditional connotations of the "wolves" and the "rose" are mixed with personal significance, and the images re-worked to express the desolation of the poet.

The significance of these certainties is less certain than the significance of their being chosen. If one accepts the assertion that "Only my body is real" (l.8) then presumably the "wolves" who are "free to oppress and gnaw" are unreal, and yet they are capable of oppressing and gnawing that singularly real body. The choice of the word "real" is significant in its absolute and certain quality in the context of a poet striving to establish value.

The use of the word "real" demonstrates a selection of values, including the sensual body (l.8), "this rose" (l.9) and poetry (l.10), which are felt to secure the self within and against the confusion of the modern world. However, the

use of "real" (ll.8 and 11) also presents a series of contradictions. If one accepts that "Only my body is real" (l.8) one might assume that the poet's mind is unreal. The rose which "My friend laid on my breast" (l.10) is presented as real whereas that friend is not. Moreover, if one accepts that "Only my body is real", then surely "this rose" and "these few lines" (ll.9 and 10) which are presented as real cannot be so. These contradictions reflect the tension between the poet's adoption of certain values and his inability to act on them.

The "us" of the first stanza is passive and abused, barely concerned by being crucified (ll.5-7), whereas the I of the second stanza is assertive yet impotent. The questions of the languid "us" are answered by a bold avowal of values rooted in selfhood (l.8). In "Rolled over on Europe: the sharp dew frozen to stars" reality is not opposed by unreality, as it is in "At the end of two months' holiday", but instead asserts one choice over another. However, the repetition of "Only" (ll.8 and 9) presents the reality of the sensual body (l.8), "this rose" (l.9) and poetry (l.10) as mutually exclusive. Although the poem binds these certainties together in the fact of their choice, it does not attempt to resolve the problem of their exclusivity. These certainties are incongruous if not contradictory, and have an absolute air which proves illusory upon closer

examination. The use of the word "real" reveals a need for the values chosen rather than a resolution of the conflict between the self and the world.

The use of traditional symbols and allusions to Christianity brings to mind an external value system which might answer the poet's need to comprehend the modern world.

Spender feels the need not only for values but also for action, because of the pressure of the modern world not only upon himself but upon his contemporaries. Furthermore, Spender's vision of heroism revolved around his need to challenge and redeem the modern world. In "What I Expected", a poem which is a central statement of his vision of heroism, he explores the expectations and flaws of that vision, which reflects the disillusionment of growing up.

The first stanza presents a vigorous but retrospective vision of what Spender expected if he were to join the good and brave, who seem to be either fighters or climbers:

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.

(ll.1-8).

Hynes perceptively observes that the verbs "fighting" and

"climbing" (ll.2 and 4) do not have objects, and the poem thus "offers no causes, only the value of individual, effortful struggle" ²⁹. Moreover, the phrase "Long struggles with men" (l.3) refers both to struggling together with men and against men. Spender's vision of the heroic is concerned with straining to become a hero rather than straining to achieve a social ideal.

The bold and strong expectations of the first stanza counterpoint the cruel actuality and certain failure asserted in the second:

What I 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
Like smoke before wind
Corrupt, unsubstantial.

(ll.9-16).

The fatiguing verbs in the second stanza, as opposed to the vigorous verbs in the first, all have objects. Spender's vision of failure is precise and comprehensive, outlining the effects upon "the will", upon vitality, upon "touch", and upon the "body and soul".

The third stanza draws images of intense but public suffering into the personal vision, casting Spender's failure to be heroic in general as well as individual terms:

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-
These, I could not foresee.

(11.17-24).

The misshapen limbs of the cripples, who might have been the good and brave of the first stanza, challenge the value of the "struggling" (l.3) which the poet initially approved and admired. The lustre of Spender's inner heroism, or rather his hope for heroism, is tarnished by the realisation that idealism is misplaced and inadequate in the face of intense suffering. The horror of the external world forces a rude re-evaluation of inner values; also fashioning his hopes of heroism into shapes like "questions/ In their odd twist" (11.19 and 20). The fourth and final stanza does not resolve the sense of failure, but presents the poet's need to believe in something secure and certain:

For I had expected always
Some brightness to hold in trust,
Some final innocence
To save from dust;
That, hanging solid,
Would dangle through all
Like the created poem
Or the dazzling crystal.

(11.25-32).

The poem devolves justification to the reader in its demand that the poet's faith is "Like the created poem" (l.31). Spender demonstrates courage in confronting and acknowledging his weaknesses, and the poem's closing

implication is that the poet partakes of heroism not by "fighting" and "climbing" (ll.2 and 4) but through this "created poem" (l.31). The poem proves the poet courageous because it exposes him to criticism and unkindness. One is reminded that the title of the poem "I think continually of those who were truly great", which Spender never changed and which Hynes links to "What I expected", has been mocked with the criticism that no-one could possibly think continually about anything. However, the poem does not convey absurdity but powerful conviction: the poet's stance is not mocking but expresses deep, even heroic, personal significance. "What I expected" not only expresses Spender's hopes for heroism but heroically acknowledges his weaknesses. Moreover, Spender's desire to act finds a form of realisation in the poem, as Thurley has observed:

"What I expected"...embodies the message it enunciates; in pursuing the structural argument, one experiences the poem. The poem here functions as an act rather than as a statement. ³⁰

Although Hynes is correct in noting that the poem does not answer or address the questions raised in the first stanza "fighting whom? climbing what?" ³¹, it does outline the aims of such effort. If Spender could become the hero he yearned to be then he could aspire to be "Like the created poem/ Or the dazzling crystal" (ll.31-32). The writing of the poem, with its commensurate straining to express content within a form or to fuse the two, has become a substitute heroism. The poem, which opens with the questioning of actual

experience, ends with an affirmation of art; a shift which echoes the change from the "I" as a possible agent of change to a detached observer.

The need for action, which has been noted in connection with "Alas, when he laughs it is not he" and "An 'I' can never be great man", is here resolved into what Hynes would call the self-conscious performance of the symbolic act of writing the poem ³². In expressing his desires the poet approaches their realisation.

"I think continually of those who were truly great" is Spender's most eloquent expression of his concept of the hero, of an ideal which in poems such as "Never being, but always at the edge of Being" and "An 'I' can never be great man" he aspires to attain.

The conjunction of the words "truly" and "great" asserts the greater reality of being a hero; as opposed to being a spectator. The poem explores Spender's worship of the heroic, and the assertion that "I think continually" (l.1) declares his relationship with this greater reality. Indeed, the fanaticism of Spender's worship might be considered heroic.

Spender, as the concerns of his other poems make apparent,

does not "think continually of those who were truly great" (1.1), although one suspects that there is a corner of his mind which does. It indicates the degree to which we are disarmed by Spender's openness and vigorous rhythms that we accept his assertion of a hero-obsession, as C. Day Lewis has perceptively observed:

...it is one of Spender's greatest merits that, when he tells us that he thinks continually of those who were truly great, we are in no doubt that he does so. ³³

Spender, in the same way that he summarized the four characters of "The Dust Made Flesh" (Twenty Poems) in brief studies of imagery, here seems to be attempting to sum up his own personality in the single phrase of the first line. However, the image of self in "I think continually of those who were truly great" is ironized by the overstatement of its portrayal; the line indicates how Spender would like to perceive his self while also indicating the distance between the wish and the actuality. Although not directly aspiring to heroism, the assertion that "I think continually of those who were truly great" demonstrates a desire to be straightforward, unconditional and unified. However, rather than detracting from the poem, this overstatement conveys a wistfulness and naivete. Moreover, the combination of naivete and self-awareness creates a sense of sophistication rather than incoherence, making Spender's innocence more precious.

The poem, although retrospective and personal, emphasises the nature of heroism rather than the poet's failure to be a hero, which was the case in "What I expected". Furthermore, as Hynes has accurately observed, one could not call the poem "polemical or political or topical", and moreover it "neither urges a cause or proposes a course of action, or links its subject explicitly to immediate history" ³⁴. The exclusion of explicitly contemporary and public concerns from the poem and the universality of the language, notably the use of terms like "Spirit" (l.6) and "essential delight" (l.10), establish the interiority of the poem:

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 in
song.

(ll.2-6).

The phrase "soul's history" (l.2) not only smacks of the mystical but also intimates a Romantic sensibility. Moreover, the word "history" is given a personal rather than, as might be expected, a political significance. Indeed, the sensuousness, frankness and mysticism of "I think continually of those who were truly great" bear witness to the influence of D.H.Lawrence, which Spender both acknowledges and says he cannot adequately explain:

No attempt to resume Lawrence's ideas can explain the influence he had over me. This was an immediate reaction when I read a page of his descriptive prose, or one of his poems...Lawrence could not have cerebralized the sea in the manner of Joyce calling it

the "snot-green sea". Nor could he, like Eliot, have described the evening sky as "a patient etherised upon a table". 35

The influence of Lawrence also informs the spirituality with which Spender encases "the truly great" (l.1), and the balance struck between their spirituality and physicality. The second stanza generalizes the physical details of the first stanza into potent natural, universal forces which demand memory and love:

What is precious is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless
springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.
(11.9-13).

The end of the second stanza moots the possibility of the suppression of such forces by modern living:

Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.
(11.14-15).

The slow insistent rhythm and matching of "smother" and "spirit" at the line ends conveys a dual sense of the strangling traffic and the stubborn resistance of the "flowering of the spirit" (l.15). The emotional force of the images is rooted in their representative quality; traffic is a component of the industrial world and the word "flowering" associates "the spirit" (l.15) with Nature. Nevertheless, the poet is thinking of "those who were truly great" (l.1) rather than those who are or will be truly great, implying thereby that "the flowering of the spirit" (l.15) has been

smothered. Indeed, the truly great now only exist as memories:

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields
See how these names are feted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
(11.16-19).

The closing lines, which echo the fall of Icarus and the vapour trail of an aeroplane, confirm the poet's view that the "truly great" (l.1) are both glorious and truly gone:

Born of the sun they travelled a short while toward the
sun,
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.
(11.22-23).

The "truly great" (l.1) travelled briefly toward their goal, which gave them being and purpose, and were consumed by the fire and heat of the passage. The poignancy of their departure deepens and validates Spender's initial position of admiration.

Having accepted that he is not a hero, a position outlined in "What I expected" and "I think continually of those who were truly great", Spender begins in poems such as "Without that once clear aim, the path of flight" and "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages" to define for himself a role as a failed and forlorn saviour defending the interior world of the self against the intrusive pressures of the modern world, defining for his self a "martyrdom serene, but horrible" ("Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages", l.27). This role is characterised by concerns with poverty,

suffering, love and death; concerns which are animated by self-contained pity and made urgent by "The Myth of the Next War" ³⁶. The role is set against what the poet cannot be: heroes, the poor and "people whose personalities were so unified that they could be summed up in a single phrase or image" ³⁷. Spender's failure to unite the inner and outer, which he more typically explores in terms of the Romantic opposition of the country and the city, is understood as a question of choice rather than balance, and becomes a main principle of his self and a central assumption of his poetry.

The first five lines of the sonnet "Without that once clear aim, the path of flight" introduce and explore the oppression of the poet by "this century" (l.3) and the associated suppression of truth:

I suffer like history in Dark Ages, where
Truth lies in dungeons, from which drifts no whisper:
(ll.4-5).

Although the mention of "We" (l.6) generalizes the situation the poem firmly focuses on the concerns and suffering of the "I". Mention of "tortures and war, in dark and smoky rumour" (l.7) suggests, given that this poem immediately succeeds "Van der Lubbe" in Poems (1934), a contemporary scenario.

The idea of the external world invading and oppressing the inner world of the individual echoes not only "Van der

Lubbe" but poems such as "Alas, when he laughs it is not he". The closing lines encompass these concerns in a typically Romantic city-country opposition made intense and forceful by the poet's direct involvement:

Road drills explore new areas of pain,
Nor summer nor light may reach down here to play.
The city builds its horrors in my brain,
This writing is my only wings away.
(ll.11-14).

But poetry is here only escape, rather than the creative, transforming action one might hope for. The closing lines proclaim the necessity of retreat from the external world into that of the imagination. In "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages", one of the most interesting and significant poems in Poems (1934), Spender obliquely develops this theme, positing an image of self against those whom he berates.

The modern world is indicted for its suppression of natural forces; especially the human capacity for "Physical delight" (l.4) which is likened to a bird. Our reading of Spender's concern with "Physical delight" (l.4) is heightened by the sensuousness and eloquence of such poems as "For T.A.R.H." and "oh young men, oh young comrades" which are placed nearby in the sequence. The diction of the opening stanza, "cages", "constricted", and "hedged and lined", forcefully conveys the suppression of the natural:

Passing, men are sorry for the birds in cages
And for constricted nature hedged and lined,
But what do they say to your pleasant bird
Physical delight, since years tamed?
(ll.1-4).

The poem moves swiftly from "men" (l.1) to "you" (l.6), the later term focusing the indictment on both a generalised figure and at the reader. However, the poet exempts himself from the accusations he makes, and his desire to judge and condemn casts doubt upon the purity of his motives. Furthermore, his vivid description of the suppression of "Physical delight" (l.4) and the horror of "Procrastination of nature" (l.16) suggests an impassive rather than a sympathetic understanding. The "you" (l.6) appears as Spender's alter-ego, a self whom Spender needs to judge and understand in order to transcend.

The "you" of "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages" is a generalized and common figure, in contrast to the mythic but tragic "he", the "aristocrat", of "Discovered in Mid-ocean". In the same way that the "he" of "Discovered in Mid-ocean" is an antidote to Spender's natural cowardice, so the "you" of "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages" is an antidote to Spender's perception of himself as "acted upon by experiences" but not able to "dominate his circumstances" ³⁸. Moreover, in positing alter-egos Spender defines a sense of self as neither heroic nor general, neither tragic nor common, but as something withdrawn from

such extremes and yet stretched between them. Spender's sense of self, perhaps more clearly here than elsewhere, is defined not in terms of what it is but in terms of what it is not.

The sensuousness that characterises, even defines, "your pleasant bird" (1.3) is suppressed beneath layers and years of neglect, negligence and deliberate action. In addition, the repression of the "Physical delight" (1.4) of the individual, who hides his natural beauty beneath "clothes" (1.6), runs parallels to the oppression of Nature by the spread of the urban:

Behind centuries, behind the continual hill,
The wood you felled, your clothes, the slums you built,
(11.5-6).

However, as in "For T.A.R.H." and "That girl who laughed and had black eyes", the present situation is incisively undercut by memories inspired by love, by images of a former state of being:

Behind centuries, behind the continual hill,
The wood you felled, your clothes, the slums you built,
Only love knows where that bird dips his head,
Only the sun, soaked in memory, flashes on his neck.
(11.5-8).

Although "Physical delight" (1.4) is now "tamed" (1.4) rather than dead, the sad transformation of the bird caused by constriction and caging inspires the poet to desire its death:

Dance, will you? And sing? Yet pray he is dead,
Invent politics to hide him and law suits and suits:
(11.9-10).

The poet's heartfelt wish not only demands the reader's sympathy but appears to be fulfilled:

Now he's impossible and quite destroyed like grass
Where the fields are covered with your more living
houses.

(11.11-12).

The overstatement of the fact of fulfillment, with the word "impossible" prefacing the conjunction of "quite" and "destroyed", undermines its apparent certainty and hints at the faint, but fundamental, possibility of healing.

The caging of "Physical delight" (1.4) has robbed the "you" of happiness (1.13) and left only hypocrisy. The "you", without the root of sensuousness, loses his individual identity and become a brittle social creature, a mirror of the world he inhabits. The poet knows the world of the "you" (11.14-15), and his superb evocation of the hypocrisy of the "you" perhaps suggests that he was once as the "you":

I never hear you are happy, but I wonder
Whether it was at a shiny bazaar,
At a brittle dance or a party, that you could create
Procrastination of nature, for your talk and laughter
are
Only a glass that flashes back the light
And covers only hate.

(11.13-18).

The love which informs the memories is distinct from the hate which animates the "Procrastination of nature" (1.16), a phrase which graphically conjures a sense of vain yet clever chatter. The word "Procrastination" (1.16) signifies delay and dilatoriness ³⁰, and in conjunction with the word

"nature" (l.16) indicates an avoidance of the significance of Nature. The "you", like the "shiny bazaar" and "brittle dance" (ll.14 and 15), is a glamorous version of something more vital and sincere. The "you" appears an alternative version of the "I".

The indictment turns into a chance of salvation in the fifth stanza, in which the poet says of the bird that he has "signed his release" (l.19). The sterility of the modern life of the "you" clashes with the Lawrentian eloquence of the stirring of "Physical delight" (l.4), which looks back to the idyllic state which existed prior to the modern:

Will you not forgive him? I have signed his release
Alarming and gentle like the blood's throb,
And his fountain of joy wakes the solitary stag
From his cherished sleep.

(ll.19-22).

The use of the word "you" in the question "Will you not forgive him?" (l.19), like the mocking calls to dance and sing (l.9), refers both to the "you" and to "your pleasant bird" (ll.3 and 6). This ambiguity links the modern man to his sensuous being and hints at the possibility of reconciliation. The poem revitalizes the possibility of healing. The sixth stanza balances the generosity of this potential release with the need for the "you" to exercise forgiveness and acceptance in order also to be forgiven and accepted. The allusions to "the angel" and "martyrdom" (ll. 26 and 27) tentatively reinforce the Christianity of this

principle:

But if you still bar your pretty bird, remember
Revenge and despair are prisoned in your bowels.
Life cannot pardon the ideal without scruple,
The enemy of flesh, the angel and destroyer,
Creator of a martyrdom serene, but horrible.
(11.23-27).

The generalisation of the closing lines broadens the indictment against the "you" (1.6) into a general statement about the nature of existence. The consequence of the continuing division between inner and outer worlds is to live in a state of "martyrdom serene, but horrible" (1.27) which, although it might^{be} an "ideal" (1.25), is nevertheless a violation of the natural balance which the poet praises.

The phrase "the ideal" (1.25) appears to be the object of the closing lines, suggesting an opposition between "Life" and "the ideal" (1.25). While it would appear absurd to identify "Life" (1.25) with the "enemy of flesh" (1.26), the phrase "angel and destroyer" (1.26) could refer either to "the ideal" or to "the ideal" and "Life" (1.25), while the lack of a preposition in the last line reinforces the sense that the "Creator of a martyrdom serene, but horrible" (1.27) might be either or both. Moreover, the last line, which stands out sharply as a lyrical climax, lacks definition. Martyrdom, which is both feared and desired, might be the effect of the inflexibility of either "the ideal" or "Life" (1.25), might be created either by choosing or by failing to choose between them. In this way the

"Creator of a martyrdom serene, but horrible" (l.27) becomes the "I" who stands at the point of ambiguity and decision.

In refusing to come to a formal conclusion "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages" powerfully outlines the dangers of indecision yet proposes an "I" who though judgemental has yet to choose. "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages", like "He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye" and "I think continually of those who were truly great", posits an intensely significant image of self.

The concept of a "martyrdom serene, but horrible" (l.27) looks forward to the image of self posited in poems such as "Shapes of death haunt life" and the profoundly introspective poems of The Still Centre, which tend to reject the outer in favour of the inner.

This tendency is continued in "The Prisoners" in which the poet withdraws from the external world into self-reflection; focusing on the need to be saved rather than the ability to save oneself. In "The Prisoners" Spender also continues his exploration of the gap between internal and external worlds. The poem presents existences characterised by isolation, sterility, despair and darkness, and explores the poet's reactions to their plight. The repetition of the word "far" (l.1) confirms the extremity of the situation of "The

Prisoners" (title) and helps establish the poet's initial detachment from the scene he presents:

Far far the least of all, in want,
Are these,
The prisoners
Turned massive with their vaults and dark with dark.
(11.1-4).

The abstracted poet observes the isolated figures who are only dimly aware of an external world or the world they occupy. The phrase "Turned massive with their vaults" (1.4) suggests the vast empty chambers of a church or cathedral which, like the prisoners, are waiting to be filled with meaning and purpose. The poem's powerful and immediate appeal rests in its lack of conspicuous judgements and its direct and unadorned description:

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.
(11.5-8).

The combination of short and long lines establishes a slow but dramatic verse movement which forcefully stresses particular words such as "prisoners" (1.3) and "feel" (1.7). Repetition also emphasises some words, notably "dark" (11.4 and 22), "pity" (11.13 and 33), "strike" (11.17 and 25) and "anger" (11.21, 24 and 31). These bold emphases create a tautness, a gaunt sparseness, which is provocatively interrupted by occasional moments of richer language, such as "visionary liquid door" (1.20) and "the black silk of the big-bellied gown" (1.28). The tension between these two

types of language reflects the acute detachment yet sympathy of the poet, the restrained pity inspired by the situation:

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

(11.13-16).

The repetition of "stone" (11.14 and 16), each time falling heavily at the end of the line, reinforces the impression of the deadness of the prisoner's lives, as juxtaposed to the salvation envisioned by the poet. The images of the "breeze" and "the summer leaves" (11.13 and 15) soften the poet's potential anger into a tender sympathy, and the stone and darkness of the prisoners reinforces the isolation of the poet. The pity inspired in the poet does not change the situation, does not become effective action:

Then, when I raise my hands to strike,
It is too late,
There are no chains that fall
Nor visionary liquid door
Melted with anger.

(11.17-21).

In the light of this inability, this failure, in the sixth stanza the poet asks two questions, the even, ponderous monosyllables of the first starkly juxtaposed to the vigour and pace of the second:

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?

(11.22-25).

The seventh stanza answers the questions, and responds to

their controlled indignation and self-reproach with the possibility of action:

If I could follow them from room to womb
To plant some hope
Through the black silk of the big-bellied gown
There would I win.

(11.26-29).

But this possibility is surrendered because "It is too late for anger" (1.31). The final line records resignation, the acknowledgement of personal failure, such that all remains is the isolated and sensitive poet recording himself:

Nothing prevails
But pity for the grief they cannot feel.
(11.32-33).

"The Prisoners" is reminiscent of, and provides an interesting contrast to, one of the closing sections of Eliot's The Waste Land:

We think of the key, each in his prison
Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison
Only at nightfall,

(11.413-415).

The lines from Eliot place the awareness of the prison and the ability to act firmly within the scope of each prisoner (the passage does not say whether the key has locked or unlocked the door), whereas "The Prisoners" postulates prisoners who need to be saved rather than being able to save themselves. Eliot is expressing a general condition, whereas Spender is combining a perceived need for action with a vision of himself as a forlorn and failed saviour. This vision is a re-statement of a "martyrdom serene, but horrible" (1.27, "Passing men are sorry for the birds in

cages"), of the choice between rather than balancing of inner and outer worlds.

"Shapes of death haunt life" links the poet's exploration of self with a meditation upon love and death which, the title implies, penetrate every moment and aspect of being:

Shapes of death haunt life,
Neurosis eclipsing each in special shadow:
Unrequited love not solving
The need to become another's body
Wears black invisibility:

(11.1-5).

The short lines reinforce the rigid certainty offered by the combination of blunt statements and precise language. This certainty is inspired yet qualified by an introspection rooted in a need to love. The poet desires a love which implies the surpassing or dismissal of self, a need which would be fulfilled after the fashion of Keats's Negative Capability in becoming another's body (1.4). However, love is inhibited by the "greed for property" and the "speedlines of dictators" (11.6 and 8): pressures from the public world which invade and divide the inner life, creating anxiety and obsessional fears which obscure one another (1.2) and oppress the self.

The "best of us" (1.10), whose messianic "adored desire" to "die for the world" (1.11) parallels the poet's desire for love, are reminiscent of the good and brave of "What I expected" and, like the good and brave, seem to be worn down

and denied by the demands of the world in response to their urge to heroism.

The second stanza explores the idea of love in the context of life and death, insistently presenting the perversions and distortions wrought in the initial condition of love by ambition:

Ambition is my death. That flat thin flame
I feed, that plants my shadow. This prevents love
And offers love of being loved or loving.
The humorous self-forgetful drunkenness
It hates, demands the pyramids
Be built.

(11.12-17).

The insistent rhythm emphasises the abruptness of such phrases as "I feed" (1.13), "It hates" (1.16) and "Be built" (1.17). This bluntness of statement gives weight to the opposition yet interweaving of alternatives of love and hate, ambition and self-forgetfulness, existence and death. Love is subject to convolutions; "love of being loved or loving" (1.14) is presented as an alternative to love, while the "need to become another's body" (1.4) parallels "humorous self-forgetful drunkenness" (1.15). The poet needs to pick his way through this confusion to come to certainty. The acceptance of ambition, of striving to achieve either public acclaim or "Unrequited love", transforms the giving subject into an accepting object (1.14). The demand to build pyramids, whose oppression parallels that of "a skyscraper over the breathing ribs" (1.7) and death's "towers" (1.19),

is granted urgency through its association with the inevitability of death and the distortion of love, and with the impossibility of preventing either:

demands the pyramids
Be built. Who can prevent
His death's industry, which when he sleeps
Throws up its towers? And conceals in slackness
The dreams of revolution, the birth of death?
(11.16-20).

The questions are rhetorical and pointed: the poet is resigned to a fate which he does not accept, a tension which informs his desire yet inability to "die for the world" (1.11). If such forces as the "greed for property" (1.6) and the "speedlines of dictators" (1.8) are inevitable, as the second stanza intimates, then his self-sacrifice can only be symbolic. The poet's desire to act heroically is partially answered, as in "What I expected", by the self-conscious, symbolic act of writing the poem. The poem asserts and forgives the observing, sympathetic detachment of the poet. The statement of the desire for heroism, together with the acknowledgement of its impossibility, asserts the heroism of the desire while absolving it of the need for fulfilment.

The image of the pyramids in line sixteen recalls one of Spender's earlier poems:

And then perhaps, in his vile pyramid
The modern serf left hid
Love in a grate;
(Epistle (Near the Canal), 11.61-63).

In both poems the image of the pyramid links an oppressive

past with an oppressive present. The pyramid serves as a general symbol of man's imprisonment, exists both within and without the self, is both substantial and "fancied" (l.24). The notion of imprisonment also informs the concealing of "dreams of revolution" in slackness (l.20) and death in sleep (ll.17-19), and the cloaking of the desire for heroic action in the fact of resigned observation. The effortless elegance and smooth rhythm of the opening lines of the third stanza confirm the comfort that the singular determination of the swallows grants the poet in his plight:

Also the swallows by autumnal instinct
Comfort us with their effortless exhaustion
In great unguided flight to their complete South.
(ll.21-23).

The reference to "the swallows by autumnal instinct" (l.21) echoes the last line of Keats's "To Autumn", a reference which illustrates Spender's sympathetic use of Romantic sources, here smoothly worked in with an acute awareness of the modern world.

The word "Also" (l.21) suggests that the poet has resigned himself to his situation, although this resignation does not mean passivity. His observations of the swallows comfort him. The easy transition from idea to idea, the swallows coming to rest merging into the understanding of their flight, leads towards a seemingly inevitable conclusion:

There on my fancied pyramids they lodge
But for delight, their whole compulsion.
Not teaching me to love, but soothing my eyes;
Not saving me from death, but saving me for speech.
(11.24-27).

The distortion of love through the pressures of the public world and ambition which the poem initially presented is not challenged but channelled; and the poem itself becomes the evidence of this new direction. The poet's resignation thereby obliquely becomes the primary impulse behind, and justification of, the poem:

Not teaching me to love, but soothing my eyes;
Not saving me from death, but saving me for speech.
(11.26-27).

The sibilants soften the formality of "Not" and "but" (11.26-27) and the firm statement of a new purpose. The closing lines do not so much propose the statement or fulfilment of desire as faithfulness to the pattern of disillusionment.

The first stanza proposed that "Shapes of death haunt life" (1.1) and that love, either unrequited or self-sacrificing (11.3 and 11), cannot realise its own ambitions. The closing lines answers love with rest and death with speech. The poet no longer wishes "to die for the world" (1.11), but has resolved to observe and record. The resignation of the self to the pressure of the external world is tempered by the passive transformation of that relationship into poetry, and its filtering through an image of self seen in terms of, to

use the closing line of "Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages", a "martyrdom serene, but horrible".

In the later poems in Poems (1933 and 1934), such as "Not palaces, an era's crown" and "New Year", Spender's concept of a personal role is tempered by both a broader awareness of crisis in his society and a vision of revolution.

Although concerned with the broader social and political sphere, these later "political" poems obliquely reflect upon a self recording a personal perspective; they help to define the area of Spender's confusion and conflict of values. In such poems as "The Funeral" Spender explores the significance of individual effort within the general crisis of his time (a theme, too, of poems such as "Van der Lubbe" and "In 1929"). Allen Tate has perceptively observed that "Within the general terms of the intellectual crisis of the age, Spender has defined a personal crisis of his own" ⁴⁰. Spender's personal crisis involves the exploration and selection of values, from the floundering for certainty in such poems as "oh young men, oh young comrades" to the conflict of values informing such poems as "The Funeral". Spender's poems are not statements of, but meditations on, value.

In my discussion of these "political" poems I concentrate on those unified by a central image or central situation before

looking at those which are more general calls for revolution or visions of a revolutionary state.

"The Express", an elegant and eloquent poem, depicts an express train steaming up, leaving the station and travelling through the open country beyond the town. The poem's vision is not explicitly stated but is embodied in the image of the express, which focuses and helps to unite the poem; this vision is rooted in a "belief in the inevitable approaching salvation of society through the use of machinery" ⁴¹.

The steaming up of the express, seen as "the first powerful plain manifesto" (l.1) and the "black statement of pistons" (l.2), associates the express with revolutionary politics. The landscape the train initially travels through is also viewed in terms of words, "the heavy page/ Of death, printed by gravestones in the cemetery" (ll.6-7), an association which neatly juxtaposes the drab urban landscape with the vitality of the express. Moreover, the lifeless townscape (ll.5-7) contrasts with the "metal landscapes" (l.17) through which the express travels when she "plunges new eras of wild happiness" (l.18).

The express, referred to as "she" (the first instance occurs in line three), eases out of the station into "the open

country" (1.8):

Where, gathering speed, she acquires mystery,
The luminous self-possession of ships on ocean.
It is now she begins to sing-at first quite low
Then loud, and at last with a jazzy madness-
The song of her whistle screaming at curves,
Of deafening tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts.
(11.9-14).

The smooth transition from image to image, together with the insistent forward movement of the rhythm and time-sequence, enhances the impression of acceleration. The rhythm gracefully follows the modulation from idea to idea. The similarity of the sound of the phrases "self-possession" and "ships on ocean" (1.10) augments their regular pace, which gives way to the tumult and complex rhythms of her "jazzy madness" (1.12) and the staccato of "deafening tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts" (1.14). The rhythm mimics the acceleration and captures the growing power and excitement of the express, which becomes no longer just a train but also the symbol and experience of

new eras of wild happiness
Where speed throws up strange shapes, broad curves
And parallels clean like the steel of guns.
(11.18-20).

She finally moves out of our vision, "further than Edinburgh or Rome" (1.21), reaching night and becoming "a low streamline brightness/ Of phosphorus" (11.23-24), an image which graphically compounds suggestions of moonlit waves, shooting stars and fast, precise machines. The closing lines fix and enclose what the express has become:

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.
(11.25-27).

The express aspires to be celestial, and the allusion to fire associates it with the spiritual. The asserted superiority of the mechanical over the natural (11.26-27) seems overstated but fails to ironize the poet's enthusiasm. The glowing description of the express ought to be ridiculous; a train bears a poor resemblance to "a comet through flame" (1.25). However, we grant Spender credibility by virtue of his considerable rhythmic skill, forceful imagery and his openness. Spender overcomes the potential absurdity of his exposure largely by the impetus of his search for value.

The express is seen as both radically different from and more beautiful than typically picturesque examples of natural beauty. The express juxtaposes rich natural imagery and scientific and technical terms. The "black statement of pistons" (1.2) immediately precedes "gliding like a queen" (1.3), the abandon of "new eras of wild happiness" (1.18) creates shapes which are "clean like the steel of guns" (1.20), and the "comet through flame" (1.25) is framed by "bird song" and "bough/ Breaking with honey buds" (11.26-27). The contrasting threads of imagery, united in the image of the express, do not so much counterpose "a symbol of modern industrial power [with]...a historically

typical subject" ⁴², as Marcus suggests, as combine a love of Nature with a faith in the future good of science.

"The Landscape near an Aerodrome" continues the interweaving and uniting of images and ideas concerned with Nature and science, developing a tension rather than a balance between opposing ideas. The poem opens with a finely developed comparison of an aeroplane with a moth; the slow movement of the verse miming the quiet descent of the plane:

More beautiful and soft than any moth
With burring furred antennae feeling its huge path
Through dusk,

(11.1-3).

The plane is fragile, even dream-like, in its flight path over a town:

Gently, broadly she falls
Scarcely disturbing charted currents of air.

(11.5-6).

The image of the "air-liner" (1.3) suggests, as Cox and Dyson have noted, ideas of the conquest of the air and the advance of science, and recalls the dreams of pre-1914 humanist writers, such as H.G.Wells, who thought men were about to create better and better worlds ⁴³. Furthermore, one notes the personal significance of the symbol of an aeroplane, which is an object of beauty, freedom and progress, in such poems as "He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye" and "Without that once clear aim, the path of flight".

The second stanza of "The Landscape near an Aerodrome" looks inside the plane at the travellers who are "Lulled by descent" (l.7), and who watch with a clinical detachment, their "eyes trained by watching", the approaching town. The town initially appears as "suburbs" (l.4), and then as "outskirts" where "industry shows a fraying edge" (ll.10 and 11), and in the third stanza as a surreal, even nightmare, landscape whose ugliness and malevolence vividly clash with the fine and free plane. The descent of the plane, to pursue the opening image, is like a moth being drawn inexorably towards a light-bulb. The plane, and its passengers, are being drawn into "the landscape of hysteria" (l.28) after having travelled:

across sea
And across feminine land indulging its easy limbs
In miles of softness,

(ll.7-9).

The travellers remain emotionally detached; they merely "observe" (l.14) and "remark" (l.20), even though the landscape they observe is one of "hysteria" (l.28). The images used to depict the townscape are highly evocative and emotive, almost shocking us with their horror:

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.

(ll.15-18).

The general impression of a "strange air" (l.17) is ironically vitalised by the vivid visual image of "women's

faces/ Shattered by grief" (ll.17-18). The image tentatively suggests a parallel between a woman's face covered by fingers and "squat buildings" (l.16) behind trees, the abstruseness of the comparison adding to the sense of disquiet. The image demands acceptance not judgement, and momentarily suspends the reader's confident expectations. This dislocation, in association with the abrupt and startling shift from the solemn but straightforward image of "chimneys like lank black fingers" (l.15) to the surreal comparison between "squat buildings...behind trees" (ll.16-17) and "women's faces/ Shattered by grief" (ll.17-18), augments the horror of the images.

The fourth stanza describes "the last sweep of love" (l.22) of the plane, while the last stanza records the impressions of the travellers as they land:

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.
(ll.27-31).

The combination of rich sensuous phrases such as "feminine land" (l.4) and "landscape of hysteria" (l.28), which generalise vivid visual impressions, and unremarkable and even hackneyed phrases such as "whose cries, like wild birds" (l.24) and "the tolling bell" (l.27), reflects the poet's alternating engagement and detachment. This process is perhaps more apparent with the last line.

The last line, although airing a standard radical view of religion, is an incongruous appendage; its generalisation seems sweeping after the delicate and suggestive details of previous lines and stanzas.

The incongruity of the last line points to the ironies and tensions which pull "The Landscape near an Aerodrome" in various, contradictory directions. There is the industrial imagery but also the disturbing surreal images; there is the impersonality but also a very personal sense of horror. Furthermore, there is the tension between the desire to state and the desire to suggest: for example, the final stanza states a position while the fourth stanza suggests a host of possibilities, including the opposition between Nature and the city, instinct and reason, and spontaneity and discipline. The tender human detail of the playing boys is set against the impersonal, smothering city:

where boys play all day
Hacking dead grass: whose cries, like wild birds,
Settle upon the nearest roofs
But soon are hid under the loud city.
(11.23-26).

By contrast, the closing line pronounces on the Church and its role in history, society and the life of the individual conscience, issues neither raised nor discussed elsewhere in the poem. The answer to Walcott's question "What does religion (l.31) have to do with this poem?" ⁴⁴ is, I would

suggest, very little. The last line seems to be an attempt to impose a conclusion and a coherence on a radically fragmented vision. This fragmentation underscores the imagery, from the combination of such dissimilar objects as feminine limbs and the landscape in line eight to the various and disparate images used to describe the industrial town. This fragmentation reflects the tension between the detachment (ll.9, 12 and 14) of the passengers and the emotional involvement of the poet. The stresses do not so much create "two tones of voice to suit the worlds of the aeroplane and the town" ⁴⁵ as reveal a tension between involvement and detachment, the latter being associated with the passengers and the former with the poet and the town.

The decision to include this closing, inappropriate line provides an opportunity to compare Spender's actual poetic practice and his concept of that poetic practice as expressed in his prose; juxtaposing the image of self revealed by the poetic technique with the image of self believed to be communicated. The imposition of a standard and even clichéd conclusion contradicts Spender's assertion that his approach was "one of complete submission to experience, which I approached with no preconceived theoretic attitudes" ⁴⁶. Moreover, Spender can himself be included in his dismissal of writers who:

...allow their ideas to lead them back from terrifying solitude to the consolatory society of approximate and familiar phrases. An experience to them is the beginning of a journey where they soon arrive at already expressed ideas. 47

The tension between desired and actual images of self informs the tension between involvement and detachment in "Landscape near an Aerodrome". This fracturing of the poem's illusion does not so much provide a weak place in the poet's armour for a fatal thrust 48 as provide an instant of insight into the processes and dynamics which inform the poem.

The indictment of urban civilization in "The Landscape near an Aerodrome" broadens out in "The Funeral" into a vision of the classless, stateless country which the Communist revolution aims at and which is yearned for in "After they have tired". The poem explores attitudes to death on the occasion of a funeral in an ideal Communist country:

Death is another milestone on their way.
With laughter on their lips and with winds blowing
round them
They record simply
How this one excelled all others in making driving
belts.

(11.1-4).

The almost proverbial opening line, which appears to propose a hypothesis which the remaining poem will prove, is counterposed by the jubilant description of the second line, the cold observation of the third and the peculiar absurdity of the fourth. The poem unites these various strands in its

celebration of an ideal country which fuses Nature and science, whose citizens exhibit qualities of naturalness, spontaneity, simplicity and technical excellence (ll.2-4). The phrase "They record simply" (l.3) reflects not only on the mourning but the poet's simple recording of that mourning. The poet appears to be sympathetically following if not actually participating in the funeral.

Although the funeral is not an occasion for grief but of communal celebration, the assertion that "This is festivity" (l.5) seems forced, its abrupt exuberance curtailed by the dull and lengthy elaboration:

This is festivity, it is the time of statistics
When they record what one unit contributed:
(ll.5-6).

The tone of the bold observation that "they record what one unit contributed" (l.6) is neither cold nor impersonal, as might be expected, but light and joyful. However, this celebratory tone appears awkward and contrived. The surprising association, almost identification, of "festivity" with "statistics" (l.5) betrays a desire to see the plain as lyrical, and perhaps also vice versa. The poem's vision advises a preference for the unconventional appeal of "statistics" and "one unit" (ll.5-6) rather than "festivity" (l.5), but the laboured rhythm casts doubt upon the conviction of the vision.

Although the poem's title might suggest the burial of an individual to be paramount, as the mourners walk home (l.9) they forget the buried worker and consider the society in which they live:

They speak of the world state
With its towns like brain-centres and its pulsing
arteries.

They think how one life hums, revolves and toils,
One cog in a golden and singing hive:
Like spark from fire, its task happily achieved,
It falls away quietly.

(ll.11-16).

Such images as "towns like brain-centres" and "One cog" (ll.12 and 14) sound scientific but are presented as lyrically beautiful. The phrase "one life hums" (l.13) elegantly blends connotations of a motor and an insect, and the "world state" (l.11) is seen as fusing Nature and science. However, this new world order has no place for individualism or emotion, and although its life is clearly and solemnly presented in lyrical terms it is devoid of lyricism. The poem is animated by a strong personal conviction which the poem's vision fails to value.

Cunningham has shrewdly observed that the transformation of people into bits of machinery, worker bees or happy sparks, who are dry-eyed when their friends and loved ones die, hardly seems a strong recommendation for this ideal state ⁴⁸. However, while agreeing with such comments, I think it is important to note the richness, clarity and lyricism of

the images which describe the ideal state which, although they do not convey appealing ideas, are in themselves appealing. Indeed, Weatherhead has observed in Spender:

a deliberate practice of countering the lyrical lines that handle the conventional poetic subjects with images that are not conventionally beautiful...which the poem's rhetoric instructs the reader to prefer to conventional beauties. 50

Although the poem's vision instructs a preference it fails to convince. The poem's lyricism carries our sympathy, and although the poem betrays the desire to see the plain as lyrical, the plain is not treated lyrically nor is the lyrical treated plainly. The poem's vision states a preference, to use terms from line five, for "the time of statistics", wishing it to be festive, whereas the poem's lyricism solely promotes "festivity" (l.5). The delicate rhythm and vivid imagery counterpoint rather than complement the dry propaganda of "the world state" (l.11).

The last stanza juxtaposes the ideal state with the world it replaces:

No more are they haunted by the individual grief
Nor the crocodile tears of European genius,
The decline of a culture
Mourned by scholars who dream of the ghosts of Greek
boys.

(ll.17-20).

The people of the ideal state look forward to the future rather than to an ancient and irrelevant past; they celebrate what the deceased did in his life rather than pretending to pity his death, and they act and speak rather

than fantasize over "the ghosts of Greek boys" (l.20). However, the one who "excelled all others in making driving belts" (l.4) seems rather absurd and comical beside the "scholars who dream of the ghosts of Greek boys" (l.20), especially considering the melodious sound of that last line. As Jacobs has pointed out, the language of the poem undercuts its stated intention ⁵¹; an irony which reveals the struggles of the poet to reconcile contrary demands. In "The Funeral" we see Spender sharply defined by such ironies; a conflict of values informs the choice of words. Furthermore, Jacobs, who has called the poem "bathetic", has indicated a possible source for the tension between the poem's stated intention and the beautiful last line:

The beauty of the Greek image-its long vowels, the sweetness and solemnity of its sounds-engenders nobility and loveliness in the past, in the very era Spender is terming inferior through the rest of the poem...Enamoured with a lovely statement, he employs it, though its gravity and melody dwarf the other lines and turn to absurdity the expression Spender sought to make before it. ⁵²

Spender's revolutionary politics appear to be inimical to, are certainly undigested by, his poetic technique. The tension between the stated intention and the closing image reflects the pressure upon a resilient lyrical form to accommodate a political message. Moreover, the implied opposition of politics and poetics here indicates Spender's uncertainty about Communism, pointing to his later abandonment of Communism and devotion to insular and

introspective poetry in The Still Centre.

"In railway halls" obliquely develops the conflict of values, which is most clearly developed in "The Funeral" and "The Landscape near an Aerodrome", by the seemingly unintentional abstraction of the poet from his circumstances. In poems such as "The Express" and "The Pylons" the poet is present in the choices informing the images, whereas in "In railway halls" the pressure of the poet's immediate circumstances allows, shapes and roots his self-reflection.

"In railway halls" opens with a series of brief, sombre images which describes a situation reminiscent of "Moving through the silent crowd":

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.
(11.1-3).

The beggars, like the "blank clock" (1.3), are important because their poverty measures the relentless progress of Time (1.3). The beggars are distantly observed as a ready example of the operation of an uncaring, impersonal force which "merely drives these lives which do not live/ As tides push rotten stuff along the shore" (11.6-7); a force which "forgets and never heals, far less transcends" (1.15). Moreover, as the third stanza goes on to proclaim:

-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.
(11.8-11).

In the face of this suffering the poet feels his poetry to
be inadequate:

No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament
To make them birds upon my singing tree:
(11.4-5).

The poet's ambivalence towards the beggars counterpoints the delicate lyricism which describes his own situation. The fact that the poet mentions that he should "weave no tracery of pen-ornament" (1.4) indicates his desire to do exactly that. The transformation into poetry would confront yet violate the terms of the experience. The absorption of the experience into an internal or mythic world would be an evasion. Ironically, the disavowal of this option apparently leaves the poet powerless. His sympathy, fleetingly glimpsed in such lines as "There is no consolation, no, none" (1.8), finds no release. Furthermore, the poet declares:

Paint here no draped despairs, no saddening clouds
Where the soul rests, proclaims eternity.
But let the wrong cry out as raw as wounds
(11.12-14).

The language records what it cannot do (1.14). The ornamental language - notably the alliteration of "draped despair" and the Romantic cliché of "saddening clouds/ Where the soul rests" (11.12-13) - counterpoints the ragged poverty the language is required to confront and embody. The

poem's failure to satisfy either the poem's vision to be "as raw as wounds" or the poet's preference for "tracery of pen-ornament" (l.4) creates an awareness centred on its own inadequacy. The poet states that he ought to proclaim the wrong, but in the second stanza he emphatically declares that:

No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament
To make them birds upon my singing-tree:
(ll.4-5).

But "In railway halls" is self-evidently a fine example of the "tracery of pen-ornament" (l.4); indeed his disavowal of such "tracery of pen-ornament" (l.4) disavows itself. This contradiction points not to those who beg "In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic" (l.1) but to the poet and the poem, to the artistry employed to be ignored.

I would suggest that Spender declares "I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament" (l.4) because he wishes to record the pity and suffering from within, express these emotions as conditions of an interior state of being. However, the awareness of this wish isolates its fulfilment from the wish-maker. Spender, although deeply involved as a weaver of "tracery of pen-ornament" (l.4), is unable to either empathize or identify with those who beg though he wishes to do so. The poverty he sees only serves to abstract him more, and the object of contemplation becomes not the poverty of the beggars but the poverty of his sympathy. Self-awareness

confronts the awareness of others, and the tension between their respective claims makes the poem both the subject and object of itself.

Spender appears here to be deceived by the will to make a thing of pity, which betrays itself by the excessive use of synonyms of pity. The result is a seemingly unintentional narcissism. We watch Spender watching himself, instructing himself how he ought to react rather than recording a reaction:

Paint here no draped despairs, no saddening clouds
Where the soul rests, proclaim eternity.
(11.12-13).

However, the picture of a sensitive and self-concerned man is qualified and balanced by the poem's stated intention:

No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament
To make them birds upon my singing-tree:
Time merely drives these lives which do not live
As tides push rotten stuff along the shore.
(11.4-7).

The concern with the poor, although focussed upon the poet, nevertheless signifies the poet's desire for honest and direct engagement with the experience. The depth of Spender's personal conviction is here expressed through the evidence of his self-consciousness rather than in the re-creation of external experience.

"In railway halls" reacts against the external world and retreats into introspection, whereas in poems such as "After

The general criticism of the rich, most notably in the first stanza, and such specific charges as "the declared insanity of our rulers" (l.27) do not exhibit the "palpable and obvious love of man for man" (l.23). The poem's vision of an universal love is energized by the vivid and impassioned language, exemplified by the Blakean "Spring-like resources of the tiger" (l.28), but ironized by the poem's revolutionary politics. The poem wonders at the hiding of that love (ll.21-23) yet itself hides it. The poetry is straining beyond itself to evoke an ideal world which it can only indicate. The ideal future country is not in itself clearly visualized, nor is the means by which it might be achieved. The fourth stanza calls for the creation of such a country for the sake of future generations whose judgement, like the fact of revolution, will:

explode like a shell
Around us, dazing us with its light like snow.
(ll.31-32).

The continual use of the image of snow has a numbing effect, its initial novelty fading with its seemingly unnecessary inclusion in, even intrusion into, such lines as:

Where light equal, like the shine from snow, strikes
all faces,
(l.20).

Furthermore, the repetition of line eight in the second stanza detracts from the catalogue of strength with injustice which is being compiled. The previous association of the line with "death" (l.6) here indicates that death,

like the shine from snow" (l.15). The firm assertion that "our strength" (l.14) is like reflected light seems poor grounds for the poet's overweening confidence, while the relationship with death which the repetition provokes is unexplored. In line twenty the snow image helps portray a simple opposition between light and dark. The simplicity of the poem's vision reflects the poet's failure to address himself to the complexity of the issues, notably death, equality and revolution, which he has chosen to explore. In line twenty the snow image, injected into the line and framed between commas, provides a fatuous continuity between the third and previous stanzas. The phrasing of the image changes little until the last line, where the image is vitalized by the the penultimate line:

the admiring dawn explode like a shell
Around us, dazing us with its light like snow.
(ll.31-32).

The excessive use of images of effusive light, especially the image of snow, both projects and ironizes the poet's apparent enthusiasm for his subject. The over-use of the image of snow reveals a need for coherence, not in answer to the poem's structural demands but the poet's desire for certainty, his desire to secure his self within the external world.

The imagery and ideas of "After they have tired" fail to come to terms with the human cost of revolution in much the

same way as "In 1929". There is no talk of murders and executions although such acts are implicit in the references to death, "the declared insanity of our rulers" (1.27) and the failure of the banks and cathedrals. The issue of human suffering is smothered by the image of snow and the over-riding concept of "the palpable and obvious love of man for man" (1.23), a combination which will transform the world. The careless and innocent idealism of the poet is heightened by the expression of such sentiments.

Spender's innocence and idealism presumably lie behind his inability or refusal to directly engage the question of human suffering. Moreover, in "oh young men, oh young comrades" Spender's revolutionary vision appears to be deeply flawed.

"oh young men, oh young comrades" sets material possessions against the beauty of the young male body in the context of, presumably, a forthcoming war or revolution:

it is too late now to stay in those houses
your fathers built where they built you to build to
breed
money on money

(11.2-4).

The poet's position is here unclear; although he patently sympathises with the "young men" (1.1) he himself is not directly included in the salvation he propounds for them. The young men, who are seen as the potential builders and

heroes of the revolution, are called on to admire their beauty in the same way that the poet, mixing cool observation with homoeroticism, has admired them:

the hairs on your head the muscles extending
in ranges with their lakes across your limbs
Count your eyes as jewels and your valued sex
(11.8-10).

The contrast between "valued sex" (1.10), which is warm, human and precious, and the impersonal and calculated breeding of "money on money" (1.4) points up the conflict between personal values embodied by the "young comrades" (1.1) and the external pressures represented by the "fathers" (1.3). Moreover, physical beauty is enclosed in beautiful natural scenery (11.11-12) in contrast to the "great houses where the ghosts are prisoned" (1.13). The ghosts are grotesque and primitive preservations:

-those ladies like flies perfect in amber
those financiers like fossils of bones in coal.
(11.14-15).

The hetrosexuality of the ladies and financiers contrasts with the implied homoeroticism of the young men who are called upon to redeem the past through physical love:

Oh comrades, step beautifully from the solid wall
advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill
(11.16-17).

The lack of prepositions grants the call to "sleep with friend on hill" (1.16) a fulsome liberality distinct from the prescribed, limiting devotion required by the ghosts, the cold exactitude of "flies perfect in amber" and "fossils of bones in coal" (11.14 and 15). The tender but flaccid

call to "sleep with friend" (l.16) includes the poet only as a possible "friend" to be slept with. The poet appears as one wishing to be loved rather than loving. Moreover, the revolutionary tenor of the poem appears inconsistent with the people whom the poem addresses; who are physically beautiful young men of good social standing and homoerotic tendency. The lack of capital letters in the first five lines creates an air of uneasy understatement, a "mood of careful constriction" ⁵⁵. The occasional use of capital letters, with the words "Count" (ll.6 and 10), "It" (l.13) and "Oh" (l.16), punctuates the poem with moments of particular emphasis. The sharp urgency of this dramatic focusing is balanced by the wistfulness of the exclamations and the slow and calm rhythm. The general impression is of a dream-like disengagement which reinforces the impression that the poem is less a genuine call to action than a piece of well-intentioned fantasizing.

"oh young men, oh young comrades" weaves Spender's political faith with his homoeroticism, and includes through the glorification of the "young men" (l.1) his adoration of the figure of the hero. Spender's emotions qualify his political statement with personal sentiment, compromising his overt Communism with bourgeois sympathies. The poem is formally elegant like the "fossils of bones in coal" (l.15). It strives to be a vigorous revolutionary call but remains a

wistful personal thought: referring to and valuing "young men" before "young comrades" (1.1). Moreover, the "young men" (1.1) are poorly realized: cardboard figures which represent rather than embody the possibility of healing. The poem is less concerned with the "young men" (1.1) than their significance to the impotent poet. This disjunction between intention and realization stems from the interplay between the internal and external and, as with "The Landscape near an Aerodrome", reveals a personal dynamic which subverts the overt political message and becomes itself the mainspring of the poem.

The opening lines of "Those fireballs, those ashes" continues the exploration of the interplay between the internal and external, focusing on the parallels between them and the way in which emotions, especially love, are shaped by external forces:

Those fireballs, those ashes,
Those cloudbursts, those whirling madman hurricanes
The palatial sky breathes, make men's organic change.
(11.1-3).

The opening forceful yet abrupt snatches of violent Nature, strengthened by the repetition of "those", modulate into a restraint centred on human nature, on "men's organic change" (1.3), the words "palatial" and "breathes" (1.3) dramatically slowing down the pace. The poet's interest swiftly but easily moves from specific instances of Nature

(11.1-3) to specific kinds of men. The first kind of men are "extinguished by horror" and "leap into the thinnest air" (1.4), and thereby achieve "Inevitable delight" (1.5) by being able to run invisibly:

Around the endless earth, for ever to blow upon
The lips of their loved friends.
(11.7-8).

Nature causes direct effects in the actions of men. The language speaks in absolutes and certainties. Nature definitely "makes men's organic change" (1.3); the earth is endless (1.7); "Inevitable delight" (1.5) comes to the men as they blow upon lips "for ever" (1.7). Natural forces have extinguished them (1.4) and they have acquired a freedom which contrasts with those who:

shake in bed whilst the sorrowing elements
Twist them to shapes of dreadful grief,
Only the mirror knows their traitorous joy.
(11.9-11).

Natural elements, such as "the sorrowing elements" (1.9), have a direct causal effect upon the men. The twisting into "shapes of dreadful grief" (1.10) is strongly reminiscent of the "limbs shaped like questions" by the "wearing of Time" from "What I expected" (11.19 and 17), reinforcing the impression of external forces dominating and moulding men's lives. Those who are extinguished become as the natural element of air, while those who "shake in bed" (1.9) fear Nature and suffer "dreadful grief" (1.10).

Both analyses contrast with the heroic figure of "Him I

delight in", who "accepts joy as joy" (l.13), and the descriptions of whom echo the poems "Hearing from its cage", "Lying awake at night" and "Constant April" from Twenty

Poems:

He is richened by sorrow as a river by its bends,
He is the swallower of fire,
His bowels are molten fire; when he leaves his friend
He takes pleasure in icy solitude; he is the dandy;
He is the swimmer, waves only lift him higher,
He is the rose, sultry loveliness does not oppress him;
(ll.14-19).

The poet's besotted adoration embraces both exultation and absurdity. The description of the loved one moves from the glorious metaphor of enrichment "by sorrow as a river by its bends" (l.14), to being "the swallower of fire" (l.15) which suggests both an elemental spirit and a circus act, to the fatuous notion that "His bowels are molten fire" (l.16). Although the tone is serious and devoted, the many aspects of the loved one, which presumably inspire the depth of the poet's love, do not suggest a rounded personality but a cartoon character in a cartoon strip. The poet, however, appears oblivious to any absurdity.

Spender's thoughts then turn to himself as juxtaposed to the adored semi-divine heroic figure (l.22) and the forlorn saviour (l.23). He does not wish to be distinguished, especially in terms of being "sadder and rarer" (l.24), from "those poor" (l.24) who are presumably those initially described (ll.2-11):

I stand far from him, but I wish that these
Slanting iron hail pattern no stigmata
Showing me sadder than those poor, and rarer.
(11.22-24).

The poet overtly states that he does not wish to be different, "rarer" (1.24). However, the rich lyricism of "Slanting iron hail pattern no stigmata/ Showing me sadder" (11.23-24) outlines an attractive and romantic, even desirable, image of self which starkly contrasts with the stumbling plainness of "those poor, and rarer" (1.24) whose ranks the poet apparently wishes to join. Furthermore, this desire for anonymity is contradicted by the hope that experience will refine him:

Let the elements that fall make me of finer mixture
Not struck from sorrow, but vast joys, and learning
laughter.

(11.25-26).

His desire to be purified by external forces demonstrates a strong faith at least in the possibility of the essential goodness of the external world. Moreover, it demonstrates a belief in the possibility of his own personal salvation.

The poem does not directly address the issue of Spender's self, but through the figures which the poet either admires or condemns a self-image is outlined. In the closing lines Spender aspires to be like his beloved. The poem becomes valuable for its outline of a possible self. In his autobiography Spender explained the process which we see operating in "Those fireballs, those ashes":

I had no confidence in myself as a dominating intellectual force, but a secret and profound belief in myself as someone acted upon by experiences and capable of revealing the truth of my feelings about them. I combined immense faith in myself with immense doubt. In what I created I could be what I was. ⁵⁶

The oblique impression of external forces upon the internal self, modified through a variety of images of self, becomes the mainspring of the later "political" poems.

In "New Year" Spender transforms the traditional objects and customs of the New Year period, such as "snow" (l.6) and "the brandy pudding crowned with holly" (l.9), into emblems of a personal search to be "of finer mixture" (l.25, "Those fireballs, those ashes"). In this poem, as the title suggests, Spender outlines a series of resolutions rooted in his contemporary situation. The first request is that

all the years and years
Of future disappointment, like a snow
Chide me at one fall now.

(ll.5-7).

The repetition of "years" (l.5) clashes with the desire for "one fall now" (l.7). The poet fears sustained suffering, and hopes that at "the centre of the turning year" (l.1) all "future disappointment" (l.6) can be compressed into one intense and brief instant. The allusion to Christ's birth in "the black fiery joy/ Of the Child launched again forth" (ll.3-4) emphatically strengthens the poet's desire for personal salvation and the single intense moment. However, the image of "like a snow" (l.6) appears inappropriate to

The fourth and final stanza predicts the revolution that such determination and resolutions prepares for:

After the frozen years and streets
Our tempered will shall plough across the nations.
(11.26-27).

The image of ploughing echoes Isaiah's prophecy that "they shall beat their swords into plowshares" ⁵⁷. However, here the image conveys not the opposition but the combination of violence and peaceful cultivation. Moreover, where Isaiah calls upon the Hebrew God to "judge between the nation" ⁵⁸ Spender proposes the impersonal justice of revolution, and where Isaiah asserts that "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" ⁵⁹ the ploughing image sets the connotations of tilling above those of destructive change. In the closing lines, which compound ideas of writing and of changing railway points, Spender simply but beautifully proposes "beauty without robbery" (l.30). The general demand for revolution is infused with a personal demand that there should be no suffering:

The engine hurrying through the lucky valley
The hand that moves to guide the silent lines
Effect their beauty without robbery.
(11.29-30).

However, the poem's lyricism contradicts its strident politics. Moreover, although proposing revolution, the poem is shy about violence:

Where scythe shall curve but not upon our neck
And lovers proceed to their forgetting work,
Answering the harvests of obliteration.
(11.23-25).

The phrase "harvests of obliteration" (1.25), like the image of ploughing, combines violence and peaceful cultivation; seems to set connotations of peaceful harvesting above those of destructive change. Indeed, the frequent Biblical echoes and allusions appear to reflect a faith in what one might call "the miracle of Communist revolution". Spender seems to have grafted Christian hope onto an atheistic world view. Moreover, the unifying idea of new year's resolutions adds a commonplace touch undercuts the grandeur and force of the poem's vision because such resolutions are, although initially well-intentioned and charged with determination, often compromised or forgotten.

"From all these events" extends the range of influencing external forces noted in "New Year"; lists a series of events from "the slump", "the war" and "the Italian holiday" (11.1, 1 and 2) to "night and peace by the lamps" (1.8), asserting that "From all these events" (11.1 and 9):

Time solitary will emerge
Like a rocket bursting from mist: above the trouble
Untangled with our pasts, be sure Time will leave us.
(11.9-11).

The image of the rocket (1.10), which fuses notions of science as a progressive force and Time as an universal but impersonal force, expresses a desire for escape from the

chaos of "our pasts" (l.11). The word "solitary" (l.9) separates Time from human concerns and concern for humans. The poem refers to "we" (ll.5 and 25) and "us" (ll.11-13, 15-17, 19-20 and 23) and never to "I", nevertheless the poem is powered by strong personal emotions. Events such as "the crowds in the square at dusk" (l.4) have a general or representative quality quite distinct from the personal references and emotions involved in such lines as:

Nesting us in high rooms of a house where voices
Murmured at night from the garden, as if flowering from
water;

(ll.17-18).

The combination of personal engagement and the particularity granted by the frequent use of "the" powerfully counterpoints the universality and impersonality of Time. The second stanza proposes Time initially as a force within us and then as a power protecting us:

At first growing up in us more nakedly than our own
nature
...Singling us from the war which killed ten millions;
Carrying us elate through the happy summer fields;
...Then sending us to lean days after the years of
fulfilment;
At last dropping us into the hard, bright crater of the
dead.

(ll.12, 15-16 and 19-20).

Individual lives are here seen as shaped and controlled by Time. The poet has relinquished notions of free will and individuality in favour of being the anonymous agent of Time. However, the poet retains a sense of his own unique importance; he has been deliberately singled "from the war which killed ten millions" (l.15), guided through "all these

events" (ll.1 and 9), presumably to bear witness to his poem's singular vision. The richness of the language, notably such vivid visual images as "the hard, bright crater of the dead" (l.20), conveys the potency of the poem's vision and grants importance to the poet as the vision-maker.

Time's involvement both in the individual life and the contemporary event (which are outlined in the first two stanzas) is distinct from yet concurrent with Time seen as:

Our universal ally, but larger than our purpose, whose
flanks
Stretch to planets unknown in our brief, particular
battle,
Tomorrow Time's progress will forget us even here,
(ll.21-23).

The notion of Time as "Our universal ally" (l.21) relates to both all mankind and those, such as the poet, who have been selected and guided through "all these events" (ll.1 and 9); a double reference which confirms the importance of "we" (ll.5 and 25). Furthermore, "we" (ll.5 and 25) are important because they are aligned with though subsumed by the prerogatives of Time (ll.21-23). Having granted such distinctions, however, the poem ends by asserting the relative insignificance of "we" (ll.5 and 25) within the broader framework of "those stellar shores" (l.25):

Already, now, we are forgotten on those stellar shores.
Time's ambition, huge as space, will hang its flags
In distant worlds, and in years on this world as
distant.
(ll.25-27).

The arbitrary nature of the list of events in the first stanza reinforces this closing idea, and associates the poet with the impersonality assigned to Time. Although "we" (11.5 and 25) are forgotten, the poet remains present and significant in the fact of his vision.

In the last poem in Poems (1933 and 1934), "Not palaces, an era's crown", Spender reveals most clearly the contrary demands and conflicting values moulding his later poetry. "Not palaces, an era's crown" is the most lyrically beautiful of Spender's poems and yet the most ambiguous. The conflict of values informing Spender's early poetry, notably Nine Experiments, is superseded in the later poems by a conflict between two sets of values, associated with the internal and the external worlds, which are not united within but precariously balanced by the poet. The strain of conflicting values emphasises the importance of the role of the poet as a focal point or fulcrum.

The poet's assertion that he builds the "architectural gold-leaved flower" (1.3) of the poem from "people ordered like a single mind" (1.4) echoes the vision of the ideal, classless, stateless country in "The Funeral". However, the poem expresses an individual not a collective vision. Moreover, that the poem should be "gold-leaved" (1.3) reflects a Romantic rather than a modern sensibility.

In the first stanza of "Not palaces, an era's crown" Spender asserts, in a manner reminiscent of "oh young men, oh young comrades", that:

This only what I tell:
It is too late for rare accumulation
For family pride, for beauty's filtered dusts;
(ll.5-7).

The poem's vision instructs that it is indeed "too late for rare accumulation" or for "beauty's filtered dusts" (ll.6 and 7), but the tender lyric which informs their description indicates a certain sympathy, if not longing, for them. Beauty is rejected in favour of "energy and only energy" (l.9); nevertheless the poem strives for, and indeed here achieves, beauty. Furthermore, the notion of drinking "energy" (l.9) from an "architectural gold-leaved flower" (l.3) smacks more of Romanticism than revolution.

The poem develops from being a seeming elegy on the lyrical to a proclamation of a new electric vitality. The poem is presented not as a place where "the mind dwells, intrigues, rests" (l.2) but a vital power source from which we are invited to drink:

Drink from here energy and only energy,
As from the electric charge of a battery,
To will this Time's change.
(ll.9-11).

The poet's apparent need to substantiate the urgent demand to "Drink from here" (l.9), demonstrated by the addition of

the pedestrian and unnecessary image of an electric battery, reveals tension between the lyrical and the need to explain or be understood. Moreover, while the idea of drinking energy is nebulous enough to be potent, the notion of drinking from an electric battery strains credulity. The lyrical pitch remains intact, however, and feeds into and is heightened by the lines which follow:

Eye, gazelle, delicate wanderer,
Drinker of horizon's fluid line;
Ear that suspends on a chord
The spirit drinking timelessness;
Touch, love, all senses;
Leave your gardens, your singing feasts,
Your dreams of suns circling before our sun,
Of heaven after our world.

(11.12-19).

This beautiful appeal to the reader's senses and spirit relies for much of its power on its vagueness, on its use of images with an undefined symbolic quality. The stubbornly general phrase "singing feasts" (1.17) is yet wonderfully evocative of an Arcadian idyll. The dreams of "suns circling before our sun" (1.18) is vapid yet appears perfectly appropriate. The nebulous lyrical evocation of the fine and the fascinating clashes with what we are to accept in their place:

Instead, watch images of flashing brass
That strike the outward sense, the polished will
Flag of our purpose which the wind engraves.

(11.20-22).

The poem describes a movement from looking outward to being forced to see. Furthermore, the beauty of what we are to surrender, as opposed to the plainness of what we are to

accept, seems to indicate that this poem, like "The Funeral", is informed by a conflict of values. This impression is strengthened by the irony of compelling liberty in the summary of the principles, which we are to take from the text, given at the end of the long first stanza:

No spirit shall seek here rest. But this: No man
Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally.
Our goal which we compel: Man shall be man.
(11.23-25).

The abrupt, almost evangelical, tone of these assertions, together with the choice and force of the word "compel" (1.25), is juxtaposed with the equality and liberty of the utopia to which they aspire. This conflict of values also informs the second stanza, whose opening lines introduce the "programme of the antique Satan" (1.26), which is:

Bristling with guns on the indented page
With battleship towering from hilly waves:
(11.27-28).

This programme is opposed to the "opposite" (1.31) programme of the poet, which asserts:

Death to the killers, bringing light to life.
(1.32).

The demand of "Death to the killers" appears to be a call for, as W.D.Jacobs states it, "wide-scale murder" ⁸⁰, although it might equally be interpreted as a call for the disabling of the "exploiters" and "the killers" (11.30 and 32) or their conversion to the cause of revolution. However, the polarity of the revolutionary poet and the "exploiters",

and the essential and basic justice of the revolutionary programme, confirm the need to answer the brutality of "the killers" with acts of equal but opposite brutality; although the concept of killing those who kill is inevitably and ultimately self-destructive, as W.D.Jacobs has observed:

The paradox of stimulating brotherhood and love by wide-scale murder ("Death to the killers") is not resolved. Worse, it is not seen. What matters here is not so much the logical confusion; rather it is the artistic failing, the structural flaw whereby the final lines strike a note of murderous vindictiveness in a poem purportedly expressing high idealism and love of mankind. ⁸¹

However, I think that the presence of an "artistic failing" or "structural flaw" is not so much evidence of a lack of "fundamental brainwork", as Jacobs goes on to claim, but reveals the processes of Spender's thinking. The poem is not a public statement of political faith but the product and means of an exploration of political and personal values. The language and implications of the poem undercut its stated intention; an irony which outlines the conflict of values and reveals the struggles of the poet to reconcile contrary demands. In "Not palaces, an era's crown", as in "The Funeral", Spender is defined as someone divided between a lyrical individualism rooted in an internal world and political values imposed from without by the crisis of his times.

In "Not palaces, an era's crown" perhaps we see most clearly what is evident throughout Spender's early poetry; the complexity and intricacy of a sensitive man's quest for certainty and significance in a world which is intrusive, confused and, above all else, apparently valueless. Although in approaching what Finch has called "the problem of his poetry" ⁶² Spender fails to reach a conclusion, nevertheless the search, the poetry, is in itself valuable.

NOTES

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