Allegiance in the Poetry of Stephen Spender, 1928-1935

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Abstract

The study aims to provide a detailed analysis of Stephen Spender's verse up to 1935, with particular attention to his use of the language of contemporary political discourse. It examines the interrelation of Spender's poetry with the literary milieu of late modernism within which it first appeared, analysing the reception of his published volumes and the dissemination of early critical ideas about his writing. The texts which provide the basis for the study are *Nine Experiments* (1928), *Twenty Poems* (1930), *Poems* (1933/1934) and *Vienna* (1934). Also examined is the concurrent development of Spender's reputation under the editorship of Michael Roberts (the anthologies *New Signatures* and *New Country*) and Geoffrey Grigson (the periodical *New Verse*), whose disparate analyses of Spender's strengths identify his conflicting allegiances to socialist thought and to literary tradition. Spender's subsequent collected volumes include revised versions of the 1930s texts, but the historical versions, most notably *Poems* (1933) and the expanded edition (1934) possess a demonstrable thematic integrity that is inextricably related to the political and literary discourse of the time; their historical pertinence is disrupted by Spender's later revision and re-organisation of the poems.

Although there have been numerous comparative studies of the work of 1930s authors, and two studies of Stephen Spender's oeuvre, this is the first comprehensive close analysis of the early poetry with which his reputation was established, and it is the first to prioritise the original published volume texts rather than the revised versions of *Collected Poems 1928-1953* and *Collected Poems 1928-1985*. This study seeks to establish the literary-historical and aesthetic primacy of the 1930s versions (which are currently out of print) and argues that, despite Spender's own subsequent reservations about his 1930s politics, his poems exhibit a unique confluence of traditionalist literary aspiration with revolutionary ideology; these versions are valuable because of the inconsistencies and paradoxical logic which are characteristic of the period.

Scholars of 1930s poetry and of Spender's verse career require access to these texts, which provide the only accurate representation of his creative development, and which reflect contemporary concerns that are obscured by later revisions. Of course, the poet's right to preserve his work in a certain form – or to discard it – is not disputed, rather this is an editorial acknowledgement of the claims of textual history.
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1. Critical Approach to the 1930s

In recent years, a minor literary critical struggle has been taking place. The region under dispute is best termed “British Literature of the 1930s” – although, unsurprisingly, a major contention is the definition, and the usefulness, of this restricting term. This struggle over a terrain of texts of various forms (which was produced by a host of writers equally in conflict with their contemporaries) is, as Karl Marx would gladly observe, a political struggle. It is a very British literary critical struggle concerning a notion still dominant in the operation of criticism in this country – the unspoken politics of the literary canon: the canon of the nation and all its historicised writers “worthy” of study, and also the biographical œuvres of individual writers.

There are many disagreements, perhaps impossible to resolve. Most fundamental, perhaps, is the question of whether or not the 1930s should be isolated, even for the purposes of discussion. It is the decade which saw the continuation of a global, post-war economic depression which had begun in the 1920s; the gradual rise of the Nazi Party in Germany which culminated in their taking power in 1933 and forcing the world into war in 1939; the flirtation of the intellectuals with communism while calling for the British government to take a more internationalist perspective on the continental threat. It is a decade which is manifestly transitional and in between – in between wars, in between crises, in between more distinct cultural eras. The socio-historical processes which saw the ideological flurry of British literature in the 1930s had started long before the decade itself, reached their most extreme culmination after it had ended, and were largely instigated and driven by international forces which lay outside the country and its domestic culture.

This critical debate then, which is attempting to limit itself to literature of this particular duration of time and geographical location, unsurprisingly finds itself confronted with a host of troubling – and perhaps, from an imagined, distant perspective of the 1930s themselves – rather familiar issues. The most significant issue appears to be this: How is literature which is openly propagandist, or at least explicitly sympathetic to a political cause, to be judged as literature per se by the reader of the early twenty-first century? In terms of literary genre, this question is far more
troublesome in the appreciation and analysis of lyrical verse than in the reading of 1930s fiction; in the latter, narratives which allude to current affairs seem to attain allegorical status in later periods by virtue of their superficial historicity. In other words, the period details of prose fiction tend to become stylistic traits as opposed to thematic content. There is a substantial difference between a Graham Greene novel, such as *It's a Battlefield* (1934), which absorbs the daily realities of Communist Party meetings and fascist parades, deploying them within the backdrop of a Conradian London, and Stephen Spender's poem "Van der Lubbe", which, after seventy years, can only yield its meaning – as a haunting sketch of the duped arsonist of the Reichstag – with a small degree of historical glossing. Part of the meaning of this poem is not now merely its contemporary pertinence, but its historical portentousness; the Reichstag Fire and the ensuing anti-communist show-trial were the first international signals of Hitler's imminent consolidation of power. The terrorist attack was an early and hotly-debated "media event" across Europe, the perpetrator of which found his way into contemporary poetry. Just as Greene's novel depicts the intrusion of a specific contemporary political consciousness into the cityscape of a cynical prose thriller, Spender's poem shows a similar intrusion into lyrical verse.

Most recent studies of the period pose similar questions: Is there a timeless aesthetic by means of which "great" writing rises to become part of the national canon regardless of its contingent origins, or are writers of the 1930s to be cherished (or derided) because of their persistent invocation of abstract political ideals and immediate, practical political quarrels, at a time when the contingencies of European politics were overwhelming intellectual discourse? Is the critic to engage in a "long shot" examination of the time and its multitude of writers, demonstrating their role as reflectors of the impersonal forces of social history, or to take a "close up" look at the microscopic details of individual writers with a view to drawing conclusions about those individuals alone? For example, as Robin Skelton has noted, the determination of irony within political poetry of this period can be a perplexing task; on occasion political elements are deployed wholesale without comment, at other times they are framed with sly inferences; these two tactics are frequently utilised by the same author:
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...so many gestures are deliberately 'placed' in the period that it is often hard to tell whether a poem is to be condemned for undergraduate and narcissistic posturing, or praised as a truly witty impersonation of the Zeitgeist made more subtle by ironic overtones.

Are we to accept as self-evidently justified, or to reject as reductive and misleading the dominance in (inevitably selective) anthologies and scholarly papers of certain writers whose output has been presumed to be representative of the period? Should the work of British writers of the 1930s be regarded as representative swirls and reflections in the cultural vortex of a Europe trundling towards war, or as the life-work of staunch individuals confronting – and reasoning with – human life in their art; human life which, at this early stage of their career, happens to be located within a compelling and tumultuous era? Or should their work be seen as part of an aesthetic lineage of national – or international – literary movements, with all the notions of generational influence and reaction that this implies, and in the light of which the “social issues” of the 1930s were a notable but accidental intrusion?

An important element of the debate, pertinent to the discussion of the canon of 1930s literature, is the critical and biographical enthronement of the “Auden Group” and the popular assumption that they are central to the literature of the decade. There is a long line of dissent from this view, from Roy Campbell in the 1930s, to Bernard Crick in the 1970s. Crick was suspicious of an exhibition which seemed to imply that W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood, Louis MacNeice and Cecil Day Lewis had been the only writers of the decade. The National Portrait Gallery’s “Young Writers of the Thirties” featured photos, letters and first editions of the writers. Crick discussed the exhibition for The New Review in July 1976. While he acknowledges that it is an important exhibition, he notes that it is far “narrower and more personal” than its title implies. Quoting from the exhibition catalogue in his review, Crick raises a crucial question: “If ‘they were in no sense a group’ and ‘sometimes had to fight off such labelling from other critics’... why perpetuate the myth that they were?” He goes on:

...there was a wealth of poetic talent in the 1930s (Eliot, Empson, Graves and Yeats too), far wider than the four and so diverse in interests as to make nonsense of the claim that the four are representative of their generation, and that the generation somehow broke from the 1920s as the 1920s had broken from the 1900s. Isn’t there some
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responsibility to recall the better, lesser talents and not to carry on going round and round with the favoured few like an old horse in a pound?^Crick identifies an important characteristic of literary-historical criticism: its subjectivity, and its tendency to pick out authors whose lives – in addition to their work – are of historical interest, and who seem conveniently to typify an age, or a generation. Stephen Spender himself was appreciative of the acknowledgement the exhibition provided, but similarly dubious of the persistence of the popular fallacy that such grouping encouraged:

It might be argued that the real thirties was that of John Cornford, Christopher Caudwell, Tom Wintringham, Ralph Fox and Julian Bell: all of them examples of men in whose behaviour ideas and actions formed a unity. But all of them were killed in Spain, and, as an exhibition of the thirties held in 1976 in London’s National Portrait Gallery showed, the idea of a literary movement in the thirties continued to seem centred in England and on Auden and his colleagues. In all our lives and work, there were contradictory ideas and confused actions, while at the same time the impression was produced of anti-fascist propaganda and activities being carried on energetically. The appearance of a common direction amid so much diversity is perhaps due to the fact that fascism itself gave anti-fascism a semblance of unity.4

Many of these issues – troubling for the critic, at least – were identified and rather shrewdly debated by the writers of the 1930s texts themselves. In fact, the literature of young British writers of the period is substantially a discourse along the lines above to which this subsequent critical discourse serves as a commentary and an echo. Geoffrey Grigson’s New Verse – which ran from 1933 to 1939 – was written and read by a limited crowd of intellectual versifiers, and its pages depict a close-knit group of writers working for similar ends yet who persistently denounce one another with unrestrained vitriol. As Valentine Cunningham has noted, the 1930s were a time of staunch critical toughness, both morally and aesthetically. The critical faculty was directed at one’s comrades, one’s friends, and oneself, with equal mercilessness. These poets debated the usefulness of poetry– their increasing political awareness caused them to become suspicious even of their own medium. A result of this was that the question of whether or not the presence of political discourse within verse was justified remained unanswered. Nevertheless, it was present: those who were simultaneously drawn to the
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Poetic form and to revolutionary politics in the 1930s produced a discourse which played out in their verse and in their prose; their writing continually manifested the antagonism of conflicting responsibilities to art and to politics.

Of course, it becomes apparent that a general approach will necessarily be insufficient to the analysis of any single writer’s output – there are as many answers to these questions as there are writers in the 1930s. At the same time, it would also appear than any in-depth study of the work of a poet who explicitly engages with political issues could not possibly do justice to the texts themselves were it not to acknowledge and attempt to assess, to some degree, the monumental historical and ideological context within which the texts appeared, and the social and economic situation of the writer under examination.

This study, which examines Stephen Spender’s writing between 1930 and 1935, aims to place the work securely within its intellectual and social context: one which, it will be demonstrated, unquestionably informs his ideas and provides the politicised linguistic tropes which appear in his verse and prose during these years. On the one hand, Spender’s poetry is characterised by its immediate modernist forbears and contemporaries in London’s literary society, centred around Faber and Faber and the extended Bloomsbury circle; on the other hand it derives a significant portion of its content from the increasing dissemination of information regarding the European crisis, Spender’s own experiences of the increasing unrest in Germany and Austria, and his passion for German Romanticism. Publications such as Victor Gollancz’s compendium of anonymous reportage of the crimes of the Nazi regime, the Brown Book of the Hitler Terror (1933), were dismissed only minimally by contemporary writers, yet these texts undoubtedly had a direct and inspirational influence on politically-conscious writers in Britain. The Gollancz book – which was followed by a second volume focussing exclusively on the Reichstag Fire Trial – shares its vivid imagery of political upheaval with the second edition of Spender’s Poems, the central volume of his oeuvre and, after Michael Robert’s New Signatures, the publication that introduced him to his contemporary readership.

Spender is invariably invoked together with W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, and, to a lesser extent, Louis MacNeice as one of the essential 1930s poets, and
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despite justified calls for a wider representation of the period, their prominence is not surprising, nor without good reason. Although the group was never official (except in the eyes of its enemies) or adherent to any precise stylistic or political ethos, there was a critical solidarity between them, and the common cause of Left-wing sympathy – which ranged from half-reluctant fellow-travelling to card-carrying membership of the Communist Party. The powerful arguments against the gross reduction of 1930s poets to such a small representative group will be discussed further, yet it must be acknowledged that this amorphous grouping (scornfully dubbed “MacSpaunday” by Roy Campbell, and also for a brief period labelled the “Pylon Poets” after Spender’s Futurist lyric) has nevertheless become a permanent fixture of British literary history.

Spender is the 1930s poet still in print whose reputation has gone through the greatest shifts since the end of his formative decade; in the latter half of his career he became a spokesman and apologist for the naive, idealistic socialism of his younger self and of his contemporaries. Partly as a result of their secure position within the Faber and Faber tradition – under the auspices of T.S. Eliot himself during the 1930s – the work of the “Auden Group” has remained available and protected when that of many of its contemporaries has long gone out of print and is accessible only to scholars of the period. With regard to his own oeuvre, Spender is responsible for a great deal of authorial revisionism, particularly in the case of his earliest, most ground-breaking and openly political verse. Significantly, this is the work with which he established his career and reputation.

I will discuss his modified assessment of the early poetry later in this chapter, and at greater length in the final chapter, but it is essential to clarify that Spender – despite his long career and censorious attitude to his early output – is inseparably linked to the politics of the 1930s and also that, despite his own final revision of the Collected Poems in 1985, the original texts of the poems from that decade contain a degree of engagement with immediate social and political issues which are essential to their meaning and significance. These historical versions are vital to any reader or scholar of the actual literature of the period; furthermore, they provide the only accurate depiction of his poetic development during these years. While Spender came to regard the infusion of idealistic and radical political ideas into his poetry (the poetry of a bourgeois
liberal who knew that he could not really transcend his class and situation) as a compromise of his aesthetic literary ambitions, I consider the engagement with contemporary issues to be a wholly positive energising of his lyrical solipsism; there is an inner tension between the aloof, timeless, modernist aspirations of his work and the "unwise" embracing of revolutionary slogans that anchor his work to the specific era of its production.

Spender's literary career therefore can be divided into two distinct halves which are approximately demarcated by the middle of the century; his autobiography was to appear in 1951, and his first revisionist *Collected Poems* in 1953. Examining *World Within World*, there is no doubt that Spender himself has the apprehension of the end of an era after the Second World War, both historically and personally, for which his autobiography and the collected volume are to serve as a bookend. Moreover, it was from this point onwards that his poetic output greatly diminished, and he became known more as a critic and spokesman for literature and the arts. During these later years his creative attention turned more to the reinterpretation and revision of his earlier work; he did this in the light of subsequent criticism, and with an increasing awareness of the insufficiency of his youthful grasp of politics; to some extent, he revised and excised in embarrassment over his rash 1930s endorsement of Soviet Russia as an example of functioning (and benevolent) socialism.

Although Spender was determined to distance himself from the politics of his youth, it is essential that criticism does not, and enough time has now passed to be able to examine his 1930s work and its political content for their unique literary-historical value: it portrays the interrelation of bourgeois literary aesthetics and revolutionary ideology. As Frank Kermode has noted:

> We are still in some ways close to the writers of the Thirties... it is in that measure harder to think about them without confusing history and value, without allowing our disillusion with their politics to colour our reading of their work – something we manage quite easily to avoid when thinking of more distant times.5

In the dozen years since Kermode wrote this, the 1930s are becoming an increasingly distant time, and with the turn of the millennium our literary stock-taking of the past
century seems to imbue it with an even longer perspective. Indeed, the world war of the
mid-twentieth century, and the relative world peace which it engendered through the
Cold War and into the uncertain present, appears to justify the self-conscious ideological
crises of the 1930s. Prefiguring the stand-off between Soviet Russia and the capitalist
world in the second half of the century, Spender and his immediate contemporaries
struggled with ideological abstracts that were gradually dwarfed by the German threat
which polarised the moral stance of Europe and then the world.

Communism would be, for the west, the road not taken, but it is essential to
remember that for the young writers of the early 1930s (from whom the insidious reality
of Stalin’s regime was still a well-kept secret) the world-state was a possible, palpable
future, and an inspiration.

A study of a poet of the 1930s cannot avoid a considerable debt to the thorough
scholarship of several major critical works that have appeared in recent decades. First
of all, for its economical delineation of the main publishing “events” for the young
writers with whom Spender is affiliated, and for its analysis of the writers’ unstable,
class-conscious social milieu, Samuel Hynes’s The Auden Generation: Literature and
Politics in the 1930s (1976) is an inescapable reference text. While it has perpetuated
the myth of the exclusive centrality of the “Auden Group” (not least with its cover,
which features the famous portrait of a sun-tanned Auden, Spender and Isherwood),
Hynes’s study has nevertheless demonstrated that the New Signatures and New Verse
writers and their associates were frequently painfully aware of their practical detachment
from the travails of the working class. Similarly, Hynes intentionally narrows his focus
in the interest of establishing a detailed portrait of a specific class of writers and artists,
yet continually acknowledges the various social groups and ideological positions which
are excluded from the study:

The poor did find symbolic ways of expressing their needs and feelings — in Hunger
Marches, in protests, in the East End resistance to Mosley’s invasion — but these were
not literary ways. This is scarcely surprising if one considers the conditions of
working-class life during those years, the unemployment, the Dole, the diet of bread
and margarine, and all the rest of it; it is simply one of the facts of the time. So when
one generalizes about the generation, it must always be with the implicit qualification that there was a large majority whose lives did not find expression in language. This is of course true of any generation; what is different about the 'thirties is that, as political and social awareness grew among educated, middle-class young people, their sense of the need to speak to and for the poor and the workers grew too, and this becomes, for the critic-historian, another literary problem.⁶

This study follows Hynes's assertion that the intimate relationship between literature and history is especially profound at periods of social and political crisis when, more intensely than ever, "the world of action and the world of imagination interpenetrate."⁷ The increasing incursion of political language into verse, and of lyrical assertion into the rhetoric of political debate are manifest characteristics of the literary culture during these years.

Bernard Bergonzi's *Reading the Thirties: Texts and Contexts* (1978), though its scope is perhaps too wide and its examples too disparately selective for it to yield any major insights into the work of individual authors, has similarly had an important influence. Bergonzi’s examination of the "impersonal" linguistic tropes of the 1930s which forced themselves into the work of so many writers of varying political and aesthetic allegiances has particular pertinence to an examination of Spender, where political and literary loyalties — taken from propagandist literature and idolised authors respectively — jostle for prominence within the poetry. Particularly, Bergonzi promotes an elision of the "background" and "foreground" of the era into a level field of textual elements which encompasses both literature and political discourse. This critical tactic applies perfectly to Spender, whose poetry and prose continually examine the unsteady distinction between the private and the public spheres, the artistic and the political. Bergonzi hesitantly follows Barthes's textual practice as suggested in *S/Z*, to an "open model" of the text which, within its contemporary contextual realm, is part of "a system of interlocking codes, of almost indefinite possible extension."⁸ In this study, Spender's 1930s poetry is regarded as precisely such a collision of verbal contexts, whose "whirling constituents come from many possible sources as well as the author's creative brain and imagination."⁹ Without diminishing the importance of Spender's role as a unique author and negotiator of these various influences, this study aims rather to demonstrate that the effect and continuing significance of his 1930s work is in its
absorption and manifestation of the public concerns of the time within a predominately introspective lyrical model.

Valentine Cunningham’s comprehensive intellectual history British Writers of the Thirties (1988) echoes Bergonzi’s rejection of the background/foreground and society/literature distinctions: “all texts and contexts will be thought of here as tending to lose their separate identities, collapsing purposefully into each other and existing rather as what we might call (con)texts.”

As a wide-ranging survey of the period, Cunningham’s study is invaluable to the contextualisation of any author to fall within its broad scope; Cunningham asserts that the historical facts which inform texts of the 1930s (the “public events and private lives, the books read and the beliefs, the journeys, holidays, machines, dictators, churches, poems, songs, plays, films, novels – messy and resistant to analysis”) are at least as important as the Derridean self-referents and hermeneutic codes which they possess; this is a view that the present study wholly endorses.

The issue of class prejudice within literary historical study, and the justifiable centrality of the “Auden Group” are discussed strongly in Adrian Caesar’s revisionist Dividing lines: poetry, class and ideology in the 1930s (1991). The debate over the notable exclusions of the 1930s canon has been mentioned above, and it is Caesar who has provided the most compelling argument against this historical distortion. Caesar argues that class discrimination is inherent in the repeated critical emphasis upon a limited “clique” of bourgeois poets within a prolific and multifaceted period. He echoes Terry Eagleton’s claim that the literary canon has been constant in its comfortable simplification of literary history:

The idea of Auden and an ‘Auden generation’ looms large over the whole period, he and his group are considered to be ‘central’. And often this centrality is defended in terms of a ‘literary value’ which pretends to be ideologically innocent. [...] The preference for Auden exhibited by the myth is not a matter of pure literary merit but of ideological bias. It is Auden’s appeal to the liberal middle-class conscience which dominates the literary history of the period, not some timeless standard of poetic craftmanship.

Caesar’s critique is compelling, and valid. He roundly rejects Hynes’s belief that “English literature has been middle-class as long as there has been an English middle-
class”, and that no significant writing emerged from any other social group during the 1930s. Studies of the period tend to exclude the full generic range of published verse in the decade, with little or no reference to Surrealism, Neo-Georgianism, “Agitprop” poetry or working class ballads. At the same time, Caesar perhaps underestimates here the contemporary centrality of Auden, who was admired to the point of idolatry by a comprehensive range of disparate talents of both his own, and the preceding literary generation. No doubt the continuing prominence of Auden’s long poetic career has inevitably strengthened his reputation and his perceived role within the 1930s, though even a retroactive canonisation is unable to explain away his unquestionable popular appeal before the war. Conversely, Caesar’s charge of a manifest “liberal middle-class conscience” is impossible to refute. There is no doubt that, like Auden, Spender (despite his written flirtation with the extreme Left) was always a middle-class liberal, and never really claimed any position for himself beyond a passionate but indefinite sympathy for the revolutionary position: his avowed pacifism logically cancelled out any potential communist affiliation other than that of the sympathetic fellow-traveller.

Nevertheless, Caesar’s fundamental argument holds true: that even criticism which professes to be aware of literature and writers that lie beyond its circumscribed region, continues, by definition, to perpetuate a distorted view of the actual totality of texts produced within a time period. This charge is, of course, applicable to any period of literature, and all conceptions of declared or implied canons. Since it sets out to examine an individual author who has been charged with benefiting from, and perpetuating, the “literary-historical myth” of the 1930s, this is clearly a limitation of the criticism of the period that the present study acknowledges, but unfortunately does not redress.

In their sensitive study Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry (1992), Michael O’Neill and Gareth Reeves set out to rescue three of the 1930s poets from what they perceive as a correct, but over-emphatic examination of the contextual function of their work. O’Neill and Reeves choose to subject the poetry to a detailed critical analysis that promotes the importance of the reader’s aesthetic response. The present study similarly upholds the view that, despite his engagement with political discourse and partisan rhetoric, Spender is constantly “suspicious both of art as propaganda and of
A useful tactic for avoiding the quagmire of political and classist wrangling which is inevitable in any discussion of 1930s literature is to disentangle an author from this specific period and to examine his career as a whole; John Whitehead does just that in *A Commentary on the Poetry of W.H. Auden, C. Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender* (1992). Ironically however, while Whitehead disparages (and even "outlaws" from his text) the ubiquitous "thirties" label, which tends to hang around these poets’ necks like an albatross, the title of his own study yokes their disparate talents together once again. Unlike Caesar, Whitehead has no problem with the highly selective attention that has been paid to these four writers – he regards them as the only four poets of their generation (that succeeding T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, and preceding Dylan and R.S. Thomas) to have escaped "minor" status. He does, however, seek to put an end to the "collective hallucination" which has separated the 1930s from the rest of the century. This is, to some extent, a rational approach – a reactionary re-centring of the author and his life in conscious opposition to the synchronic pattern-making of Bergonzi and Cunningham. But it is also a traditionalist method (so despised by Caesar) which ultimately further bolsters Auden’s critical reputation as the architect of a long and distinguished career in verse, while it condemns his three companions for the crime of simply not being Auden. Whitehead’s year-by-year commentary on their published volumes of verse charts a relative decline in Spender’s verse which is, unsurprisingly, directly proportional to his diminishing output, and to his increasing distance from that intellectual turmoil of the 1930s which had infused his poetry with such inner tension and ideological ambiguity.

Contrary to Whitehead’s position, I regard the arc of Spender’s career as a misleading measure of the importance of his work in the 1930s; indeed, Spender has contributed considerably to the critical "downplaying" of the work, by his revisions which, whilst seeking poetic "clarity," obscure the political and historical resonance of the original texts. Spender has also repeatedly expressed regret at the intrusion of crudely-formed political opinion into the idealised realm of literary art during the 1930s. While not claiming that Spender was ever an orthodox Marxist writer (on the contrary,
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his prose work of the decade continually warns against any orthodox position for the artist), Marxism is undoubtedly the ideology to which he is closest during these years, and the importance of his 1930s poetry is its insistence upon acknowledging the palpable threat of fascism. The 1930s are distinctly different from the 1920s and the 1940s by virtue of the steadily escalating European crisis; moreover, they are radically different from the 1950s and 1980s, during which decades Spender chose to revise his poems with an eye to "ahistorical" poetic standards. In this regard, the literature of a young writer of the 1930s quite rightly warrants special attention. As Terry Eagleton has suggested:

There are periods and societies where conscious, 'progressive' political commitment need not be a necessary condition for producing major art; there are other periods -- fascism, for example -- when to survive and produce as an artist at all involves the kind of questioning which is likely to result in explicit commitment. In such societies, conscious political partisanship, and the capacity to produce significant art at all, go spontaneously together.\(^\text{18}\)

Tyrus Miller, in his study of avant-garde literature of the inter-war years, has made a compelling case for a clearer demarcation of the period during which the high modernists and their young successors were drawn away from their purely aesthetic ideals and into the political fray. Spender's earliest work emerges within a period best termed "late modernism"; a transitional phase in the arts in Britain which is innately and self-consciously compromised, during which time current affairs directly influence the formal characteristics of "high-brow" literature:

...late modernist writing weakens the relatively strong symbolic forms still evident in high modernist texts. It reopens the modernist enclosure of form onto the work's social and political environs, facilitating its more direct, polemical engagement with topical and popular discourses. [...] it also registers the ways in which intense social, political, and economic pressures of the period increasingly threatened the efficacy of high modernist form.\(^\text{19}\)

Miller's study concentrates largely on the work of Wyndham Lewis, a considerable figure in the literature of the 1920s and 1930s, whose writing provides forceful evidence that it was not just the young Leftists who brought politics to bear on their writing. Writers of all manner of political and religious allegiance had a lot to contribute to the
ideological discourse of the 1930s, not least the high modernist T.S. Eliot, whose conscious aesthetic aloofness did not prevent him from engaging in extensive discussions of the value of communism (or lack thereof), and the edifying benefits of Christianity. Eliot was a poetic and literary-critical giant for the young writers of the 1930s, and the importance of his influence – as something to be followed or railed against – cannot be overstated.

The economic crisis in Europe and the brewing political conflict affected British writers universally, whatever their political attitudes, and it did so in an unprecedented fashion that is testament to the sheer intensity of social concern during the decade. Most significantly, politics of the 1930s introduced to modernism a phenomenon that might be called the aesthetics of politics. By this I do not mean simply propaganda, but a phase during which writers of varying political sympathies were compelled to find formal analogues within their work for their professed loyalties; Spender’s poetry is an ideal example of this tendency. By the time he came to produce his early poems the philosophical and moral despair of post-War verse, typified by Eliot, had transformed into a consciousness of the need for practical action, and the need to reunite literary aesthetics with direct statement. As J.A. Morris suggests:

If we follow the development of literary forms from about 1910 we find a growing involvement in political ideas which by about 1935 had become almost universal, for, by then, the expression of political views, tacitly or implicitly, had become itself stylistic rather than ideological.²⁰

Late modernism is thus stylistically political rather than reductively propagandist; Spender’s humanist Romanticism takes on the colour of Marxism in the 1930s as he and his contemporaries find themselves polarised in opposition to the fascist threat.

Spender’s Poetry

Although the bulk of this study is made up of a close analysis of Spender’s poetry from 1928 until 1935, it is useful to leave briefly the strict attention to his 1930s output and to delineate the constant characteristics of his work which span his career. For the most
part, his work eschews changes in literary trends, instead it consistently pursues the attempt to record in language the essence of the individual's felt experience. At around the time of the Second World War his work employs biblical invocations common to the "Apocalyptic" school, as he similarly grapples for a mode that is appropriate to the cataclysmic aerial bombardment of London, but this seems to have been his only self-conscious utilisation of a prevailing contemporary style. In the 1930s, of course, he had been the co-creator of a clearly discernible "school" of imagery, although this seems to have been - at least initially - an untactical stylism, borne of shared background and interests, and was something that he viewed with some regret in the 1940s. It is not until the *Collected Poems* of the mid 1950s that he first "owns up" to the "Pylon" poetry, for example.

Throughout his career, his poems shift in tone and idiom, depicting the self-conscious struggle of an isolated inner-self attempting to criticise its own motives and evasions, its moral lapses, exploring the need for an affirmation of the "other" beyond itself in the social and political world. It is poetry which describes a phenomenological isolation of the individual, especially that separation which exists between lovers; the inner consciousness is portrayed as hovering "at the edge of being", and in "the still centre". Spender's poetry asserts the ultimate dislocation of the self from a communicable language which can fully express the inner visions and convictions which precede a primarily verbal reality, and combines this with the notion that the need to pursue such communication is valuable and perpetual. His work exhibits a continual resistance to systematised religion or myth, whether established or individualist, in favour of a compassionate moral pragmatism.

Spender is apart from high modernist predecessors such as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats in this insistent secularism, and distinct from his friend and contemporary W.H. Auden, whose interest in, and utilisation of religious, mythical and scientific systems and traditional poetic forms, is the foundation of his work. During the 1930s, Spender's atheistic stance and criticism of the Church were deplored by T.S. Eliot during a radio broadcast, and stood very much as a symbol of the young, godless, "red" generation. Spender had been making his position plain as early as 1932 when, writing in the *Bookman*, he praised Auden's work for abandoning pagan and Christian myth in favour
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of the "imagery of psychoanalysis." Significantly, it was Spender's atheist verse which Eliot chose to pastiche in his pageant play *The Rock* (1934) when became to give voice to the socialist "Redshirts" who will have no part in the building of churches.* As G.S. Fraser suggests, writing on Spender in 1959, "his feet are on the ground. No myth, no hunger for myth, obsesses him."23

It is arguable that this willed "apartness" is symptomatic of the stance which prevents some of Spender's work from transcending an individualist viewpoint, and it ultimately functions most vividly as a portrayal of the contradictory, uncertain self situated within a social and political milieu of positive action. Spender himself has famously noted of his early 1930s poetry that "I was an autobiographer restlessly searching for forms in which to express the stages of my development."24 His poetry exhibits a sympathy and pity for the weak – whether this weakness is physical or moral – and for the oppressed, and this combines with a self-pity, and self-consciousness, which are themselves a subject of the work as well as being manifest characteristics. A constant feature of the poetry is to place the sincere desire to establish an accurate verbal correspondence to an idea before the demands of form, occasionally even before the demands of the largely Romantic lyricism which is Spender's aesthetic tendency, and ultimately before the demands of social or political ideology.

This last claim may sound paradoxical since, as previously discussed, Spender is best known as a member of the "pink generation" of politicised young Leftists to emerge between the world wars, coming to the public's attention largely courtesy of Michael Roberts's *New Signatures* poetry anthology which appeared in 1932.25 This was a generation weaned on the aesthetically experimental yet politically reactionary modernism of writers such as Eliot, and late Henry James; along with W.H. Auden, its brightest star, it included William Empson, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice, Rex Warner, Julian Bell and John Lehmann. They were steeped in the apocalyptic sense of an ending of Western civilisation, as encouraged by poetry such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Oswald Spengler's portentous *The Decline of the West* (1926, 1928).

*"Our verse / is free / as the wind on the steppes / as love in the heart of the factory worker" (T.S. Eliot, *The Rock*, London, 1934, p. 43.)
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This aesthetic and philosophical atmosphere of post-War decline, combined with a certain youthful enthusiasm and idealism, led them to produce a collection of poetry, as Spender has written, that spoke "with near-unanimity... of a society coming to an end and of revolutionary change." This is despite the fact that, up until the publication of *New Signatures*, the majority of them had never heard of one another. Their poetry was characterised by its social consciousness, and its deliberate shift away from a largely pastoral Georgian tradition which – in stark contrast to the war poets – was wilfully ignorant of this sense of cultural collapse and political crisis, and was disinclined to portray the "gas-works" or "power stations" of the real contemporary British landscape (what Samuel Hynes has dubbed "Auden country").

Lawrence Durrell, describing the first appearance of *New Signatures*, evokes the palpable impact that the young writers had on their contemporaries and juniors:

...it is impossible to describe the effect they made on younger writers with this, their first collective appearance. The smouldering embers of Georgian tradition burst into flame and from the cheerless hearths of papers like *The Poetry Review* the critics woke up and sharpened their battle axes. Here was something really new, and worth attacking.

Nevertheless, the primary critical response seems not to have been aesthetic, as it was for Durrell, but political. An examination of Spender's poetry throughout the communist-leaning 1930s reveals not the straightforward propaganda one might expect, but rather an individual verbal consciousness straining under the pressures of a sense of social responsibility, and an unclear, idealised notion of the aesthetic vocation. The result of this internal conflict is to create poetry, for all its sincerity, of some moral ambiguity, which it might be argued dramatises the struggle of the liberal conscience with the dogma of the far Left. It is significant that his poetry of the Spanish Civil War – in which he championed the fight against the fascists – was sympathetic to those on both sides of the conflict to the extent that it incensed the communists as well as the Right.

O'Neill and Reeves have identified Spender's ongoing endeavour "to remain faithful to individual perception regardless of social opinion", yet inevitably this determination has political as well as literary implications. The refusal to bend wholly
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to a social or political ideology, while still "taking sides" and acknowledging that social action is necessary, corresponds to the refusal to bend to the politics of "complete" or formally "realised" poems wholly beyond the subjective. The honest verbal portrayal of "individual perception", even in poems with an obviously political subject matter such as "Not palaces, an era's crown" and "After they have tired" in *Poems* (1933), provides enough contradiction and ambiguity to thwart any simplistic assumption of their ideological meaning, Marxist or otherwise. The revulsion of critics such as Randall Jarrell at Spender's sensitivity and technical "softness" — his willingness to be sincere to the point of self-condemnation — is a reaction to Spender's apparent failure logically to conclude, or unambiguously to endorse positive action. This is a similar response to that found in Thom Gunn's ironic celebration of the "boys who were rough", or "tough" — at Spender's expense — in his poem "Lines for a Book" (1954).

As Samuel Hynes has noted, Spender's volume *Poems* (1933), following as it did in the wake of *New Signatures*, was taken up and praised almost entirely on the basis of its lyrical treatment of pressing social and political concerns — the poor, the unemployed, the creeping industrialisation of rural Britain. The "experimentalism and technique" which its publishers Faber and Faber wished to promote on its cover, were largely ignored. Poems such as "I think continually of those who were truly great" and "What I expected" appear to have portrayed, respectively, a generation's mood of aspiration and disillusionment, and achieved this without direct reference to the concerns of the early 1930s; but the need for concrete political change was inherent in the *New Signatures* writers' polemical prose: an indubitable utilitarian element in much of their poetry explicitly calls for solutions to the sense of social decay and injustice. And this political agenda asserts itself far more insistently than any formal innovations. A character of ideological revolt and intense social concern came to be attributed to Spender's *Poems* as a whole, blurring its inherent contradictions, and masking the

*Spender's ideological open-mindedness is closely related to his admissions of admiration for totally opposite personalities to his own: the vigorous physicality of the working class children, for example, or the sporting achievements of a college "hearty" in the "Marston Poems." Creatively, it relates also to his professed respect for Auden's disciplined formalism, or the talent of such right-wing modernists as Wyndham Lewis. This element of his 1930s work will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3.
individualism which made his aesthetic and moral outlook somewhat unsuited to Marxist doctrine.

A knowledge of Spender’s subsequent interest in the Vienna uprising and his involvement in the Spanish war, when the pressure to be politically-committed and to take sides against Fascism was all-pervading, can distort the historical fact that, in 1932, it was not long since the “Auden generation” had been hardened and committed literary aesthetes. As Spender was to recall in a 1994 introduction to a new edition of his autobiography *World Within World*:

> Up till 1929 these young writers had been programmatically unpolitical – anti-political even. The Literary gods they worshipped were... James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and, beyond these, Henry James... our generation was only drawn into politics because world events presented us with situations in which it seemed impossible for us not to take sides. 33

**Solipsism and Revision**

I will examine the internal political and aesthetic currents of Spender’s 1930s poetry in greater depth in subsequent chapters, but I will provide a preliminary outline of Spender’s consistent – if contradictory – approach to the composition and revision of his poetry. My intention is to do this with a view to demonstrating how his aesthetic tendencies and practices intuitively inform his approach to the development of a poem and its rhetorical methods.

“Beethoven’s Death Mask” first appeared in Spender’s *Twenty Poems* (1930), published by Basil Blackwell in Oxford before he left university. It reappeared in *Poems* (1933) unrevised. As O’Neill and Reeves have observed, the poem is an “empathic meditation on the nature of... artistic genius”, namely *Romantic* artistic genius. 34 As an undergraduate, Spender was given a book of photographic prints of the death masks of notable individuals, and he composed the poem as a conscious fusion of his appreciation of Beethoven’s music with the image of the mask. 35 The significance of the mask is twofold since it also symbolises the fact that Beethoven’s achievement in the final phase of his career, subsequent to 1815, was made when he was totally deaf; yet he still produced some of his greatest and most innovative pieces, including the
Ninth Symphony, and the Late Quartets. The poem, like the one that follows it in Poems (1933) (which was also the first to appear in Twenty Poems), “Never being, but always at the edge of being”, envisions the conscious creative self as being trapped within the physical body – specifically the head, in reference to the composer’s encroaching deafness:

He is prisoned, masked, shut off from being;  
Life like a fountain he sees leap – outside.

However, in the manner of the Romantics, the notion of correspondence is soon invoked, as in the wilfully disorientating first stanza of Shelley’s “Mont Blanc” where “The everlasting universe of things / Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves”. In fact, Spender’s poem seems to take up directly Shelley’s example, and Beethoven’s isolation is not really so complete:

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 passage of his brain.

The basis of Spender’s poem, which is an early appearance of a conception of the self as located both within an existential “still centre” and at the “edge of being”, continues throughout his work in the 1930s and 1940s, and seems to derive from this conception of Beethoven’s late genius as it recreated a world of sound from memory; the composer constitutes a compelling archetype of the artist – producing an art (music) which exists only in his mind, yet which is transmitted to paper and can hence be interpreted and performed. In fact, a relatively late poem in Collected Poems 1928-1985, “Late Stravinsky Listening to Late Beethoven” takes up the same concept decades later with reference to Stravinsky’s final illness, analogous to Beethoven’s condition: “His eyes became / Windows on the skull through which he looked / Out on a world of

* Incidentally, “Mont Blanc” was composed in 1816, acknowledged to be the first year of Beethoven’s Late Phase.
sound... Into that light where the perceiver / Becomes one with the thing perceived, /
The hearing with the seeing” 40

Beethoven is a profoundly important influence in Spender’s thought and writing on the creative process. In World Within World he recalls the discovery and appreciation of the composer’s music with Isaiah Berlin** when they were fellow undergraduates, describing how “in Beethoven’s posthumous quartets there was the exploration of a universe of pure melody, beyond suffering, oppression and difficulty.” 41 Also, it would seem, beyond language; and a theme of verbally inexpressible experience reoccurs throughout Spender’s prose works. In his critical study of the moderns, The Destructive Element (1935), Beethoven is invoked in an analysis of T.S. Eliot’s success, taking into account the apparently paradoxical factor of the older poet’s artistic remoteness:

I see Eliot as an extremely isolated artist of great sensibility, whose work at one moment, in The Waste Land, achieved a wide objectivity; but his poetry narrows on the one side back to Prufrock, on the other side forwards to Ash Wednesday and Marina. To say this is not necessarily to attack it, because it was an extremely isolated, a deaf and a neurotic sensibility that produced the great Quartets of Beethoven’s last period. 42*

While examining a slightly different area of the creative sensibility – namely the approach to the compositional process – Beethoven proves similarly useful to Spender in discussing Henry James’s writing method. He compares the insight into the composer’s mind provided by an examination of the sketch books with the usefulness of the published notes to James’s unfinished novels:

** The Oxford philosopher, a lifelong friend of Spender’s since they met at university, is integral to the understanding of the poet’s political and artistic sensibilities. More so than with Auden, Spender shared Berlin’s enthusiasm for German Romanticism, both its politics and its literature, and above all its music as manifested by Beethoven. Spender’s relationship with Berlin was always one of intellectual equality, whereas with Auden it was one of (assumed) inferiority and creative antagonism. In terms of Spender’s creative influences, his enthusiasm for the German Romantic poets and dramatists, including Schiller, Toller, Hoelderlin and Stefan Georg (all of whom he translated during the 1930s) provides a more useful context for his “revolutionary” verse than direct comparison with Auden’s formal modernism.

* The essential flaw of The Destructive Element is in its forced political slant: Spender was drawing a communist moral from the works of James and Lawrence amongst others, and his overemphasis on the notion that their works represent the decline of a capitalist empire, rather than individual writers’ perception of a decline which they chose to portray in their fiction, creates a disparity between the literary critical and the political discussion.
These notes convey a feeling, not of the observation of life, not of rapportage, but of the creation of living, pressing forms of life. To grasp the whole pattern, to breathe all the excitement, and to follow all the difficult yet urgent thematic arguments, one has to read these notes. They remind one of Beethoven’s sketch books, or of his account, reported somewhere, of how he heard a theme and lost it and then pursued it unceasingly until it was clear.

It is this aspect of Beethoven – as an artistic type who must pursue elusive themes relentlessly in order to produce his finished product – which appeals to Spender and his own creative temperament, in conjunction with the conception of the self as being fundamentally isolated from the outside world.

Spender has written lucidly about his own writing methods in his autobiography and in essays including “The Making of a Poem” (1946). He claims to be “scarcely capable of immediate concentration in poetry. My mind is not clear, my will is weak, I suffer from an excess of ideas and a weak sense of form.” In “The Making of a Poem” Spender posits that there are roughly two types of writing method or “concentration”, one being “immediate and complete” and the other “plodding and only completed by stages”. He obviously places his own writing in the second category. He adds:

Some poets write immediately works which, when they are written, scarcely need revision. Others write their poems by stages, feeling their way from rough draft to rough draft, until finally, after many revisions, they have produced a result which may seem to have very little connection with their early sketches.

Spender’s suggestion is that these tendencies derive from two general types of creative genius (genius only in their highest forms); the examples he proposes are musical – Mozart and Beethoven. The “Mozartian” artist is “more brilliant and dazzling” and utilises the “tremendous effort of a moment”, while the “Beethovenian” artist “must dig deeper into his consciousness, layer by layer”. On the one hand, Spender dismisses the relevance of the working method – the greatness of the resulting work is what matters, and both Mozart and Beethoven rate highly in this regard. Nevertheless, his fascination is precisely with the working method, and it is the artist who must slowly and painfully unravel the secrets of his own consciousness that obviously holds the far greater appeal to Spender’s perception of his own temperament.
The struggle to find just the right word or phrase, the continual attempt to pursue an elusive, personal theme – the "thematic argument" – is directly connected to Spender's central motif: the relation of the conscious self to the outer world. In a passage detailing his early experiences writing poetry, a description of the struggle with language and the solitude of the individual consciousness are directly linked:

I began to realize how much audacity, patience and solitude are required to express one's experiences. For the imagination suggests to the poet the undefined sensation of a metaphor which explains to him the quality of some experience. But to feel his way beyond this vague sensation to the exact image of the metaphor, to pursue it through solitude to places where it is hidden from all that has been put into words before, and then to mould it within all the hazards of language, reconciled with grammar and form, is extremely difficult... The writer who clings to his own metaphor is facing his own loneliness; in fighting to distinguish a new idea from similar ideas which have already been expressed, he may find that his most hidden experience brings him in conflict with current ideas among people surrounding him, and face to face with the terrifying truth of his own isolated existence. For he is revealing a fragment of the ultimate truth of his loneliness.48

It would appear that in this brief summary of the writing process there is a fusion, and in part, perhaps, a tentative explanation of Spender's political and aesthetic characteristics. He is asserting the rights of the artistic and political individualist, at the expense of understanding. There is a sense in which the "most hidden experience", so elusive, and nearly impossible to communicate, is perhaps the inner experience of the deaf Beethoven, for example, whose "universe of pure melody, beyond suffering, oppression and difficulty" was also beyond communicable verbal language.

Spender appears to connect the effect of Beethoven's music to the writer's transformation of inspiration to the completed work. In the appreciation of music, an "undefined" sensation can still result in melodies and harmonies of some aesthetic value, but the translation of inspiration into a linguistic form is more problematic: the journey from "vague sensation" to "exact image" necessarily involves the "hazards of language" – of grammar, logic, social and political ramifications, and the fear of merely re-expressing the clichés of a well-worn functional idiom, falling into the grooves of propagandist slogans. This anxiety is diagnosed by Spender, and analysed – it is the result of a deep-rooted idealism about the purpose of poetry. For him, poetry is an
autobiographical outlet, and one that should never be compromised to the constraints of formal necessity. Describing himself as a young poet, he writes:

...I could not accept the idea that the poetic experience in reality, which led into a poem, was then, as it were, left behind, while the poem developed according to verbal needs of its own which had no relation to the experience. My poems were all attempts to record, as truthfully as I could, experiences which, within reality, seemed to be poetry. Whenever the poetry, for the purpose of ending satisfactorily a poem, seemed to require something which was not true to my own experience, I abandoned it.49

Once again, this is a modern dilemma, and a particularly intense one for a writer who consciously eschews dogmatic ideology in his work, either in its form or its content. Spender's intention is fairly clear: "to put myself outside a very general movement amongst modern poets to develop philosophies, embrace creeds, join movements... because they have arrived at a point in their writing where they need a myth, a faith, or some external impulse which takes them beyond the limits of their personal experience."50

It is important to emphasise that Spender's comments and analyses above derive from a later period of his career; there is a degree of objectivisation of himself in the role of the poet, and his hindsight inevitably informs the retroactive analysis of his earlier writing methods. At the same time, I hope to illustrate the conceptual continuity of his thoughts on creative work across several decades, in the light of which his subsequent revision of his oeuvre can be regarded as a logical and inevitable outcome.

"September Journal" was written in 1939, immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War, and after the break-up of Spender's first marriage; it was first published in full in 1985. It provides contemporary evidence of his compositional theories as it existed in the 1930s. Spender claims to have kept the journal in an attempt to overcome a writer's block which had resulted from an intense depression. He describes a lunch with T.S. Eliot during which they discuss the apparently urgent matter of the relation of form to a poet's ability to communicate his sensibility to a contemporary readership:

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But there are disadvantages in this [Spender's] way of writing which is the method of the vers librist. In the first place, it concentrates entirely on expression, and is only poetry in so far as the thought happens to be poetry. Whereas if one chooses a form which is in itself poetry, like any of the well-known traditional forms, the traditional use of the form tends towards poetry, to which one conforms... accepted forms tend towards an objective realization of what form requires if it is to be successfully used, whereas my way tends towards subjective needs and standards. On the other hand, contemporary writing which fits into traditional standards does not really interest me. Eliot agreed with me about this, and he seemed also to agree that Auden's virtuosity in using accepted forms, while it certainly saves him from extremes of subjectivity and also, to some extent, from obscurity, has evaded the real problem - which is to discover new, recognised, generally acceptable forms suited to the requirements of today.51

Again, Auden's use of "accepted forms" may be regarded as being akin to the lot of the musical composer. The function of music is always to engage the listener prior to any logical apprehension of its technical operation. It was Beethoven's extension and innovation of established musical forms which inspired Spender and his friend Isaiah Berlin. Nevertheless, even when it is highly abstract, musical notation - and hence the resultant performance - is always formal; the writer whose poetry has a familiar form is ultimately at liberty to go further into "obscurity" than the writer of subjective subjects in a subjective form before he disappears into "extremes of subjectivity". Without a "generally acceptable" formal frame to "save" him, the autobiographical vers librist has a difficult, if not impossible task. In fact, it was Eliot's own notion that poetry can communicate before it is understood, an idea that manifests itself in his own extensive utilisation of rhythms which deliberately, by turns, elucidate and obscure logical linguistic meaning.

Spender identifies the central issue of his own poetry, with its lack of "traditional" forms or spiritual beliefs, when he wonders "whether working everything out in this way one isn't working always back to the same centre, expressing the subjective in subjective terms according to subjective standards."52 His thoughts return to the "same centre": his ongoing endeavour to express this situation in poetical form. He is unapologetic about his ideal of the communicable experience, but acknowledges that it is an unrealisable ideal. His estimation of the limits of his own vocation, and the
source of his inspiration in poetry, remain constant throughout much of his career. As he writes in 1951 of his younger self in 1929:

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.  

Despite its "profundity", the "secret" nature of this conviction seems to be an implicit acknowledgement of its irrational idealism. Spender also continues, paradoxically, to acknowledge the contrary, realist notion that the writer who "clings to his own metaphor", to his own "truth of... feelings", at the expense of engaging in a previously socially accepted idiom, may find himself isolated, and necessarily impossible for others to understand.

The question of working at an elusive theme – in Spender's case, struggling and continually attempting to capture an original conception in verbal form by following the "thematic arguments" of repeated revision, is especially pertinent when one considers that he continued to revise, recast and re-title certain poems long after their first appearance, often in a minor fashion, but on occasion radically. He did not hesitate to update even those poems that had initially established his career, many decades after they had served that task, leaving the 1930s texts out of print. This derives from Spender's idealistic notion of the function of poetry as previously discussed, and it assumes also a belief in the constancy of the creative self and its intentions over many decades.

In his introduction to the radically revisionist Collected Poems 1928-1985 he explains that "In reworking poems I have always done so with the sense that in writing a poem I have certain intentions which I rarely forget." This raises questions of editorial ethics: the relation of the author to his oeuvre after publication, due consideration of the author's last wishes (as in the case of W.B. Yeats's final Collected Poems which remodelled the work of his earlier career into his later style) and the
antagonism between this consideration and what Edward Mendelson has called (discussing Auden’s latter day, censorious moral judgement of some of his own early work) the powerful “claims of history”. As O’Neill and Reeves have suggested, Spender’s willingness to rewrite and reinvent the “same” poem (even though it might little resemble its original) “implies a myth of the poet as explorer... This myth has attractions, but it blurs rather than sharpens one’s sense of Spender’s poetic achievement in the thirties.”

In fact, Spender’s continual re-evaluation and rewriting of his poems can incense the literary critic who requires some chronological historical neatness. In a recent piece in Notes and Queries, having discovered Spender poems in a 1970 copy of Shenandoah which differ significantly from their Collected Poems 1928-1985 versions, Arthur Sherbo comments that “In an abortive study of Spender’s verse I found that he appeared to be incapable of leaving well enough alone...” For the most part, however, Spender’s revisions tend to be slight and in the interests of a clearer grammar and sense – occasionally at the expense of vivid irrationalism; and he has been more likely to discard poems which he considers minor or “confused” rather than attempt to improve them.

I would like to examine an early example of Spender’s compositional process, which in this case occurs prior to the initial publication of one of the “Marston” poems, “Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing”, in Twenty Poems (1930). An early typescript draft of this poem exists which was sent by Spender from Hamburg to his friend Gabriel Carritt. The piece exhibits Spender’s fascination with the conflict between the isolated consciousness and the external social realm, and in this case is made more pointed by describing the difficulties of emotional expression where love is not reciprocated. It is based on Spender’s experiences with a fellow undergraduate at Oxford; “Marston” is the vigorous sporting idol and Spender the admirer, the classic love-struck aesthete. I have reproduced the Twenty Poems version followed by the earlier typescript version for the purpose of comparison:

* For example, Auden entirely disowned “Spain” (1937) and “September 1, 1939” (1939) on moral grounds, yet it is precisely poems such as these which are vital for an understanding of the English intellectuals’ reaction to the struggle against Fascism in Europe in the 1930s.
Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing
Not privy looks, hedged words, at times you saw.
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
Whose every movement had been missionary
A pleading tongue unheard. I had not thought
That you, who nothing else saw, would see this.

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.^*

(Twenty Poems)

Acts passed beyond the boundary of my eyes
Not privy looks, hedged words, at times you saw.
These blundering, heart-surrendered troopers were
Small presents made, and waiting for the tram.
Then once you said “waiting is 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:

Not Titans enslaved, those loud alarms
From fighting grief and lust, not wooing sleep
And holding back
The harsh night-plundering hours,
But minutes under lamps
Measured by beating rain.

So “very kind” was merest overflow
Something I did not reckon 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, a tide
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Which harnessed properly
Might give a city power, or drive a train.\(^59\)

(typescript – my italics)

It can readily be seen that the “boundary of my eyes” in the earlier draft corresponds to the sense of the isolated consciousness in “Beethoven’s Death Mask” and “At the Edge of Being”, while the published version sees this notion modified into the slightly more abstract “mere wishing”, which nevertheless is more accurate in a poem concerning repressed desire and the difficulty of action, rather than literal observation. Apart from the final lines which have been effectively compressed, the only change to the poem is the omission of the lines I have italicised. This discarded section is attempting to give a verbal description of the “inner turmoil” of the speaker, the besotted and unfulfilled lover. The “Titans enslaved” and “loud alarms” are suggestive of the notion of Beethoven’s Romantic sensibility encased within its “death mask” of deafness, portrayed in Shelleyan terms.

Spender is clearly attempting to dramatise in lyrical verse the failure, and futility, of purposive action coupled within an intensity of emotion which facilitates involuntary and fleeting gestures of affection. By postponing and reducing its description of the inner turmoil to “tricklings through a dam”, the published version possesses a double-effect of increasing the sense of feelings repressed, and locating the poem wholly within “Auden country”. It is strengthened by the removal of the “Titans” and the wild weather, and is now in a milieu of “trams”, “dams”, “factories” and “trains”. The only abstraction in the second version is the metaphorical army of the speaker’s emotional reserve, the “heart-surrendered troopers” and the lone “chance deserter”.

This is an example, of which there are many in Spender’s work, of his success in portraying the “vague sensation” by reference to its concrete effects or correspondences in the external world. Here, the “Audenesque” dam, and factory provide a motif which is both a projection of the individual’s emotional state onto the modern environment and an internalisation of the modern environment for the purposes of self-definition. Spender is quite literally making his work more Audenesque by this editing, and the removal of the heightened section actually increases the wry humour of the final lines.
Spender's subsequent conviction was that poetry reveals "external actuality as symbolic inner consciousness"; these lines are a manifestation of that method.60

To conclude, then, the elements which appear in Spender's poetry with some consistency are these: the obsessive desire to find the ideal verbal expression for his emotional experience, which is the endeavour of all lyric poets, but in Spender's case it is both a manifestation of his writing and one of its main subjects; his Romantically-based, and secularised, conception of the isolated self and its phenomenological detachment from the "outer" world of others (the realm of physical action and interaction, which is also the social and political domain); an ongoing concern with the political characteristics of even highly personalised language; and a manifest struggle between an ideal of expressionist poetry and a near-solipsistic scepticism as regards the ability of language to be personal at all. As Peter Ackroyd has suggested: Spender's 1930s work "has a resonance and immediacy that come from its direct connection with the period... one in which the exigencies of individuals in love or war, and the struggles of writers to find self-expression, become the emblems of change and meaning."61 It is the contention of this study that the frequent solipsism of Spender's verse achieves its most effective expression in the 1930s work, where it is challenged -- and hence dialectically defined -- by the infusion of political themes which represent objective, external responsibilities, and by an insistent moral discourse that is dictated by his compassionate response to the social crises of the decade.

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3 Ibid., p. 56.
7 Ibid., p. 9.
9 Ibid.
1. Critical Approach to the 1930s

11 Ibid., p. 2.
17 Ibid.
29 *Vision and Rhetoric*, p. 204.
31 Quoted in *The Thirties Poetry*, p. 37.
33 *World Within World*, New Introduction, p. xii.
34 *The Thirties Poetry*, p. 54.
39 *Poems*, p. 19.
41 *World Within World*, p. 71.
43 Ibid., p. 53.
45 Ibid., p. 48
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 *World Within World*, p. 93.
49 *World Within World*, p. 59.
50 Ibid., p. 60.
1. Critical Approach to the 1930s

52 Ibid., p. 47.
53 World Within World, p. 61.
56 Auden, MacNeice, Spender: The Thirties Poetry, p. 35.
58 Twenty Poems, p. 9.
59 "Acts passed beyond..." variant MS version on a letter to Gabriel Carritt sent from Hamburg circa 1930.
60 World Within World, p. 94.
2. *Nine Experiments* (1928) and *Twenty Poems* (1930)

During the summer vacation of 1928, at his home in Hampstead, the nineteen year old Stephen Spender typeset two pamphlets of poetry on a small hand press, both the debuts of their respective authors: one was *Poems* by his friend W.H. Auden, the other was his own *Nine Experiments* ("by S.H.S."). Spender's pamphlet was to lead directly to his first publication (other than in school and university magazines) courtesy of the American anthologist Louis Untermeyer (who was shown a copy by the poet Anna Wickham), although it is significant that Untermeyer didn't actually publish any of the *Experiments* themselves, but later compositions, in his anthology *Modern British Poetry* (1930). The reason for this is quite clear – certainly from Spender's point of view. *Nine Experiments* does not exist as far as his 1951 autobiography *World Within World* is concerned; it does not earn even a passing mention. Moreover, this keenness to erase the pamphlet from his personal literary history had taken a far more literal form in the months following its creation. He was to acknowledge it for the first time since the 1920s upon the publication of a facsimile edition by the University of Cincinnati in 1964, although he declined to re-read it even then, when he was to recall: "I later retrieved and destroyed as many copies of NINE EXPERIMENTS as possible... I did not publish anything 'worth preserving' until Blackwell's issued my TWENTY POEMS in 1930."

His extreme reaction against the pamphlet suggests considerable embarrassment. Throughout his career he was to be particularly emotionally susceptible to unfavourable critical responses to his poetry. Spender claims that this earliest incidence of his censorious shame was caused by a heavily negative (and not personally forthcoming) response to *Nine Experiments* by Auden, who had left Oxford that summer and whose comments reached Spender by means of their mutual friend Gabriel Carritt. In a 1979 journal, published in 1985, a reminiscence and attempted analysis of his early relationship with Auden immediately brings the pamphlet to mind. While he sees
2. *Nine Experiments* (1928) and *Twenty Poems* (1930)

Auden as "*sui generis*, not at all like other people and of an inhuman cleverness";* * Similar to Isherwood's description of Auden as a difficult genius, whose "pedantic objectivity" could infuriate as much as enlighten. (*Christopher and his Kind*, 1978, p. 271.)

Auden was to regard him as "a wild romantic, rather 'mad'". The cover blurb for Spender's *Poems* (1933) would promote the depiction of Spender as the enthused Romantic foil to Auden's reticent wit and intelligence. It is clearly the effusive character of *Nine Experiments* which Auden scorned. Of the pamphlet itself, Auden was "contemptuous", and Spender confirms that it "certainly was very bad". For good or ill, the *Experiments* were a powerfully formative experience in the young poet's career and his life-long relationship with Auden.

Writing in 1990, a far mellower Spender would claim at last to be more "tolerant" and less "ashamed" of the poems; not least because, in an ironic twist, an original copy of the decidedly rare item had recently been sold at auction for a sum of $57,500. Spender possessed no copy of his own, alas. It seems that the precise nature of the cutting remarks from Auden are beyond recall; all that is certain is that they ensured both the rarity of *Nine Experiments*, and Spender's disinclination to retain a copy. They were barbed enough — or Spender was characteristically sensitive enough — for them to have "had the effect of making me destroy every copy of *Nine Experiments* I could lay my hands on (sometimes stealing them from friends in order to do so)."*

There is a palpable sense in which this early example of self-censorship sets a precedent for Spender's later authorial tendency, which was continually to alter and even to obliterate parts of his published canon. Nevertheless, the poems in *Nine Experiments* undeniably pre-date what can be regarded as Spender's mature phase, which was to commence with those works (some written in 1928, prior to the printing of *Nine Experiments*) that soon appeared in the Blackwell's volume of 1930, his first "canonical" volume. Indeed, the eradication of these nine pieces of juvenilia — some of which have passages that are penned in a gauche undergraduate awe of Auden — may be said to have enabled the necessary emergence of a style that was autobiographical, more individualised, yet less abstractly affected and "mad". A.T. Tolley, in *The Poetry of the Thirties* (1975), seems perplexed that Auden's influence in the pamphlet is as minimal
as it is, considering Spender's professed admiration for him at the time, but it seems that, for the most part, the poems predate their meeting. Auden’s influence lies predominantly in the pamphlet’s scarcity.

It is quite clear that, even in 1928 (which was his first year at Oxford) Spender was keen to contextualize the verses as consignments to the past; the title itself fails to cast them in a particularly positive light. Not only are they “experiments” — a hesitant description at least — but we are also assured on the title sheet that they are “Poems Written at the Age of Eighteen”. Spender was, in the summer of 1928, not even a full year older than the “naïve” poet of the Experiments; but still, one might deduce that this seemed a considerable interval of time to the undergraduate, thrown into a heady and eccentric world of Oxford experience. He had only recently been introduced to some peers who were something of a legend — even then — albeit in small circles. Unlike Spender, who was naively forthright, the proto-novelist Christopher Isherwood and his deputy, the poet Wystan Auden, were impeccably aloof and intellectually severe. In fact, Isherwood had considerable status, no longer being an undergraduate, and Spender’s senior by five years.

The pair encouraged Spender’s muse, yet paradoxically enhanced his sense of relative underachievement due to his much-confessed, naively inordinate awe in their presence. Isherwood’s Lions and Shadows (1938) effectively portrays the affectionate condescension they felt towards the hopeful young fresher, renamed “Stephen Savage”, whose writing could be “very good indeed”, and who “was so absorbingly interested in himself, in his own sensations and in everybody who came into contact with him that you couldn’t help sharing his interest.” The flip side of Isherwood and Auden’s appreciation of Spender was a confused exasperation and irritation: “In fact, the experience was so vivid as to be quite painful. You blushed for him, you squirmed at his every faux-pas; you wanted, simultaneously, to kick and protect and shake him.” Spender’s embarrassment over the pamphlet may well have been the realisation that the older writers had been patronising him. As he suggests in the 1979 journal, recalling Auden: “I imagine he laughed at me a lot behind my back.”

At the time of printing the Experiments Spender was also embarking on the composition of new poems: short lyrics based on a torturously repressive romantic
fixation on a fellow undergraduate which would ultimately become the “Marston” poems, the best of which were to survive his entire career after their debut in *Twenty Poems*.

Seen in this light, there is a sense in which the production of *Nine Experiments* is an affected leave-taking of “cast-off” work, although this perhaps does little to explain fully the sheer extent of Spender’s subsequent shame, which might be seen as a retroactive embarrassment brought on by his increasing awareness of the attainability of “legitimate” publication courtesy of Untermeyer, Blackwell’s company, and T.S. Eliot’s *Criterion*, the latter of which was to print four of his poems in 1930.* Certainly, in the years immediately after 1928, as he moves into his stride as an assured, published poet, Spender doesn’t seem to be adhering to any mere whim of Auden’s, or adopting his idiosyncratic aesthetics in any direct manner; there is no immediate response on his part simply to “drop the ‘Shelley stunt’” as he was famously directed. On the contrary, the explicitly Shelleyan tendencies which Auden found so distasteful persist throughout his poetry of the 1930s; but it is undeniable that the affected madness and inscrutability of some of these nine poems were the first elements to be left behind, and Auden’s contribution to this is clear.

The poems of *Nine Experiments* are of conflicting styles and idioms, vaguely Romantic in their effusion, more Shelley than Blake although both poets are echoed. The pamphlet’s modernism is derivative of the “typographical opportunities” of Edith Sitwell,7 and the previously “ugly, anti-poetic and inhuman” elements present in the Eliot of *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*.8 It might be unwise to search too hard in so few lines for a variety of distinct influences, since their randomness is not indicative of a solid aesthetic agenda. As John Whitehead has pointed out, the *Experiments* do not exhibit many influences that couldn’t have been gleaned from Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*.9 Auden is certainly a shadowy presence, although at this point it seems that

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* The poems, dedicated to W.H. Auden, were early versions of “The Port”, “The Swan”, “Lines Written When Walking Down The Rhine”, and “Not to you I sighed. No not a word.”, all included in Blackwell’s *Twenty Poems (Criterion*, Vol. 9, October, 1930, pp. 32-4.) Ernst Robert Curtius, a Professor of Literature at Bonn University (and the acclaimed translator of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*) was keen to translate Spender’s poems, and Spender visited him and his wife in the autumn of 1930. Curtius encouraged Spender’s study of German literature, which resulted in translations of Stefan George, Hoelderlin and others in the following years.
his influence is notional— in the mordant, pseudo-religious worship of ugly, functional industry ("Come, Let Us Praise The Gasworks")— rather than prosodic. Auden had, at some point, claimed that the walk along the river past the gasworks was the most beautiful in Oxford. \(^\text{10}\) The poems are short and playful, and, for the most part, strongly in need of a subject. A short lyric entitled "Appeal" likens the cries of the poor to birds which "thud against a sullen pane", which, albeit clumsily, anticipates the dramatisation of an awkward class pity in the much anthologised "Moving through the Silent Crowd" of 1933; and the third section of "Epistle", in which the speaker boils "desperate coffee" while repressing passionate urges, anticipates the "Marston" poems of Twenty Poems, particularly "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing", the first version of which was to appear in Oxford Poetry the following year. \(^\text{11}\) But without exception they are all very much the work of a budding poet who is simply waiting to "happen."

Implicit in the "mad" style of the pamphlet's opening "Invocation", is an indication that the directionless muse of the schoolboy is being overcast by the wilful, if similarly aimless, rebelliousness of a first year undergraduate (there was certainly some degree of revision going on in between these poems' composition and their printing in the volume in 1928). It ends with the defiant (and hopefully not too earnest) exclamation "let all burn beneath my printed page!" \(^\text{12}\) Most notably, as the older Spender was eager to point out with reference to Nine Experiments, he was then at University College— "mad Shelley's college"— the historic proving ground of literary anarchy and atheism. He was a PPE student who longed for literature, and as he describes in World Within World, he very much considered the wearing of a red tie, the reading of poetry on a cushion in the quad, and the chanting aloud of Blake's lines to be the accepted form of affected defiance to the hard-playing and hard-drinking life of the college "hearties."

The Experiments show Spender "casting about in many directions for a style and a subject", as Whitehead has suggested. \(^\text{13}\) They pre-date the burgeoning political

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\(^\text{*} \) "Acts thrust beyond the boundary of mere wishing", Oxford Poetry, ed. Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender, Oxford, 1929. Note that the vigorous "acts thrust" of the first line was to be softened to the oddly parliamentary "acts passed" in subsequent versions of the poem. Spender's revisions prior to its appearance in Twenty Poems are discussed in the previous chapter.
awareness which was soon to be instrumental in his early recognition, and also the
infusion of a "heroic attitude" so much of its time (and evident at both extremes of the
political arena, from the black-shirts to the socialists) which he was to glean from the
striking imagery of Russian soviet films which he was to see in Berlin. This collection
also precedes, by one year, the monumental 1929, when, in Germany, in the midst of
highly formative experiences recounted in The Temple (written that year but revised and
first published in 1988), the twenty year old Spender was to first hear the name of Adolf
Hitler, and after a walking trip along the Rhine to write "In 1929", a powerful
visionary piece which depicts, with eerie prescience, the sense of a very particular
cultural crisis centred in Germany; a crisis which was, of course, to culminate in a
second world war, and was to inform, with great specificity, his poetry for the coming
decade. At the same time, even though they precede the maturity of experience and
assured style of the work soon to come, the poems of Nine Experiments depict an
unformed poet already on the creative trajectory which would lead to those styles and
preoccupations that characterised both him and his fellow Oxonian poets of the 1930s so
insistently. While not commensurate to its monetary value as a rare item by any means,
the pamphlet’s relevance to Spender’s œuvre is certain, even though it quite fairly
belongs outside that mutable body of work.

Interestingly, it is the gaudy “Gasworks” piece which perhaps most sharply
anticipates Spender’s subsequent industrial and political imagery: those stock 1930s
symbols which came to communicate the complexly sympathetic, bourgeois response
which he and his peers were to have to socialist thought during the Depression. Indeed,
certain lines – such as the description of the figurative “mechanization” of the speaker –
seem teasingly to refer to common imagery of machine-anxiety in the 1920s, a useful
correlative being Fritz Lang’s 1927 film epic Metropolis, although at this point it is not
a source for Spender’s abstract meditation on the power station:

And man, the grimmest, starkest
Of all those intimate machines; the harshest
Grate grate. I’d love
In an archaically perfect mechanic to move
With clockwork limbs. Out out, brief love!
Of course, although the imagery is familiar, Spender is not expressing machine “anxiety” here, but a futurist embracing (literally, in this case) of the Machine Age. This is an early formulation of Spender’s portrayal of the “Pylons” that stand dwarfing the quaint countryside, or the monumental “Express” that nature “shall never equal”. It also anticipates the “love enough to run a factory on”, in the materialist-expressionist love poem “Acts passed ...”

Spender’s apparent ambivalence to the wonder and achievement of industrial modernity – a lyrical celebration which is infused with an ironic acknowledgement of the unsubtle destruction of an old sensual order which such mechanisation brings, seems to precede his later conception of its role as an external, “Lawrentian” manifestation of man’s will and imagination. His early 1930s work will see this ambivalence mirrored in his expressions of political affiliation and social conscience. Most importantly, suggestions of physical love persist when Spender addresses these themes. Again and again, Spender’s descriptions of the proletariat and the workers and their mythical “factory” milieu are given a sensual overtone, and this tendency continues throughout the decade, including the proletarian masses in Vienna and the working-class soldiers in his poems on the Spanish War.*

Even in this juvenile collection, Spender’s bourgeois (the term he was to claim unashamedly for himself and his work) response to the exigencies of 1930s public life and discourse in England is anticipated in the crude phrasing and titling of the 1928 poem. In terms of the development of this strain in Spender’s poetry, the interests and themes of D.H. Lawrence must not be overlooked in as far as they were to inform its increasingly moral, social agenda. He was about to enter a phase of reading Lawrence’s fiction and essays voraciously.16 In Nine Experiments Spender has yet to be swayed fully by the commanding influence of Lawrentian vitalism, which will be discussed in greater detail in the context of his long poem Vienna (1934). The “heroic attitude” of Soviet and German film and literature similarly has yet to fuse with Spender’s growing

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* Valentine Cunningham has a reductive analysis of the Hellenic idealism of the 1930s generation: “Without doubt, the widespread homosexuality helped entrench some immaturely lopsided views. Much of the period’s writing about the proletariat is vitiated by the bourgeois bugger’s specialist regard.” (Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties, Oxford, 1988, p. 150.)
apprehension of Lawrence’s moral injunctions to those overly-intellectual and ineffectual youths among whom the young Spender counted himself. It is important to note that, despite his subsequent political discourse, prior to any particular party affiliation, the “truly great” in “I think continually…”, and the express trains and pylons sweeping the countryside in their eponymous poems, are all “praised” in a language and method equally as reminiscent of the right-wing Italian Futurists as they are expressive of the poet’s socialist affiliations. But the notions of physical vitality and social responsibility are from this point always to be fused in Spender’s conception of the class struggle.

In Spender’s verse, evocative images of strength and greatness tend to transcend the writer’s political allegiance, and when moved beyond the secure 1930s context of politically committed discourse they become amenable to a variety of interpretations or potential propagandist uses. The ostensibly socialist orientation of this young “parlour Bolshevik” (George Orwell’s wryly damning tag) doesn’t, for example, prevent his poem “I think continually…” from being a favoured source for aptly heroic quotation by Republican and Democratic American Presidents alike (although one feels that the White House speech-writers need no reminding whatsoever of the amenability of stirring rhetoric to a variety of needs).*

I am suggesting that Spender’s uncertain sense of political affiliation – or of a social responsibility beyond mere pity – is not something which he was simply to “grow out of”, but that it is a characteristic which was, within two years time, to be complicated and disguised – rather than eradicated – by his growing conviction of the necessity of revolutionary politics in the social world beyond literature. Spender’s purist passion poetry was to be overcast by the anxiety of his social conscience, and as a result of his willing presentation, courtesy of Michael Roberts, as a political poet.

* President Clinton quoted the final lines at a memorial service in 1996, while President Reagan (likely thanks to Peggy Noonan, his speechwriter) paraphrased them in his speech to the gathered survivors of the D-Day landings on the fortieth anniversary at Point de Hoc, Normandy, 6 June 1984. Addressing the veteran American Rangers: “These are the boys of Pointe de Hoc. These are the men who took the cliffs. These are the champions who helped free a continent. These are the heroes who helped end a war. Gentlemen, I look at you and I think of the words of Stephen Spender’s poem. You are men who ‘in your lives fought for life…and left the vivid air signed with your honor.’ ” The poem was also read in full at the inauguration of the Kennedy Library in Washington D.C. in 1965.
Certainly, for one who became known for a time as a “pylon poet” (eventually unhappily so: his best-known and definitive poems are perversely absent from his 1940 Selected Poems), Spender’s pre-industrial, Romantic exuberance is never really repressed. In “I think continually…” we are exhorted “Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother / With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit”. It is in such moments that Spender hints at a latent reactionary sensibility in his literary heritage, and one which lies closer to the Georgians and the Yeats of “Innisfree” than Prufrock’s nocturnal wanderings through urban fog. Even in the aborted Nine Experiments it is quite possible to detect the rumblings of an antagonism between an exuberant idealism, a tendency towards rural nostalgia, and a modernist embracing and “celebration” of the minutiae and ugly side-alleys of metropolitan existence.

It was Eliot’s example that demonstrated to Spender, and so many of his post-war contemporaries, “that modern life could be material for art, and that the poet, instead of having to set himself apart from his time, could create out of an acceptance of it”. But Spender never loses touch with the need to escape from the contingencies of “his time” in his poetry, to establish this as a counterpoint to the material of modern life. Interestingly, in his autobiography Spender suggests that he was to see the Soviet propaganda films such as Eisenstein’s Potemkin (1925) as cinematic, “Modernist answers to The Waste Land”. With their appeal to a sense of positive, concerted social action, “they extolled a heroic attitude which had not yet become officialized.” This is compelling evidence for an internal struggle in his poetry, nascent in the Experiments, that establishes the aesthetic dilemma of the 1930s shortly before his career, or the monumental decade itself, had commenced.

The Experiments are essentially evidence of the young poet uncertainly discovering his craft; no doubt part of Spender’s justifiable desire to suppress the poems is the fact that their publication encourages the sense of a writer unwisely practising in public. The poems exhibit a tendency to redundant word-play, and self-conscious references that overpower the latent qualities of the verse. In “Epistle”, dedicated to G.C. (Carritt), the author makes explicit his self-consciousness over the tenor of his descriptions:
Let us take beauty frankly...
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.

Spender is toying with the tonal conflict between lyrical "prettification" and a modernist "butchery" of language. Undeniably the tone is ironic, yet the playful young poet seems guilty of the habits he claims to dismiss:

Obdurately I dreamt I was that king
All youth dreams: with how vain a muse
Painted the rose, and once more did confuse
Sordidly abstract words: now not a curse,
No, not a tedious gesture we rehearse
On this drab stage, I would sooner cast away
Than envied youth.

The faux world-weary tone discounts the "tedious gesture" of versification. And then, lines later:

I am sick of rhyming, Gabriel, life goes too madly
For this pleasant tinkling... So I did badly
With 'limbs' and 'things'! I am harshly sick
Of all, but a harshly-perfect music...

It is important not to be too harsh on a privately printed edition, given to friends, and containing more than a few private and now inscrutable jokes. Auden, for one, made a firm reputation on his cryptic references to friends in his work, notably in The Orators, his most audacious example of studied obscurity within assured verse and prose.

Still, there is a case here in which Spender's jovial self-consciousness is symptomatic of a more important tendency that operates behind it; what comes across in this pamphlet as the mere lack of an applicable subject for the verse simultaneously expresses a genuine anxiety over form and method, despite the fact that it is perhaps too self-conscious to be very effective. Spender was shortly to shift into the use of a freer verse form: most of his memorable work from the 1930s was to be in a relaxed metre and would see rhyming largely being subordinated to the requirements of a precision of
emotional expression, his work functioning at its best when any anxiety over the form is outweighed by the assured nature of the poem’s statement of a self-discovered conviction. This is not to suggest that vers libre was by any means a radical concept at this point, but it is important to remember that a strong Georgian “non-recognition” of modern life and aesthetics still held English poetry and the young would-be poets largely in its sway, and in such a context Eliot and his ilk still represented an unusual, even exotic model to a youthful writer casting about for inspiration and methods.

The experimentalism of Joyce, and in poetry, Edith Sitwell (although she remained wholly objectionable to some of Spender’s contemporaries such as Geoffrey Grigson) was an appealing alternative to a wilfully blind-sighted ruralism and balladry at a time of economic crisis and post-war despair, even if, in these early stages, real literary experimentalism only goes so far as providing Spender’s modest pamphlet with its title.

Twelve Poems (1930)

Recalling his time at Oxford in a 1970 interview, Spender indicates the origins of the emergent style that would culminate in Twelve Poems (1930):

> If I had never met Auden – I was at Oxford with Auden, and then I was writing extremely romantic poetry – then I would be much closer to those neo-Romantic poets of the forties. Whether this would have been a good thing or not I don’t know. Before meeting Auden I was writing extremely bad poetry. Terribly romantic outpourings, and enormous quantities of them. I wrote three or four poems a day sometimes. Therefore it was possible, it seemed of great benefit, to completely change my attitude, and to write poetry much more consciously and in a much more workmanly kind of way. On the other hand, I sometimes think that perhaps I suppressed some kind of romantic urge that might have had an interesting development.22

In fact it was the shift away from mere “romantic outpourings” which marks Twelve Poems as a huge advancement on the Experiments; Spender is working towards lyrical verse that explicitly dramatises a continual suppression of the romantic urge – there is an infusion of emotional self-consciousness into the poet’s persona, no doubt partly a
result of the contrasting influence of Auden's "detached" method. The result is that Spender's 1930 collection portrays the marshalling of opposing forces, the controlling of the romantic sensibility that will be further developed in Poems (1933).*

This conscious aesthetic suppression correlates directly to the dramatic descriptions of suppressed passion and affection in his unrequited love for the mysterious "Marston", who is the subject of the love poems that make up half of the collection. As seen in the previous chapter, "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing" – the seventh "Marston" poem – is perhaps the most adept dramatisation of Spender's conceived inner struggle, and his denial of instinctive "romantic outpourings". In this poem a merest touching of hands becomes the formal and emotional climax of the piece: the intense emotional life finds its physical expression in a minuscule gesture, and finds its metaphorical correlative in the imagery of modern industry and automation. Moreover, as the manuscript version demonstrates, the "Shelleyan" coterie of classical beings (clichéd romantic poetics once thought commensurate to Spender's epic sense of his undergraduate emotional life) has been abandoned in favour of an austere but vivid twentieth-century aesthetic.

At the same time, the idea that Spender fully adopted Auden's critique of his style and revised accordingly is simply not accurate. The "Marston" poems were composed prior to his first meeting with Auden in spring 1928, and both poets seem to have happily accepted their dialectical differences of taste and temperament without the need for uniformity. Spender's abandoned early novel "Instead of Death",* on which he worked through the summer and autumn of 1928, and which appears to relate Spender's experiences that year with very little fictionalisation, makes it apparent that both seemed to relish their clashing sensibilities. Benjamin Saschen (Spender) gives Vernon Hunter (Auden) two poems and a journal to read, and they discuss the work over a rather formal picnic. Although unimpressed by Saschen's style, Hunter asserts that "the important thing is that everything that happens to you seems unique and interesting and has a quality as though it had never happened to anyone before. God, how I envy you!"* The

* A typescript from summer 1927, the summer before he went up to Oxford, demonstrates Spender's prolific early output: each minor incident of his summer vacation occasions a lyrical meditation.
poems in question are “Saying good morning” and “His figure passes”, two of the Marston poems which would appear in *Twenty Poems*. Hunter dismisses Saschen’s heightened emotional sensitivity as “trash,” yet paradoxically admires the directness of feeling. Saschen seems resolute that his vocation is to relate his experience as it was felt, regardless of absurdity or formal weakness, and Hunter relishes his determination. Significantly, the poems were entirely unchanged when finally published.

Despite the fact that Spender had *Twenty Poems* privately printed, intending to cover his costs by sales to friends and family, he despatched it widely and received many favourable responses, not least (indirectly) from Virginia Woolf, bolstering his introduction to Bloomsbury society (and the continued satirical attention of Wyndham Lewis), and also T.S. Eliot, who selected four of the poems for inclusion in the *Criterion* in October of that year. *Twenty Poems* was as audacious a debut as *Nine Experiments* had been a regrettable false start; moreover, ten of the poems (including four of the “Marston” poems) would reappear in *Poems* (1933), his Faber debut, and his definitive (widely-distributed) introduction as a solo published poet after the *New Signatures* anthology of 1932.

The first and last poems of the collection provide its philosophical “frame”: “At the Edge of Being” and “Beethoven’s Death Mask”. “At the Edge of Being” was, according to Spender’s own prefatory note, composed most recently, while the rest of the collection follows a predominately chronological order. This poem is the first statement of the fundamental phenomenological scepticism that is to permeate his poetry of the next two decades. It was also to provide the title for his 1949 volume *The Edge of Being*, proof of its persistent thematic significance to him, and it also establishes the conceptual basis of *The Still Centre* (1939), a volume which reasserts the primacy of the individual self, that it is distinct from the social disorder of the mid-thirties and the recent political allegiance demanded by the Spanish War:

I think that there is a certain pressure of external events on poets today, making them tend to write about what is outside their own limited experience. The violence of the

**It was Virginia Woolf who encouraged Spender to abandon “Instead of Death”, before he went on to work on *The Temple*, which would deal with his experiences in Germany.**
times we are living in, the necessity of sweeping and general and immediate action, tend to dwarf the experience of the individual, and to make his immediate environment and occupations perhaps something that he is even ashamed of.  

In Twenty Poems, however, the "pressure of external events" is not yet sufficient to push Spender beyond personal experiences for his subject matter, and the conflict between the internal life and external phenomenon is, for the most part, embodied in personal relations rather than political ones. "At the Edge of Being" examines Spender's detached, secular philosophy in its relation to lyrical verse and to love.

Although it opens the collection, the indication by Spender that it has been composed most recently signals that it is to be read as an introduction, or a thematic summation, of the poems that follow. Taken in this manner it is particularly illuminating; indeed, it contains verbal allusions to several poems in the collection: "Beethoven's Death Mask", "Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing", and "Not to you I sighed"; Spender establishes the thematic unity of sensual denial and philosophical isolation; the awkward suffering of his limited romantic success at Oxford, of which the character "Marston" seems to be the assigned amalgam, is fused with the conception of the isolated, aesthetically romantic sensibility which is being wilfully stifled by the young poet, who is seeking more modern correlatives for his expression:

Never being, but always at the edge of Being  
My head, like Death-mask, is brought into the Sun.  
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.  
Observing rose, gold, eyes, an admired landscape,  
My senses record the act of wishing  
Wishing to be  
Rose, gold, landscape or another—  
Claiming fulfilment in the act of loving.  

Here, the "act of loving" is defined by its physical expression, those actions which, in the correlating "Marston" poem, pass "beyond the boundary" of simple desire, or "wishing". The speaker's inner desires and observations are meaningless (or non-
existent – “never being”) until they attain physical manifestation in positive action or in poetic statement. The question of whether a poem can itself constitute a positive action would be an escalating debate as the decade developed, as political specificity began to encroach upon British verse.

There is no suggestion of reciprocity here, either. In the case of Marston, Spender’s affections are tolerated – coolly – but never returned, yet the poem asserts that simply the act of loving, the outward expression of his infatuation, is a justifiable end in itself. Of course, this is a “fulfilment” that the speaker does not allow himself to reach since, having suspended “the act of wishing” across the clause of the penultimate line, the resolution suggested remains only a wish to act, and not an action.

This evocation of tortured isolation recalls the late work of W.B. Yeats, who is entirely contemporaneous with the young Spender in this period when “high” modernism and “late” modernism occupy an identical time frame. The second sentence of Spender’s poem, from “The Shadow pointing” to “lean outward for seeing” is close in both tone and theme to “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928), indeed, it is a phenomenological rewriting of Yeats’s lament for old age:

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
   A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
   Soul clap its hand and sing, and louder sing
   For every tatter in its mortal dress

Yeats’s caveat that only joyous action can invigorate the ageing self (“unless / Soul claps its hand and sing”) is echoed by the inactive speaker of Spender’s poem (“never nearer... than touching / Though the Spirit lean outward for seeing”). Spender hardly has the burden of an ageing body to hold him back, but he restates the notion that despite the sensual reverie implicit in the artist’s perception of affecting phenomena (“rose, gold, eyes, an admired landscape”), this is still non-being if it is not accompanied by action. With reference to “Beethoven’s Death Mask”, and the composer’s own symbolic aural detachment from the medium of his creativity, the implication is that in verse an un-acted desire may find an alternative outlet as communicable art.
Despite the ubiquity of *The Waste Land* and its erudite evocation of a crumbling Europe, Yeats is as influential as Eliot on Spender and his generation; particularly relevant to Spender’s creative temperament, Yeats did not share Eliot’s scepticism towards (or distaste for) the Romantic poets, yet he had specifically endeavoured to move beyond the “Celtic Twilight” balladry of his early work into a modern idiom which actively incorporated his social and political themes. As with Eliot, Ezra Pound had been an important contributor to the “modernisation” of Yeats’s work (and famously, not always to Yeats’s pleasure), yet the echoes of the Irish poet’s mystical background continued to inform the thematic architecture of his poetry.

Allen Tate, reviewing Spender’s *Poems* (1933) in *New Verse*, would specifically note the Yeatsian connection “he has obviously studied the later Yeats, but without trying to become Yeats”; Tate perceives traces of the older poet in Spender’s metrical constructions.

Later, writing on Yeats’s work in the *Criterion* in 1934, Spender would concur that it is Yeats’s philosophical curiosity rather than his arcane Theosophical system that interests him:

> What one admires in his poetry are in fact not the mystery, the magic, or even the atmosphere: but the passion, the humanity, the technical perfection, the integrity, the strength, the reality and the opportunism.

> Why then is this romantic façade at all necessary? Or, since it exists, why does it not falsify the whole poetry? The answer is that Yeats’ poetry is poetry devoid of any unifying moral subject and always in search of one. With much wisdom as it is, yet he offers no philosophy of life; but, as a substitute, a magical system which, where it does not seem rhetorical, is analytic, instead of constructive.

Spender’s poetry shares Yeats’s continuing search for a philosophy, though he is far less willing to embrace systems of thought, preferring to limit his explorations to terms of emotional immediacy and rational scepticism. Yet there is a nod to the occultism of Yeats’s creative approach when, in the second of the “Marston” poems, “The Dust Made Flesh”, he self-consciously conjures the characters of four disparate friends who are “fixed like rocks / On Europe”. The heroic, sporting Marston is to be admired, above all, “the superb boxer,” who,

> ...ski-ed through snow,
2. Nine Experiments (1928) and Twenty Poems (1930)

Curved through whiteness, ran,
Helmeted drove through air,
- A balanced winner backed by all the crowd

Then “dark-eyed” Helen, and Catherine who, for an obscure reason, “despised me even when in womb”, and lastly “Ainger the poet”, who likely represents Auden,

...severe, voiced raucous-reed,
With fascinating facets of crude mind,
An enormous percipient mass on the plain.29

These figures, like Yeats’s homunculi, are “made”, “formed” and “conceived”; recast as characters within his poem, they are honoured and enshrined: “These made, these loved again their souls arise”.30 Spender, though eschewing religion, clearly finds the notion of poetry as incantatory, creative magic to be an appealing conceit.

Though the identities of the individuals whom Spender evokes remain undisclosed, what is apparent is a conscious act of personalised myth-making. “Discovered in Mid-Ocean”, the first “Marston” poem, is an implicit description of Marston himself, and is an early example of the search for heroic figures which will begin to dominate literature of the period, portrayed with ever-decreasing scepticism; here, Spender’s treatment is a long way from the unreserved enthusiasm of “I think continually” and portrays its airborne hero with flat irony:

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...31

The inherent romantic tragedy is offset by the alternating metre, creating an uncertain tone of wry bathos.

The unfolding drama of the poem sequence establishes that Marston is the unwitting object of the poet’s obsession, and far more mundane than an Icarus, though equally disappointing. Spender’s subsequent analysis in World Within World suggests
that it was the unsophisticated, Lawrentian directness in Marston’s character that appealed to his anti-intellectual yearnings:

Marston was someone with whom I had few interests in common. 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 – for he was already training to be a pilot.\(^\text{32}\)

Writing in 1951, Spender is surprisingly candid about the intensity of his feelings for Marston, and that fact that his attraction was unquestionably homosexual, though unreciprocated. At the same time, Spender is suspicious of the term, regarding it as a restricting, false label: “As a result of this tendency to give themselves labels, people feel forced to make a choice which, in past times, was not made.”\(^\text{33}\)

The third poem consolidates the notion suggested in “The Dust Made Flesh” that Marston is a phantom presence; this suggests that he belongs to past experience, but also that his relation to the speaker is one-sided, that there is a hollowness in the relationship:

\[
\text{His figure passes, and I confess} \\
\text{No suddenness of pain, but an old pain} \\
\text{More constant in the heart that heart lives by}^{\text{34}}
\]

The implicit narrative continues with “Not to you I sighed”, a lyric which reveals the extent of the speaker’s suppressed emotion; it introduces the internalised melodrama which provides the basis for “Acts passed, though without the latter poem’s sardonic humour:

\[
\text{Not to you I sighed. No not a word.} \\
\text{We climbed together. Any feeling was} \\
\text{Formed with the hills. It was like trees’ unheard} \\
\text{And monumental sign of country peace.}
\]

\[
\text{But next day stumbling, panting up dark stairs,} \\
\text{Rushing in room and door flung wide, I knew.} \\
\text{Oh empty walls, book-carcases, blank chairs} \\
\text{All splintered in my head and cried for you.}\(^\text{35}\)
\]
The lyric refers to a walking tour of the Wye that Spender took with Marston, including a visit to Tintern Abbey in honour of Wordsworth. Spender recalls in World Within World the embarrassing anti-climax of reading Wordsworth's poem to the bored Marston. He describes the trip as "a depressing failure", realising that his enthusiasm for literature and the historical reverberations of the landscape are not shared: "I soon realised that for him the walking was just walking." The entire experience is reduced to two stanzas which provide an effective double-formulation of the internal and external conflict introduced in the opening poem. As with the emphatic "never" of "Never being", the repetition of "not" in the first line restates the tragic inability of the speaker to express his emotion in Marston's company; in the first stanza, inner feelings seem to be suppressed by the landscape. In an unusual inversion of the romantic trope, the feeling "formed with the hills" is a silence, a "monumental" non-expression.

The explosion of emotion in the mirroring second stanza is possible only in the privacy of the speaker's confined room, a liminal realm of security and isolation which provides a stark contrast to the rural expanse. The violence of the final two lines is intense yet figurative; the latent rage which they imply does not result in any actual damage, yet the effect is all the more vivid for the implied bitterness of the outburst. Particularly, there is a suggestion of resentment, that (in the young aesthete's eyes) the "hearty" and artless Marston had somehow managed to remove the environment's literary appeal by his sheer indifference.

The ordering of the "Marston" poems within Twenty Poems provides a considerable degree of their textual meaning; there is a clear emergent narrative which wavers between over-seriousness and comic deflation in individual lyrics. Appropriately, after this heightened emotive realisation that his affections are not reciprocated in "Not to you", Spender then draws attention to the pettiness and mundane reality of this "aristocrat" and "superb boxer"; "Marston, dropping it in the grate, broke his pipe" is an unequivocal deflation of any potentially romantic celebration of his subject.

Julian Symons was to recall of this poem: "I once spent part of an evening trying to convince a young critic that [the opening line] ... was both memorable and original, a line that could not have been written with that style and punctuation even five
Marston, dropping it in the grate, broke his pipe.
Nothing hung on this act, it was no symbol
Ludicrous for calamity, but merely ludicrous.  

Marston’s pipe, a “heavy-wrought briar with the great pine face” is dismissed as his “absurd relic” from an Alpine trek and journey along the Danube. There is no sense of grandeur for the mighty mountain range celebrated by Wordsworth and Shelley, but there is the suggestion that Marston’s eagerness to spend “his last money” on such a souvenir, and implicitly to regret its loss – is to have been oblivious to the sublime nature of the landscape. On the one hand, Spender’s anti-romantic tone is simply a mode by means of which Marston’s limited appreciation – and questionable taste – are lampooned, but on the other it maintains a motif of the intrusion of mundane actuality into a state of romantic reverie which is repeated throughout the collection: the mundane having its most forthright expression in “An ‘I’ can never be Great Man”. Marston’s “pilgrimage” home without food, having spent all his money on the pipe, is to be seen as pointless, and not something worthy of either regret or admiration.

It is at this point in the sequence that the best of the “Marston” poems appears, “Acts passed beyond the boundary of mere wishing”. It is once again a depiction of the speaker’s intense feelings towards an essentially oblivious Marston, juxtaposed with the minimal expression of this intensity in physical action. The besotted Spender scrutinises the object of his obsession for “secret signs by which I would know whether or not he cared.” The composition of this poem has been examined in the previous chapter, but the important fact to note is how differently the poem communicates within the context of the “Marston” poems. Marston has already been depicted as a deflated hero, with “ludicrous” insignificance of action, despite his sporting and aeronautical “achievements.”

So a lyric that, in isolation, provides no information about the object of the speaker’s affection (other than that he, “who nothing else saw”, notices that the speaker
waited unnecessarily for him in an act of apparent kindness), in the context of the other "Marston" poems leaves the reader in no doubt that the speaker is acutely aware that his feelings are disproportionate. In this way the poem – which sharply and humorously depicts the hidden torment of infatuation – implicitly signals the realism that underlies the romantic illusion. Simultaneously, the poem's historical significance derives from the fact that the speaker describes his scarcely-controllable emotional surge in military – actually revolutionary – terms, and the poem achieves its wry conclusion by invoking the kinetic emblems of the machine age that are to play such a prominent role in the success of Poems. Importantly too, as O'Neill and Reeves have noted, despite its exuberant style and forceful imagery the poem is wholly confined to Spender's consciousness; it is an emotional performance entirely based upon a single, fleeting touch of hands. Spender's silent hysteria casts him in a grotesque light, yet the simplicity and strength of the emotion is immediately sympathetic; he is implicitly aware of his absurdity, knowing that "there was something fussy and old-womanish about my pursuit of a person who met my enthusiasm with quiet politeness."

"Lying Awake at Night" and "Constant April" return to the spring walking holiday for their subject. The former, describing the sleeping Marston, is another short two-stanza lyric that once again contrasts the speaker's romantic celebration of his hero with a persistent suggestion that the reality of its subject is not so impressive. Anticipating the phrasing of "I think continually", Marston is both "born of light" and "born of nature, among men most divine, / He copied, and was our sun"; yet this hyperbole is reversed in the final three lines, in which Marston's supposedly titanic demeanour is stated and then immediately diminished by a far less dynamic description:

And his mood was thunder
For anger,
But mostly a calm, English one.

"Constant April", with its gentle half-rhymes, is a less reservedly affectionate portrait of Marston,

... when you laughed, your laughter
Was like the bright cascade
The sun sheds on a cloud,
2. *Nine Experiments* (1928) and *Twenty Poems* (1930)

With its faint shadow after.

Yet the stanzaic form is once more employed to counter the positive mood when the final stanza provides a subtle intimation of Marston’s discomfort:

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And, if you frowned, your frowning
   Was knit as light as these
     Slight showers, that shake the trees
And gleam across the morning.43
```

In the lover’s eyes, even Marston’s mild suffering becomes merely a transient blemish on a beautiful landscape, a natural “shower” which has its own aesthetic appeal. The fact that this suffering is caused by the speaker’s over-zealous attention does nothing to diminish his pleasure in recollection. Marston’s stoical “constancy” is actually the cause of the unhappiness of the “Marston” poems; Spender repeatedly craves a reaction, good or bad – Marston’s indifference is the cruellest possible response to the poet’s gauche advances.

The penultimate “Marston” poem urges an end to the suffering of both parties. Having reached the point of incidental meetings in which “slight words / Fall cumbrously about our feet, like swords”, the second stanza is a sensitive declaration of the need for an emotional closure to put a stop to a very English awkwardness:

```
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. We should not meet
  So lightly. Let us break our hearts
Not casually, but on a stated day.44
```

On the one hand, this is a moving, understated portrayal of a withering relationship, and the speaker’s understandable demand for an end-point that will enshrine and “book-end” his memories, not sullying them with a mundane upkeep of shallow acquaintance. Yet on the other, as the sequence of poems has demonstrated, the speaker repeatedly has been striving – and failing – to imbue the relationship with unequivocal romantic grandeur; there is an undeniably comic element at work in this melodramatic endeavour to create an intense romance out of an unreciprocated undergraduate crush. In fact, it is
this humanising self-consciousness which Auden’s interpretation (as related in “Instead of Death”) appears to miss. In World Within World Spender notes how his final declaration of the intensity of his feelings was met with bemusement and incomprehension, resulting in excruciating embarrassment for him. Auden observed that Spender’s most important attribute was his capacity for humiliation. Yet, as a result of his pursuit of Marston and its ignoble failure he is led, “to write poems different from any others I had done. A concrete situation had suddenly crystallised feelings which until then had been diffused and found no object.”

With Marston as his muse, Spender’s love lyrics exhibit a realism imbued by his awareness of the absurdity of his infatuation even while he acts upon it, and an understanding that its development is unlikely, or impossible. The effect of this is to ground Spender’s romantic hyperbole within a consciousness that is self-critical and ironic. This is an emotional maturity far beyond that of Nine Experiments, and an awareness of this playful tone is vital to an understanding of Spender’s early verse; his apparent rhetorical excesses are frequently underscored by a self-conscious questioning of the usefulness of literary idealism. As in Romantic poetry proper, a palpable sense of the stark reality from which the Ideal offers escape is never far away. In the “Marston” sequence, this stark reality is the unremarkable nature of the poet’s chosen object; Marston is hero-worshipped in spite of – even because of – his “ordinariness,” which nevertheless persistently intrudes upon the poems.

In this way, the “terribly romantic outpourings” that Auden had censured at Oxford are not abandoned, but rather are placed within a wider context that is sceptical and self-critical, yet does not relinquish its romantic optimism. Spender’s social theme has not yet significantly entered into his poetry, and thus its solipsism – the heightened sense of the importance of his own feelings – is not balanced by the altruistic conscience that emerges in Poems (1933), “I had days when I was seriously unhappy because I could not see then that unhappiness, unless it has a permanent physical or economic or psychological cause, is only a mood.” In subsequent years his bourgeois “guilt” would alter the way in which he would portray such subject matter.

The final poem in the sequence, “The Port” is a drastic tonal (and geographical) shift away from Marston and the obsessive focus on Spender’s infatuation. Inspired by
his 1929 vacation in Germany, it is a description of the streets of Hamburg during the summer of sexual awakening which he was to fictionalise in *The Temple* (drafted in the following years, and finally published – after much revision – in 1988). It is a short ballad in the manner of Baudelaire, via T.S. Eliot’s Anglicised metrics, and it is a significant transition away from the self-contemplating poetic “I” to an anonymous and all-seeing observer.

For the first time in the collection, Spender’s language is consciously fixed upon external phenomena, as befits an eye-opening jaunt through this harbour district where – in stark contrast to his Oxford experience – there is blatant and gaudy sexual freedom: “the pale lily boys flaunt their bright lips, / such pretty cups for money” while, in lurid contrast their seniors, “the older whores / Skuttle rat-toothed into the dark outdoors”. There is a hint of the fascination of pestilence and decay made so alluring in Baudelaire’s decadent Paris and in Eliot’s grubby London, yet here it is energised by the frisson of sexual discovery:

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

These men are “hopelessly” drawn by the idealised sensual allure, despite its sordid reality, yet when “Smile dawns with a harsh lightning, there’s no speaking, / And far from lapping laughter, all’s parched and hard.” Like Marston’s unrealised “solar” heroism, the anticipated “sun” of these “flaring” cheap boudoirs proves to be merely “harsh” lights, and the “magic lantern faces” are in fact worn and weary, toughened by experience.

Presumably it is the “pale lily boys” that most interest the twenty year old Spender in his last long vacation before his final year at Oxford, yet the second stanza does not dwell on the prostitution of the seaport, it instead moves on in its swift sketch to take in the personified ocean to the north, who “exerts his huge mandate”, and then south to where the merchants live in stark (and perhaps *admonishing*) contrast to the licentious denizens of the sex district. With no need to hide their imperfections, “Well-
fed, well-lit, well-spoken men are these, / With bronze-faced sons, and happy in their daughters." Such brazenly functional family units, with their healthy sons and daughters suggest a neat dialectical alternative to the pale boys and "rat-toothed" whores whose income has none of the wholesomeness of trading legitimate wares. Yet Spender applies no explicit moral judgement to the piece, the dirt and decadence appear to be formal tropes to be delighted in rather than to be condemned, and, if anything, the cartoon-like self-satisfaction of the merchants is to be derided.

The first of the remaining eight poems (which are titled "Other Poems") is perhaps the most significant in the entire collection. "Written Whilst Walking Down the Rhine" (to be re-titled "In 1929" in Poems) is a portentous snapshot of Europe's youth at the peaceful midpoint between two world wars which define them as national enemies. During September, at the end of his summer vacation, Spender took a walking holiday along the Rhine with Herbert List, a German photographer (a friend of Erich Alport; Spender had met Alport at Oxford and stayed with him at his parents' house in Hamburg that summer) and Heinrich, a young communist. Spender chose to include the poem as an epilogue to The Temple, and chapter four of the autobiographical novel describes the journey:

[Heinrich] was standing by the river, undressing. For now it was midday, the time when, with much fooling around, Joachim [Herbert] would give Heinrich his swimming lesson. After that was finished, they would eat a picnic lunch which they had bought from the previous night's hotel. They ate very little during the day. Thus the evening meal, when they ate a lot and drank Rhine wine, formed the climax of the day. They would sleep early because they were tired after the day outdoors."

"Written Whilst Walking Down the Rhine" establishes an assured historical, internationalist perspective, all the more striking for its mature breadth of scope after the navel-gazing tendency of the "Marston" poems:

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.
The disarming companionship between these youths whose fathers were bitter enemies is given an additional resonance in that they have met in a “new”, socially optimistic era in Germany’s history, where the cult of the body (the “temple”) and the resurgence of sun worship have brought the young men together as equals who are open to future experience, stripped of clothes, distrust, and nationalist antagonism. All of this set against the sobering backdrop of economic recession. For Spender, though they are of a kind – healthy young men with homosexual leanings – they are still each utterly distinguished, and disunited, by their nationality. There is no neutrality or blurring of identities in the poem – the men are equal but culturally distinct. Once again recalling Yeats’s late, phantasmagorical work, Spender now shifts his perspective outside the present instant and imbeds his meditation with a haunting, deterministic view of the youths’ place in a larger and less innocent historical process:

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 third with world-offended eyes
Builds with red hands his heaven; makes our bones
The necessary scaffolding to peace.

Spender’s language evokes the ethereal “winding path” of Yeats’s embalmed figures, but his manipulation of elapsing time suggests film spooling on a projector. Rolling backwards, the English and German youths’ former incarnations seem to be superimposed – a “ghostly posture” haunting the present; while accelerating ten years into the future projects the young communist at the forefront of a world revolution; he builds a new society at the mortal cost of the English and the German, who signify the “offensive” capitalist world to his communist eyes.

Although he is mistaken when he suggests that the future war will be driven by communist forces, Spender’s prescience is still uncanny; after the continual consolidation of Hitler’s power through the decade, it will indeed be 1939 that sees the outbreak of a new world war; his claim that his own bourgeois death will provide the “necessary scaffolding to peace” eerily prefigures the political “necessity” of murder, a
right which will be claimed and ideologically justified by all parties, by both General Franco and his enemies in Spain, by Stalin’s Great Terror, and the Nazi holocaust.*

The poem continues in a strange fusion of Yeats’s mysticism with the disturbing visions of Wilfred Owen, who is clearly a conscious model for Spender’s evocation of the Great War and its historical precursors:

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.50

These are not literal ghosts but metaphors for remembrance; as the “new” landscape of factories and modern cities overlays the ancient battlefields, the gradually-forgotten dead find the non-partisan unity which Owen states so plainly in “Strange Meeting”; this realisation of the similarity between enemies – their simple mortality and suffering – comes too late in death, is meaningless even, it has significance only for the living. The “once-envious” dead are freed from such concerns. Though the young Europeans’ fathers were enemies, they maintain “no feud” like the troubled, vengeful Hamlet (stanza four), there is no sinister shadow “struck across the path” which they follow alongside the German river ten years after the war.

Then comes Spender’s Yeatsian conclusion, cold in its appraisal, and unflinching in its assertion of the democratic even-handedness of death:

Our fathers’ misery, the dead man’s mercy,
The cynic’s mystery, weaves a philosophy—
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:

These, risen a moment, joined or separate,
Fall heavily, then are always separate,

---

* The moral weight of the word “necessity” was to become a major theme in 1930s discourse, including poetry, George Orwell’s reaction to Auden’s “necessary murder” (“Spain”) in the essay “Inside the Whale” will be discussed in the context of Spender’s Vienna.
A stratum unreckoned by geologists,
Sod lifted, turned, slapped back again with spade. 51

Once more suggesting Hamlet’s graveside meditations, this introduction of the human skull seems to be a tonal allusion to the stern familiarity with mortality in Eliot’s beloved recreation of Renaissance motifs; it identifies the common characteristic of these vibrant youths: the inevitable future image of their bleached skeletons, signifying the relentless processes of death and decay.

This dissolution of national antagonism in death (which Owen’s metaphysical fantasy “Strange Meeting” evoked so profoundly for the post-War generation) — the “dead man’s mercy” is comparable to the carefree mingling of youths in a peaceful Europe, but the resignation, even nihilism implicit in such total non-allegiance among the living is troubling: “the cynic’s mystery”. The poem concludes bleakly, its repetition of “separate” suggesting an existential solitude which, measured in the sweeping scale of history, is fleeting and negligible. Even if “joined”, these skulls will be so only for a brief instant. Spender’s treatment of death offers no Christian consolation, it is final and measured only in dust and mud, “Sod lifted, turned, slapped back”. This is certainly an allusion to the sodden battlefields of the Great War.

The penultimate line is particularly striking, emphatic of the impersonality of historical forces — and of history itself in scientific terms, and it is baffling that it is excised in Spender’s final version of the poem. Similarly, the description of the contemplative, skeletal head of “granite” is replaced by a line that takes advantage of Spender’s subsequent knowledge of 1930s history:

... the history of man traced purely from dust
Is lipping skulls on the revolving rim
Or war, us three each other’s murderers 52

This revision certainly makes sense, but rather bluntly; I think it is clear that the original line, though obscure, evokes the image of a “granite” skull; its pompous “posture of genius” in this context suggests humanistic hubris; the effect is a deflation of the intellectual grandeur which cannot accept the inevitability of death. There is an
additional allusive resonance in that the granite evokes the famous opening lines of Owen’s dream-vision:

*It seemed that out of battle I escaped*  
*Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped*  
*Through granites which titanic wars had groined.*

"Strange Meeting" is obviously an important influence in Spender’s conception of the geographical, even geological metaphors concerning the description of battle and its past and future reverberations; echoes of Owen’s images return in the final lines of *Vienna*, and Spender makes one of Owen’s couplets the epigraph to the 1934 poem.*

The original ending of "The Rhine" is vague certainly, but imagistic and striking; Spender’s later quest for "clarity" (over 50 years later) offers a literalisation of the coming war that utterly transforms the poem’s conclusion: it is rewritten into a retrospective analysis of the 1930s when the original poem obviously is no such thing.

I will return to a discussion of the rationale behind Spender’s revisions, and the compelling need for an edition of his 1930s poetry as it appeared during that decade, in the final chapter. Most significantly, this poem is avowedly concerned with the occasion of its composition, which can only heighten the importance of this original published version. “Written Whilst Walking Down the Rhine”, to be re-titled “In 1929”, not only describes a specific time and place, but indicates its moment of composition within a confluence of historical circumstances. Spender sent a copy identical to the published version in a letter to Edward Garnett in the very month of the walking tour.*

It was this original version that stood out so impressively from the rest of *Poems* for Allen Tate in *New Verse*; its assured statement made it “one of the best, possibly the best in the book, and certainly one of the finest English poems of the century. These lines possess an absolute clarity, a complete mastery of words...” He quotes the third

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*"They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress. / None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress." (The Poems of Wilfred Owen, London, 1990, p. 125.) As an epigraph, Owen’s lines evoke the alignment and engagement of opposing forces, despite the terrible cost to civilization. Writing to Isaiah Berlin in July 1932, having completed *Poems*, Spender reveals his enthusiasm for Owen: "Have you read Wilfred Owen’s *Poems*? He is my favourite modern poet.” Though he has the eagerness of a recent convert, it seems unthinkable that Spender had not come across Owen before composing “The Rhine.”*
stanza ("the once-envious dead..."), and perhaps overlooks the eerie obscurity of the final images, but the innate, prophetic tone was clearly captivating to readers soon after the poem's first appearance, and without any knowledge of just how the decade's political events would unravel. O'Neill and Reeves also note the poem's adept marshalling of contrasting philosophies and tones; they regard it as "balanced between formal and thematic antitheses - eloquence and inelegance, hope and wariness, the clear and the unfathomable."

A year before the publication of "I think continually..." (the first version of which appeared in the Listener in November 1931) Spender provides a more realistic assessment of the "truly great" in "An 'I' Can Never Be Great Man". This poem has several effects: it debunks the notion that "great" individuals manage to manifest greatness in all aspects of their life; further implying that greatness is an attribution that cannot be possessed by the living - it is rather something attained posthumously, imbued by the judgement of history. Additionally, Spender seems to be speaking of "great" leaders or artists, whose apparent "unearthly" superiority (divined from their reputation) may well dissolve into petulance and pettiness over the dinner table, for example:

This known great one has weakness
To friends is most remarkable for weakness:
His ill-temper at meals, dislike of being contradicted

Just as the European youths of "The Rhine" whose differences and oppositions - delegated to them by the impersonal "whim" of history - become insignificant when juxtaposed with the spectre of their death, so too the private foibles of the "great man" are insignificant next to his public achievement, yet these foibles attest to the fact that greatness itself is an abstraction, a necessary idealisation:

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

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This is a deflation identical to that of the “Marston” poems and “The Rhine”; Spender insists upon a sense of materialist realism even while he celebrates an abstract ideal. It is essential to understand that Spender does believe in the ideal of greatness, and no doubt in truth, beauty, and justice. At the same time however, he is anxious to state and restate the chasm that lies between the aspiration to ideals and the actuality of life as it is lived. “What I Expected” (which was published in the New Statesman the following February) is a further formulation of this encroaching realism of experience.

O’Neill and Reeves conclude that “An ‘I’...” relies “too doggedly on unadorned (if congested) statement”, and that it is founded on fragile, “homespun Freudian scepticism.” This analysis seems to me to have missed the stylistic intention of the poem, which in the context of this collection, and indeed of its subsequent place in Poems (1933), is to state Spender’s troubling inability to reconcile the world of public and historical achievement with the realities of personal life. “An ‘I’...” is not a criticism of “great” figures as much Spender’s own troubled attempt to fathom that great achievements are made by individuals who are – for the vast majority of their waking lives – unremarkable. It is this unromantic actuality that dictates the “unadorned” style. The “great I”, “can never claim its true place / Resting in forehead, secure in his gaze— / ‘Great I’ is an unfortunate intruder...” Greatness is indeed an abstraction, a simplification of human fact – it does not belong in everyday life; nevertheless, as this poem’s successor will demonstrate in its celebration of the “truly great”, scepticism and idealism can coexist.

Spender describes the origin of the idea in a letter to Robert Nichols in October 1931:

That poem was partly suggested to me by Chekhov’s play the Seagull. You may remember that in this play there is a study of two writers, one a successful, “great” one,
and the other an entirely unrecognised one. The heroine of the play is disappointed by the great author because of his complete lack of belief in himself...61

Indeed, in Collected Poems (1985), Spender identifies its source by re-titling the poem “Trigorin.” This suggests that, as with Beethoven, Spender is thinking primarily of artistic greatness, and possibly of the modesty of a great man; but as with all manifestations of the myth of the hero that were thrown up in the early 1930s, the resultant poem is as applicable to political giants (of the Left or the Right) as it is to the celebration of literary heroes.

Writing on the Georgian poets in 1974, Spender claims (correctly) that their “poetic little-Englandism tended towards quietism”, a position which he and his contemporaries were keen to oppose: “The poet was seen as a solitary who may have to live in London to earn his living but who hankers for the weekend of countryside.”62 As Geoffrey Grigson would recall of the generation who succeeded the Georgians: “a hint, a suspicion of interest in birds, butterflies, flowers, rarities in vasculum, or fishing, marked one with sneering immediacy as a ‘Georgian.”63 Nevertheless, “I hear the cries of evening...”, XVIII in Twenty Poems, might well have been penned by a Georgian ten years earlier, and it is characteristic of an era even before that, epitomised by the down-trodden clerk Leonard Bast in Forster’s Howards End. The urbanite speaker, lying awake in a house creaking after the warm day, yearns for a communion with the natural world:

Town-bred, I feel the roots of each earth-cry
Tear me apart.

It is one of the few poems in the volume to have regular and perfect rhyme, and its tone and idiom are far closer to antiquated “little Englandism” than the visionary internationalism and political awareness revealed in “The Rhine”; while the latter poem looks ahead to an uncertain but tumultuous future, “I hear the cries of evening...”
expresses nostalgic yearning for a pre-urban existence which is itself – in 1930 – a well-worn literary convention.*

If Spender’s prefatory note is true, then this is one of his most recent compositions, yet it seems to belong to an earlier literary period. Yet despite its evocation of “quietist” Georgian forbears, whose style contrasts so starkly with the grim melodrama of the War Poets, it is important to bear in mind the influence of D.H. Lawrence, whose passionate belief in the “blood history” of man seems to inform Spender’s drama:

These are the creakings of the dusty day
When the dog Night bites sharp,
These fingers grip my soul and tear away

Spender’s nostalgia here is both a reactionary, Georgian wish for a mythic agrarian idyll, but also a Lawrentian admonishment – a call to a more visceral and animalistic philosophy of life.

Spender was, at this time, undergoing a willed programme of modernisation of his verse style. There is evidence of his formulating thoughts in an essay which appeared in the *Spectator* during his seminal summer in Germany in 1929. He had submitted the essay at Isherwood’s urging, and it was published as part of an on-going series that was intended to give column space to the “younger point of view”, providing an opportunity for “our readers under thirty to express their views.” The essay, “The Problems of Poet and Public”, is evidence of a developing view of the role of his own poetry in the contemporary environment. While making a plea that the public should allow for “difficulty” in new poetry, in order that young poets may find a style which is appropriate to the modern context, he provides several indications of his personal symbol-system during the time when *Twenty Poems* was being drafted and composed:

Clearly the poet is justified in searching for a new poetic language, when he lives in an age whose difference from all preceding ages most of us are concerned to emphasize.

For example, he finds that in a crowded industrial country the most emphatic symbol

*The original MS of the poem is entitled “Crackington Haven” after the holiday in Devon which occasioned it. (MS in Lewis Papers at Yale University Library.)
for love is not the word “rose,” but something much more closely associated with Hyde Park. The blanched skeleton that inspired the people of the Middle Ages with a fear of death, hardly frightens us now, but the smell of anaesthetics, a doctor’s rubber gloves, these are symbols that we quickly recognize.  

Spender’s reference to the outmoded Shakespearean “rose,” indicates a further resonance in its appearance in “At the Edge of Being” in which, along with “gold” and the “admired landscape”; it becomes an anachronistic tool for expression of the modern consciousness, which the speaker wishes to abandon. Similarly, the skull of “The Rhine” is not the medieval emblem of fear and disease dismissed as redundant in the essay, but the Metaphysical symbol for the inevitable demise of all generations.

Spender’s discussion is clearly dependent on Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1920), yet he embellishes Eliot’s foregrounding of the impersonal literary tradition with a call for young poets to incorporate that which is “important” in contemporary life, particularly the new art forms. He regards the vivid conceptualism of advertisements as “poetically used images”, and the advances of cinematic grammar as the most significant transformation of modern consciousness which poetry should not overlook. He admires:

...the cinema... with its absurd unrealism, and its way of superimposing completely different aspects of one idea, the scene changing like the stanzas of a poem.

This is precisely the narrative operation of “The Rhine”, with its “spooling” time-lapse effects, and its superimposition of a sinister past and future onto the present idyll of the “new”, sun-drenched Germany. Such cinematic, imagistic segues prove to be a main feature of the programmatic lyrics of the following years, and the Russian propaganda films that Spender admired on his trips to Germany at this time – many watched with Isherwood in Berlin – start to inform his writing very directly, the aesthetics of film montage fusing with the ideology of socialism.

There is a perplexing statement in the essay, which seems to criticise an increasing trend for industrial imagery that – as Twenty Poems will demonstrate the following year – he himself indulges:
2. *Nine Experiments* (1928) and *Twenty Poems* (1930)

...it seems to me that a good many poets exaggerate to themselves the importance of such devices as gas-works and railway stations, which, although very imposing, neither they, nor any of us, feel very strongly about.

I would argue that this, written in the wake of *Nine Experiments* and during the composition of *Twenty Poems*, contains both an element of self-criticism and an implicit proposal for a new way of utilising the modern environment for poetic purposes.

Spender's (near psychopathic) "praise" of those Oxford gasworks so perversely admired by Auden, has, by the time of "Acts passed..." transformed into a quite different method; the poet takes the active role and submits the modern industrial setting to his own expressionist intention; the factory and train are now objective correlatives for the speaker's emotional life. To some extent, Spender's use of political imagery and themes in the years to follow maintains this method: his flirtation with socialist ideology is as much a metaphorical expression of lyrical emotion as it is a clearly defined political position, yet it is the blurring of the boundary between propaganda and "disinterested" poetry which will establish his reputation.

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3 *The Author*, 1990, p. 126.
5 Ibid., pp. 172-3.
8 *World Within World*, p. 95.
10 *World Within World*, p. 95.
11 *Nine Experiments*, pp. 7, 11.
12 Ibid., p. 5.
14 *World Within World*, p. 131.
15 *Nine Experiments*, p. 12.
16 *World Within World*, p. 97.
17 *World Within World*, p. 95.
2. *Nine Experiments* (1928) and *Twenty Poems* (1930)

18 *World Within World*, p. 132.


20 Ibid., pp. 8-9.

21 Ibid., p. 9.


28 “W.B. Yeats as a Realist”, *Criterion*, Vol. XIV, No. LIV, October 1934, p. 26

29 *Twenty Poems*, p. 4.

30 Ibid., p. 5.

31 Ibid., p. 3.

32 *WWW*, p. 64.

33 *WWW*, p. 67.

34 *Twenty Poems*, p. 6.


36 *WWW*, p. 65.


38 *Twenty Poems*, p. 8.

39 *WWW*, p. 66.


41 *WWW*, p. 65.

42 *Twenty Poems*, p. 11.

43 Ibid., p. 12.

44 Ibid., p. 13.

45 *WWW*, pp. 66-67.

46 *WWW*, p. 64.


48 Ibid.


50 *Twenty Poems*, p. 15.

51 Ibid., p. 16.


54 Letter at Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

55 *New Verse*, No 3, May 1933, p. 22.

56 O’Neill and Reeves, *The Thirties Poetry*, London, 1992, p. 120.

57 *Twenty Poems*, p. 17.

58 Ibid.


60 *Twenty Poems*, p. 17.

61 To Robert Nichols, Sunday October 4, 1931, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

2. *Nine Experiments* (1928) and *Twenty Poems* (1930)

64 *Twenty Poems*, p. 21.
65 *Spectator*, August 3, 1929, p. 152.
66 Ibid.
3. Poems (1933)

The year that saw the publication of Spender's first volume for Faber and Faber also saw Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor, the infamous Reichstag Fire and the subsequent trial and execution of the arsonist Marinus van der Lubbe. The developing political drama in Europe now had two undisputed factions – the Fascists and the Communists, and information began to cross the channel of the suppression and persecution of Jews, socialists and intellectuals in Germany. In Britain, unemployment was as its highest since the depression had begun, and Fascist marches became a new phenomenon under Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists; the “blackshirts” and “redshirts” established themselves as the new archetypal representatives of “mass” response to the economic crisis.

Spender had been spending long periods of the preceding three years in Europe, particularly in Germany, but his contrasting experiences of the two cultures (in Germany a frugal life with Isherwood in Berlin, where they were foreigners witness to the social unrest at ground level; in England a bourgeois, “literary” existence with frequent “weekends in country houses”) suggested to him that Britain was in denial about the seriousness of the economic “slump” and the intimations of war manifested in Hitler’s aggressive policies: “English middle-class life was characterised by a refusal to contemplate further disasters. The middle years of the 1930’s were symbolised in England not by Hitlerism or even the Spanish War, but by the Royal Jubilee.”

In stark contrast to this perceived national denial, the socialist opposition to the Nazi Party began to entrench itself in Spender’s imagination; the “underground” resistance, with its literary resonance in the form of seditious pamphlets, and its calls to rally against the evil regime, created a romantic vision of the ultimate purposive use of language – to fight against oppression. Writing to Isherwood in October 1933, Spender reveals his excitement at the poetic potential of political dissent:

A friend of ours was in Berlin recently, and he says that everywhere you find communist leaflets & literature concealed in the cracks of walls. One day he was walking along the street & a procession of people singing the Red Flag was suddenly formed. As soon as the police arrived the procession had miraculously dissolved again into the crowd.
There is clearly a sense of admiration here, and it seems natural that as a result of this romanticisation of revolutionary activity a tone of iconoclasm should begin to enter his work; the poems which had appeared in *New Signatures*, the *Listener* and the *Criterion* had signalled by their vocabulary an allegiance to the “crisis” language shared by Auden and Day Lewis; he begins to preach the abandonment of the “brilliance of cities”, and his eschatological visions plainly state the necessary destruction of the nation’s “palaces.” While the “palaces” of Spender’s verse may only symbolise an aristocratic and monarchic class-system that has outlived its usefulness, they obviously have correlatives in the physical world – buildings which the orthodox communist would gladly destroy. There is a stark difference between the Spenglerian decline of a civilization and a willed revolution that will destroy and replace that civilization, but Spender’s poetry begins to occupy the uncertain moral ground between these extremes.

Michael Roberts’s part in the creation of Spender’s “political role” (in *New Signatures* (1932) and *New Country* (1933)) will be discussed in a later chapter, but the ideological characterisation of his poetry was not something which Spender resisted; on the contrary most of his reviews and essays of these years have an entirely political theme, and Janet Adam Smith of the *Listener* tactfully chose to place his apocalyptic lyric “After They Have Tired” literally in the *centre* of T.S. Eliot’s essay “Christianity and Communism” in March 1932. Eliot’s essay authoritatively surrounds the panel containing the poem. Spender’s frequent exhortations to “comrades” demand the reader to think politically, even amid the poem’s pseudo-religious prophecy of a coming paradise which will arrive “after the failure of banks”; yet Eliot’s dismissal of communism as merely constituting a phantom religion – on the very same page – provides an intertextual pre-reading of Spender’s work which would have been very much in the mind of his earliest readers and reviewers.3

*Twenty Poems* had established a clear, formal vocabulary which edged beyond Georgian insularity; it consisted of a romantic aspiration and longing, and a critical deflation of this romanticism; an ambivalent use of emblems of the “machine age”, and an emergent historical sense – specifically a consciousness of European history and its potential developments. Spender’s published poetry in the intervening years had maintained this trajectory: his political prose and the extra-textual glossing of his
editors and publishers (primarily Roberts) effect to foreground the political implications of the verse, and by the time of the publication of *Poems* he is presented as a fully-formed lyric poet of implicit political allegiance. Along with his immediate contemporaries, he assimilates into his work the emblems of modern Europe: industry, transport, social crisis, direct action, political frontiers and dictators. Stylistically, the romantic dynamics of *Poems* are as extreme as the impending revolution that they perceive, ranging from the deification of the giants of history ("the truly great") to pitying the "silent crowd" of the unemployed.

Samuel Hynes has suggested the dilemma faced by all citizens as the severity of the economic and political situation gradually became clear: "It must always have been difficult, to the ordinary man, to take significant direct action on public issues, but it becomes more difficult, almost imaginable, when the issue is a vast and threatening abstraction — Poverty, or Fascism, or War." Spender's response is to take on these abstracted "public issues"; the question of whether this constitutes "direct action" is difficult to ascertain. Poetry is, of course, "abstraction" by definition, but whether tackling abstract concepts in an abstract form takes one closer to or further from the problem is not resolved; indeed, this debate constitutes a major part of the critical discourse of Roberts's 1930s collections, Grigson's *New Verse*, and the *Left Review*.

The significant textual issue now is that Spender's 1933 collection portrays a unique confluence of styles and forms — it is as much influenced by Marx's manifesto as by Yeats and the Romantics — and while his central preoccupations remain constant (several of the *Twenty Poems* are reprinted unrevised) the explicit politicisation of the verse makes it a statement of revolt within the contemporary British poetic tradition. It is a move away from the isolationism and ruralism of the Georgian years, a descent from the disinterestedness of high modernism into "short-term" politics.

Politically, what Spender appears to embrace in *Poems* is the Soviet state. He does not embrace it without reservation or irony, but for a large proportion of his middle-class readership his affiliation with — and approval of — the ideals of communist politics would have come across fairly unambiguously. *Poems* appeared as part of a growing trend for advocacy of the Soviet system (before the true horrors of the Great Terror were revealed), and it is important that it is read with an awareness of this
intellectual context. David Caute has described this transitional phase in Russia’s public image to the rest of the world:

...after 1928, the whole image of Soviet Russia changed. At last the USSR entered the great phase of construction: planned, “scientific” social engineering replaced the image of violent insurrection and the compromises of the New Economic Policy. Immediately a tide of pent-up goodwill, optimism and moral idealism flooded from the West into Russia. Trotsky was gone, and with him the forbidding spectre of permanent revolution. The fellow-travellers cultivated a convenient schizophrenia: as they scorned democracy – at a distance; they invested their dreams of positivistic experimentation and moral regeneration – at a distance.5

During the 1930s Spender must be considered at the very least a “fellow-traveller”, though his reservations about many points of communist doctrine – particularly its dogmatic aesthetics – are repeatedly stated. His verse is certainly a repository for a cultural trend for “goodwill, optimism and moral idealism” directed towards Soviet Russia.

Peter Ackroyd has noted that Eliot’s mantle as the “old man” of British verse, enshrined at Faber and Faber, was passed down (rightly or wrongly) to his successors of the Auden generation, and subsequently to George Barker, Ted Hughes and Thom Gunn.6 Even in the early 1930s Eliot’s reputation as the modern poet, and his role as Faber poetry editor, commanded a sense of orthodoxy and authority, and imbued his apparent protégés with the “benediction” of publication. In this light, Spender’s invocation of the ideology of the extreme Left should be seen as carrying more iconoclastic weight than is now the case. Although Eliot’s The Waste Land had been formally avant-garde, Eliot still represented tradition, conservatism, and, since his conversion to the Church of England in 1927, Christianity – diametrically opposed to communist ideology; Eliot’s faith is the social “opium” which is the declared enemy of Marxist action. In March 1932 Spender had written to Isaiah Berlin insisting that the Church no longer “provides a truth for people with brains”, and the antagonism between his position and that of Eliot is very important, for this is the ideological environment within which Poems was written and published.7
Poems was published in January 1933, the same month that Geoffrey Grigson’s *New Verse* made its debut. Writing to Isherwood in February, having read the (mostly very good) reviews that had appeared thus far, Spender reveals that the question of poetry and propaganda is still very much on his mind. His essay “Poetry and Revolution” was to appear this year in *New Country,* and he formulates for Isherwood the idea this piece propounds:

> Propaganda is external and deals with general statements which are the business of politicians I think. Poetry states something only by qualifying it and creating the circumstances in which it is true. I don’t think poetry is useless because I think it can prepare people for political propaganda, and shake their prejudices.\(^8\)

Spender is in the midst of hazy logic here – a hazy logic that the essay was to spell out at greater length. Essentially though, he indicates the innate individualism of his work, that it serves to portray a particular truth – that of the poet’s own consciousness. However, in his polemical discussions Spender can be seen consistently blurring the relation between the conception of political and individual truth. His thoughts may be informed by Shelley’s famous dictum in *A Defence of Poetry,* and he sees his role as that of the “unacknowledged legislator” preparing the way for practical action. Nevertheless, as he had demonstrated in *Twenty Poems,* Spender wholeheartedly believes in the “truth” of poetry, and that this is not merely a subjective phenomenon; but his desire to “shake” his readers’ prejudices by incorporating the language of propaganda into his individualist poetry does not clarify the issue.

The significance of the critical response to Spender’s interrelation of poetry and propaganda is that Spender’s reviewers largely responded to the political aspects of the collection, despite the fact that the jacket “blurb” had pointedly avoided any discussion of ideology; on the contrary, the writer has bent over backwards to assert Spender’s technical achievement and his orthodox “classical” heritage:

* Spender had written “Poetry and Revolution” since completing *Poems,* and on his return to London from Spain, awaiting the reviews, he dismisses it as “a bad essay for the Hogarth anthology” (January 23, 1933, *Letters to Christopher,* p. 56.). *New Country* would be published in March 1933, and also included four new poems. The problematic logic of “Poetry and Revolution”, and the critical discussion which ensued in *New Verse,* will be examined in Chapter 5.
These thirty-three poems introduce to the general public a young poet whose work has already created unusual interest in a small circle. [...] Like W.H. Auden, who has already been recognised for a writer of great significance and originality, Stephen Spender comes from Oxford, and he is of the same generation as Auden.

If Auden is the satirist of this poetical renaissance, Spender is its lyric poet. In his work the experimentalism of the last two decades is beginning to find its reward.

The poems are free, but they are rhythmical and musical; rhyme and assonance are used as they are needed, without self-consciousness, by instinct rather than rule; the language is generally direct and simple, for all its frequent use of sensitive and subtle imagery; obscurities are rare.

Technically, these poems appear to make a definite step forward in modern English poetry. Their passionate and obvious sincerity ranks them in a tradition which reaches back to the early Greek lyric poets.9

It is an apology for Spender’s occasional obscurity, combined with a somewhat patronising observation of “passionate and obvious sincerity”; and an overburdening of praise, potentially at Auden’s expense – it certainly delivers a reductive analysis of Auden’s achievement. The “sincerity” label particularly was to haunt Spender for many years. On receiving his copy, Isherwood dismissed the blurb as “portentous tripe”,10 while Spender felt moved to write to Faber to complain, observing to Isherwood that “it seems to have been written out of pure malice and I’m afraid it will annoy Wystan.”11 Archibald MacLeish, in his review of Poems in the Hound and Horn in October specifically attacks the “cautious little blurb”: “I am aware that indiscriminate praise is disgusting... But even more disgusting that indiscriminate praise is the pinched, squeamish, sour, pedagogic spite which criticizes poetry as though it were marking themes.”12

One effect of this double-edged introduction is to yoke Spender together with Auden, and to suggest a dialectical relationship between their styles and personalities. The “satirical” label does not really seem to fit Auden’s work at this stage, though it may be an attempt to categorise the strange, almost psychotic tone of the diagnostic “state of the nation” book The Orators, and the Marxist pantomime of The Dance of Death which was soon to be published by Faber. Auden too had begun to adopt

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* The blurb was written by T.S. Eliot himself – possibly as an exercise in pastiche of the current style. Eliot took pleasure indulging in “menial tasks” as the poetry editor: “one of his skills was in parody so close to the original that it is difficult to tell whether it is faked or genuine...” (Peter Ackroyd, T.S. Eliot, London: Penguin, 1993, p. 182.)
communist ideas in his poetry and had been “assimilated” into Roberts’s minor movement: Spender and Auden had appeared together in *New Signatures*; furthermore, in October 1930 he had dedicated his four “debut” poems in the *Criterion* to Auden, Spender in turn had been the honoured dedicatee of *The Orators*, and had even been mentioned within the text itself.*

The effect of these references is twofold – it perpetuates the notion of a professional relationship, (“public places”), and also a “gang”, or boys’ club (“private faces”) which evokes a mood of public school camaraderie as much as socialist comradeship. At this time, Roberts propounded a determinedly “Boy Scout” vision of socialism, and all of this notion seems to inform Auden’s personal mythology. Eliot himself had expressed concern that Auden’s technical virtuosity seemed to have exceeded his emotional or spiritual development, and in this light the emphasis of Spender’s “obvious sincerity” is probably meant to characterise his poetical viewpoint as contrasting with Auden’s highly intelligent, analytical detachment. Where Auden writes by “rule”, Spender’s form is dictated by “instinct”; where Auden is elliptical, Spender is “direct and simple”.

In fact, this editorial analysis proposed by Faber, though despised by Spender at the time, seems to have echoed his own determination of the differences between himself and Auden. In a letter to Isaiah Berlin the previous summer, he had compared his romanticism to Auden’s craft:

> Auden is a much ‘purer’ poet than I, because even where he uses far more modern phraseology than I would use, he uses it so that it all fits into a pattern. His poetry accepts, it is not romantic. Even his satire is not at all rebellious but written in a sense of jazzy fun.14

And by the time of *World Within World*, he reiterates his response to Auden’s view that the formal integrity of the poem’s logic is more important than the original inspiration:

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* Auden’s dedication of *The Orators* neatly identifies Spender’s ongoing conceptual conflict – the public and private worlds: “Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places.” (*The English Auden*, p. 59.) The first of the Six Odes (Book III) includes the reference to Auden himself along with Spender and Isherwood: “Lo, a dream met me in middle night; I saw in a vision / Life pass as a gull, as a spy, as a dog-hated dustman: / Heard a voice saying – ‘Wystan, Stephen, Christopher, all of you, / Read of your losses.” (Ibid., p. 94.)
3. Poems (1933)

...I could not accept the idea that the poetic experience in reality, which led to the poem, was then, as it were, left behind, while the poem developed according to verbal needs of its own which had no relation to the experience.15

This is an idealisation of poetic language which must be emphasised with regard to Spender’s 1930s poems – the “truth” of experience is one that poetry is capable of communicating, by “creating the circumstances in which it is true.” When Spender writes of poetic truth (“the truly great”) and the truth of fact that facilitates and justifies political action, he frequently seems to be describing the same thing. This creates difficulties and over-simplifications in the linguistic engagement of practical action, and by the time of Vienna (1934) Spender’s exhortations to the “truth” of Leftist ideology would be attacked in some quarters, false platitudes to be “condemned, and even despised.”16 But with Poems (1933) and its second edition the following year, Spender’s poetry finds a balance between a fresh poetic idiom and the infusion of socialist language which manages not to divide its audience, but rather to attain the consensus that a lyrical poet who declares a social conscience which leans to the Left, and who calls for a spiritual (and perhaps material) revolution, is someone to be praised and encouraged.

Spender’s opinion piece for the Bookman in October 1932 (“This Age in Poetry”) confirms (and perhaps influences) the jacket blurb for Poems by declaring an admiration for the formal experimentalism of Eliot’s early career. It also states the manifesto of the New Signatures collection (for which his Bookman piece is really an extended notice) by encouraging contemporary poets to bring to their work an inclusive class-consciousness; he does this by invoking the theme of social apocalypse that will inform both his volume and Day Lewis’s The Magnetic Mountain the following year:

In my opinion the real contribution of “The Waste Land” to the problem of “Contemporaneity” is that Eliot’s blank verse illustrates the parallel between our own world and the world of the late Elizabethans. ... [today’s poets] might feel that scientific discovery was as exciting as the discovery of classical mythology, and that the construction of giant machinery was as exciting as the discovery of a new world; and that both these things were full of material for poetry. Think too of the lives of people to-day. Is not the life of the unemployed significant? The lives of the workers, and the lives of the rich people and even the lives of officials can all be seen now as being insecure, ready to fall into disaster or to form a new alignment.17
This might well be the "poetical renaissance" suggested by the Poems blurb, yet while the blurb attends only to Spender's style, his own definition of a new, cultural renaissance is concerned primarily with its radical subject matter: a second age of discovery in which the geographical frontiers that European civilization once aspired to conquer are replaced by the frontiers of technological development; there is an implicit faith here that future industry will somehow emancipate society.

Conceptually, Spender's "new age" of industrialised emancipation derives from the extant, idealised machine age of socialist propaganda and of German Expressionist film. It also owes a debt to the social "imagineering" of nineteenth and early twentieth-century science fiction. As Orwell was to note later in the decade, the myth of the mechanised future which is so worshipped by the socialists is not at all different from H.G. Wells's various visions of efficient industrial Utopias, both of which (the Wellsian and the socialist futures) Orwell witheringly dismisses as too perfect to ever risk becoming a reality, and from which "sensitive minds recoil."*

Aligned with Spender's assertion of the importance of Futurist imagery to contemporary poetry is a call for the need also to include the lower – the ignored – classes celebrated by Marx as the equal citizens of the future state. Marxist thought constantly informs Spender's logic during these years – in his prose and his verse, and the eschatological movement in this paragraph is clear: the acknowledgement of "the employed" and "the workers" is followed by the apparently inevitable demise of "the rich people" and "the officials", whose position is already "insecure" and faced with either an imminent "disaster" or "a new alignment". The more programmatic poems in the 1933 volume reflect this conceptual formulation, and Spender's frequent addresses to his imaginary comrades prophesy both "disaster" and "a new alignment" in equal measure. This signals an uncertainty on his part with regard to the practical characteristics of the revolution which he is compelled to celebrate. An orthodox allegiance to communism requires unequivocal radicalisation: one must endorse a class...

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* "...the idea of Socialism is bound up, more or less inextricably, with the idea of machine-production. Socialism is essentially an urban creed. It grew up more or less concurrently with industrialism, it has always had its roots in the town proletariat and the town intellectual, and it is doubtful whether it could ever have arisen in any but an industrial society... The Socialist world is always pictured as a completely mechanised, immensely organised world, depending on the machine as the civilisations of antiquity depended on the slave." (Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Penguin, 1962, pp. 74-75.)
war and be prepared to participate in it; but Spender's position is not orthodox: he
seems to regard himself a witness to the drama of the age rather than a participant.

A letter written to Isherwood in February 1933 suggests that his attitude towards
programmatic language is already changing. He has composed the poems that will
appear in *New Country*, and indicates the uncertainty of his position with regard to
*Poems*:

> They [six new poems] are very modest & even personal because I can't write
pretensions any more (or I don't want to) even when the pretensions are not mine but
those of something, like communism, which I believe in. I want to describe a phase of
society with precision because when that phase is fully recognized people will want to
go on to what grows out of it.19

Here, communism is something he continues to "believe in", but it is also a rhetorical
and emotional "pretension", almost an adopted character. It was just such a
ventriloquist stance which Auden ultimately condemned in himself when he dismissed
"A Communist to Others" as "trash."* The transitional "phase of society" which
Spender apprehends echoes Yeats's prophecy of the apocalyptic struggle that will result
in a new order (in Yeats's case, an arch-conservative social order); the "new alignment"
will, to the present age, resemble a "terrible beauty".** The implication is that Spender,
like commentators of various political persuasions during the period, regards violent
social conflict to be a necessary evil; "necessity" becomes the watchword for justifiable
violence in the 1930s, as seen in *Vienna*, Auden's "Spain", and Orwell's critique of the
term in "Inside the Whale". Spender's implicit moral justification at this stage is the
stance of anti-Fascism. The letter is written in the shadow of a significant historical
event – Hitler was appointed Chancellor on January 30, just as the reviews of *Poems*

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* "A Communist to Others" had been printed in *Twentieth Century* in September 1932, and in *New Country*, March, 1933. Auden and Spender's visions of the coming "revolution" are similarly unspecific, though Auden's is arguably more *laissez-faire*: "Their splendid people, their wiseacres, / Professors, agents, magic-makers, / Their poets and apostles, / Their bankers and their brokers too, / And ironmasters shall turn blue / Shall fade away like morning dew / With club-room fossils." (*New Country*, London: Hogarth Press, 1933, p. 213.)

** Despite Spender's eschewal of religious systems, Yeats's vision of the "gyres" of history is a discernable model for his conceptualisation of the 1930s; "[Yeats] saw spiritualism as a revolutionary social force as important in its power to influence the world, as politics, psychology, or science." (*World Within World*, p. 165.)
began to appear: "I read eagerly the news about Germany and am filled with appropriate feelings of hatred plus despair."\textsuperscript{20}

To some extent Spender is playing with fire – he fails to visualise (or draw attention to) the abhorrent reality of a violent insurrection. As Edward Mendelson notes with regard to Auden’s brief flirtation with communism: in literature the step from visionary politics to practical politics can be made rather too easily.\textsuperscript{21} The charges levelled against Spender in subsequent years, that he is “the Rupert Brooke of the Depression” and a “parlour Bolshevik” seem to arise from this disparity between thought and action.\textsuperscript{**} His celebration of revolution is wholly reminiscent of Wordsworth’s poetic exhilaration at the idea of the original commune and the revolt in France. In Wordsworth’s case too, there was a subsequent retreat from such radicalism.

Spender’s later defence of his youthful enthusiasm for revolution, particularly the charge that he waged war on his own class in word but not in action, is to recognise his socialist exhortations as symptoms of bourgeois guilt: “the thirties writers represented a middle-class crise de conscience. And there is nothing despicable about this.”\textsuperscript{22} At this stage Spender’s association with communist ideology is best described by his own paradoxical verdict: it is a pretension which he believes in.

\textit{Poems} contains thirty-three numbered lyrics; it includes eleven of the original \textit{Twenty Poems}, of which four are drawn from the “Marston” sequence; in the preceding two years, seven had appeared in \textit{New Signatures} (1932), three in the \textit{Listener}, and one in the \textit{New Statesman}. Although the thirty-three (for the year of their publication – 1933) are not organised into formally distinct sections, they are certainly organised in a logical thematic sequence. All of the earliest work is placed in the first half of the collection, with “The Port” (the final “Marston poem”) as number XV. The sequence from XVI (“Moving through the silent crowd”) to XXI (“Without that once clear aim”) contains

\hspace{1cm} ** “Parlour Bolshevik” comes from Orwell, but was renounced after the two writers met and became friends: “When you meet anyone in the flesh you realise immediately that he is a human being & not a sort of caricature embodying certain ideas. It is partly for this reason that I don’t mix much in literary circles, because I know from experience that once I have met & spoken to anyone I shall never again be able to show any intellectual brutality towards him.” (Letter to S.S., 1938, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.) The “Rupert Brooke” quip is quoted and described as the “wise-crack of another poet” (actually Norman Cameron) by Geoffrey Grigson. (\textit{New Verse}, 15, June 1935, p. 15.)
two love poems, while the other four introduce Spender’s emergent theme since his last published volume (as declared in his *Bookman* essay): pity for the unemployed, and empathy for the workers. Within this sequence, XVII (“Who live under the shadow of a war”) is a direct statement of Spender’s adopted vocation and responsibility: to engage the events of the age within his verse in the aftermath of the Great War.

The careful arrangement of the poems becomes apparent at this point, and the final third of the volume contains three distinct sequences arranged into themed groups of three. XXII (“Oh young men, oh young comrades”) establishes the socialist call to action, it is followed by “I think continually...” and then “After they have tired”, a lyrical prophecy of the continuing economic collapse which will make revolution inevitable. In this context, the “truly great” of “I think continually...” are not the neutral figures so amenable to Presidential quotation as discussed in the first chapter, but are implicitly *revolutionary* heroes, possibly even mythic figures of the Bolshevik revolution.*

After this sequence comes “The Funeral”, the portrayal of a funeral within a socialist state which introduces the industrial emblems so vital to the deification of the machine in Soviet propaganda. “The Funeral” bridges into the second distinct sequence: Spender’s Futurist poems, “The Express”, “The Landscape near an aerodrome” and “The Pylons”, in which the machine and the landscape are lyrically fused. These poems are ambivalent meditations on the accelerating “machine age” and the transformation of the urban and rural terrain that is necessitated by new technology.

The final three poems constitute the final “apocalyptic” sequence; “Those fireballs, those ashes”, “From all these events” and “Not palaces, an era’s crown” recall the broad historical perspective of “In 1929” (“Written Whilst Walking Down the Rhine” in *Twenty Poems*) but preach the “triumph of man” far less equivocally. These three poems provide the ideological climax of the volume, in which Spender seems to ally himself not simply with the impartial omniscience of “Time” but with the young

* It is important to recognise the politicised atmosphere within which Spender’s poems are appearing; in this context their socialist allegiance is even more emphatic. For example, John Reed’s seminal *Ten Days that Shook the World* (1919) was reprinted in 1932, previously having only been available in a 1926 edition by the British Communist Party.
3. Poems (1933)

communist who wills the destruction of the capitalist system and “builds with red hands his heaven”.

By a close analysis of the text of the original volume, I intend to demonstrate that Poems (1933) constitutes the most definitive synthesis of Spender’s competing allegiances. Its conceptualisation of the myth of revolution and its relation to the individual consciousness establish a thematic model that continues through the poetry of the 1930s and 1940s. He assesses the responsibility of the individual to align himself with a common good that has the potential to abnegate individualism. Poems also assesses the relation of the bourgeois poet to the plight of the workers, the unemployed, and the destitute. While he risks accusations of self-dramatisation in his offerings of pity, he also demonstrates a redeeming self-consciousness, an awareness that his pity can only be an abstract, general solidarity for humanity, since it is not informed by personal experience.

I also intend to demonstrate that the volume has an “architectonic” integrity which is disrupted by the subsequent isolation and reordering of its constituent lyrics. Wyndham Lewis was to contend that Spender “had not paid enough attention to the ‘hanging’” of this “exhibition” of poems,23 but its tonal progression from introspection to despondency, and thence to a resolution to act – or to promote action – suggests otherwise. When Spender came to revise his published work for Collected Poems 1928-1953, he claimed that this collection “formed a solid block in which I had made very few internal changes, and none of which stepped out of their volume”,24 and this is testament to their structural coherence, even in the eyes of their revisionist author. Collected Poems 1928-1985 would be far less inclusive, and revise Poems more radically. Though he would retreat from the militancy of its exhortations and its Futurist vision in later years, Poems is an important reflection of the heightened response of middle-class youth to the crises of the early 1930s.

Poem XII, “My parents kept me from children who were rough”, is one of Spender’s more anthologised pieces; behind its simple depiction of a regretful reminiscence of childhood bullying it portrays – with a degree of self-criticism – innate class-consciousness and guilt; it dramatises formative experience of interacting with the working class from a self-consciously bourgeois perspective. The fact that the poem is
reminiscence suggests a critique directed at the thought processes of the child, but by extension it encourages a similar critique of the speaker. The poem indicates that class prejudice is imbedded at such an early age that it is not really contemptible in children, it merely arises from experience. The portrayal of the social clash also brings a humorous counterpoint to the text: while the child is bullied and mocked, the “effete” poet is similarly mocked for subtleties of insult and emotional propriety that will hold precious little significance for those on the breadline. Yet the speaker has a continuing fascination with this “other” social group, which remains objectified despite his professed desire for empathy and understanding. At the same time, the autobiographical source of the poem is Spender’s sense of youthful “overprotection;” he had severe rheumatic fever as a child, and was in hospital or bed-ridden for long periods. A resultant sense of admiration, and mild envy, for physical vitality and freedom is innate to his lyrics.

The heritage of the “fathers” – the aftermath of the great war and the current, crippled economy— is repeatedly rejected in Poems, it is his generation’s responsibility to outgrow these restraints. In the same way, the child’s parents are the instigators of his alienation of “rough” children, an alienation which the poem does not manage to overcome; in fact, by the final lines, the pessimistic conclusion seems to be that, once established, class divisions cannot be undone. There is an absolute distinction in the child’s mind between himself and the working class children, who even play different games to assert their otherness. The distinction arises from the total disparity between the life experience of the coddled speaker and the unwashed children who are almost destitute and, as a mark of their poverty, “never smiled.” Even in its negativity the portrayal of the children is romanticised; it is unlikely that they never smiled at all, more the case that their “lisping” class enemy inspires gestures of aggression. They are utterly physical and active, while he is utterly passive – his only action is to “look another way”. He is unable to comprehend their lack of disciplined (or repressed) behaviour. The description of their physical liberation, “They ran in the street / And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams” suggests a wistful jealousy, just as
the grown man will similarly (and perversely) covet the idle hours of the unemployed in
"Moving through the silent crowd": *

Though it doesn’t rise to the high rhetoric of the later poems in the volume, even
this even-toned reminiscence manages to draw upon emblems of the developing myth of
the coming revolution in its second stanza: he “feared more than tigers their muscles
like iron”, wherein the apocalyptic tiger of Eliot’s “Gerontion” and Owen’s “Strange
Meeting” describes the intimidating physicality of the underclass, yoked with an
allusion to the industrial machine. They constitute a mass that is waiting to “spring”
against its oppressors. In the same way, the children are manifestations of the speaker’s
guilt; their very existence admonishes his family’s comfortable life: “They were lithe,
they sprang out behind hedges / Like dogs to bark at our world.” The poem invites the
bourgeois readership to share in its uneasy accusation of “our world”.

The final lines capture the regretful realisation of an unbridgeable divide, both
social and physical:

They threw mud
And I looked another way, pretending to smile.
I longed to forgive them, yet they never smiled. 25

There is a complex interrelation of sympathies here; of course, any child who is bullied
or rebuffed in this way, particularly violently, is deserving of compassion and
sympathy. The class difference does not reduce the speaker’s suffering or loneliness.
At the same time, his assumed moral authority – that he is able and justified in granting
absolution – is both a universal characteristic of childish moral logic, and an indictment
of the class which he has come to represent. There is an absence of any expression of
sympathy for the rough children, and the question of why it is that they will not, or

* There is a difficult distinction between envy and admiration which is central to Spender’s characteristic
verse of “sympathy” and celebration. Even in his juvenilia – the pastiche Miltonic sonnet “To J***
H******” in The Gower, December 1926 – Spender had been impressed by fellow-pupil John Hepburn’s
proclivity to fighting and stoical, guilt-free acceptance of school discipline, traits which the young
Spender would have liked to have shared. Spender was frustrated by the wilful misreading of this joke
poem about a fight as a veiled homosexual ode in Hugh David’s biography Stephen Spender: A Portrait
with Background (Heinemann, 1992). At the same time, there is a thematic relation to Spender’s
admiration in his later verse: for Marston, for the stoicism of the unemployed on hunger marches, and for
the idealised “truly great.” This innate inequality of status between the poet and his subject dissolves in
his poem for Tony Hyndman (“To T.A.R.H”), which is discussed in the next chapter.
cannot smile, is left unexplored. He pretends a smile that he does not feel, while the
deliberate chiming of "smile" with "smiled" hollows the positive meaning of the word.
The speaker's regret can be sympathised with, or criticised, equally, but the pessimistic
conclusion is plain. His hope for reconciliation between the classes is impossible in as
far as they do not share a common emotional language.

In later poems the metaphorisation of the coming revolution formulates the
proletariat in terms of this childhood experience: the workers and the unemployed are
tiger-like aggressors who possess unity of emotion and action; they await the time to
strike, and have nothing to lose. The poem states Spender's realisation of his place in
the class struggle: while he is for the working class, he is not of the working class. His
smile is empty - in the Marxist struggle, the bourgeois poet is himself the class enemy.

The disillusionment implicit in this realisation continues in the next poem,
"What I expected", in which the romantic idealism that is asserted - and challenged - in
Twenty Poems is once again brought to confront the actuality of experience, and is
found wanting. What the poet had expected of life was a titanic conflict, "Thunder,
fighting, / Long struggles with men":

After continual straining
I should grow strong;
And then the rocks would shake
And I should rest long.

The physical vibrancy of the first stanza, its "fighting" and "climbing" recalling the
games of the "rough" children, gives way to a very middle-class ennui, an apprehension
of impermanence:

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.\(^6\)
The internal rhyming of “weakening” and “leaking” suggests the diffusion of focussed purpose, but in the second quatrain the disillusionment is not moral so much as material. While it is the mundane reality of “the gradual day” which erodes the moral will, the “corruption” is more of the body than the soul, the relentless forward movement towards death, as the third stanza affirms:

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.  

The projection of emotion onto the afflicted here will be continued in the portrayal of the unemployed and the persecuted “Prisoners”; the “questions” come not from the cripples themselves but from the speaker’s awareness of physical deformity; the visual resemblance between the “odd twist” of their limbs and a question mark, and the literal questioning which is implied are fused, emphasising that it is a literary conceptualisation and projection. Hence the “pulverous grief” and its “pity” which can melt bones are aggressive emotional forces, a paradoxical infusion of emotional pain into the physical description.

There is a sense that, as in “My parents…”, he is proffering emotion to a social group that is indifferent to his feelings, well aware that his “pity” alone will not achieve any improvement of the human situation. In fact, the ambiguous final stanza returns to the expectations of the first; it is a reversal of the linear progression of disillusionment which retreats from the despairing vision of “The sick falling from earth” back to his idealised hopes:

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.

This “final innocence / To save from dust” is desired, but not necessarily reached; it is the same “brightness” of hope which we are told has leaked away with the weakened will in the second stanza. With no philosophical comforts in the face of his growing apprehension of mortality, he places his faith in the “created poem” itself. It is an orthodox romantic concept, to present his art as a permanent contribution to the world which will outlast the author’s own fragile existence; yet the disparagement of the preceding lines clarifies the leap of faith that this final stanza demands. It is, ultimately, a return to the (seeming) certainties with which the poem began, the “thunder” and “struggles” gleaned from his childhood love of poetry. The schism between romantic aspiration and life as it is actually experienced is never accepted in Poems; Spender repeatedly dramatises the moment of disillusionment, yet insists upon remaining loyal to his challenged ideals.

“Moving through the silent crowd”(XVI) and “In railway halls” (XXX) provide portraits of the unemployed; the latter poem serves as a counterpoint to the former. “Moving through...” actually begins with the same moment of realisation depicted in “What I expected”:

Moving through the silent crowd
Who stand behind dull cigarettes
These men who idle in the road,
I have the sense of falling light.28

The “falling light” corresponds to the fading brightness of the earlier poem; it is the dwindling hope of the unemployed on a hunger march that he apprehends. O’Neill and Reeves suggest that the strangely subdued crowd is menacing, insurrectionary, but in

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* An earlier version of the poem had appeared in Oxford Poetry in 1930. The original makes the poet’s ambiguous (and economically enviable) position more explicit:
I give you quick my hand of comfort –
We know our sentimental poet.
Yet I have bought my heart no ease.
Haunted by weeping images. (Oxford Poetry, 1930, p. 42.)

Poverty which Spender had witnessed in Germany directly inspired his lyrics to the unemployed and destitute: “Even in summer I can remember walking through the streets feeling oppressed by the evident distress of poor people in Hamburgh. In December in Berlin, it was so much worse.” (S.S. to Isaiah Berlin, 30 January, 1930.)
fact it is dissipated and defeated. The absence of hope has broken their spirits; they are an impotent, aimless mass in stark contrast to their younger selves who had so boisterously attacked the young poet – their middle-class counterpart. They are not revolutionary tigers, animated by a political plan of action:

They lounge at corners of the street
And greet friends with a shrug of shoulder
And turn their empty pockets out,
The cynical gestures of the poor.

The “cynicism” suggests a shrewd appreciation of their situation, and a depressed acceptance of social injustice. The desire to “will this time’s change” that Spender later propounds is not present in this underclass, it is a luxury of the bourgeois. In the third stanza the unemployed are compared to the sarcastically-dubbed “better men” who, according to the workings of capital “sit at desks and take much pay”; this refers by implication to Spender’s own class, as much as it does to the bankers so hated by the communists. Yet he is still prepared to admit to covetousness, an understandable – but somehow contemptible – jealousy of their free time, “the hours that drain away”:

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

Though the poem begins with Spender himself “moving through the silent crowd”, the “desks” of stanza three suggest a shift of location and by this final stanza we are distanced from the subject, and the last couplet sees the poet commenting on the lines he has just written. Just as the crowd is empty of purpose, he is correspondingly empty of any moral conclusion. Their “hungry eyes” serve to admonish him, just as the children had “barked” at his comfortable life, and the ghosts of the great war had “howled” near the new factory of “In 1929”. But the admonishment here is silent; the noisy vigour of childhood, war, and revolution is notably absent in the crowd.

“In railway halls” continues where “Moving through...” ends and provides a response to its despondency. The shattered but dignified unemployed are joined by beggars, “their eyes made big by empty staring”. In the second stanza comes a
rhetorical refusal which expresses the awareness of the empathic divide between himself and the poor: "No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament / To make them birds upon my singing tree". This seems to be a reference to his own juvenilia, the facile "Appeal" of *Nine Experiments* which had pitied "The voices of the poor, like birds / That thud against a sullen pane...". Like the unemployed, they are purposeless, "lives which do not live", but unlike the previous poem, Spender allows an explicit Marxist moral to interject, and it provides the third stanza, replacing the rejected "pen-ornament":

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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.

This is a poeticisation of economic fact, a lyrical exhortation to the indisputable reality of materialist decline.

"In railway halls..." immediately precedes the final three programmatic poems which end the volume, so it is clear that Spender intends an infusion of Marxist moral into the ongoing emotional responses to the victims of economic oppression. He describes to Isherwood his wish to use his poetry to "shake the prejudices" of the reader and to prepare the way for propaganda, and this seems to be the precise intention of the poem. The final stanza, in direct opposition to the struggle for consolation in art at the end of "What I expected", turns toward a determinedly materialist moral vision:

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

The alliterative penultimate line makes its point forcibly, a stressing of emotion into the physical suffering which the former poem had attempted to overcome; in this case transcendence within literature has been denied. The bleak diagnosis, that "Time forgets and never heals" is to be contradicted by the aspiration of the final sequence, so in its context the poem should be seen as the constituent unit of an unfolding drama in which individual statements (poems) are part of a sequential argument rather than a
categorical position. These are the "pretensions" to which Spender adheres, but seem to represent a mode of thought that is followed rather than originated by him. Throughout the volume there is an alternating tone of optimism and pessimism, the former corresponding to romantic idealism and the aspirations of Marxist revolution, and the latter to a disillusioned realism and the condemnation of capitalist society which Marxism offers. In both cases Spender's individualist emotional response finds its objective correlative in the politics of socialism.

"The Prisoners" (XX) is characterised by the same apprehension of the absence of hope in the unemployed, and a similar, self-conscious projection of sympathy that is not felt by its recipients. In *The Thirties and After* Spender suggests that his early 1930s guilt resulted from a belief that, elsewhere in Europe, there was "a terrible reality which was the truth of the time experienced by people in prisons and concentration camps." The dissemination of information about the Nazi persecutions in Germany will be discussed in the next chapter, but "The Prisoners" (which had appeared in *New Signatures*) is one of his early attempts at imaginative projection into the unknowable realm of "terrible reality" — an experience that precious few of the victims would be able to communicate.* As portrayed by Spender, the prisoners' enforced inaction is akin to that of the disenfranchised unemployed and beggars:

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.\(^2\)

The "eyes" of the oppressed are a constant fixation, and rather than "hungry" (the unemployed) or "empty" (the beggars), the *solidity* of the prisoners' eyes in the relentless dark of their prison suggests a kind of fossilisation, a numbness induced by the relentless passage of time, like the beggars' hopeless clock-watching at the railway station. It is these vistas of unoccupied time that Spender sees as the most onerous

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* "One became more and more aware of the indescribable suffering of victims — of an incommunicable reality which was the truth of history in this decade. Compared with it, a literary movement like that called 'The Thirties' was a mockery, like a parrot imitating the screaming of a prisoner being tortured." (*The Thirties and After*, London: Fontana, 1978, p. 22.)
burden, though there is no jealousy in this instance; he employs a spacious simile which casts a cruel counter-image to the prisoners' confinement:

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

The metaphorical hyperbole by which their years in prison become aeons of prehistory is elegantly fused with the image of a crack of light - beneath a closed door perhaps, or an inaccessible window. The awareness that his sympathy is frequently unappreciated - or unfelt - is literalised for the prisoners: while his projected pity "moves amongst them like a breeze / On walls of stone", it is immediately echoed by a more disparaging simile, "or like a tune / On ears of stone." He is unable to offer any help, or to communicate his solidarity, and his visualisation of their plight does not lead to any positive outcome: "There are no chains that fall / Nor visionary liquid door / Melted with anger."

Once again, he perceives that hope is the greatest commodity, but without the power to imbue the prisoners with this "brightness" retroactively, he can only imagine a victory:

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.33

What is being regretted here is a kind of social predetermination that limits the opportunities of the oppressed - almost to zero. The "falling light" of the unemployed workers was already in decline when they were those unsmiling rough children that unconsciously despised his effortless access to economic security. He concludes by contrasting his own impotent anger at their persecution with their dehumanised numbness:

It is too late for anger,
Nothing prevails
But pity for the grief they cannot feel.
This poem outlines a particular fear – that, unless it motivates some kind of resultant action on the part of the poet or the reader, then the compassion has been ineffectual. The indulgence in pity – which some of the reviewers of *Poems* would identify rather pointedly – risks becoming a self-congratulatory portrayal of his own sensitive response to the plight of others.* Nevertheless, the “piteous” poems do make this anxiety explicit within the text, and give rise to their implicit moral question – “what can be done?” The defeat expressed in “The Prisoners”, “In railway halls...” and “Moving through the silent crowd” is answered by the affirmation and prophecy of the “rallying” sequences that follow them; just as “The Prisoners” dramatises the projection of the imagination into an unseen realm of persecution, so too “After they have tired” and its counterparts depict the imagination attempting to project itself into a realisable future; visionary politics which might inspire – or prepare the way for – practical application of the will to alter the social order.

The sonnet “Without that once clear aim” (XXI) is a thematic bridge between the self-conscious projection of “The Prisoners” with its sense of despairing futility, and the first programmatic sequence that commences with the “visionary” propaganda of “oh young men oh young comrades”. The subject of this sonnet is the poet himself: it is a stylised dramatisation of his own position, it even commences by correlating his disillusionment to the passage of twentieth-century history in the first quatrain:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Without that once clear aim, the path of flight} \\
\text{To follow for a life-time through white air,} \\
\text{This century chokes me under roots of night} \\
\text{I suffer like history in Dark Ages...}^{34}
\end{align*}
\]

Initially, the romanticisation of his personal suffering seems histrionic, particularly in the light of the genuine suffering of the prisoners. It recalls the bourgeois, existential ennui of “What I expected”. But the second quatrain – which runs on in the fourth line

* “At this time my prevalent social attitude was one of pity. This, and sympathy with weakness, showed in my work and behaviour... It enlarged my sympathies by leading me down paths where people were insulted, oppressed, or vicious.” (World Within World, p. 119.) This is as much a description of Spender’s romantic inclinations in Germany as it is a description of his poetic tendency; his verdict is that, unlike “Walter” or “Joachim”, his flâneur friends and lovers, his *deus ex machina: the poem* was the justification for his own indulgent lifestyle (Ibid., p. 120.).
– establishes the nature of the suffering: it is the fear of an impending crisis, intuited from increasing unrest and unseen atrocities:

I suffer like history in Dark Ages, where
Truth lies in dungeons, from which drifts no whisper:
We hear of towers long broken off from sight
And tortures and war, in dark and smoky rumour,
But on men’s buried lives there falls no light.

The “dark and smoky rumour” of Berlin bars serves as a counterpoint to the calm ignorance of English society. The isolated realm of “The Prisoners” is where the “truth” of events lies submerged; the “buried lives” of the imprisoned and the murdered are haunting by their absence, just as the poor have haunted him by their “empty” presence. In the sestet he casts himself as the tortured bearer of disturbing knowledge that he must somehow overcome – or exorcise – in his work:

Watch me who walk through coiling streets where rain
And fog drown every cry: at corners of day
Road drills explore new areas of pain,
Nor summer nor light may reach down here to play.
The city builds its horror in my brain,
This writing is my only wings away.

The final couplet condenses the logical progression of “What I expected”, but in this case the intimations of mortality have been replaced by the manifest “horror” of the city, its “road drills” are the correlative for silent, covert persecution. The “innocence / To save from dust” which is the idealised “created poem”, can no longer remain inviolate from the perceived horrors. Whether the act of writing is really intended to provide a romantic escape is uncertain: the grim reality is delineated at too great a length for it to be easily dismissed. Since it precedes the first of the exhortations to “comrades”, the conclusion may be read as an introduction to the sequence that contextualises the succeeding visionary optimism.

“Without that once clear aim” stresses the Keatsian idea that Spender’s lyrical affirmation is – at least in his estimation – achieved by a turning away from the pessimism of his other poems: the reality that he apprehends so starkly. His “wings
away" from the social crisis is to embrace revolutionary optimism, even though it is clearly a simplification of his worldview.

As Eliot observed at this time, in its dogmatic reliance on positivist assertion, communism is just as much a religion as Christianity. Spender is clearly reliant upon the “pretensions” of communist faith to imbue Poems with an optimistic tonal movement in its latter sequence. It begins in the final third of the volume with another New Signatures poem, “oh young men…” (XXII), a direct call to his contemporaries (identified by the heavily-loaded Soviet term of address) to abandon their ideological inheritance and renounce the capitalist system,

oh young men oh young comrades
it is too late now to stay in those houses
your fathers built where they built you to build to breed
money on money…

It is the only poem in the volume to use punctuation and capitalisation so minimally, and the effect is of an even-toned chant of accumulated statements, a sermon-like incantation that evokes the pulpit as much as the declamations of a soap-box socialist. Rather than the politics of Capital, his rhetorical argument proposes the relocation of value from the body politic to the body itself – the “temple” of Germanic sun-worship – in a description that is animated by the Hellenic ideal of the male form which will recur in Vienna’s depiction of the idle masses. Rather than to count money, he implores the young men to,

Count rather those fabulous possessions
which begin with your body and your fiery soul:--
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

This is not a physical description of the empty-eyed beggars, or the hungry-eyed unemployed; by the same defining characteristic, these young men have jewelled eyes, imbued with the “dazzling crystal” of hope; the glittering metaphor continues with the celebration of sun and stars that will be maintained in “I think continually…”, as they are exhorted to “count the sun and the innumerable coined light / sparkling on waves
and spangled under trees”. This is a heightened visionary realm, and hardly the landscape of economic collapse. It becomes apparent that he is not addressing the underclass at all: the jewel-eyed comrades are Spender’s fellow middle-class men, who must turn away from the secure social culture of inherited wealth which – as in Auden’s “A Communist to Others” – encourages a frozen image of an outmoded past:

It is too late to stay in great houses where the ghosts are prisoned
– those ladies like flies perfect in amber
those financiers like fossils of bones in coal.

This is the crumbling Western civilization of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* – a culture which has met its natural end; its final generation – represented by Spender and his class contemporaries – must break out or die with it.

But there is an ambiguity in this poem which identifies a moral quandary central to the volume: there is a sense in which he protests too much that “it is too late”. If the young men do choose to “stay in great houses” like the ghosts of a old social order, it is not necessarily apparent that anything will change at all.

Spender, himself a beneficiary of the class structure – seems to realise here that the real “decline of the west” will only come about as a result of purposive action by his own class, the status quo can be maintained easily by an unquestioning generation that falls into the grooves of its forebears. Purposive action means revolution: simply waiting for the end of civilisation may mean waiting for an event which will never transpire without some assistance. The final lines clarify, somewhat reticently, that the cost of an idyllic future will indeed be a class war:

Oh comrades, step beautifully from the solid wall
advance to rebuild and sleep with friend on hill
advance to rebel and remember what you have
no ghost ever had, immured in his hall.

There is a huge gap between the first two lines quoted here, an unspoken revolution that is glossed by the transition from a “beautiful” step, to a rebuilding, to a “boy’s club” vision of fellow comrades sleeping rough under the “coined light” of the stars. The “solid wall” is implicitly destroyed here, yet the language neatly avoids the necessary destruction. Nevertheless, militaristic associations are emphasised, the repetition of
“advance” make plain the notion of attack, and “rebuilding” and “rebelling” are presented as interchangeable terms for the constructive revolution.

The logic of these lines arises entirely from the revolutionary/evolutionary paradox that forms the basis of Marx’s manifesto; Spender is employing the language to justify an aggressive social transition which is not merely metaphorical. However, there is a substantial difference between a rallying call to the workers who have “nothing to lose” and a lyrical call to a middle-class readership that, presumably, has a great deal to lose. Even though they are “ghosts” in the hall of an outmoded system, it still provides them with a comfortable existence. In this context the fantasy of rebellion is a reassuring romantic escape, but it is far from the practical reality of the moneyed classes.

Samuel Hynes’s description of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, and its amenability to various political readings, also serves as a useful description of “I think continually of those who were truly great”:

> It has no clear political implications... it could lead to either right-wing or left-wing action. What it expresses is a sense of the time that, though not political, is a condition of politics.36

In its context in *Poems*, however, its alignment is clearly to Socialism, and its tonal inspiration – as for the Futurist lyrics to come – is undoubtedly the Soviet propaganda films he had admired and absorbed in Germany. Hynes has noted how “What I expected” and “I think continually...” manage to capture the disillusion and the aspiration of the era respectively, but the latter poem also serves now as an intriguing illustration of the similarity between the idealisation of heroism in both left- and right-wing ideology.

This was the time when Hitler was constructing his own heroic myth as the new dictator of Germany, and the sides in the political struggle were becoming clearly defined. Valentine Cunningham has identified the significance of ideological heroism in the period:

> What injects the business of ’30s heroics with its importance, what keeps up its attraction to the writers and ultimately grants it so much of its deep ambivalence, is that
bigness entered directly into the rivalry between Socialism and Fascism. The going questions of the day were, which of the two was morally the bigger, and which would prevail physically, be militarily the stronger?\textsuperscript{37}

Soviet Russia had its heroes in airmen and explorers, the propagandist supermen who sought to rival the stage-managed stature of the Fascist dictators, and while Spender’s poem doesn’t precisely evoke “bigness” as its mark of greatness, it does express a worshipful celebration of lofty superiority, an airborne grandeur which serves to abstract the nature of their achievement; it is unclear whether this achievement has been in revolution, or leadership, or artistic achievement, but it is the context which so heavily implies a Bolshevik association. The affirmative rhetoric and the hyperbolic imagery suggest the epic monumentalism of Soviet sculptures of the idealised worker.

“I think continually…” had previously appeared in the \textit{Listener} and \textit{New Signatures}, and while in later years it was to become his most anthologised, quoted, and parodied poem, it was already in 1933 something of a definitive piece. The opening lines draw together several of the motifs which have been employed in the description of the underdogs of history, and here they are inverted and made wholly positive:

\begin{quote}
I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns
Endless and singing.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Unlike the prisoners, who are hopeless from the womb, these figures have had utter certainty of purpose since before their birth, and in contrast to the “falling light” of the aimless unemployed, they are bathed in a hyperbole of blinding light and angelic chorus. The second half of this first stanza raises an alternative identity for the “great ones”: a correlation is made between the greatness of action and of expression, and it seems to be a direct address to the theme of oration in \textit{Poems}, the “unacknowledged legislators” who declare and enable future action:

\begin{quote}
Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot in song.
\end{quote}
There is a certain lightness in Spender's description which counteracts the potentially brutish bombast of warring heroics; "lovely ambition", like the young comrades who must "step beautifully", gives a paradoxically delicate rendering of the inevitable tumult of social upheaval.

The second stanza revisits the rural yearning of "I hear the cries of evening", but the Georgian withdrawal is now reformulated into a memorial for something which informs present action, and is not consigned simply to the realm of nostalgia and regret. D.H. Lawrence's vision of the "blood history", and the anti-modernist anxiety of Yeats's "Lake Isle of Innisfree" are fused into a positivist defiance of those forces which threaten to suffocate romantic aspiration:

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.  
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother  
With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.

In fact, this reference to the oppressive modern city is the only hint of the anxiety that is far more explicitly – and self-consciously – portrayed in Poems. "I think continually..." is defiantly outward-looking; after invoking the "titanic" struggles of an imagined prehistory, the rhetorical refusal of the disillusioning forces "Never... Nor... Never..." enable their inclusion without overwhelming the lyrical consciousness, as they have in "Without that once true aim". Importantly, the "wings away" are literalised here, and the "path of flight" of the truly great enables, in reverie, an escape from the pessimism which has repeatedly enforced itself upon the romantic sensibility of the volume.

The final stanza shifts to an alpine horizon, "Near the snow, near the sun." The oft-quoted final lines, celebrating those "who in their lives fought for life" fuse several concepts, not least the martyrs of the revolution, and the superhuman airmen of 1930s mythology, those who have scant regard for their own safety yet who achieve immortality by the very intensity of their existence:

Born of the sun they travelled a short while towards the sun,  
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.39
Despite its unfailing optimism, it is essential to draw attention to the textual interrelation of the first poem in the collection, “He will watch the hawk with an indifferent eye”, one of the original “Marston” poems. The conceptualisation of Marston’s tragic, romantic failure, describes an identical fate to that of the truly great; he,

Had paced the enormous cloud, almost had won
War on the sun;
Till now, like Icarus mid-ocean-drowned,
Hands, wings, are found.40

Marston had proved unworthy of the lyrical investment in him, but the airborne heroes of this poem are to be given no tone of deflation or criticism, they are to be idealised, inviolate and abstracted from mundane experience. “I think continually...” similarly acts as a lyrical response to “An ‘I’ can never be great man” (VIII), and the fact that both of these poems have preceded “I think continually...” in the volume indicates Spender’s overall thematic development.

Poems is a conscious movement from romantic disillusionment, scepticism and despondency into a mode of heightened affirmation. It is almost a deliberate abandonment of realism, and an adoption of the “pretension” of communist thinking informs the visionary politics of the final sequences. There is still a degree of ambivalence, as shall be seen in the discussion of the Futurist lyrics below, but essentially there is a drive towards an apocalyptic faith in revolution which will engender a new order against a backdrop of inevitable social decline; it is to be both an individualist “flowering of the spirit” and a social regeneration.

The unremitting optimism – and lack of irony – that “I think continually...” expresses as an isolated lyric was not universally admired. As O’Neill and Reeves have observed, it “throws down a gauntlet to those who would prefer self-protective irony”.41

Archibald MacLeish was to praise its brave directness: “It is a poem not only of great beauty but of great power. It is capable of destroying a whole intellectualist generation.”42 For the same reason, Randall Jarrell despised its lack of cautionary reserve, claiming that the poem “should ever have been greeted with anything but helpless embarrassment makes me ashamed of the planet upon which I dwell.”43 It is a
poem which is sufficiently direct, and ideologically neutral in its language, to transcend its politicised context, but which is as vulnerable to charges of immoderate propagandism as it is to amoral hero-worship.

It was partly the effect of "I think continually..." which led to the "Rupert Brooke" label: its optimism is a far cry from the withering depiction of heroics that Spender had gleaned from Wilfred Owen, but, as Poems demonstrates, the transition from scepticism to affirmation is a conscious statement of the volume, and readings which isolate the poem from the other lyrics inevitably overstate its drive towards unqualified affirmation.*

"After they have tired" (XXIV) had, as discussed, originally appeared in the Listener in March of the previous year, on the same page as an essay by T.S. Eliot which defined communism as a faith, impossible to refute on its own terms: "Russian communism is a religion, and a religion which is not mine." During these years, in parallel to the younger poets' flirtation with the ideology of communism, Eliot's own position against it was clarifying and becoming more extreme. In fact, by 1934, he was to define the "struggle of our time" in extreme oppositional terms: "[it is] to renew our association with traditional wisdom; to re-establish a vital connection between the individual and the race; the struggle in a word against Liberalism."^45

Soon after the appearance of Spender's Poems, Eliot was to state his objection to communism plainly in his "Commentary" for the Criterion. He reiterates his assertion that adherence to its tenets constitutes an act of faith:

Communism – I mean the ideas of communism, not the reality, which would be of no use in this way – has come as a godsend (so to speak) to those young people who would like to grow up and believe in something. Once they have committed themselves, they must find (if they are honest, and really growing) that they have let themselves in for all the troubles that afflict the person who believes in something. I speak of those who are moved by the desire to be possessed by a conviction, rather than by the obvious less laudable motives which make a man believe that he has a belief.^46

* The final line in the original published version had been "And left the air signed with their vivid honour." (Listener, Vol. VI, November 1931, p. 912.) Isherwood proudly boasted that he had "urged the transposition of 'vivid', a claim that Spender did not refute. (Christopher and His Kind, London: Minerva, 1978, p. 111.)
Spender’s use of language in his prose and letters suggest an awareness of what such a “belief” entails, and he certainly has the desire to be “possessed by a conviction”; nevertheless “After they have tired”, so pointedly juxtaposed in the *Listener* with Eliot’s critique, rushes headlong into the visionary aspirations of revolutionary thought, yet he infuses the poem with self-conscious Biblical allusions that seem to require the reader to associate the evangelical tenets of Christianity with the apocalyptic language of the collapse of capitalism.

The first stanza claims that waiting for “Death and Jerusalem” to give the “crossing-sweeper” the just rewards he was not given in life is a futile exercise (a reference to Jo, the emblematic proletarian of Dickens’s *Bleak House* who is “dying thus around us every day”); yet, in wholly Biblical terms, the generation which will succeed the present will “spring from our sides” like Adam’s rib. But, he asserts, the respect of the future generation must be earned by the proper response to the present crisis:

Let not them wonder how after the failure of banks  
The failure of cathedrals and the declared insanity of our rulers,  
We lacked the Spring-like resources of the tiger  
Or of plants who strike out new roots to gushing waters.

This is almost a reformulation of the accusatory recruitment slogan “What did you do in the war, daddy?” The conceptualisation of the social crisis also yokes together the idea of Spenglerian collapse with the revolutionary movement. It is both a vegetable process and an act of Darwinian aggression (the revolutionary tiger), once more evoking the paradox of Marx’s manifesto.

In this poem, the actions of the radical generation must apparently take place “after” the failure of institutions, an Eliotian “whimper” with which the poem begins as the old world withers away out of simple fatigue, when its inhabitants have “tired of the brilliance of cities”. Just as the young middle-classes rejecting their inheritance *en masse* was unconvincing in “oh young men”, so too the thought of those who “strive for office” giving up on civilisation out of sheer boredom takes a considerable leap of faith. Importantly though, the apocalyptic death by entropy of the first stanza is countered at
the conclusion – the dawn of the epoch will “explode like a shell” through the torn ruins of the old world.

The poem is unusual in the volume in as far as it employs a lyrical refrain, “Clean and equal like the shine from snow.” Initially it describes the grinning skull of death, then the strength of the bones of the new order, the blanching light of equality, and then the glare of the “shell” which signifies the new dawn. The bone motif recalls the universality of death as evoked in “In 1929”, but here it is transformed from a morbid, philosophical acceptance of death into an emblem of comradeship, solidarity, and preparedness to die for a cause; the values of a communist revolution.

The third stanza provides the most explicit parallel, as Eliot had noted, between the “religion” of communism and the religion of Christianity. In fact, in Spender’s description their underlying moral is indistinguishable:

Readers of this strange language,
We have come at last to a country
Where light equal, like the shine from snow, strikes all faces,
Here you may wonder
How it was that works, money, interest, building, could ever hide
The palpable and obvious love of man for man.49

This is a visionary world-state akin to Roberts’s *New Country* in which the comradeship between men is identical to Christ’s commandment. The tenet of brotherly love will be the foundation of the new order, and capitalism has merely disguised it in the present. The anticipated “failure of cathedrals” of the fourth stanza will herald the release from religious oppression, for in the decadent present, religion has lost sight of its own moral dictums.

In 1933, Eliot’s response to the dogma of communism was to accept its amenability to the morality of rational people (whom the young poets Auden, Spender and Day Lewis represented) but to roundly reject it as false:

I have, in consequence of these reflexions, much sympathy with communists of the type with which I am here concerned; I would even say that, as it is the faith of the day, there are only a small number of people living who have achieved the right *not* to be communists. My only objection to it is the same as my objection to the cult of the Golden Calf. It is better to worship a golden calf than to worship nothing; but that, after
all, is not, in the circumstances, an adequate excuse. My objection is that it just happens to be mistaken.\textsuperscript{50}

By defining it as a faith, Eliot is able to regard communism as preferable to the godlessness of atheism ("you can never fight a religion except with another religion"\textsuperscript{51}), and his analysis captures the sense of Spender’s position at this time; the ideology of \textit{Poems} is a belief which he struggles to comes to terms with, and he repeatedly attempts to convince himself, as much as the reader, of its truth, self-consciously "stamping the words with emphasis".

An attempt to adjudge the tone, and sincerity, of "The Funeral" (XXV) is essential when determining Spender’s textual relationship with the images and implicit values of the communist state. This is the first – and only – of the poems to attempt to describe an \textit{achieved} socialist Utopia; it expresses both a fear of the collective mass consciousness and an affiliation to the “decadent” culture of Europe that appears to contradict the endorsement of socialism in the preceding poems. It is, in effect, a dramatisation of his own position – he is too enamoured of the artistic forms of his own inherited culture, and the centrality that it allows individualism, to be able to portray the impersonal “dictatorship of the proletariat” (in which the single life is eminently replaceable) with anything other than a strange, halting humour. Its declarations dare the reader to mock the apparent inhumanity of the workers, for whom death is simply “another milestone on their way”:

\begin{quote}
With laughter on their lips and with winds blowing round them
They record simply
How this one excelled all others in making driving belts.\textsuperscript{52}
\end{quote}

This is quite different from the “lovely ambition” which causes the lips of the truly great to sing. The image is grotesque; the stark shortened line envisioning the worker’s name being calmly ticked off in some employment ledger – an action that is literalised in the second stanza. The post-capitalist regime regards the measurement of “what one unit contributed” to be a fitting memorial in this pragmatic “time of statistics”. And while echoes of the revolution and its red flag haunt their memories, the “pennons of song still fluttering through their blood”, they are now dehumanised, part of a massive machine which is the world-state, “With its towns like brain-centres and its pulsing arteries.”
3. Poems (1933)

This is, of course, a reference to that ever-present 1930s emblem, the arterial road, growing out of London particularly at this time, linking the city ever more efficiently with its suburbs and industrial exurbs and satellite towns; Day Lewis, Auden, and even Graham Greene had similarly begun to chart their impact on the landscape.

Dovzhenko's *Earth*, seen in Germany in 1932, gives setting and imagery, but the portrayal of a future civilization with massive "brain-centres" owes a debt to the striking imagery of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, which Spender had seen in Berlin, and which the sensibility of *Nine Experiments* had anticipated. However, Lang's depiction of the drones of the workforce that painfully, morosely rotate stylised cogs in the steamy depths of the city hardly provides a very encouraging vision of the future. The men, after the heady heroism of a world revolution, have become soulless robots, mere extensions of the machine which they serve, rather than the other way round:

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.

The last line of this stanza echoes "They record simply"; the entire funeral ceremony manifested in a scribbled report, and then likened to a vanishing spark. It is impossible to see how, in this context, the vision of mankind as an insect colony could possibly warrant the reader to concur with the simile and its dainty and inappropriate adverb, or to approve of the workers' cheery acceptance of death.

In fact, following the accumulation of statements, the use of "happily" identifies the interpretative crux of the poem; like Eliot, Spender seems to regard communism as a religion, and the response to this simile determines the faith, or the lack of faith, of the reader. The final stanza, which proffers an antithesis to the preceding description, suggests that Spender himself cannot fully accept the idea the man would serve as a contented drone; there seems to be too much history and achievement to abandon to the cultural purge demanded by communism:

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.
The rhetorical denial employed elsewhere in *Poems* allows Spender to introduce a context for his argument; in “I think continually...” it is the dreary “noise and fog” of the city which are dismissed – but included – and here the communist state seems to have no value unless there is some nod towards what has been lost.

Spender’s depiction of the workers and their funeral is sardonic in the sheer hyperbole of their contentedness and absence of grief, and the final stanza introduces the opposite extreme: an absurd portrait of scholars weeping over Hellenic specimens they have studied, and coveted, but have never known. The “European genius” indicates another outgrowth of the valuation of individuality – the cult of personality; the reference here is not simply to the artistic greats, but to the geniuses of past and present history; the appreciation of European idols such as Beethoven, and the celebration of heroic individualist action will become meaningless in a “world-state” without conflict, and this is a dynamic which he is clearly not prepared to sacrifice, as it provides the logical development of the poem. Spender’s ethos is far closer to the individualism of Eliot’s Christianity than it is to the selflessness that communism demands, and “The Funeral” depicts the gulf between these world-views. Michael Roberts was to divine an unconflicted communist moral from “The Funeral” in his introduction to *New Signatures* – his tactical misreading will be examined in a later chapter.

In 1934, Edwin Muir provided a survey of contemporary trends in poetry for the *London Mercury* in which he names Spender’s *Poems* as a representative example of the current poetic language; he claims that Spender has “formed his personal idiom by drawing on the vocabularies of the various schools into which poetry is at present split, as well as on poets of the past: Mr. Eliot, the engineers, Rilke, and some of the romantic poets.” He emphasises the use of “engineering imagery”, but suggests that Spender’s use of this communist trope is tactical rather than compulsive, and as a comparison he asserts that Spender “is not, like Mr. Day Lewis, addicted to this kind of imagery; he simply uses it as one of the current resources of poetry”:

The tendency of poetry as well as thought, when an old and semi-religious belief has fallen, is to turn to a purely earthly one. That happened at the beginning of the romantic
movement, when many of the English poets looked towards the French Revolution. The popularity of engineering imagery at present is due to a belief in the inevitable approaching salvation of society through the use of machinery, and this makes it more than a curious literary fashion. But the periods when poetry has held a purely earthly – that is, political and historical – belief have always been short; and whether Communism prevails politically or not, the mode of Communist poetry is bound to be fleeting.\textsuperscript{56}

Muir’s analysis is shrewd, and would prove to be quite correct. The trend for communist machine-worship would be relatively short-lived, and Spender seems to be aware of this fact in \textit{Poems}. “The Funeral” states quite plainly that even in the event of the prevalence of communism, the “straining red flags” of his “for-the-duration” poetry will become a distant memory.

Muir identifies what Spender and his contemporaries have learned from the Russian films, that a belief in communism and a belief in salvation by the machine go hand in hand. Such was the brief intensity of this mode of literary imagery, that by 1937 Orwell was to dismiss it as \textit{irrevocably ingrained cliché of Socialist dogma}:

...the unfortunate thing is that Socialism, as usually presented, is bound up with the idea of mechanical progress, not merely as a necessary development but as an end in itself, almost as a kind of religion... The kind of person who most readily accepts Socialism is also the kind of person who views mechanical progress, \textit{as such}, with enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{57}

While “The Landscape near an Aerodrome” and “The Pylons” view the impact of the machine on the country with some degree of ambivalence, “The Express” (XXVI) is a less reserved celebration of the power of the locomotive, a playful fusion of the concept of speed and technological progress with revolutionary politics. It is not, on close reading, a simple acceptance of the visionary fervour of socialism, but it is a rhapsodic enacting of that relationship between man and machine that the Italian Futurists had conceived over a decade earlier.\textsuperscript{4}

\textsuperscript{4} “Look west, Wystan”, Poem 16 of Day Lewis’s \textit{The Magnetic Mountain} (London: Hogarth, 1933), along with Spender’s own “The Pylons” and “The Landscape near an Aerodrome” fairly single-handedly fused the two together with Auden as the “Pylon Poets” of disaffected modernity:

\begin{quote}
Sky-scrapers put high questions that quench the wind’s breath,
Whose shadow still comes short of truth, but kills the grass:
Power-house chimneys choke sun, ascetic pylons pass
Bringing light to the dark-livers, charged to deal death.\textsuperscript{p. 29}
\end{quote}
Bernard Bergonzi has at length discussed Spender's "Pylon" lyrics, defining them as "Futurist," and this is a term which I have adhered to, but it is important to stress that in the strictest literary-historical (and geographical) sense they are not really covered by the label. The pre-War enthusiasm for the machine and the reinvention of the cityscape (what Auden was to echo in his call for "new styles of architecture"), summarised in Marinetti's vivacious 1909 manifesto, had been echoed most closely in Britain by Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism; but during these years the British avant-garde had continually lagged behind the frequent faddish revolutions of continental art and literature. Cubism, Dada and Surrealism had not crossed the channel effectively; the Auden generation's more formally conservative assimilation of the tenets of Marxism had somewhat pre-empted the paradoxes of the Surrealist method (a tendency to over-seriousness mixed with insolent humour) when it was introduced courtesy of Herbert Read and David Gascoyne later in the 1930s. As Bergonzi notes, the Futurists were hardly in Spender's mind when he composed "The Express" yet it bears a powerful resemblance to their avowed disdain for antiquity, and a declared preference for all things new, loud, and fast.

Unlike "The Funeral" and its bleak depiction of imagined human "cogs", the subsequent dramatisation of machine-worship in Poems has a decidedly middle-class flavour: the passenger's-eye view of the arrival of a plane at a suburban airstrip, the sight of pylons stretching across fields, perhaps from a car window while on the way to a "country house" for the weekend, and a journey in an elegant locomotive which hurtles from city to city in "The Express".

The train journey is now a clichéd emblem of the 1930s sense of its own modernity, and Spender's poem is one of the primary contributions to this micro-genre, drawing on the monochromatic stylisation of locomotives on film. In the first of the "machine" poems, the alliterative opening line establishes the thematic fusion of politics with, as revealed in the second line, the machine:

After the first powerful plain manifesto
The black statement of pistons, without more fuss
But gliding like a queen, she leaves the station.
3. Poems (1933)

The witty personification in the third line, and the revelation that it is a train being described, establishes the tone of the entire poem. Whether it is literally a queen or a serene homosexual that is referred to doesn’t really change the effect; it possesses a stately grandeur of “luminous self-possession” that the poem, at its outset, does not attempt to undermine. The slightly irregular metre with its five stresses suggests the rhythmic urgency of the train’s relentless forward motion as it glibly passes the ugly “gasworks” and the cemetery which delineate the boundary of the city without concern or comment. The poem is a self-conscious manifesto of aesthetics, and the “heavy page / Of death, printed by gravestones” poses no threat to the “powerful plain” statement of forward motion. Like the “truly great”, the express is compelled to sing, but it is not a heavenly chorus but something assuredly modern, which crescendos “with a jazzy madness”:

The song of her whistle screaming at curves,  
Of deafening tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts.  
And always light, aerial, underneath  
Goes the elate meter of her wheels.

Jazz, the new musical form of the 1920s, was still a growing phenomenon, and had characterised the clubs of Berlin; with its inclusion of new cultural trends, politics, automation, music, the subtle intimation of relaxed sexuality, “The Express” is a celebration of radicalism and freshness on all fronts.

Sound is the medium by which the power and speed are evoked. At the same time, this country of the future is a double-edged territory, and the train’s “scream”, combined with the contradictory similes, suggests the cost of technological advance:

Screaming through metal landscape on her lines  
She plunges new eras of wild happiness  
Where speed throws up strange shapes, broad curves  
And parallels clean like the steel of guns.

Rather like the “truly great” who have flown across a mountain range towards the sun, the express train hurtles past its earthly limitations in a final hyperbole, “Beyond the crest of the world”, until it seems to be driving through space:

Ah, like a comet through flame, she moves entranced
This visionary leap suggests a certain neutrality, or amorality, of the machine; while the Italian Futurists became circumstantially affiliated to the Fascistas, and ultimately Mussolini's proud perfection of the railways and stations, Spender seems to evoke a political disinterestedness by employing the pathetic fallacy; the technology which the express represents is awesome, yet it is of "luminous self-possession", and "wrapt" in the deafening sounds of her own making. Just as she passes the "heavy page / Of Death" which the gravestones proffer in response to her technological manifesto with "restrained unconcern", so too she drowns out and fails to acknowledge the trifling tones of birdsong, and especially not the soundless processes of the trees.

Spender portrays the enthusiasm for mechanical progress "for its own sake" which Orwell was to hold in contempt, but he does so with cautious regard for that which is ignored by such blinkered enthusiasm. In fact, since the opening lines have aligned the portrait of the train with a manifesto (as political as it is a statement of aesthetic allegiance) it seems that it must be this very enthusiasm for the machine age which socialism endorses that is under examination, and the moral tenets of socialism itself. Just as the grief and pity felt towards the unemployed and the prisoners were meant to motivate political action, so too the revolutionary act seems to require a suspension of such compassion for the duration of the horrors of the revolt; moreover, as "The Funeral" suggests, the abnegation of compassion may result in the permanent dehumanisation of mankind, at least by the standards of the present. "The Express", despite its Futurist trappings, is not an unreserved rhapsody on the unquestionable greatness of technology, but a suggestion that technology, in itself, is simply a tool, and like all tools it is subject to the moral dictates of its creators.

"The Landscape near an Aerodrome" (XXVII) continues the portrayal of modern transport, at first in a style identical to "The Express", but then in a gradual transition which (due to the aerial perspective of its passengers) takes in the kind of landscape that had been ignored by the self-possessed train; it subjects the landscape to an analysis which wavers between a Freudian and a Marxist diagnosis of the state of the working class. In contrast to the train (though it is similarly feminised), the plane is
defined by her silence; the engines are "shut-off" as she "glides" in to land, just as the train had so elegantly departed the station. The opening line, "More beautiful and soft than any moth" is a direct recapitulation of the rural comparison at the finale of "The Express".

In the second stanza the passengers are identified as the observing consciousness; they are given the clear vision and ultimate perspective which only the mythic 1930s airman can possess (Auden's sharp-sighted "helmeted airman", and Spender's Marston who watches the hawk "with an indifferent eye"). The "travellers" are able to cast a cold eye on the suburbs, "the outskirts of this town", so that they "may see what is being done." The airborne travellers are presumably unlikely to be suburbanites themselves, so the implicit perspective is not simply one of aerial elevation but of social and economic superiority. They are allowed a rare glimpse of the "outposts / Of work" – the neglected domain of those who constitute the unrewarded workforce of society; to them, it is a landscape of immanent terror:

... chimneys like lank black fingers
Or figures frightening and mad

Whether it is the passengers’ or the poet’s apprehension of horror is unclear; in fact, the distinction is irrelevant; what is clear is that the menace is being attributed by the observing consciousness and not by the inhabitants of the suburbs surrounding the airstrip. They would never liken the "squat" industrial buildings to "women’s faces / Shattered by grief." The poem dramatises the projection of class definition, the latent guilt of the fliers attributes psychological unease to its surroundings: those who live and work in the nearby factory are portrayed as the excluded, sent to live and work in a sterile no-man’s land, yet ignorant that this causes spiritual unease:

Here where few houses
Moan with faint light behind their blinds
They remark the unhomely sense of complaint, like a dog
Shut out and shivering at the foreign moon.

This is the creeping suburban sprawl with its orange-tiled roofs so despised by the aristocratic Count Dionys in Lawrence’s novella “The Ladybird” (1923). It is more evidence that Spender seems to have inherited Lawrence’s sense of man’s organic roots
in the landscape which is corrupted by such mundane neighbourhoods. It is a more extreme position than mere Georgian nostalgia; moreover, the implication that the housing developments are an affront to the spirit of humanity sits uneasily with Spender’s enthusiasm for pioneering technology – of which the plane and its required aerodrome are symbols.

The suburbs of the poem are not the sterile comfort zones of the present but an incursion of the concrete sprawl beyond the city limits. While not quite proposing Betjeman’s extreme suggestion of a bombing campaign, there is a clear criticism here of the spiritual disillusionment which he divines in such developing areas as Hendon, Slough, and Croydon. The examination of these “unloved”, functional realms of housing estates and industrial parks (or interzones, as J.G. Ballard has dubbed them) becomes a consistent trope in literature after the Second World War, and it begins in the early 1930s literature, the writers of which – like Spender – were eager for change but uncertain about the “démocratisation” of the city limits and its soulless aesthetics.

The increasingly Marxist portrayal of this subsection of the cityscape once again invokes the “rough” children of Spender’s childhood reminiscence, the suburban boys’ only pastime is to play in the fields around the aerodrome, nihilistically “Hacking dead grass”. Their cries similarly provide an implicit admonishment of the privileged classes as the children who would “bark at our world”, yet, like the self-absorbed express train, the city takes no interest. Their voices,

...like wild birds,
Settle upon the nearest roofs
But soon are hid under the loud city.

In what has been interpreted as a crude piece of Marxist dogma, the final stanza sees a shift in tone culminating in an abruptly anti-religious final line; as the passengers come in to land, they suddenly hear the “tolling bell” of a church – actually “the” church, the definite article emphasising its emblematic role. It is larger and more menacing “than all the charcoaled batteries / And imaged towers against that dying sky”, and, most menacingly, it “blocks” the sun of socialist enlightenment.

The suburban realm is described as a “landscape of hysteria”; and by this psychological projection, it is an outward manifestation of mankind’s will. In stark
contrast to the elegant forms of the city, which represent human aspiration and sanity, the suburbs here are the physical contours of suppressed anxiety and uncertainty, just as their inhabitants become the repositories of oppression and hopelessness. The “imaged towers” are both the poem’s literal images, and the projections of architectural will. In this context “the” church, in its hyperbolic, exaggerated scale, is an “image” of the opiate which prevents the workers from perceiving their exploitation.

Simon Dentith has argued that the origin of this particular “hysteria” is ultimately indeterminate; it might arise from the inhabitants, the tolling bell, or represent an unconscious transformation of the landscape by the poet in a Surrealist manner, all ultimately dissolving “into the ambiguities of projection that were always threatening” the various viewpoints. While the poet is certainly wilfully projecting his characterisation of the landscape as much as he is diagnosing or divining it (the two are really indistinguishable) there is also a more prosaic explanation which fits the unfolding narrative. The first and second stanzas evoke a peaceful, graceful flight in which the unsuspecting passengers are “Lulled by descent”; it is only when the altitude has decreased sufficiently for the airstrip and its surrounding neighbourhoods to come into view that the first expressions of anxiety occur: “frightening” and “mad” chimneys, and buildings manifesting “grief”. It seems to portray the normal, escalating anxiety before landing. Despite the plane’s deceptively graceful glide, its “sweep of love”, the emotional movement reaches its “hysterical” climax as the plane touches the runway, and the church’s bell seems to be as suggestive of the passengers’ imagined brush with mortality as it is of religious oppression.

Nevertheless, there is no question that the main objective of this abrupt image is to condemn religion from a Marxist perspective. Spender certainly felt that the poem was integral to the collection. In a letter to Isaiah Berlin in March 1932 he expresses regret that Berlin did not like it, but insists that, in his own opinion, it is “one of the best.” The reason for intrusiveness of the final, portentous image appears to be that, until the very end of the poem, it is the privileged classes, and the architects of suburban development who seem to be the accused, and the ending implies that the responsibility for the upkeep of the “functional” landscape and the well-being of its inhabitants should lie with Christianity. The result is an unconvincing, jarring conclusion. At the same time, despite its engagement with concepts of psychological repression, the poem is
essentially an *imagistic* description of movement across a landscape, stressing its visual components as forcibly as its subtextual unease; as elsewhere in the collection, the apparent statement is, in its context, made conditional by the confusion of viewpoint.

"The Pylons" (XXVIII), the last of the sequence, is more sparse and epigrammatic than its precursors, and takes a ballad form. In fact, though Spender had by this time abandoned the "typographical opportunities" he had toyed with in *Nine Experiments* (apart from the lower-case letters of "oh young men..."), the alternation of long and short lines is perhaps intended to mimic the silhouette of five pylons stretching across a country field. As in "The Funeral", two opposing worlds are suggested, almost offered for evaluation; the choice is between nostalgia for a vanishing rural life or the acceptance of a "superior" technological future. Where "The Funeral" ended with (and hence seemed to endorse) the nostalgia for lost culture, "The Pylons" contrarily abandons its uneasy regret at the passing of a more innocent country landscape in favour of a future cityscape of skyscrapers penetrating the clouds.

The poem revels in the contrast between the two world-views: the quaint country-mindedness of Georgian paeans to a secure and comforting England is cruelly "mocked" by the brash and confident "quick perspective of the future" that the electric cables signify; the pylons themselves are depicted as the harbingers of an inevitable coming world as visualised by Fritz Lang and H.G. Wells.* It is accepted that the forward movement of society and technology necessitates a loss of innocence; just as the rural landscape was once a treasury of "hidden villages", its "secret" the stone it yielded to make cottages and walls, so the pylons are of functional concrete, "Bare like nude girls"; they are a brash, shameless manifestation of unadorned technological function that has "no secret". But far from regretting the lost simplicity, and an organic interrelration of the inhabitants with their landscape, the poem ends in the midst of a prophetic reverie, "Dreaming of cities" with gargantuan structures.

It becomes apparent through close analysis that the verbal textures of *Poems* are a clear example of poetic diction in transition between two distinct styles; concepts of
nostalgic, Georgian lyricism are evoked in order to offset and define a forward-looking sensibility which sees that it must embrace the future – in politics, in technology and in aesthetics, while acknowledging that these three elements are intricately entwined.

As I have argued, the volume follows a linear thematic development; as it develops it exhibits an ever-increasing confidence in the necessity and inevitability of revolution in the face of cultural dissolution; whether this proves to be a communist revolution, or a “Gnostic” visionary revolution which the rhetoric suggests, is not determined, but the final sequence of poems drives towards a rhapsodic conclusion that fixes determinedly on the future. “Those fireballs, those ashes” (XXXI) provides a celebratory portrait of the idealised revolutionary man, “From all these events” (XXXII), like “In 1929”, iterates the position of the current generation in history, and projects beyond their demise into a cosmic future “larger than our purpose”, while “Not palaces, an era’s crown” (XXXIII) concludes the volume with an explicit call to action, to “will this Time’s change.”

“Those fireballs, those ashes” had appeared in the Listener in June 1932 with the title “Misfortune cannot fail”, a phrase from line 12 which, in the volume version, has been revised (“fail” becomes “fall”) to radically alter the meaning from negative to positive (i.e. – the inevitability of misfortune becomes the impossibility of misfortune) in a manner suited to the affirmative tone of the sequence.66

The poem begins with an apocalyptic vision that justifies its eschatological desire with the declaring that an epochal change is caused by nature:

Those fireballs, those ashes,
Those cloudbursts, those whirling madman hurricanes
The palatial sky breathes, make men’s organic change.67

Once again, the tension between the “organic”, evolutionary transformation of society and the willed act of revolt (as derived from Marx) is manifested in the paradoxical rhetorical development of the sequence; but in this lyric alone the cataclysmic change is external to mankind rather than willed – and he is judged according to his response to it.

* Lang’s Metropolis appeared in 1926 and Spender saw it in Germany with Isherwood during their Berlin “era”; H.G. Wells’s The Shape of Things To Come would be published in September 1933, and went on to provide the basis for William Cameron Menzies’s 1936 film.
In a short catalogue, alternative reactions to the apocalypse are described: “Some” die immediately, “extinguished by horror”, and are transformed into ghosts who “delight” in their liberation, “invisible to run” and plant unfelt kisses on their loved ones. But the ones to be condemned are the “Others”, who “shake in bed whilst the sorrowing elements / Twist them to shapes of dreadful grief.” The implication is that those who do not rejoice in the transformation of society – which involves a death of the cherished individual self – are condemned to die with the old order, though they will do so with a bizarre, “traitorous joy”. Their refusal to “join” casts them as betayers in this phantasmagorical revolution.

The poem appears to be arguing for future vision, an ability to look positively at events to a time beyond the present struggle. After the assertion that “misfortune cannot fall”, the ideal man is described – one who can rejoice in the “organic” change of society and remain unruffled by others’ terror:

Him I delight in accepts joy as joy;
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;
The clouds of our obscuring disillusion
Are thoughts which shade his brow, and then he smiles.68

He is a Shelleyan Prometheus, yet he is able to transcend the romantic, tragic demise and make the “fire” of crisis his food and motivation. In a reference to the first poem in the volume, this ideal does not disappoint like Marston, (who disdains to “strain his brow” and consequently meets the fate of Icarus); rather this idealised hero allows “our obscuring disillusion” to “shade his brow” but responds with a defiant smile in the face of disaster. He is essentially a positive thinker, a messianic enthusiast and optimist who is as content in solitude as in company. Importantly, he is “the dandy”, an idealised, carefree artist.

The final lines attest that the poet is far from this ideal, but he hopes that rather than be destroyed by the obscure deluge of “iron hail”, he will rather become transformed into someone “of finer mixture / Not struck from sorrow but learning
laughter.”* This is a transition which reverses the movement of “The Funeral”, in which the cheery machine workers are drawn in stark contrast to the mournful, nostalgic scholars of European culture. It is an explicit statement of allegiance to the world-view of the future, a joy in a collective consciousness rather than the “traitorous joy” of insular reactionaries.

The four stanzas of “From all these events” (XXXII) exhibit a similar Psalm-like repetition that asserts a conscious, willed visionary tone. It marks a significant stylistic contrast to the earlier poems. In fact, the mode is so different in the programmatic sequences that it would be hard to believe that “My parents kept me...”, with its understated phrases, or “Without that once clear aim” with its intimations of doom, could be the work of the same poet if they were not collected in the same volume. It recalls the level-eyed view of history which commands the philosophical relativism of “In 1929”, but here it is exaggerated into a time-scale of cosmic proportions; once again, by the final lines it is the spirit of H.G. Wells’s fantastic predictions that seem to inform Spender’s imaginative sweep.

Just as the spectres of the dead of the great war had haunted the German, Englishman and communist on the walk along the Rhine, it is “ruin” and “Time” which have cut a generation short, “singling” the youth of the 1930s “from the war which killed ten millions.” The drive of history compels them forward “from the slump, from the war, from the boom.” The guilt of having escaped the terrible duties of the war, and its grisly signal honour (as gleaned from the war poets) seems to inform this vision of history; it is only by the foreshortening perspective of aeons that the trials of the 1930s generation can be indistinguishable from the tribulations of their fathers. The third stanza shamefully relates the “happy summer fields” of youth, the continuing “ruin” only returning with the economic “slump”, which sends them “to lean days after the years of fulfilment.”

The final stanza provides a positivist, cosmic perspective in the face of the death of the individual:

Our universal ally, but larger than our purpose, whose flanks

* This phrase would later provide the title of the book that described his visit to Israel in 1952 (Learning Laughter, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953.)
3. Poems (1933)

Stretch to planets unknown in our brief, particular battle,
Tomorrow Time's progress will forget us even here,
When our bodies are rejected like the beetle's shard, today
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.69

It is a strange amalgam of Paradise Lost and the space serials of the 1930s, and it cannot avoid evoking an image of brave Soviet cosmonauts planting the red flag on far flung planets; but the space that he is describing is not populated by humans – on the contrary, this is a bleak vision of an unpopulated universe long after mankind's insignificant demise. The embracing of the infinite in this passage is a direct rebuttal of the solipsistic rejection of the night sky of "frozen stars" in poem II, when he had insisted that,

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.70

The dialectical relationship between the cold, merciless universe and the passionate, creative self is an extension of the opposing tropes of optimism and pessimism throughout the volume. The tension between the commemoration of the individual, and the dissolution of individual identity which a world-state demands is a manifestation of Spender's unease at the thought of the death of individualist expression. The mythical revolution is a highly-charged romantic endeavour; just as the events in France in the 1790s had captured the imagination of the British Romantics, so too the posited workers' revolution of the 1930s will provide ample scope for the poetic portrayal of heroism and romantic tragedy; but the subsequent establishment of a communist state will, of course, abnegate those inherent conflicts which define Spender's rhetorical drama.

In this analysis, "The Funeral" becomes the cautionary portrait of a roboticised mankind. Literature which derives its subject matter and inspiration from oppression and the rise of Fascism, and which employs revolution as its motivating theme, cannot exist without Fascism to define it. Writing after the Second World War, Spender's verdict on the romantic dream of revolution would be to emphasise its inherent tragedy;
describing the Viennese uprising of 1934 in *Returning to Vienna, 1947*, he sees the participants as socialist heroes who “denied their souls / To hammer from their time-bound bodies / A world where workers would wear haloes.” In his later formulation it is a *denial* of an innate spiritual instinct which motivates the revolt. The defeat of the workers’ revolution is a result of them – and their dream – being “Killed by the realists.”

Spender’s later observation that “fascism itself gave anti-fascism a semblance of unity” identifies the paradox of his 1930s poetry: while he would subsequently regret the politicisation of his work, its “betrayal” of the aesthetics of modernism, it actually provides the poetry with its innate ideological tension; it is both a reflection of the general “bourgeois crise de conscience,” and a manifestation of the competing modes of influence in his work. Although it resists the systematised structure of Auden’s (schematic) psychoanalysis, or his later adoption of Christianity, Spender’s cosmological framework provides an austere, impersonal perspective on his romantic effusion.

The final poem, “Not palaces, an era’s crown” (XXXIII), is a rhetorical movement from the poetic “I” to the collective (and emphatically not royal) “we”. It establishes a refusal of the monarchist and aristocratic model in favour of the rule of equality:

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Not palaces, an era’s crown
Where the mind dwells, intrigues, rests;
The architectural gold-leaved flower
From people ordered like a single mind,
I build.  
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Importantly however, it is the individual poet who is wilfully constructing the political alternative. Moreover, there is the suggestion that he is trying to convince himself of the veracity of his argument, aware that he is a mouthpiece for the revolution. He imagines people “ordered like a single mind”, but of course it is a “single mind” formulating this vision in the first place. There is a tension between the individualist will to action and that of the collective who must be *told* of their own will. The repetition of “I tell” and “I say” in its anti-capitalist declaration that “It is too late for rare accumulation” and for “family pride” suggests a strong self-consciousness, a
portrayal of himself in the role of the agitator – and this seems to be the “pretension” that he had admitted to Isherwood. His verse is intended to be a resource of enthused passion for his comrades:

I say, stamping the words with emphasis,
Drink from here energy and only energy,
As from the electric charge of a battery,
To will this Time’s change.

An appeal is made to the creative sensibility of the audience, as though, like the poet, it is the creativity which derives from the observing consciousness that will be the source of their power: “Eye, gazelle, delicate wanderer, / Drinker of horizon’s fluid line”.*

And thence the call to action, echoing the sentiment of “oh young men”, and an explicit rejection of Christian mythography:

Leave your gardens, your singing feasts,
Your dreams of suns circling before our sun,
Of heavens after our world.
Instead, watch images of flashing brass
That strike the outward sense, the polished will
Flag of our purpose which the wind engraves.

This is a declaration of allegiance to brash materialism, the “outward sense” that contrasts powerfully with the solipsistic romanticism of Twenty Poems, and the love lyrics of Poems, in which “only my body is real.” And yet, “stamping the words with emphasis”, he seems to be working hard to convince himself that the collective will can be trusted.

Spender presents the two interdependent modes of his lyrics; one is an indulgence in pity, described in “In railway halls...” as a realm of painted, “draped despairs” and “saddening clouds / Where the soul rests.” “Not palaces...” provides the alternative mode – an explicit rejection of this passivity in favour of a literature of manifesto and prescription:

* The phrase originates from a poem written in Germany and sent to Isaiah Berlin in November 1930. “In the Country” describes a walk with Wolfgang Clemens:
    
    I am tired after town
    Our eyes on the horizon are gazelles
    Which drink the liquid and transparent line
No spirit seek here rest. But this: No man
Shall hunger: Man shall spend equally.
Our goal which we compel: Man shall be Man.74

The final verse paragraph (which is notably deleted in the 1985 *Collected Poems*) states the innate paradox of *Poems*, the unresolved issue that the liberation of the oppressed requires nothing less than a class war, and the rejection of traditional values:

– That programme of the antique Satan
Bristling with guns on the indented page
With battleship towering from the hilly waves:
For what? Drive of a ruining purpose
Destroying all but its age-long exploiters.
Our programme like this, yet opposite,
Death to the killers, bringing light to life.

The phrase “like this, yet opposite” encapsulates the impracticable paradox. On the one hand, the violent overthrow of the “exploiters” is, as Milton’s Satan discovered, a revolt doomed to failure; on the other, any ideology that proposes “Death to the killers” self-evidently necessitates violent action. He rejects the “ruining purpose” which, regardless of its ideological motivation, had resulted in the desolation of the Great War, but also adheres to a collective “programme” that aligns itself in opposition to the establishment.

Of course, the argument here is metaphorical, claiming an affiliation with the ideals of liberty and equality; but any avowed sympathy with communism, even if it does not constitute orthodox membership, inevitably engages a correlative sympathy with the concept of practical action. It was just such rallying poems as this that Roy Campbell (himself staunchly right-wing, anti-Semitic, and a supporter of General Franco in the Spanish war) was to hold in contempt when he described Spender in a couplet in *Talking Bronco* (1946):

A more ferocious, bloodthirsty poltroon
Has never howled for blood beneath the moon75

Though Campbell’s charge is greatly exaggerated, in the light of his later denunciation of communism and the events of 1939-1945 Spender himself was to conclude that his
expressions of "bourgeois guilt" had been over-zealous in their promotion of war, whether abstract or actual."

The critical response to *Poems*, on its publication, was positive. John Whitehead observes that Spender's Faber debut marks the logical progression "from pitying the working class to making a commitment to Communist revolution", a progression which he shares with Day Lewis, although the Day Lewis of *The Magnetic Mountain* and *New Country* asserts a position of far greater communist orthodoxy, and without Spender's humanist (and individualist) equivocation. Herbert Read responded immensely positively in the *Adelphi*, embracing the political theme and hailing Spender as a new Shelley, while Allen Tate in *New Verse*, similarly invoking Shelley, concluded that, "Within the general terms of the intellectual crisis of the age, Spender has defined a personal crisis of his own." Tate's review recognises that the dilemma which *Poems* identifies is as much a personal and aesthetic negotiation as it is political:

> It was possible for Shelley to imagine, at least, that he was rewriting the classical mythology. Our own contemporaries have the gospel according to Father Marx, certain passages of which are almost as moving as Dickens; most of it is merely engaging dialectically, leaving the young humanitarian to flounder in an opaque mass of abstraction that is not easily translated into the mere physical objects that the distressed Platonist, in all times, is compelled to see.

I think that this, one of the earliest analyses of Spender's sensibility, is also the critique which most sharply pinpoints the innate thematic and stylistic tension of his 1930s verse. Tate's perception is particularly indicative of the fusion of genres that *Poems* evokes — they are *moralist* forms: Spender's literary landmarks are the rhetoric of Marx's manifesto and the social-consciousness of Dickens's paeans to the lowly crossing-sweepers of Victorian England; the poetry is Romantic (unfashionably so) but

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*"I was driven by a sense of social and personal guilt which made me feel firstly that I must take sides, secondly that I could purge myself of an abnormal individuality by cooperating with the Worker's Movement... It is clear to me now that I did not need to join the Communists, because I had already taken sides. My side was whoever believed in social justice, freedom, and telling the truth about the methods which it was necessary to use in order to attain these ends." (in Richard Crossman (ed.), *The God That Failed*, London: Bantam, 1950, p. 247.)
3. Poems (1933)

justifies its effusion with a utilitarian social conscience that is to become a defining
classic characteristic of late modernism.

Most importantly, Tate identifies the common denominator in the consciousness
that informs Spender's poetry before and after the politicised 1930s - he is a "distressed
Platonist" who desires moral absolutes; yet in the social crisis this inviolate, idealised
self is forced to choose between external and relative moralities, to take sides and
sacrifice the liberal individualism which he is so clearly reluctant to abandon. Tate
describes him as oscillating "between two social relatives", and the 1930s texts - the
verse and the prose - see him continually working out a philosophy that is not (and
cannot be) resolved.

The review that appeared in the Times Literary Supplement the following
summer maintains the general approval of Poems, and takes the formulation of
Spender's "In 1929" as its tenet; he is "born of a generation risen between a war and a
hazardous future", his spirit is "burning and lyrical" and he "advances outwards" into
the world of action. This essentially recapitulates the dramatisation of the poet's
vocation as Spender has portrayed it. Similarly, he "intervenes" in social issues which
the Georgian poets had disdained, "happy in their meadows." It suggests that his
occasionally flowery diction "will displease the modern purist", but it is countered with
a "ready power of memorable and novel phrase."

Poems managed to please all parties; its vocabulary had enough traditional (even
Georgian) tonal sequences to suit those seeking lyrical escape, and enough radical
imagery and ideology to excite those caught up in the revolutionary spirit. Julian
Symons's recollection of the appearance of Poems effectively sums up its constituent
successes:

In reading his Poems, many readers were overwhelmed by the lyric optimism about the
future, and by his acceptance in poems of what we were still calling the Machine Age.
For those to whom Auden was difficult and uncompromising, Spender made machinery
sound lovely and likeable... such images made machines and technical developments
seem 'revolutionary' in the manner of the time, and yet 'traditional' too, something that
could be fitted happily into the current literary language.

The contextualisation of Spender as both a compatriot of Auden, and a writer who
presented a distinctly different sensibility to Auden, was set from the outset and it is as a
part of a literary trend that *Poems* correctly belongs; along with Auden’s *Poems* and Day Lewis’s *The Magnetic Mountain* it contributes to a temporal cross-section of literary responses to the issues of the 1930s.

Symons identifies that it was the “acceptance” of the Machine Age that excited many readers, but it was this (qualified) enthusiasm for industry that Spender was to distance himself from first. Only seven years later, in his *Selected Poems* of 1940, he chose to include none of the Futurist lyrics or “The Funeral”, preferring to write them off as the impetuous outbursts of youth. It would be fifteen years before he would acknowledge them again – with some reluctance – in *Collected Poems 1928-1953*. He explains in the introduction:

...there seemed to be an obligation to ‘own up’ to those poems, like *The Pylons* and *The Funeral*, which, when they were written, provided a particular label for some of the poetry of the 'Thirties: an embarrassment to my friends’ luggage even more even than to my own. It would perhaps be excusable to disclaim these give-aways now; yet when I come to look at them, they seem to me better than many of the poems I have thrown overboard. In any case, they have a slight historic interest which, I feel, ought to be represented.  

The embarrassed and grudging acceptance of his work is a familiar characteristic, and was unfortunately to inform his revisionist editing for years to come. While Spender himself allowed only “slight” regard to the historical importance of his published work, I would argue that the claims of history require the integrity of the original collection in order to demonstrate the unique and conflicted poetry of those years. His political sympathies may have been proved dubious by the subsequent course of history and the revelation of the realities – rather than the ideals – of communism, but it is “not despicable” to have opposed Fascism and to have promoted a tonal shift in British poetry.

*Poems* (1933) captures a particular moment in a constantly modifying interrelation with political ideas; just as Auden’s *Poems* and *The Orators* rekindled the notion of the poet as social prophet (a role most recently adopted by Eliot in *The Waste Land*), the mixed tenors of Spender’s collection dramatise an uncertainty as to the role of the writer and just how far he should go towards a *specific* declaration of allegiance. *Poems* shares the near-unanimous apocalyptic vision of the *New Signatures* poets, and
in the same spirit as Auden's *The Dance of Death*, it aims to present "a picture of the decline of a class, of how its members dream of a new life, but secretly desire the old."\(^8\)

*Poems* illustrates that Spender does not exclude himself from the charge of nostalgia for his class history, but he asserts a desire, at least, to transcend it.

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20. Ibid.
23. Wyndham Lewis, typed letter to Spender, December 3, 1933, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.
27. Ibid., pp. 24-25.
28. Ibid., p. 29.
29. Ibid., p. 51.
33. Ibid., p. 34.
34. Ibid. p. 35.
35. Ibid., p. 36.
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37 Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties, p. 176.
38 Poems, 1933, p. 37.
39 Ibid., p. 38.
40 Ibid., p. 11.
41 O'Neill and Reeves, Auden, MacNeice, Spender — The Thirties Poetry, p. 57.
42 Hound and Horn, Vol. 7, No. 1, October-December, 1933, p. 147.
46 Criterion, Vol. XLVIII, April, 1933, p. 472.
48 Poems, 1933, p. 40.
49 Ibid.
50 Criterion, Vol. XLVIII, April, 1933, p. 473.
52 Poems, 1933, p. 41.
54 Poems, 1933, p. 42.
56 Ibid.
59 Poems, 1933, p. 43.
60 Ibid., p. 44.
61 Ibid., p. 45.
62 Ballard appropriates the term from W.S. Burroughs’s non-nationalist Tangiers and applies it to the British suburbs. Interview in Re/Search, No. 8/9, 1984, pp. 14-15.
63 Poems, 1933, p. 46.
65 S.S. to Isaiah Berlin, 6 March, 1932.
67 Poems, 1933, p. 52.
68 Ibid., pp. 52-53.
69 Ibid., p. 55.
70 Ibid., p. 12.
71 The Edge of Being, London: Faber and Faber, 1949, p. 22.
73 Poems, 1933, p. 56.
74 Ibid., p. 57.
77 Adelphi, February, 1933.
79 Ibid., p. 22.
80 Times Literary Supplement, Thursday July 6, 1933, p. 463.
3. Poems (1933)


The publication of his verse in New Signatures, New Country, and his own Poems had a cumulative effect: Spender’s reputation as a young political poet was firmly established. He was also appearing in the periodicals frequently, garnering the repute of being a writer in touch with the European zeitgeist. Most of his reviews during this period – where they are not of volumes of poetry – tend to be contemporary histories of the events in Germany or works with socialist themes. In the Criterion in autumn 1933, Spender’s review of W.H. Dawson’s Germany Under the Treaty and Spotlight on Germany by Erich Roll indicates that he shares the widespread uncertainty as to the outcome of events on the continent: “In spite of the achievements of the totalitarian state, in spite of the example of Mussolini, Hitler’s power may collapse in the autumn and this winter may still see a military dictatorship in Germany.” In this case his supposition was, sadly, wrong, and Hitler’s grasp on the German nation was to hold fast and soon extend itself.

Similarly, writing in the Bookman in December 1933, Spender asserts that the German crisis affects intellectuals directly, and that the Nazi regime is the direct enemy of liberalism, socialism and all individualist art. Spender makes his “fellow-travelling” sympathies with the world revolution clear:

At the beginning of this year something happened in Germany which has added to the political self-consciousness of almost every contemporary writer in Europe. The Hitler party came to power in February, and in March the books of writers who have had the greatest influence on European literature since the War, were banned and even formally burnt in public squares. So loud is the voice of the minister of propaganda in Germany to-day that we are already likely to forget that the real German revolution – part of a much larger world-revolution – was taking place before the Fascist party came into power, and that the so-called Nazi revolution is in no real sense a revolution. On the contrary, it is a violent arrest and stoppage of a gradual process of revolution.

The brutal destruction of the literary culture of Europe is a great evil, but Spender does not alert the reader as to the paradox of his allegiance to revolution here – the communist world state demanded by Marxism-Leninism and Stalin requires a cultural purge of bourgeois literature and religion – the weapons of the “enemy” class – that would be as cruel, and even more absolute than that of German Nazism. Although the
“revolution” which he discusses includes the German literary culture of Thomas Mann and others, Spender’s language asserts a belief in the gradualism of communist revolution after the erosion of capitalist institutions; nevertheless the very existence of fascism poses a staunch challenge to the ideology of the Left: if fascism can exist, and not merely exist but consolidate its power, then the world-revolution of Lenin and Stalin was never an inevitability. Spender acknowledges that it is the sheer force of propaganda which can sway the allegiance of a nation, and an awareness of the new rhetoric – that of news reporting and the manipulation of information – becomes a theme of the new additions to *Poems*.

Spender stresses the point that, regardless of allegiance, writers should respond to the implications of world events. This is the continuing conflict between high modernism and late modernism, the aesthetic old guard versus the politicised “young Turks.” Wyndham Lewis and H.G. Wells are the exception to this rule; the former’s admiration for Hitler places him in the enemy camp, and the latter’s weighty, prophetic tract *The Shape of Things To Come* (1933) is applauded by Spender for its engagement with pressing social themes, but dismissed as the work of a “self-styled revolutionary” and “a dim utilitarian reactionary.”* In 1933, Wells was at the height of his fame, and Spender’s attack is anti-establishment, and suspicious of Wells’s right to propound his views with any moral authority. This is to some extent a projection of the anxiety that permeates *Poems* – that it is the problematic mission of the solitary writer to express his individual vision, in the hope that it captures a collective vision of “world revolution”.

Spender has unquestionably aligned himself with the political discourse of the age, though he retains the sense that his aesthetic ideals continue to admonish his descent into politics. In 1933, “almost every writer seems to be taking up some ‘attitude’ to the crisis, even if it is an attitude of disgust at the thought of artists adopting any attitude.”³

In the summer of 1934, when Spender was well into the composition of *Vienna*,

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* Wells’s book was originally intended as an authoritative, predictive sequel to *The Outline of History*, and is an industrialised version of the vision that had produced *Anticipations* (1901) and *A Modern Utopia* (1905). Wells shares the younger generation’s apprehension of the shadow of a coming war, and his prediction of the imminent world conflict is only slightly more extreme that the reality. On the other hand, he shares with Lewis an unreconstructed racist anxiety which is very much of its time, but which leads Spender to conclude that he “would be the mascot of any fascist party that ever came into power in this country.” (*Bookman*, Vol. 85, December, 1933, p. 147.)
he wrote a review of *The Worker's Point of View* – a collection of papers written by factory employees and published by the Hogarth Press. Ever mindful of the implications of the class struggle for artists, Spender's review draws a literary moral from the workers' testimony, and he goes on to advocate a willed withdrawal from the comfortable world of Forsterian drama in response to the economics of the slump:

As a result of the Crisis, a time seems to have come when we are getting less interested in romantic and fictitious variations on themes drawn from the adventures of members of the middle-class in their leisure hours, and more interested in the working lives of those who are in closest contact with the industrial machine: which we see as somehow identified with a principle of economic reality which manages or mismanages our lives.4

Essentially, this is a restatement of the personal predicament that he had established in *Poems*; but it also indicates a retreat from the images of violent revolution that the volume had evoked: his outlook is now an intellectual movement towards a conception of the class struggle as requiring a *psychological* revolt which must prefigure any *physical* revolt:

The task of the psychologist would be to make the worker have the sense that he was working for his family and for his comrades, and not for directors and shareholders on whom [...] he has often never clapped eyes. The psychologist can only accomplish this by making it true. And in order to make it true, he will have, incidentally, to bring about what amounts to a revolution.5

This is an idea that is latent in the programmatic sequences of *Poems*, although there it is the poet, rather than the psychologist, who aims to break the spell of oppression by shaking the readers' prejudices. And of course, the poetry is addressing itself to the fellow middle-classes rather than to the workers themselves. In the light of such ideas, Spender's new verse sees a continuation of the love lyrics, but now with a new tone of cynicism; and an increased psychological critique begins to infuse his verse with a more explicit *apologia* for (achieved by the contextualisation of) rhetorical excesses, locating the visionary predictions of a new epoch within the poet's own individualist ambition.

*Poems* (1934) essentially maintains the thematic arc of the first edition: from romantic introspection, through despair at the social crisis, and onto a resolute commitment to heroic action. But the new "political" poems (including "Perhaps", and
4. Poems (1934)

— more tentatively — "Shapes of Death Haunt Life") show an increasing scepticism towards the accurate dissemination of information about political events in the print media, and a suspicion of the fundamental psychological motivations of both the dictator and the revolutionary — themes which are to be further explored in Vienna.

Only two poems from the original volume ("I hear the cries of evening" and "My parents quarrel in the neighbour room") are discarded in favour of the nine new pieces. It was published in September 1934, a month before Vienna, as an expanded edition of the 1933 volume, and the majority of the new poems were composed during 1933.*

Three had appeared in New Country in March and, importantly, in those poems the politics of Poems (1933) is notable by its absence; in spite of Michael Roberts’s confrontational communist preface, Spender’s slight retreat from the “pretensions” of communism (as he had described them to Isherwood in February 1933) means that his contributions are not political; he offers two “Futurist” meditations on the new landscape, and two avowedly personal, and embittered, love lyrics.** In New Country Spender’s political discourse is saved exclusively for the essay “Poetry and Revolution”, which shall be discussed in the next chapter.

Upon its appearance in the spring of 1933, history had immediately caught up with the prophecies of social upheaval in Poems; the tumultuous events in Germany that year were to provide the subject for one of Spender’s most important new poems, “Van der Lubbe” (XXIV). It first appeared in the Spectator on September 29, 1933, and again in Living Age in November. The dates are significant since it was on September 21, 1933 that the infamous Reichstag Fire Trial began, during which the Dutchman Marinus van der Lubbe stood accused of being the arsonist in an alleged communist plot against Hitler’s government that had led to the burning of the Reichstag on February 27. The communists themselves declared the fire to be a Nazi conspiracy — a view that persisted for many years, just as the Nazis maintained that it was a communist conspiracy.

* Due to the success of the original volume there had been a second impression in May 1933 (which reinstated Isherwood as the dedicatee) before the expanded edition of September 1934.
** “The morning road with the electric trains”; “After success, your little afternoon success”; “Alas, when he laughs it is not he”; “At the end of two months’ holiday there came a night” (New Country, London: Hogarth Press, 1933).
Historian A.J.P. Taylor claims that the idea of a premeditated Nazi conspiracy (that Goering or Goebbels had ordered the fire to be started) is ludicrous, but he is of the opinion that the Nazis honestly believed it was a communist plot, and that they honestly believed that van der Lubbe was a witting – albeit deranged – accomplice. Regardless of the nature of the Nazis’ involvement in the fire itself (it is also conjectured, for example, that the Nazis may have hampered the fire services to increase the severity of the fire) what is clear is that they manipulated the event, and the ensuing panic, to their advantage. Whether or not van der Lubbe acted independently may never be known, he may well have been abetted by the Nazis, as the anti-Fascists had insisted, nevertheless Hitler acted swiftly to characterise the arson as an explicit revolutionary bid by the communist party.

Certainly, the Reichstag Fire worked entirely in the Nazis’ favour, and under the guise of suppressing an imminent communist revolt, the Reichstag Fire Decree of the 28 February abolished the civil rights that had been guaranteed by the Weimar Constitution. The outcome of the Reichstag Fire Trial the following autumn would prove that Hitler’s drastic response was unjustified – the Leipzig Supreme Court ultimately found no link between van der Lubbe and the accused communists, but by then it was too late and Hitler had consolidated his dictatorship; for the entire year his government had exploited its suspension of civil rights in order to persecute communists and anti-communists alike, arguing that Jews, Jehovah’s witnesses, Catholics and intellectuals of almost any persuasion contributed to a social divisiveness which aided the aims of communism.

The sinister implications of the Decree were perceived at once. Writing to Isherwood (who was still in Berlin) immediately after the announcement, Spender indicates that the increase in paranoia was instant:

The news from Germany is awful. [heavily-deleted passage] No, perhaps I had better not say anything that might conceivably get you into trouble. Or is this a ridiculous fear?

It was no mere paranoid fear that the letter could incriminate Isherwood in the eyes of the German authorities; Isherwood was not political but his lifestyle put him in palpable danger of the actions of the Nazi Storm Troops. Spender’s self-censorship illustrates
the innate anxiety that went hand in hand with the romantic appeal of the communist opposition. There was a genuine sense of shock and revulsion at the oppressive violence of the Nazi regime. While subversive activities held an heroic allure (such as the communist procession which had “miraculously dissolved again into the crowd” of a Berlin street), they did so in the face of absolute opposition – persecution and murder by the Nazis. Spender’s poetry of 1931-32 had called for great heroes to emerge, and Hitler’s regime seemed to produce an heroic resistance even as it attempted to define its own authority. Indeed, by the time of the Reichstag Trial in September, the main characters of the political and legal drama (particularly two of the accused – the enigmatic van der Lubbe and the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov) were international figures.

The trial – and the widespread belief that the Nazis had somehow orchestrated the fire – captured imaginations across Europe. In *Prater Violet* (1946) Isherwood describes his work on a film script with director Friedrich Bergmann in London in autumn 1933. Bergmann’s fascination with the heightened theatricality of the trial as it was being reported in the newspapers and newsreels motivates him to role-play the participants’ contributions:

Bergmann enacted the entire drama and represented all the characters. He was Dr. Buenger, the testy embarrassed President of the Court. He was van der Lubbe, doped and apathetic, with sunken head. He was earnest, harassed Torgler. He was Goering, the straddling military bully, and Goebbels, lizard-like, crooked and adroit. He was fiery Popov and stolid Tanev. And, in the biggest way, he was Dimitrov himself.\(^{12}\)

Van der Lubbe was the paradoxical focus of the entire trial, not least because he was portrayed by the prosecution as a seditious and cunning activist, yet he came across as a complete lunatic. Whether or not his bizarre behaviour had preceded his imprisonment was unclear, but he was almost certainly being drugged by his Nazi captors, or had possibly been given electric shocks, or even some form of lobotomy to ease the prosecution’s case. Bergmann (and Isherwood) are particularly captivated by the mysterious arsonist:

He stands before his accusers, with his huge stooped shoulders and hanging hands, the chin sunken on the chest. He is scarcely human: a wretched, clumsy,
tormented animal. [...] The head jerks up at once, automatically, as if in obedience to
some deeply hidden memory. The clouded eyes wander around the court-room. Are
they searching for somebody? A faint gleam of recognition seems to flicker in them for
a moment. And then van der Lubbe begins to laugh. This was really horrible, indecent,
terrifying. The heavy body quivers and heaves with noiseless laughter, as if shaken by
its death-agony. Van der Lubbe laughs and laughs, silently, blindly, his mouth open
and dribbling, like an idiot’s. Then, with equal suddenness, the paroxysm ceases.
Again, the head falls forward. The grotesque figure stands motionless, guarding its
secret, unapproachable as the dead.13

Clearly Isherwood and Bergmann regarded van der Lubbe as a Nazi puppet, but he was
also a manifestation of the paradoxical conflict between the Left and the Right – a
figure of insanity whose allegiance was almost incidental to the crisis he represented.
He is a force of history, whose iconoclastic act provides an opportunity for the political
factions to show their true intentions. In Christopher and his Kind (1977) Isherwood
discusses his early ideas for Paul is Alone: “Its hero is a sort of van der Lubbe, an
embodiment of the madness and hysteria of our time. He is the type of ideal liar who no
longer has the least notion that he isn’t telling the truth. I think I can make him rather
heroic.”14 Isherwood, writing over a decade later, and perhaps consciously echoing
Spender’s 1933 poem, sees van der Lubbe as a representative of “the dead”, but also a
symbol of the apocalyptic, non-partisan vision of the artist, the “ideal liar.”

Such was the public fascination with the events that, not unlike Bergmann’s
morbid one-man show for Isherwood’s amusement, a mock trial was actually organised
in London, supposedly to provide a fairer hearing of the evidence.15 The belief that the
Nazis were manipulating the judiciary for their own purposes was widespread.
Dimitrov became a romantic hero, defying the Nazi prosecutors with wit and rational
argument, disputing their contradictory evidence. He would go on to receive a hero’s
welcome in Moscow when the court finally exonerated him. In The Thirties (1940),
Malcolm Muggeridge wryly describes this contrary period of ideological unease and
exhilaration during which the Leipzig trial became an emblematic conflict between
Fascism and Communism:

Young men with beards sold the Daily Worker in the streets; novelists led their heroes
by devious ways to solidarity with the toiling masses, and poets sang in vers libres the
praises of the Soviet Union. The Film Society strenuously applauded the storming of
the Winter Palace at Petrograd in the many versions of it presented; and the Unity
Theatre was satirical to the delight of the largely unproletarian audiences. Fathers in clubs complained that their sons had become Communists at Oxford; and well brought up daughters suddenly announced, sometimes in the presence of servants, that they proposed henceforth to devote themselves wholly to the Class War. German, Italian and Russian newsreels were filled with propagandist material. Spender's *Poems* was receiving positive reviews, Michael Roberts's *New Country*, Day Lewis's *The Magnetic Mountain* and Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* had been published. Even Faber and Faber published *Why Nazi*? (1933), an anonymous Jewish writer's first-hand account of the brutal Nazi regime in Germany.

During 1933, one of the most influential reportage publications was *The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror and the Burning of the Reichstag* (1933) ("the Braunbuch"). Though it describes real events, the sheer extremity (and accuracy) of its claims against the Nazis is, as Hynes has suggested, "distorted and visionary," depicting "the death of liberalism and the rise of terror as a national state of mind." The *Brown Book* was compiled from the writings of many anonymous German journalists by Willi Munsterberg, and published by Victor Gollancz for the "World Committee for the Victims of German Fascism" whose nominal president was Albert Einstein – the symbolic intellectual giant whom the Nazis would willingly destroy. It was compiled quickly in order to pre-empt the Reichstag Fire Trial, and six hundred thousand copies were distributed in twenty-three languages. In fact, its detailed analysis of the evidence of the night of February 27, 1933 was so meticulously argued that it actually disproved any connection between Dimitrov and van der Lubbe, and contributed to the communists' escape from prosecution, and execution.

The following year, Dimitrov was to describe the *Brown Book* as "a factor, a decisive factor, in the struggle which was waged between two different worlds around the Reichstag fire trial":

> Even during the course of the preliminary examination I learned from the National-Socialist press, the only newspapers which we were permitted to receive, of the existence of a mysterious 'lying propagandist work' which appeared at least to be a fly in the ointment of National-Socialism in Germany.

He goes so far as to name the *Brown Book* as "the sixth accused," so objectionable was it to the Nazis' plan to whitewash the incident.
4. **Poems** (1934)

Though it is not directly referenced by Spender or Isherwood, and the only contemporary allusion to the book other than reviews seems to be Herbert Read's poem in the December issue of *New Verse* ("The Brown Book of the Hitler Terror"), there is no question that the text shares a vivid, contemporary imagery with Spender's "Van der Lubbe", "Perhaps", and the catalogues of atrocity in *Vienna*. The *Brown Book* was reviewed in the *Times Literary Supplement* as an important contribution to the dissemination of information regarding the suppressed activities of the Nazi regime, and its brutality was emphasised: "The details are often repulsive; all are alien to British political instincts." While being wary of the obvious propagandist aims of the text, the accumulation of facts is overwhelming: "There is in parts a Communist bias. At the same time the book is, perhaps, the most formidable indictment of the movement which has yet appeared."

Reading the *Brown Book*, one gets the sense of a propagandist, sensationalist digest of official and unofficial reports and documents. There is a balance between undisputed fact and condemnatory rumour; there are many vivid and disturbing photographs. The text is punctuated by direct, sloganistic sub-headers that clarify the narrative of Nazi oppression, and continually characterise events with a communist interpretation. Repetitive phrases are intended to urge the reader to outrage and action. There are relentless catalogues of atrocity, lists of prisoners in concentration camps and their locations, even photographs of the Storm Troopers' murdered victims and bizarre, staged images (for the news photographers) of the Rimbaudian van der Lubbe, who is seen hand-cuffed between guards with his head bent rigidly down into his chest, his wildly tousled hair suggesting creative genius and madness.

The resonance of the *Brown Book* with Spender's poetry is not simply in its imagery, but its moral dictum; its language of the "trampling" boot of Nazism was to directly inform Spender's view that public events in the 1930s "trampled" on the private life of the individual. The *Brown Book* provided an impassioned plea for solidarity between all those who opposed fascism, regardless of their beliefs or social class; it called for a unity of resistance between the intellectuals and the workers in the face of atrocity. The Nazis had already begun their cultural purge, and the loss of European culture which Spender had regretted in the concept of a communist world-state ("The
Funeral") had actually come about as a result of the ritualistic, fascist book-burning in Germany:

At the same time as their main attack against the German working class and its organisations, Hitler and Goebbels are also waging war against the best sections of the German intelligentsia. Nazi boots trample on the life work of the most prominent scientists and artists. In the literal sense they trample on the brutally treated bodies of many intellectuals, who are hated by the Nazis on account of their independence, their progressive and liberal outlook, although in many cases they have had no connection whatever with the militant workers. Under Hitler even a liberal outlook is a crime which must be mercilessly avenged.23

Spender’s moral stance is always to advocate – unconditionally – the “liberal outlook” so reviled by fascism.

The Brown Book’s characterisation of van der Lubbe as a Nazi puppet is not taken up by Spender in his poem, he rather sees this grotesque figure as an active metaphor for the nihilism implicit in the political crisis. Van der Lubbe is a modernist construction, made up of newspaper and Movietone images, and the bizarre, nonsensical statements quoted in the press; specifically, he is a dupe characterised as a communist by Goering’s prosecution. Nevertheless, Spender’s treatment concurs with the Brown Book’s portrayal of the arsonist as a figure who has pinpointed some truth about the political situation. The Brown Book’s verdict is direct in implicating the Nazis:

On February 27th van der Lubbe was arrested in the burning Reichstag. The flames were the background of the hoax in which van der Lubbe for a few hours played the leading rôle. Then he passed from the stage. The searchlights of truth have pierced the fog of deception and mercilessly shown up Goering and Goebbels, who made use of van der Lubbe as their tool.24

In Spender’s poem it is the rapt public who possess the “searchlights” that fix van der Lubbe in their gaze. The poem is an imagined monologue by the arsonist, a lyrical meditation at odds with its historical counterpart, whose actual speech has been fragmented and nonsensical:

O staring eyes, searchlight disks,
Listen at my lips. I am louder than to
Swim an inhuman channel, be boy, or climb
A town’s notorious mast.
The climbing of the mast and the channel swim are past episodes in van der Lubbe’s messy biography; a brief sketch of his life is given in the Brown Book, including his mystifying past affiliations with both communist and Fascist organisations, now interpreted by each party as evidence of spying. The “eyes” at once correspond to the various references in Poems (1933) – the eyes of the disenfranchised and oppressed are replaced by the eyes of Europe. The “lips” which for the “truly great” are the celebrants of heroism and the source of visionary prophecy, in this instance provide no illumination. Spender’s van der Lubbe is the impenetrable and mythic figure of news reports, emphatically in grainy black and white, unreal:

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.25

The arsonist is a figure of insolence and wilful chaos, teasing the court and the public audience with his reluctance – or inability – to elucidate his intentions. The second Brown Book provides a description of van der Lubbe’s performance in the court – a performance that provides the subtext to the poem’s elegant statement of nihilistic intent; van der Lubbe was the first of the accused to be examined on September 21, just a week before Spender’s poem first appeared, and the striking details of his “performance” are an assumed common-knowledge between the poet and the reader:

He appeared then to have completely collapsed. He walked as if he were asleep. His head was bowed. The expression on his face was set; his eyes unseeing. When in his place amongst the accused his head was bent over his breast. He appeared to take no notice of those around him. He was almost unaware of the proceedings. When he was made to answer questions he rose slowly and awkwardly, without raising his head. The answers he gave were most of them mere unrelated expressions – ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ ‘Perhaps,’ ‘I don’t know.’ Frequently he answered both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ to the same question.26

Van der Lubbe’s frustrating responses, and his maniacal ambivalence were also to provide the theme and title for “Perhaps.” Although it is unclear whether he has always been resigned to his own destruction, or whether it has been induced by the farcical Nazi trial, this van der Lubbe is clearly a nihilist; recapitulating Spender’s conception of
the solipsistic creative self of the artist, he is cut off from the external world of social morality, and is an embodiment of the blind destruction implicit in the political struggle:

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.

The senses are shaken from the judging heart:
The eye turned backwards and the outside world
Into the grave of the skull rolled:
With no stars riding heaven, and disparate.

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

While the audience's eyes must "drink" van der Lubbe's "newspaper glance", his own eyes are "turned backwards" away from the world of public affairs into a self-absorbed death-wish that drags the world with it into "the grave of the skull" – the Metaphysical emblem of "In 1929", and the prison of Beethoven's creative genius in "Beethoven's Death Mask".

Significantly, Spender suggests that Goering's questions and van der Lubbe's unhelpful answers are incidental to the striking visual statement that the defendant makes: the broad strokes of obfuscation and deception are there for all to see, and van der Lubbe becomes a metaphor of the destruction necessitated by power. For the audience, who possess "the judging heart", what is most intriguing and disturbing about van der Lubbe is his inhumanity in the face of death – his suicidal insolence that sees him prepared to die without a clear political cause other than those which are projected onto him:

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.
Van der Lubbe was ultimately beheaded – this penalty was certain before the trial began since he had been caught in the burning building (even the communists were agreed that he had been the culprit, though they denied any involvement). In the first version of the poem it is “German justice” that he laughs at and ridicules, a specificity which Spender chose to discard for the volume version. While the meaning is unchanged, it does subdue the accusatory anger directed at the German government.

The most prescient aspect of Spender’s poem, particularly in terms of its swift appearance during the trial, is its delineation of the empty centre of the political conflict. “Van der Lubbe” captures the voice of iconoclastic nihilism, and turns this voice outwards to a description of its implications in the partisan political and social world; the focus of the poem is not the enigmatic figure himself, but the “eyes” of the court, the public, the newspaper readers across the world who look to the agent provocateur for some explanation, when the meaning of the Burning of the Reichstag is in its interpretation and the action which it engenders.

Since the communists were released, the Fire Trial was essentially a failure for the Nazis, and their case was shown to be a shoddy fix. It also (briefly) created a communist hero in Dimitrov. In a speech to the Soviet Writers’ Association the following year, Dimitrov was to maintain van der Lubbe as an emblem of the evils of Fascist manipulation. The communist view was that the Dutchman had been brainwashed into acting on their behalf; the executed arsonist was a figure “whose example shows so well how the worker can become a tool in the hands of the class enemy. In the light of the bad example of Van der Lubbe it should be possible to educate thousands of young workers and combat the influence of Fascism on youth.”

The poem, named for the arsonist who was so instrumental in the consolidation of Hitler’s dictatorship, is significant in its capturing – within a week of the events it describes, and while they continued – the moral crisis at the heart of the political situation in Europe. Although it projects into the unknowable consciousness of the accused, it manages to establish as its subject the fear and uncertainty of an observing public that cannot be privy to the facts, but is aware that the news reports carry momentous implications. In the light of world events, the portrayal in “Van der Lubbe” of a specific iconoclastic moment in the history of the 1930s and its transmission by the news services is as relevant now, in late 2001, as it was in the week of its publication.
"Shapes of death haunt life" (XIX) is another attempt to deduce the psychological implications of the upheavals in Europe. It first appeared in The Listener in January 1934. In this case the subject is not an impenetrable arsonist or his all-too-easily understood prosecutors in the Nazi regime, but an examination of that innate ambition – the Nietzschean will to power – which the individual shares with the dictator. The poem presents a fusion of the individualist vision of the ambitious artist with the egotistical will of the political dictator. It has an Audenesque psychological reductivism which regards Fascism as an expression of neurosis, of perverted will. Life is represented by the migrational instinct of swallows, a collective movement analogous to the communist ideal, also described as a basic human urge, a “self-forgetful drunkenness” which capitalist and political ambition denies and suppresses.

The lyric invokes the Rainer Maria Rilke of the Duino Elegies, a verbal equivocation of life and death that would continue in “Darkness and Light” from The Still Centre (also the epigraph to World Within World), and the 1940s meditations of Ruins and Visions and The Edge of Being. Spender draws an analogy between “The need to become another’s body” and the egotism of capitalist ambition which seeks to heap “a skyscraper over the breathing ribs”. This corporate aspiration which projects itself into the high-reaching, phallic cityscapes of the 1930s is then aligned with the self-defeating actions of the generic despots of European politics:

The speedlines of dictators
Cut their own stalks:
From afar, we watch the best of us –
Whose adored desire was to die for the world.

This is the axe that severed the “stalk” of van der Lubbe’s proletarian neck; the swift and brutal exigency of the “Futurist” state is reckless as to the make up of the Coriolanean body politic, and exploits the foundation of society – the workers. This is certainly the socialist and intellectual underclass being persecuted by the German Fascists as related in the Brown Book; their “adored desire” to die in the cause of

* Spender had reviewed Rilke’s lyrics for the Spectator, (March 23, 1934, pp. 472, 474.) and had published a translation of a Rilke poem in New Verse the previous autumn (“Orpheus Eurydice Hermes” in New Verse, No. 5, October, 1933, pp. 2-5.).
freedom is a precise verbal correlative to the "lovely ambition" of the "truly great". Just as the "truly great" are distanced by time and history, the "best" of the present are distanced from the poet and his readership geographically; "from afar", their ordeals are divined via the clues in rumours and news despatches.

The second stanza expands upon the "Unrequited love" which has been made analogous to the "greed for property"; recalling the imagery of Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress", in which his "vegetable love" will grow "vaster than empires" after death. Spender appropriates the sentiment and employs it to signify his own ambition, which thwarts the natural love of the "breathing ribs" of stanza one; it is an aspiration that "prevents love / And offers love of being loved or loving." This narcissistic ambition correlates to the egomania of the dictator and the business giant, the desire for artistic greatness: "Ambition is my death. That flat thin flame / I feed, that plants my shadow..." It is the same dream of posthumous success that had informed the formulations (and the sense of discrepancy) of "An 'I' Can Never Be Great Man", and it recalls the mystical transfiguration of the artist into his own artifice that Yeats had recently celebrated in "Byzantium":

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit  
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,  
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame

In fact, Spender's "flat thin flame" is an alliterative allusion to Yeats's symbol of the artist's life-in-death; implicit in this flame of ambition is a turning-away from life toward the "immortality" of posterity, and it is an impotent fire "that cannot singe a sleeve."

It is important to remember the extent of Yeats's influence - and the contemporaneity of his poetry with Spender's at this point. The Winding Stair and other Poems (which included "Byzantium") had been published recently - in 1933 - and Spender had reviewed it, with the respectful header "Honour to Yeats", in the Listener in October. Spender's meeting with him around this time at the home of Lady Ottoline Morrell was the source of much anticipation and dread. It seems clear that Yeats's philosophy, with its equivocal view of the living and the dead - particularly in relation to the artifice of poetry - suggests Spender's imagery. Yeats himself claimed
that the imminent era would be the political, which belongs to “your people,” meaning Spender and his contemporaries. After this would come the era of psychologists, then the era of spiritualists:

That will be a time when the separation of the living from the dead, and the dead from the living will be completely broken down, and the world of the living will be in full communication with that of the dead.36

Spender almost seems to be working through Yeats’s eras of thought within the poem; it is a meditation on ambition which draws upon ideas from politics, psychology, and spiritualism, the latter in its ghostly projections of skyscrapers and fantasies of future turmoil dictated by will and phantom historical forces.

The “grave evening demand for love” of the “truly great” signifies their reassuringly human urges after the immortal achievements of the day; by inverting this demand Spender suggests that the aspirations of artist and dictators alike are a basic psychic projection of fantasy into physical, architectural forms, an ambition that “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?

Spender seems to be suggesting an awareness of the shortcomings of his apocalyptic visions of socialist revolution: the dream of bringing “death to the killers” in “Not Palaces...” is here revealed for the paradoxical dream-wish that it is, a fantasy of the “birth of death”; similarly, this dream is concealed in the “slackness” of inaction.

The poem ends with a description of the migrating swallows that perch on the imagined pyramids of cultural ambition; they are clearly a symbol of the instinctual, collective will of man, which is an “autumnal instinct” of mass migration, of shared endeavour, rather than the imposition of one will on the populace. The action of the birds is “for delight, their whole compulsion.” It is not unlike Michael Roberts’s conception of the communist work-ethic, which he likens to the joint cause of a difficult hike, with limited regard to the ideology of the “destination” or the purpose of the
journey beyond its function as a male-bonding exercise. The poem seems to suggest that the will of the people is natural counterbalance to the neurosis of the individual. The role of the individual artist is therefore pertinent to the resolution of the poem – self-evidently so, since it is his sensibility which seeks to draw a moral. The final couplet states the role of these swallows in the preceding imagery:

Not teaching me to love, but soothing my eyes;
Not saving me from death, but saving me for speech.37

The avowed purpose of the birds is not to serve as a restorative emblem of love for the insular speaker but as an aesthetic distraction; nor are they present to diffuse the speaker’s individualism, but rather to affirm it. He is not to be the mouthpiece of a collective will, but “me”, a consciousness moved to “speech” by a reverie that is entirely personalised and rooted in individualist ambition. At the same time, the function of the poem is to “soothe”, a rather different proposal than the economic reverberations of aggressive capitalism or the social implications of a political dictatorship; while the same neuroses can motivate the lover, the businessman, the artist and the dictator, the effects of their actions are not always commensurate.

“Passing men are sorry for the birds in cages” (XXVI) was written during the communists’ imprisonment in Germany, April 1933.38 It fuses various conceptions of suppression; that of the lover, that of the caged animal, the political prisoner, the poor, and even the working classes, imprisoned in a banal “Aerodrome” landscape that suppresses rural nature. All are examples of “constricted nature hedged and lined”. The caged birds do not possess the mindless delight of the imagined swallows of the previous poem, and their suppression is blamed upon the unnamed addressee, who has driven “physical delight” out through years of taming, “Behind centuries, behind the continual hill, / The wood you felled, your clothes, the slums you built”. The third stanza clarifies that this bird is emblematic of a wider persecution:

Dance, will you? And sing? Yet pray he is dead,
Invent politics to hide him and law suits and suits:
Now he’s impossible and quite destroyed like grass
Where the fields are covered with your more living houses.39
This poem is an example of Spender’s verse interpenetrating of the personal with the political; the following stanza shifts tone away from this symbolic social analysis into an accusation that is far more personalised:

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 that covers only hate.

This is equally a critique of a class that is oblivious to the plight of those who suffer at its economic expense, but also quite apt as an emotional attack by the witness to an unequal relationship, perhaps even expressing a jealousy at an unjust suppression of a lover’s personality. It possibly refers to experiences in Barcelona in 1932, also portrayed in the short story “The Burning Cactus”. Spender had managed to “save” a young German, Hellmut Schroeder (“Till”) from a humiliating situation where he was the housekeeper for a German doctor in the city. Spender was to live together with Hellmut during his winter in Spain. It is possible that the accusations are directed at Hellmut’s authoritarian employer. The poem maintains these multiple meanings, and ultimately states that any suppression – whether it is personal or societal – is an attack upon life and the Lawrentian vitality that is so frequently manifested in Spender’s portrayal of the workers:

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 martyrdom serene, but horrible.

By their very predicament, the oppressed are the communicants of significant facts of human interaction and the forces of history; “Without that once clear aim” and “The Prisoners” assert Spender’s conviction that the “truth lies in dungeons” – that the authentic human experience of the age resides in the covert persecutions inflicted by
governments, which produces “martyrs” and heroes against oppression. When enacted as a metaphor, this conviction stands whether the perceived injustice is within a personal relationship, or a political situation.

“Perhaps” (XXX) is an imagistic review of the year’s events, told from the point of view of a communist (“our party”). Its theme is the uncertainty of the implication of contemporary events, and also the uncertainty of the validity of events as they are portrayed by a partisan media. The “spin” or characterisation of incidents was increasingly apparent during 1933, and the poem emulates the fractured, intersecting narratives of newspaper reports, a method pursued at greater length in *Vienna*. The first stanza, with its literal explosion, is a metaphorical explosion of events, and then of the reports of events, as they spill out onto the newspaper page in fast succession:

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)
the parliament their own side set afire
and then our party forbidden
and the mine flooded, an accident I hope.41

The orphaned “Perhaps” expresses both uncertainty and a latent sarcasm borne of cynicism; likewise the “hope” that the mine has been flooded accidentally strikes an ambiguous tone between sincerity and ironic scorn. That the speaker is himself a communist might suggest that paranoid suspicion takes the upper hand, but the poem develops into a statement of resolute uncertainty, and the postponement of any conclusion.

As in “Van der Lubbe”, the eyes of the spectators of European events are of paramount importance, but they are detached from the unravelling drama, receiving fragmented chunks of information at one remove, and of dubious accuracy, from:

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* The story appeared in the *Hound and Horn* in Spring 1934, and was the title story of *The Burning Cactus* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).
...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.

With crude analogy the papers are vomited forth; the mechanical dissemination of fact is portrayed as a blunt and clumsy instrument; the metaphors are gritty, suggesting that the "news" is stale ("mouldy"), and the peculiar image "our eyes mud" conjures both disrespect for the public gaze, and suggests that their vision is marred by filth or moral uncertainty. With insufficient evidence, the individual is left to question the possible significance of events:

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 edge of antarctic?

The rhetoric brings together Spender’s various formulations of world crisis – the single act of assassination, the “organic”, inevitable war that serves to shed the metaphorical dead matter of the culture, and the epic formulation of Biblical cataclysm, “leviathan”, a marine counterpart to the apocalyptic “rough beast” of Yeats’s “The Second Coming”.

He offers these various poetic interpretations, derived from the imperfectly apprehended facts; the answer is “Only perhaps.” For Spender, the Platonic ideal which is the truth of history lies out of reach, hidden by the veil of newspaper reports: “headlines are walls that shake and close / the dry dice rattled in their wooden box”.

Events are mysterious and covert, but also subject to chance and random combinations which will determine history, that is itself dwarfed by the cosmic “Time monstrous” of Poems.

When Spender had written to Isherwood of the “pretensions” of communist language in early 1933, he mentioned the “six new poems” that were more personal, a reaction against the programmatic tones of Poems (1933). The new additions to the expanded Poems do reveal a shift in tone, and as “Perhaps” and “Shapes of Death...” demonstrate, even the political verse exhibits an increased uncertainty over the objective
characteristics of the dream of revolution. Spender seems keen to assert that his own revolution fantasies are born of the same imaginative impulses that build skyscrapers and crave power; it is an individualist will that can be allied to the collective good, but is reliant upon the single imagination. This is an idea that the political sequences of *Poems* (1933) had included, but they had maintained a less equivocal alliance to the imminent class war. The poems already examined reveal an increased self-consciousness regarding the dissemination of information by means of newspapers and propagandist reportage – an awareness that the truth of events will continue to be elusive, and hence their calls for revolution must be conditional, and avowedly rooted in the realm of the poetic imagination. The revolution is no longer a certainty, but only “perhaps” will come to pass.

Spender chose not to include the Georgian “I hear the cries of evening” in the expanded edition, thus diminishing the sense of pre-war nostalgia so unpopular with Roberts’s *New Signatures* manifesto, and even the urban-anxiety of “Passing men are sorry...” is more an expression of regret for suppressed humanity than for the “hedged and lined” rural landscape. “At the end of two months’ holiday” (VI) had appeared in *New Country* and was written in late 1932, too late for inclusion in the original volume of *Poems*. Rather than the late Georgianism which had echoed through *Twenty Poems*, this sonnet demonstrates a formal self-consciousness with regard to the implicit nostalgia of rural poetry; the inherent “modernity” of the train journey is the central motif, but it is contrasted not with a regretfully bygone era, but with a lost idiom of lyric poetry. The “honey buds” cannot equal the scream of “The Express”, but here the rural landscape and the neat verbal correlatives of Georgian lyrics are smashed into “unreality” by the brash, vivid determination of the machine. The first quatrain depicts a familiar romantic situation – the poet kept awake by the titanic swell of the sea which engages his imagination:

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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.\(^4^3\)
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The “fretless scansion” is significant here, the relaxed metre rolls over the pentameter with its assonance; but the sea evokes not a natural, or a mythical correlative in the poet’s mind – it is rather the “town’s roar”. This signifies the apprehension of the return to the city after a secluded holiday, but, importantly, the simile is an inversion of the nostalgic order – the sea acts to invoke the animal “roar” of the urban realm. The second quatrains begins with a jolt of cinematic montage:

I was in a train. 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.

The reader is jerked from troubled sleep into a train carriage. The sudden perspective in which the trite “simple green which can heal / All sadness” retreats into the distance seems to make a mockery of the rural ideal, transforming it into a quaint dream. The sestet, with its transition into regular pentameter, signifies that these emblems of the rural setting have been irremediably transformed into two dimensions; they are now over-determined stock images that are inappropriate in the context of rapid transit, and the imaginative faculty cannot give them depth or palpable presence:

Real were iron lines, and, smashing the grass
The cars in which we ride, and real our compelled time:
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.

Just as the sea’s “fretless scansion” had metrically overextended itself, so too it is the urgent “compelled time” that projects beyond the pentameter, and the “moving glass” of the train’s windows. There is no expression of regret in these lines, but rather an implication that the “clear world from which we pass” is itself a quaint simplification, made simple by the perspective of trains and cars. Spender is partly evoking the “blurring” phenomenon of the Wilcox family car in Forster’s Howards End, which allows no time to pause and appreciate the countryside which speeds past; still, the modern conception of metropolitan urgency – “our compelled time” – is not disparaged.
here. The sonnet observes an awareness of two disconnected visions of the world, and spans them without apparent regret.

This poem maintains the Futurist *kineticism* of the earlier machine poems which imbues its descriptions with speed and force, even when the object described is static; it is a willed attempt to infuse the contemporary landscape with a sense of propulsion into the technological and political future that is apprehended by the imagination. Hence the stationary “Pylons” have wires that are “whips of anger” and possess the “quick perspective of the future”, the abstract “speedlines of dictators” represents their political exigency; similarly “The Express” *projects* its kinetic force onto the surrounding landscape, in which “speed throws up strange shapes.” The physical movement is always a projection into the future for Spender, and is characterised by exhilaration as much as by apprehension; this seems to hold true for technological advance and political developments in equal measure.

“After success, your little afternoon success” (XII) and “Alas, when he laughs it is not he” (XIII) are love lyrics – somewhat embittered, and defiantly apolitical – which had appeared in *New Country*. Spender had had troubled relationships in Germany and Spain in 1932, and this is clearly a direct inspiration for the poems. The former addresses itself to a lover unidentifed by gender, who drives the speaker to “jealous perplexity”:

...you pass
Your silk soothing hand across my arm
And smile; 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. 44

Again there is the existential scepticism that had informed *Twenty Poems*, and which sees the definition of love in “Shapes of Death” as “Neurosis eclipsing each in special shadow”; it is combined with a scathing judgement of character, a scorn of the object of his affection. The inconstant lover is dismissed as “simple” for not realising that the speaker is acquiescing rather than being a dupe, although there is a sense that this may be a vain, retroactive analysis of the situation by the speaker.
In a similar vein, "Alas, when he laughs it is not he" depicts the disillusionment of a relationship after initial compatibility; and the speaker hopes for some genuinely-felt emotion to break through their existential separation, "that obdurate cliff",

That shuts out all our sky and always grows
Black between us and the silent pools of the will.

He wishes that "the rocks / Would burst with German streams again." It is likely a description of Hellmut; Spender noted to Isherwood that "when Hellmut went away although I felt very lonely for a day or two, it was impossible to miss him because he was quite lacking in the traits of a personality which one misses in people." This is a rather cruel dismissal of someone who is in effect a non-person, and undeserving of much affection. The disillusionment is thus less extreme than the grudging realisation of Marston’s banality that provides the subject for the first section of Twenty Poems; nevertheless, a sense of thwarted romanticism – and romance – continues to provide emotional material for the more personal lyrics.

“For T.A.R.H.” (XXII) is addressed to Tony Hyndman whom Stephen met soon after the publication of Poems (1933) and who became (ostensibly) his secretary, but who would be his partner for the next few years. Hyndman was literally “the unemployed” when they met, and became a significant part of his life. It was Hyndman’s treatment for appendicitis in hospital in Vienna that would provide the imagery for the opening verses of the long poem, and the psychological sketches are fundamentally reliant on Spender’s relationship with Hyndman and Muriel Gardiner. The poem portrays the confusion of time – of the present and of reminiscence – in the contemplation of his lover (“Even whilst I watch him I am remembering”), and in contrast to the lyrics which had appeared in New Country, it is a sensitive portrayal of an affection borne of time and intimacy:

Even while I see I remember, for love
Is soaked in memory and says
I have seen what I see, and I wear

* "I really did not need a secretary, and I find it difficult to force someone who is living on equal terms with me to work... We painted our Maida Vale flat, Jimmy [Tony] cooked, I worked, we entertained and were entertained.” (World Within World, p. 176.)
All pasts and all futures like a doomed, domed sky.\(^\text{37}\)

The poem is a counterpart to “Shapes of Death Haunt Life”, and where that poem’s treatment of time suggests a meditation on past achievements of mankind, and an anticipation of future projections of will onto the world, “To T.A.R.H.” depicts an equal relationship in which the “doomed, domed sky” of past and future can be relinquished for the solace of companionship:

At night my life lies with no past or future  
But only space. It watches  
Hope and despair and the small vivid longings  
Like minnows gnaw the body. Where it drank love  
It lives in sameness.

Rather than the isolation of “Neurosis eclipsing each in special shadow”, this relationship finds companionship – even solidarity – in shared “hope and despair”; the final phrase suggests that the reward for love is the realisation of “sameness”. This seems quite different from the desire to project oneself into “another’s body” in the former poem, yet still the speaker will “wear always the glint of quick lids / And the blue axel turning” of his lover’s eyes; the “sameness” of his “Gestures indelible”, will bring comfort in their constancy.

There is a constant associative connection in Spender’s verse between the companionship of lovers and the companionship of those with shared political ideals; the concept of the “gang” and the “Party” is at the root of the 1930s poetry, and it is the manner in which Spender and his contemporaries were portrayed, and liked to portray themselves. The collectivist idyll presented by communism is figuratively aligned with solidarity within the homosexual “class” – which was a broad social group but still legally maligned, and furtive by necessity. The Brown Book had made much of van der Lubbe’s innate untrustworthiness since he moved in homosexual circles which had allegedly brought him into contact with – and exploitation by – the Nazis, suggesting an official communist disapproval of homosexuality; yet it was a frightening fact – and close to home – that the Nazi Storm Troops were persecuting homosexuals as well as
Jews and other minority groups.* In this sense, though they fall short of outright declaration, Spender's love lyrics are a brave gesture at a time when homosexuality was being attacked on all sides, not the least by the declared establishment values of his own country. This sense of solidarity provides part of the important connection between Spender and his distant, fellow "gang member" Isherwood. At this time the apolitical dedicatee of Poems was still in Germany, in the heart of the "Hitler Terror," though soon to flee.

"New Year" (XXXVIII) first appears as the final entry in Spender's 1932-1934 notebook, and he enclosed a copy in a letter to Isherwood in Berlin, dated January 1, 1934.48 As he recalls, Spender had a romantic view of Isherwood's expatriate isolation in inland Europe, in the stronghold of Fascism. The young novelist is envisioned in self-imposed exile, an artistic pioneer whose social life and writing are commensurate to the endeavours of great adventurers:

I corresponded with him in the spirit of writing letter to a Polar explorer. I thought of him in the centre of the northern European plain, gripped in icy cold, across the stormy and black channel.49

This version of the poem ("New Year, 1934") is virtually identical to the volume version, and was first published in New Verse in February.50 Isherwood was, of course, bearing first-hand witness to the social crisis in Berlin, which added an element of drama to the portrayal of a continent shrouded in darkness; and the prayer-like poem, swiftly despatched to Germany, locates itself within the darkness of winter, on the cusp of the changing year: "Here at the centre of the turning year, / The turning Polar North, / The frozen streets..." It is a temporal and geographical point which he employs to signify a pivotal point in history; rather than to indulge in the sensual escape of the midwinter feast, he calls for a sense of realism about world events to harden him against the coming trials:

I ask that all the years and years
Of future disappointment, like a snow
Chide me at one fall now.51

* Years previously, Spender had wittily noted to Isaiah Berlin the innate hypocrisy of the "Hitler youth" in Germany, those young men who moved on to fill the Nazi ranks and yet were the epitome of a (cntd.)
The second stanza echoes the calls to action of *Poems* (1933), but without the effusive sense of imminent (and inevitable) glory; rather, it advocates belt-tightening stoicism, the confrontation of difficulties in order to endure the challenge of history:

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I leave him who bums endlessly
In the brandy pudding crowned with holly,
And I ask that Time should freeze my skin
And all my fellow travellers harden
Who are not flattered by this town
Nor up its twenty storeys whirled
To prostitutes without infection.
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The ideal “prostitutes without infection” and the reference to “my fellow travellers” indicate a new-found realism of terminology and political definition that continues into *Vienna*. “Fellow travellers” has a double meaning, of course, Spender is certainly suggesting communist sympathy as well as the comradeship of intellectual explorers who must brace themselves against metaphorical arctic winds.

The third stanza revisits the paradoxical revolution envisioned in “After they have tired” and establishes that it is an acknowledgement of social decline that marks the “strange” new generation as distinct. The end of the capitalist system and establishment values is to be entropic, a natural and inevitable decline:

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Cloak us in accidents and in the failure
Of the high altar and marital adventure;
In family disgrace, denunciation
Of bankers, a premier’s assassination.
From the government windows
Let heads of headlines watch depart,
Strangely depart by staying, those
Who build a new world in their heart.
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But it is a catalogue of desired crises – the failures of the “high altar”, of the institution of marriage, and of “bankers” are willed, pre-emptive; Spender seems to have determined that the revolution is not actively to dismantle the establishment, but to allow it to fall; the assassination of the fourth line is a peculiarly passive event. The

homosexual youth culture that Nazi dogma condemned (S.S. to I.B., 10 October, 1930.).
revolutionaries will “strangely depart” from the present system — ideologically rather than physically, with “a new world in their heart.” The phrase “heads of headlines” for the political leaders depicts the same media-consciousness which informs “Perhaps” and “Van der Lubbe.” In answer to the particularly German method of execution of communists — beheading — the scythe will be the Soviet sickle:

Where scythe shall curve but not upon our neck  
And lovers proceed to their forgetting work,  
Answering the harvests of obliteration.  
After the frozen years and streets  
Our tempered will shall plough across the nations.

Spender reiterates that this future state resides within the heart of the future generation, and it is a state of collective endeavour — “forgetting work”, like the “self-forgetful drunkenness” so abhorred by egotistical ambition in “Shapes of Death…” . It is a coming spring which will bring a suitably socialist agricultural Utopia to “answer” the destructive “harvests” of Fascism.

However, Spender’s use of the adjective “tempered” to describe the collective will of the people pinpoints the moral uncertainty of his desired revolution. Firstly, “tempered will” suggests the “tempered steel” of the plough blade — a will that is focused and controlled, by extension that is firm, measured, and just. But secondly, of course, “tempered” suggests angry, enraged, even a vengeful will which has calmly bided its time before unleashing its force “across the nations”.

In the final lines the morally ambiguous plough transforms into Spender’s ubiquitous train, and then into the writing hand of the poet himself:

The engine hurrying through the lucky valley  
The hand that moves to guide the silent lines  
Effect their beauty without robbery.  

The moral paradox of revolution is matched by the paradoxical blurring of the individual and the collective will; the “silent lines” are both the railway lines, the lines made across the earth by the socialist plough to engender the birth of a new age, and the lines written by “the hand” of the poet, that invisibly “guides” their outcome. Just as the “architectural gold-leaved flower” that the poet must create “like a single mind” in “Not
palaces...”, Spender suggests that the writer’s delineation of the collective will requires autonomy, an individualism of expression that resides outside of the orthodox collective.

The recognition of “fellow travellers” in the second stanza is an indication of Spender’s self-conscious interrelation with communism and its “pretensions.” David Caute has offered a tentative definition of the fellow-traveller – a definition gleaned from observation rather than by any prescribed responsibilities that go with the title – and it serves well as an indication of Spender’s position:

...the fellow-traveller’s commitment takes a different form from that of a communist because his disillusionment with Western society is less radical, less total, less uncompromising. The fellow-traveller retains a partial faith in the possibilities of progress under the parliamentary system: he appreciates that the prevailing liberties, however imperfect and however distorted, are nevertheless valuable.53

This poses the question of what the final line of the poem might mean: the hand that silently guides the lines is able to “Effect their beauty without robbery”. What this robbery might entail is unclear; but it is possible that, as a fellow-traveller, but not as a revolutionary, Spender is able to contribute to the envisioning of an ideal state without the morally problematic need to be involved in the physical struggle.

Again, the poem states the uncertainty of Spender’s allegiance but does not explicate it, a literary effect which his polemical prose of the time fully endorses. If his role is to state the “truth” of his position, then that “truth” is sympathy toward communist ideals, an attraction to the notion of a shared, equal endeavour, and a persistent uncertainty as to the moral cost of a violent class struggle. Spender’s perceived role as a political poet, and his changing views from 1933 to 1935 on the relationship between “Poetry and Revolution”, and between “Writers and Manifestoes”, will be discussed in the next chapter.
4. Poems (1934)

5 Ibid., pp. 667-668.
6 *Spectator*, September 29, 1933, p. 400; *Living Age*, November 1933, p. 345.
10 Ibid., p. 152.
11 *Letters to Christopher*, pp. 61-62.
21 *New Verse*, No. 6, December, 1933, p. 2.
22 *Times Literary Supplement*, Thursday September 7 1933, p. 582.
31 *Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 32.
34 *Listener*, October 11, 1933, p. xi.
35 *World Within World*, pp. 163-164.
36 Ibid., p. 165.
38 Holograph Notebook (Oct. 1932 - New Year, 1934), Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
40 Ibid., p. 43.
41 *Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 49.
42 Ibid., p. 50.
43 Ibid., p. 16.
44 Ibid., p. 23.
46 *Letters to Christopher*, p. 55.
47 *Poems*, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 36.
4. Poems (1934)

48 Letters to Christopher, pp. 64-65.
49 World Within World, pp. 126-127.
51 Poems, London: Faber and Faber, 1934, p. 64.
52 Ibid., p. 65.
The highly impassioned, vitriolic literary discourse of the 1930s regularly invoked images of war in its portrayal of cultural conflict. The British literary “intelligentsia” was a relatively small community, but its dissemination of the writing of the 1930s poets is integral to the meaning of their work, and is essential to its interpretation; the latent prejudices which the poems assume in the reader are dictated by this milieu of periodicals and anthologies. Particularly, it was *New Verse* that succeeded in establishing – and criticising – the “Spender myth” that had been formed in the course of only two years, a period when the poet at its centre was rarely in the country. By 1935 Spender had become a representative type of the young generation. Poetically, he was not as distinguished as Auden – although a few rated him more highly; his work was regarded as direct and emotive, and willing to lay bare the paradoxes of his political conscience. On either side of the debate between politics and poetry, the general belief (rightly or wrongly) was that the work of the young generation constituted an absolute break from the concerns of the preceding decade, and that Spender’s work epitomised this trend.

The new “movement” was a paradoxical entity, as much a journalistic convenience as a conscious group effort; but it was this collective identity that enabled the easy dissemination of their work, as Spender’s own self-critical review of *New Country* in the *Bookman* would indicate. The young writers were all approximately communist, if only for a brief time, and this presented an opposing stance to the apolitical Bloomsbury set (which was apolitical in its art, at least) and provided a critique of the older generation’s reluctance to choose sides in the escalating crisis. Yet the youths were able to dissent from the “Bloomsbury outlook” under the direct patronage of Bloomsbury itself. Spender’s “red” *Vienna* would be published under the authority of the conservative, Christian T.S. Eliot at Faber and Faber, proving that the ideological debate was being played out within the established institutions of literary discourse. Despite the materialist sympathies of the younger members, the writers of both generations were united in their conviction that art and literature are of innate value, and that art is utterly justified whether it is bourgeois or proletarian. Importantly,
the old guard did not simply dismiss the young writers who allowed political ideas to enter their writing; on the contrary, they provided an atmosphere of tolerance and patronage without which the new generation could not have flourished.

This is not to suggest that there was unanimity of purpose, or even agreement, among the young writers and their editors. While Michael Roberts’s politicised anthologies *New Signatures* and *New Country* were published by the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press (at John Lehmann’s urging), Geoffrey Grigson was unflinching in his scorn for what he saw as Roberts’s clumsy political reductivism, and the false creation of a “movement”. Grigson’s response to the communist preface of *New Country* was to demand, “What joins these writers except paper?” In turn, Roberts’s polemical introduction had rather audaciously bitten the hand that fed the anthologies by condemning “Bloomsbury” as politically and aesthetically impotent.

Unlike Roberts’s vision of a political revolution in poetry, Grigson’s editorial mission was to promote something far more traditional, even reactionary: the preservation of the poem from the onslaught of current affairs, to keep it free from the increasingly “democratised” prose of the print media. During the Depression, when verse increasingly seemed an anachronistic indulgence, the launch of a poetry magazine was an ambitious and idealistic gesture. Poems were grudgingly being assigned space at the bottom of random columns of the periodicals, yet Grigson championed the poem as an affirming manifestation of human experience, and argued that now, more than ever, the poem should not become a political tool. Moreover, he is challenging what he regards as the insular, reactionary character of the literary establishment. In the first number of *New Verse*, he declares that the poem is an object of innate value which, at its best, can rise above “the poisonous and steaming Gran Chaco of vulgarity, sciolism and literary racketeering.”

While both radical, Roberts and Grigson represent two definitions of poetry which are separated by an apparently unbridgeable ideological divide. There is no question that for its participants it was a literary war. Of course, in the perspective of the upheavals of the twentieth century – indeed, of the 1930s themselves – this seems to be an exaggeration, but those who had been born too young to participate in the Great War, who felt admonished but inspired by the grim trench philosophy of Wilfred Owen and critical of the escapism of the Georgian collections, sought some vital conflict to
test their literary mettle. For this small community, the search for a cause found two causes, which were to have an uneasy interrelation – politics and poetry.

In a 1970 interview, Spender recalls the beginnings of this self-conscious movement and its protestations of “newness”:

I remember getting a letter either from Michael Roberts or from Geoffrey Grigson in which whoever it was, starting his anthology or starting his New Verse, said that the other had begun laying down mines and we are going to start a creeping fire. You suddenly realised that one was supposed to be part of some gigantic literary war and that this literary war was being dramatised by, really, high-class literary journalists. This characterisation of a generation – the establishment of a conflict between communist idealism and literary idealism – was fundamentally the work of these two editors, Roberts and Grigson. Of course, it was the poets who provided their generation’s preoccupations – the fascination with (and apprehension of) war, revolution, an impending crisis, but it was Roberts and Grigson who managed to marshal these interests into a discernible debate, and to create a literary atmosphere which was a stark progression on from the ordered seclusion of high modernism and Georgianism. Without John Lehmann’s advocacy of Roberts’s proposal for the New Signatures anthology at the Hogarth Press, Grigson’s New Verse would still have found its contributors, but may well have had far less heated debate. It was the disparity between Roberts and Grigson’s positions that sparked the figurative war of words. As Spender says of the young editors, “They were the people who invented the 1930s. It really wasn’t us. And, after all, during this time I wasn’t at the centre. I was in Germany most of the time.”

The enthusiasm for a literary turf-war was certainly borne of youth. As Valentine Cunningham suggests, “it became the fashion of the post-War period to be a child prodigy of letters, to hasten as it were to fill up the gaps blown open in the ranks of art and letters by the War.” Herbert Read, Wyndham Lewis and Robert Graves were genuine veterans of the Great War, wearing the badge of courage and authorised citizenship that active service granted. The up and coming writers, eager for conflict, seeking validation in unstable allegiances that would create feuds and intrigues, did so by filling a minor void in cultural discourse, in an era when international conflict was nascent.
A sense of post-War guilt partly accounts for the militaristic fervour with which they attacked the literary and political debates of the era, but it is also a result of youthful idealism. In early 1932, which saw the publication of Auden’s *The Orators* and Michael Roberts’s *New Signatures* anthology, Auden – the most reputable “veteran” of the 1930s at this point – was only twenty-five. The old guard of Bloomsbury and modernism were still in their forties – Eliot, Lewis, Woolf and Joyce; but the young “guns” were all in their twenties: Evelyn Waugh, Edward Upward, Christopher Isherwood, Graham Greene, George Orwell, Cecil Day Lewis, Henry Green. Geoffrey Grigson, soon to launch *New Verse*, was twenty-seven. Spender himself, one volume under his belt and his Faber and Faber debut due to appear the following January, was only twenty-three.  

Roberts and Grigson did not reconcile their views on the purpose of poetry, but it is significant that Auden and Spender, two poets whose work manifested the tension between literary idealism and political conscience, should have been admired and promoted by both editors, even argued over. Where Grigson was to regard Spender as a lyrical talent whose calls for social justice merely coincided with communist ideas, Roberts was to see Spender – particularly the Spender of “The Funeral” – as the originator of verse in a new, propagandist, communist idiom which managed to preserve purely literary standards. It is the effect of “pleasing both masters” that serves as evidence that Spender’s textual conflict was amenable to variant interpretations in its contemporary milieu, and it is responsible for his emergence as the archetypal, socially-conscious bourgeois poet of the 1930s.

A somewhat “official” endorsement of Spender’s cultural significance was to come in the summer of 1935, upon the publication of *The Destructive Element*, the “Henry James book” for Jonathan Cape with which he had been struggling for two years. The study (with its timely Conradian title) is a sweeping analysis of modernism, culminating in an examination of Auden’s place in the linear development of literary tradition. Beneath its gloss of Marxist orthodoxy, the method is actually an historicised, humanist criticism. But perhaps more significant than the critical content of the book is the *statement* its publication makes. It is a statement of literary ambition – that Spender is not simply a poet but a man of letters with aspirations to the grand analytical scope of
T.S. Eliot.

Naturally, there is always the threat of hubris in such a work (Spender was still only twenty-six) and, in his notice in *New Verse*, Geoffrey Grigson surveys the dual nature of Spender’s fame, which sees him as the recipient of both admiration and (resultantly) suspicion. Nevertheless, by the middle of 1935 Spender’s place in the world of letters (for better or for worse, Grigson’s equivocal tone suggests) is assured.

Grigson claims that “the critical and conversational game of the last few months has been to argue about Stephen Spender”, and that Spender, of all his contemporaries, has been chosen as the critical icon who must be praised, analysed, or attacked. According to Grigson, an opinion on Spender – whatever that may be – is a necessary requirement for any literary-minded person. Grigson commences his discussion with a phrase that was to become Spender’s journalistic tag for decades to come – the quip that he was the “Rupert Brooke of the Depression.” Although he was later to deny that he had coined the term (“I wouldn’t have dared”), attributing it to Norman Cameron, Grigson manages to have his cake and eat it by printing the line.* On the one hand, he is allowed his affectionate jibe, but on the other he puts it to more serious use in the analysis of Spender’s literary reputation; like many of the rumours and apocryphal tales concerning public figures, Grigson perceives an important truth in the persistence of the label:

It is not untrue, but its quantity of truth is really external to Mr. Spender; it surrounds him in an admiration which is exaggerated, unreasonable, and produced by a mob requirement. Any time needs a poet – one, if possible, with the Elstree side-face and youngness of Rupert Brooke. Critics who emanate from the public mind and serve it, make such a poet, if his looks are good and his poems easy, into an agreeable centre for public fantasies, for the elements of public lyricism. Nobody fits now except Mr. Spender. Put the world in a depression, and he is more comforting than ever.

Spender has become, in Grigson’s estimation, the poster-boy for a reactionary art form, but also for a new creed of political allegiance quite at odds with the *nationalistic* idealism symbolised by Brooke’s lyrics. (It is important to note here that Grigson does not object to the “reactionary” idealism of the poetic vocation.) Spender represents new
political ideas – collectivism and socialism in the face of economic crisis, and a sympathetic portrayal of the unemployed. He has a popular appeal, an “easiness” that can transcend specialism and become an advertisement for contemporary poetry, which is a minority interest in the present cultural climate, and regrettably so.

At the same time, the implicit meaning of the label, which derives from Brooke’s own biography, acts as a critique of Spender’s literary persona, and indeed of his character. Brooke, of course, had composed his lyrics and died before seeing active service, thus was deprived the signal honour of fighting for his country; he was denied too the authoritative realism which experience of the war had granted Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg and Edward Thomas. This is a criticism by association of Spender’s lyrical exhortations to communism, which he makes despite his avowed dedication to the cause of liberal individualism. The “Rupert Brooke” label insinuates cynicism towards Spender’s failure to endorse revolutionary poetics with corresponding practical revolutionary action.

Grigson goes on to delineate an enduring model of Spender’s literary reception, in which he is not so much disparaged for having not been Auden (as would be the case in some studies later in the century), as for not turning out to be the same Stephen Spender that had been expected according to the early, popular perception of his archetypal role as a Romantic lyricist:

In his Poems, Mr. Spender stated several things excellently; and was then victimised by the establishment of a Spender myth. He wrote Vienna, he wrote a very bad psychopathological poem published in the Spectator; and those who had mistaken the Spender myth for Mr. Spender at once concluded that here, after all, was a writer who had had his moments of adolescent clarity, but was not really of any importance whatever."

Grigson notes that the critical and journalistic envisioning of Spender has, in the space of only a few months, portrayed a marked “falling off” of the promise of Poems; Spender seems to have exhausted the direct lyrical idiom which he had made his own.

Grigson’s conceptualisation of two Spenders – one a constant poet on his own

* Grigson subsequently described the phrase as “funny, understandable” but “unfair,” adding the witty barb: “Stephen was never as handsome as Brooke.” (Geoffrey Grigson, Recollections, London: Hogarth Press, 1984, p. 80.)
creative trajectory, the other a public image that is the amenable repository for a host of contemporary projections (positive or negative) – is almost a postmodern extension of Spender’s own metaphysical uncertainties regarding the relation of the self to the world, and the conflicting pressures of individualism and collectivism that he explores in his verse. Outside the poet’s phenomenological system is a further layer of critical dissemination and gossip which has become inextricably linked with the meaning of his work.

There seems to have been an expectation, based on the lyricism of *Poems*, for more political lyrical verse of similar enthusiasm; this has created the assumption that Spender is a representative test case for the efficacy and durability of such poetry. This is an analysis that the difficult and pessimistic long poem *Vienna* seems to have disrupted. *Vienna* would make Spender’s inherent contradictions all the more explicit as he upset the Left and Right equally: it celebrates the idea of revolution as Romantic, bourgeois wish-fulfilment and correspondingly delineates the inherent limitations of the Austrian insurrection and its failure. To those who appreciated the optimistic visions of spiritual emancipation in *Poems*, the forced, modernist ugliness of *Vienna* came as something of a shock.

However, as this study aims to demonstrate, and as Grigson astutely recognised at the time, Spender was on a steady formal and thematic progression through the two editions of *Poems* which culminated in the psychological emphasis of *Vienna* and its uneasy apprehension of the equivocal role of the news media and the insidious influence of state propaganda.* For a brief period of two years before the appearance of *Vienna* Spender was taken up as a future hope: a poet who could engage in political discourse which supplemented his poetry without contradiction. This was a time when the young poets’ experimental forebears Eliot and Pound were propounding dubious morals that went against their successors’ libertarian instincts, and for the *New Verse* audience Spender’s lyrical politics offered a viable alternative to high modernism.

The “Spender myth” is something that *New Verse* is responsible for having helped to construct, subsequently to use it as ammunition against him in its response to *Vienna*. But Grigson’s constant aim with *New Verse* was to provide a neutral arena for

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*Vienna* will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.
critical debate, and its inconsistent stance toward Spender (himself a regular contributor) arises from Grigson’s insistence upon critical toughness, and a plurality of voices and allegiances. Nevertheless, as we shall see, even Grigson was unable to staunch the steady flow of socialist verse into his magazine, and despite his protestations of the superiority of aesthetics and the uncertainty of politics, New Verse was to have a decidedly left-wing character.

By examining the development implicit in Michael Roberts’s two anthologies — New Signatures and New Country — and the further dissemination and analysis of the anthologies and their contributors’ work in Grigson’s New Verse, it will be seen that Spender’s reception is dictated by the literary milieu of his publication, and the political endorsement — both implicit and explicit — which his poems make by their textual relation to the works which they accompany. Grigson’s verdict in 1935 is to applaud the fact that The Destructive Element sees Spender beginning to clarify his reservations about communist ideology after the ambiguities of his essay “Poetry and Revolution” and the apparent advocacy of violent insurrection in Vienna:

You can, if you must, explain human development within the co-ordinates of production and economics, of spiritual teaching, of rats and lice, of frustrated sexual desire, or any simple set that has any relevance to affairs, but it is evident that neither Mr. Spender nor Mr. Auden are deceived by the rigidities of communism. [...] What may very well happen is that Mr. Auden or Mr. Spender will be detested and blacklisted by our Left Reviewers, who aim “to work out a Marxist line of criticism and understanding for English literature.”

Unsurprisingly, Grigson regards Spender’s non-orthodoxy as a great attribute, an intellectual stance that makes apparent his and Auden’s allegiance to literary tradition above party politics. Spender’s verse had been stating the uncertainty of his position quite consistently, but the convenience of the “Spender myth” had effectively suppressed this reading of his work. Similarly, while Spender’s association with Roberts’s anthologies urged a communist reading, Grigson (and Spender’s publishers) were keen to emphasise his secure connections to literary tradition rather than to contemporary political debate.
New Signatures


*New Signatures* appeared when the Depression was deep-rooted in Britain: approaching three million men were unemployed. Although it did not direct itself toward an unemployed readership, the aim of the anthology was to express the contemporary mood; if not the consciousness of the unemployed themselves, then the sympathy and concern of the poets. Roberts’s intention was unquestionably to make a political statement as well as to present a new literary generation. While its social impact was, at the time, negligible, nevertheless the anthology achieved the critical aim of establishing in the minds of reviewers an historically distinct group with a convenient label – the *New Signatures* poets. Though their poetic styles and politics are, in fact, quite dissimilar, and Roberts’s over-zealous protestations of unity tend to alert the reader to this in his preface, the writers do share a contemporary imagery which enables them to be grouped into a school or minor movement. As Samuel Hynes describes, they share a “mood” that communicates, above all, “the sense of crisis, the menace of the future, the need for action.”

Roberts announces that the young poets have decided to turn away from the “difficulty” of modernist styles toward a more direct mode of communication; Faber’s blurb for Spender’s *Poems* would reiterate this notion of a retreat from arcane allusion and formal architectonics in favour of the adoption of a refreshing directness of sentiment. At the same time, while these young “materialist” writers retain traces of the
abrupt, mechanical tropes of urban modernism, Roberts suggests that they represent a new, "third way" after the simple traditionalism of Georgian poetry and the erudite literary modernism of Joyce, Eliot and Pound:

It was inevitable that the growth of industrialism would give rise to a "difficult" poetry. Because our civilisation has hitherto depended directly on agriculture, and because our thoughts have hitherto made use of images taken from rural life, our urban and industrial society leaves us uncomfortable and nostalgic. Rural poetry in recent years has been, in general, a cowardly escape into the past, whilst urban poetry, the poetry of the machine age, has seemed, even to intelligent and conscientious critics, abrupt, discordant, intellectual.¹⁰

Roberts argues that his poets possess a unique sensibility due to their place in history: the volume is a conscious reaction against Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* anthologies, and against continental modernism. The *New Signatures* poets are not alarmed by technological developments or urbanisation, but neither are they ensconced in an experimental form which embraces "abruptness" without sensitivity or emotion. Moreover, Robert's main claim is that the poets are not elitist in their cultural currency – they are poets for the masses, whose strangeness of tone is balanced by a refusal to intimidate or bewilder the common reader: "The poems in this book represent a clear reaction against esoteric poetry in which it is necessary for the reader to catch each recondite allusion."¹¹

The strangeness of tone referred to is the most important aspect of the collection – it is an unashamed acceptance and promotion of a materialist ideology that holds art and literature themselves in a kind of contempt. Roberts attempts to prepare the reader for the paradoxical implication of the anthology: that the liberal individual consciousness which lyrical verse celebrates must, in the present era, be subordinate to the collective will. It is a difficult case to make. On the one hand, Roberts claims that his intelligent young talents are well aware of the relativism of political convictions, and yet they still appear readily to accept the dogma of communism. The new poets,

... have learned to accept the fact that progress is illusory, and yet to believe that the game is worth playing; to believe that the alleviation of suffering is good even though it merely makes possible new sensitiveness and therefore new suffering; to believe that their own standards are no more absolute than those of other people, and yet to be prepared to defend and to suffer for their own standards; to think of the world, for scientific purposes, in terms which make it appear deterministic, and yet to know that a
human action may be unpredictable from scientific laws, a new creation.\textsuperscript{12}

To suggest that by promoting technological progress the poets are playing a worthwhile “game” seems a rather unsatisfactory justification, and yet it accurately pinpoints the difficulty which liberal intellectuals would face in making the case for their advocacy of communism during the decade. Roberts is attempting to explain the detached nods to communist collectivism (and implicit revolutionary action) in *New Signatures*, which seem to sit so uncomfortably with his claims of sensitivity and compassion for suffering. But if his poets believe that human action is “unpredictable”, isn’t he identifying – rather than explaining away – a hypocritical ideological stance which promotes a deterministic analysis of human history and society while providing a formal celebration – in the poem itself – of liberal individualism, and bourgeois expression?

The intimations of violent insurrection so at odds with the contributors’ bourgeois lifestyles would become more explicit in the succeeding volume. Ultimately, Roberts depicts a generation which has made the intellectual move to a relativistic outlook after the mythic, objective scope of modernism; for example, Eliot’s promotion of the systematised objectivity of history and a single cultural tradition.\textsuperscript{*} The “new signatures” have relinquished the old aristocratic order, and in its place have hesitantly adopted Marx.

Nevertheless, as he would expand in his preface to *New Country*, Roberts’s vision of communism is not at all orthodox, rather it is a quaint, English vision of shared endeavour untroubled by the customary brutality of revolution. It is morally indistinguishable from Christian ideals. Roberts is attempting to bring communism to the lay reader by providing an intellectual justification of “…the communist attitude: the recognition that oneself is no more important than a flower in a field; that it may be good to sacrifice one’s own welfare that others may benefit.”\textsuperscript{13} Roberts’s position has particular relevance to Spender’s implicit philosophy in *Poems*, and it is significant that Roberts chooses “The Funeral” as an example of the role of the communist sensibility and conscience:

\textsuperscript{*} Despite the anthropological cultural relativism suggested by *The Waste Land*, Eliot’s literary critical stance primarily promoted a conservative, Christian tradition.
This impersonality comes not from extreme detachment but from solidarity with others. It is nearer to the Greek conception of good citizenship than to the stoical austerity of recent verse, and its expression in many of the poems, and particularly in Mr Spender's "The Funeral" suggests new possibilities for English poetry.\(^{14}\)

Roberts's reading of Spender's lyric is characteristically blinkered; he regards it as an unreserved celebration of the ideal world state, but – as has been discussed – Spender's equivocal treatment of the cultural purge required by a world revolution does not provide an unreserved advocacy of communist doctrine. The Poems blurb would also draw on the Hellenic associations of Spender's "good citizenship". Roberts does not enter into the poem's obvious regret for the cultural abandonment of Hellenic art that communism threatens, on the contrary, he sees "The Funeral" as the first purposive step towards a new poetic mode which will ultimately enable irony and critique, though it is not in itself ironic: "...poetry is here turned to propaganda, but it is propaganda for a theory of life which may release the poet's energies for the writing of pure poetry as well as provide him with standards which may make simple and direct satire possible again."\(^{15}\) Roberts identifies the unease of the poem, but in his eagerness to emphasise the political "shared aims" of the anthology, he is resistant to the idea that "The Funeral" contains its own critique of the ideological implications of the workers' revolution. This is the kind of reductive, dogmatic interpretation germane to Roberts's project that so irked Grigson.

At the same time, it is important to note that the essential Christian moralism of Roberts's communism was not unusual; in fact, the attraction of communism to British liberals (and potential revolutionaries) was in its amenability to basic Christian ideals of equality. It is this same ethical foundation which sees Spender's own verse rhetoric occasionally adopting the tone of Christian eschatology, and which explains the lack of personal antagonism between Eliot – for example – and his young successors, despite their professed ideological differences.

Though New Signatures achieved only modest sales (a thousand copies in its first year, but less than a fifth of that in the second\(^{16}\)) its effect was to be long lasting. By the end of the decade all of its contributors were well known, and as a result sales had continued lowly but steadily throughout the 1930s. Rather than launch the poets on
a receptive public, the anthology enabled a group context for the discussion of their work in the periodicals, so that reviews of the individual contributors subsequent work would reference *New Signatures* and hence invoke the names of fellow contributors. The effect of this was to bolster their reputations and to identify *New Signatures*, and subsequently *New Country*, as convenient “primer” volumes for the young writers who were causing a creative stir with their “machine imagery” and – apparently – denouncing Bloomsbury’s eschewal of politics. Though their views of the role of poetry were fundamentally opposed, the two editors did share a common desire for the promotion of the form; like Grigson, Roberts’s belief is that “English poetry may again become a popular, elegant and contemporary art.” Spender and his contemporaries benefited from the editors’ ongoing endeavour in this regard.

**New Country**

*New Country - Prose and Poetry by the authors of New Signatures* appeared on the heels of Spender’s *Poems* in March 1933, and its revolutionary tone played an important role in the characterisation of Spender’s volume of lyrics. *New Country* is a far more explicitly politicised volume, containing prose from Day Lewis (“Letter to a Young Revolutionary”), stories by Isherwood and Edward Upward (including “Sunday”), a literary satire by Roberts (“Non-stop Variety”), and a story by William Plomer.

Upward’s “Sunday” is an elegant summation of the conscience of a generation – the conviction to act in the face of economic crisis and fascist threat. It describes a young man’s decision to join the Communist Party at their shady meetings in “the small club behind the Geisha Café.” Its final declaration, that the allegiance to communism is a necessary, unglamorous step, and without the prospect of immediate reward, evokes the general thrust of the whole volume: “It will take time. But it is the only hope.” There is poetry from Auden (including “A Communist to Others”), Day Lewis (including “Look west, Wystan”), Lehmann, Madge (“Letter to the Intelligentsia”), Roberts, Tessimond, R.E. Warner; Spender’s contributions are the essay “Poetry and Revolution”, and the lyrics “The Morning Road”, “After success…”, “Alas, when he laughs…”, and “At the end of two months’ holiday…”
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*New Country* is a rather different enterprise from *New Signatures*; where the first had urged that poetry should be re-established as an “elegant” contemporary art, the successor is confrontational, strongly partisan, and mixes genres in a manner which suggests that on all fronts – poetry, prose fiction and essays – writers are taking up their pens in the support of socialist ideology. Furthermore, the editorial policy assumes that novelists and poets are qualified to discuss politics and its interrelation with contemporary literature, and that they have important ideas to express. The thematic transition is plain: from the writer’s individual “signatures” to the “country” at large – both the country which they make their subject, and the future state which they represent. The anthology declares collectivisation in its very title but, as Grigson was to contend in his review, it presents a kaleidoscope of aesthetic and ideological positions quite as disparate as the individualist “signatures” of the previous book; the title is symptomatic of Roberts’s aspirations – he has a vision of a new political future, and a vision of a unified body of writers.

Despite this assured vision, or rather as a direct result of it, Roberts’s preface strikes a tone of urgent protestation. It is long and confrontational, assuming that its reader is antagonistic to its aims – innately sceptical of socialist ideology, and particularly suspicious of British communism as it is practised. Roberts dramatises himself speaking to an unconverted (and perhaps unconvertible) audience, and employs the immediate, broad-stroke rhetoric of the soapbox prophet: “To-day we have no security. Not that the world is in the grip of the financiers, but simply that it is not in anybody’s grip at all. It is not intelligence which is lacking, but control.” It is a global crisis akin to Yeats’s apprehension of apocalyptic spiritual and political anarchy wherein “the falcon cannot hear the falconer”. At the same time, it is a crisis unacknowledged by the ruling classes; Roberts sees “all that we believe in threatened;” a stand must be taken against an economic status quo which endorses private gain and refuses to propound solidarity for the workers and the poor who enable the bourgeois lifestyle: “If our sympathies turn toward revolutionary change it is not because of our pity for the unemployed and the underpaid but because we see at last that our interests are theirs.”

Roberts is an apologist for communism, and as a result he is obliged to acknowledge its poor reputation among the left-leaning British middle classes, and its
apparent inability to stir the underclass into an effective revolutionary movement:

Communism, in this country, is associated with hooliganism, tactlessness, inefficient propaganda, mere discontent. The Communist Party of Great Britain has produced no Lenin, no Trotsky, no Lunarcharsky. But sooner or later, if we toy with this notion of revolutionary change, we must make clear our politics.  

Roberts’s ideal – or anticipated – reader is aggressive and cynical. His accusatory tone is intended both to incense the enemies of socialist thought, and to push the hesitant communist sympathiser further in the direction of the party by admonishing his lack of commitment to social change. At this time a great deal of cynicism was directed towards the Communist Party, which was seen as impotent, far removed from its Soviet precursors and located in a democracy where outright revolution was deeply unlikely. Graham Greene’s It’s a Battlefield (1934) evokes this contemporary mood, suggesting that the Communist Party of the early 1930s, despite pricking the social conscience of youth, is most strikingly characterised by its ineffectualness which manages to disillusion even confirmed revolutionaries. On his way to a party meeting, Jules anticipates the familiar outcome:

Men would be making speeches to a late hour, reconstructing England in theory, abolishing poverty on paper... He wanted something he could follow with passion, but Communism was talk and never action...  

The common feeling that Greene exploits here is identical to the suspicion that Roberts’s rhetoric anticipates – even demands – in the reader of New Country.

Roberts’s justification for aligning oneself with communist dogma by joining the party is that the British CP, despite its shortcomings, is a dormant tool which the intellectuals can infiltrate and commandeer. This is a rather blatant admission that most intellectuals are unorthodox in their communism. Roberts’s stance anticipates Spender’s subsequent membership of the Party during the Spanish War, when he was to declare, “I am a Communist because I am a Liberal.” Just as the growing fascist threat would ease the transition from anti-fascism to left-wing sympathy and even communism, so too the apprehension of the economic crisis seems to demand, for these writers, that they champion communist ideals, or at least proffer them as a viable option. At the same time, Roberts’s keenness to co-opt the Party for liberal ends demonstrates a
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strange misunderstanding of the radical foundations of communist thought – it is not an ideology of compromise or negotiation, as he is determined to portray it:

The only way of ensuring that a political party shall represent our ideals is to work with it now, to help to choose its leaders and to remember always that beyond our theoretical divergences there is our practical agreement, and we must learn to settle differences in friendliness and not hostility.²⁴

Roberts then makes an odd claim that is entirely symptomatic of the New Country generation’s outlook, indeed, it goes right to the heart of the ideological paradox of Spender’s Poems; Roberts declares that “it is time that those who would conserve something which is still valuable in England began to see that only a revolution can save their standards.”²⁵ Roberts provides a bizarre justification: that revolution is the champion of tradition. He is invoking a timeless standard of egalitarianism that has little to do with England’s aristocratic heritage or the realities of the communist state. This equating of revolution with conservatism is an unresolved theoretical issue for Roberts, and symptomatic of the New Country generation’s crisis: they are burdened by the need to promote their favoured form (poetry) and their preferred politics (socialism); the pervading assumption is that these two concerns must be interdependent, but the discourse which the relationship inspires continually hints that their modernist forebears have been right all along – that poetry and socialism may not necessarily have anything to do with one another. Spender would continually be “approaching” communism throughout the decade, but as a poet, it is a futile endeavour: bourgeois literature, whatever its sympathies, is antithetical to the aims of communism; this is an antagonism which cannot be negotiated, let alone resolved, as “Poetry and Revolution” demonstrates.

With New Country Roberts is promoting a new literary mode which can incorporate political argument, both as a reaction against the wilfully introverted Little Englandism of Georgian poetry, and against the experimentalism of high modernism. The moderns have been, in Roberts’s estimation, aesthetically rigorous but elitist and politically ineffectual. In fact, his scorn for Bloomsbury as an artistic impasse is forthright:

Bloomsbury is absurd not because of its minor affectations, but because of its
impotence, because it is an agglomeration of individuals wrenched out of their proper environment so that their abilities no longer serve or give pleasure to themselves or others.^[26]

The condemnation of Bloomsbury (his use of the term is a convenient – and symptomatic – simplification) is that these writers' bohemian detachment from genuine social concerns has resulted in inferior art – it is freakish, and inapplicable to the life experience of a readership which spans the class divide.

Roberts's sense of the crisis facing the bourgeoisie is identical to Spender's dramatisation of the bourgeois conscience: "We, the intellectuals and the white-collar workers, have served our purpose in making possible the world of modern industry; are we now to become useless survivals, pensioners of a system of which we disapprove?"^[27] But just as the heroes of Spender's visionary revolution will simply step from their ghostly halls into a new socially-just era, Roberts is tellingly vague about the practical measures which will enable the communists to "abolish the whole class system."^[28]

Spender's Poems delineates an unresolved dilemma for the artist – the extent to which the individual creative self should attempt to express the sentiments of a mass movement without moral compromise, and without the imposition of the individual will; Roberts's prose advocates the conscious submission of artists to the dictates of revolutionary necessity. The preface clearly demands a commitment which exceeds that of most of the contributors to the anthology; in Spender's case, the preface actively seeks to overlay with certainty and conviction work that actually manifests uncertainty and conflict. Whether or not the unresolved issues in Spender's essay and poems are consciously employed is not important: the significance is that Roberts's desire for the suppression of the individual will to the needs of a joint endeavour actually has a suppressive interpretative effect on the work that follows, suggesting unity of purpose where there is a range of political positions, confidence and resolve where there is hesitancy and uncertainty. Indeed, he is critical of those who lack resolute allegiance to the party, and Spender unquestionably falls into this camp:

It will not be easy for the intellectual near-communists, each with his own Utopian scheme, to submit themselves to the job in hand, to accept independence of thought, but unanimity of action. And it will not be easy for a revolutionary party to see that clear distinction between the necessary anarchy of thought and the essential dictatorship of action.^[29]
The most important issue for writers and their readership, of course, is the question of whether political convictions can and should influence literature. Roberts's conclusion, unlike Spender, is for a near-orthodox propagandism which must explicitly use literature as a weapon in the class struggle:

The novelist, therefore, must either write in a way which shows the futility and hopelessness of that [white-collar] class, or he must turn for his subject-matter to the working class, the class which is, he thinks, not utterly corrupted by capitalist spoon-feeding and contains within itself the seeds of revolution.30

Roberts's own contribution to New Country is, quite appropriately, a literary satire ridiculing the machinations of literary modernism (either an act of implicit self-criticism or a suggestion that there are rather different types of literary activists at work in the London community). Yet he claims to resist total submission to "crude" Marxist doctrine which promotes propagandist value above all literary considerations; he regards strict adherence to the doctrine as an unacceptable ignorance of cultural value, condemning those philistines who do not give "two hoots for art" and fail to respect the gentlemanly pursuit of "a job well done." He invokes football as the working-man's metaphor for artistic endeavour, suggesting that there are those who enjoy the game played at its highest standard, and then those who simply want their own team to win. Nevertheless, Roberts does not conclude from this that perhaps politics has no role to play in literature, that literature should simply strive for its own highest standards — on the contrary, the all-pervading assumption that literature must be explicitly political (the assumption which Grigson was to find so objectionable) informs all of Roberts's assertions.

New Country's definition of "social communism" is a direct comment on the vague spiritual solidarity of Spender's programmatic Poems and Auden's "A Communist to Others". Roberts assures the reader that his writers' visionary politics are not a naive, bourgeois whimsy, but a literary mode which is firmly aligned with practical action:

...by social communism I do not mean any diminution or mystical loss of personal identity or any vague sentiment of universal brotherhood: I mean that extension of personality and consciousness which comes sometimes to a group of men when they are
working together for some common purpose.\textsuperscript{31}

There is a dual effect here: firstly, Roberts is suggesting that the eschatological elements of Spender, Auden and Day Lewis’s poems are not abstract meditations, rather a concrete discourse which will engender social change; secondly, he is expressing his own naive – or rather quaintly English – conception of the revolution. The example he provides of a “common purpose” is a hiking trip he took with some students in the Jura, which cannot help but give a “Baden-Powell” vision of what a revolution entails, paradoxically evoking \textit{imperialist} clichés of pioneering physical action. Yet his language also evokes a struggle which will be not so much a bloody uprising as a boyish outdoor romp followed by a warm bath and a return to school on Monday.

Roberts is protesting, perhaps to the more resolutely revolutionary of his readers, that he and his contributors are doing their part for the revolution and not simply paying it lip service, but his case is not convincingly made. The “public school” trope resonates effectively with Auden’s “schoolmasterish” pronouncements, and the persistent suggestions of a literary “gang” which the poets’ Oxford association encourages. A. Kingsley Weatherhead deftly describes Roberts’s communism as “good clean fun in the fresh air with the sons of the upper middle class or the gentry – young men who had team spirit.”\textsuperscript{32} When this is combined with Roberts’s “football” metaphor for artistic endeavour, there is certainly a pervading sense that the revolution will be, above all things, good sport well played.

It is important to remember that Roberts is not simply directing his statements toward the antagonistic bourgeoisie or the resolute communists, but towards the young, impressionable readers who might be discovering communist thought for the first time. Since the publication of \textit{New Signatures} communism had begun its “creeping fire” across British universities, and the rhetoric is certainly intended to capture the imagination of young poetasters in public schools and in college common rooms.

Despite his assertion that he has no time for mystical invocations of brotherhood, Roberts utilises a considerable amount of religious language in his description of the required shift to communist ideology and the coming revolution.\textsuperscript{33} He balances this with apocalyptic imagery of social decline and street warfare which anticipates Day Lewis’s advocacy of terrorism in his essay.\textsuperscript{34} Roberts also contributes
to a nostalgic 1930s literary mythology, what Hynes has dubbed the “Myth of England,” which had most recently been reinforced by the Georgians and Rupert Brooke. Despite the dismissal of the Georgians, the evocation of boisterous hikes and a struggle which will restore the spiritual England of old is deeply nostalgic and antithetical to both the requirements of socialist realism and the future world state.

In fact, in its ethereal, rural perfection, the Myth of England is perhaps a comfortable counterpart to the monumentalist visions of agrarian Russia, but it is reactionary, and quite at odds with the Futurist deification of the machine that the “movement” also embraces. Despite their deployment of imagery of revolution and industry, Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, themselves youths of the Georgian era, share Roberts’s tendency to idealise England as an enduring pastoral realm which will somehow be preserved and restored by a communist revolution. It is certainly an unlikely dream, but perhaps an essential one for lyric poets whose genre has grown out of the culture and landscape of England. Hynes argues that this myth of pastoral England affirms,

...that Shakespeare’s England still exists, and that it still sustains lyric poets; but it embraces also a contrary set of images which carry the sense of England’s crises – the problems that must be solved through action before the lyric vision will be valid once more.35

This is certainly a good description of Spender’s uncertainty (for example, “Shadow of a war”) – the fear that the tradition of lyric poetry, which evokes national security above all, is invalidated by the current political crisis.

Ultimately, Roberts’s preface serves to illustrate anxieties and reservations about communist ideology that he shares with most of his contributors; they are all, admittedly or not, intensely influenced by Eliot’s notions of the essential conservatism of literary tradition. The iconoclasm which communist thought demands sits uneasily with the writers’ traditionalist authorial aspirations. Roberts certainly protests too much, a symptom of his desire to persuade himself of the necessity of communism, and as a result his writing fails to convince the writer, let alone the reader. Only three years later Roberts was called upon to edit the prestigious – and influential – Faber Book of Modern Verse, and while he would include representatives of this new generation that
he had helped to form, he would also retreat from polemic to assert that the "true objective" of poetry is not moral or political, but rather the pure, linguistic "extension of significance", to which contemporary social concerns are inferior, and a regrettable distraction.\textsuperscript{36*}

The most unreservedly revolutionary piece in \textit{New Country} is Day Lewis's contribution "Letter to a Young Revolutionary." It is addressed to its (ideal) young readership who, it assumes, "are thinking of joining the Communist Party..."\textsuperscript{37} The letter takes on board two concepts which Roberts and Spender have been reluctant to elucidate; firstly, it asserts that communism is, and should be, unapologetic in its dogmatism - like Eliot, Day Lewis accepts that a belief in communism is essentially analogous to a religious conviction, and that there is nothing wrong with this; secondly, Day Lewis is forthcoming in acknowledging that the means by which the revolution must be carried out will be violent, and even contemptible by current moral standards. Day Lewis, at this time propounding orthodox communist doctrine, roundly asserts that the ends will always justify the means and that the young revolutionary must be unflinching, and without sentiment, in his dedication to the difficult task ahead.

Day Lewis states that his own generation - the \textit{New Country} authors - have a more compromised vision than their successors since they are bound to a transitional era. Those whose formative years were spent in the England of Lawrentian diagnosis and Georgian seclusion are marked by the "contagion" of "physical exhaustion" and "psychoanalysis" that the Great War inflicted upon the national consciousness.\textsuperscript{38} Reiterating the incantatory assertions of Spender's \textit{Poems} and \textit{The Magnetic Mountain}, an "absolute belief" in revolution is "the prime essential."\textsuperscript{39} But, just as he is prepared to accept any means by which to attain a "new life" under communism, Day Lewis has scant regard for the psychological processes which might engender this faith in revolutionary thought: "I am not suggesting that your revolutionary feelings are a

\textsuperscript{*} Roberts included "Not palaces, an era's crown" and "After they have tired", Spender's programmatic verses, as well as "The Prisoners" and "In railway halls". But correspondence from the time indicates Spender's keenness for his recent poetry to be represented - and the influential Faber collection contains "An Elementary School Classroom", "The Exiles" and "The Uncreating Chaos", all written in 1934-5.

\textsuperscript{(cntd.)}
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sublimation or a perversion of your religious instinct. I don’t think it would matter if
they were.”

While Spender is increasingly concerned with the psychology of the dictator,
seeking to analyse the bourgeois guilt that fuels his sympathy for the workers, Day
Lewis promotes pragmatic disregard for self-analysis and any thoughts that might
threaten the will to act. Although he is not discussing poetry, his argument essentially
justifies the tenor of The Magnetic Mountain, which exhibits unflinching (and vitriolic)
allegiance, eschewing lyrical introspection and equivocation.

Moreover, Day Lewis goes on to demand an even starker commitment from his
young charge. He advocates the total submission of one’s individuality to the
communist machine — “you’ll have to wear a stiff collar and get down to some hard
labour.” In language that refutes Spender’s (and perhaps, insistently, his own) liberal
individualism, diversity is not to be tolerated. He then discusses, with disturbing
detachment, the ideal method for a successful insurrection in Britain. He romanticises
the revolt as a “David and Goliath” scenario, in which an all-out attack would be futile
and short-lived:

The body is invulnerable; it is too massive, too well armoured in indifference for any
missile to have much effect upon it. Crack the skull; paralyse the nerve-controls; then
you can cut off the head, and go one better than David by sticking on a new one. Put
like that it sounds as easy as drinking tea. But it may also be called — and would be
called — a campaign of treachery and terrorisation.

Day Lewis writes with the coolness of a confirmed revolutionary, disdaining sentiment,
and stating that the young communist must align himself with terrorism and prepare for
a sustained underground campaign against the established order: “You would be called
upon to take part in a course of action absolutely foreign to your nature. The I.R.A.
very sensibly realised that guerrilla warfare was their only hope; but they were enabled
to carry it on because they looked upon the British as their natural enemies and the pro-
British in Ireland as traitors...” Of course, were Day Lewis writing this under an
oppressive regime, perhaps a military dictatorship, his words would have a clear

In 1936, Spender was already seeking to distance himself from his definitive pieces: “The Pylons” and
“The Express” (and, indeed, the “Truly Great”) are notably absent. (S.S. to Roberts in Berg Collection,
New York Public Library; The Faber Book of Modern Verse, London: Faber and Faber, 1936.)
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libertarian appeal. But as it is, his discussion is intentionally incendiary, and designed
to fire up the apocalyptic imagination of his university readership. The “nerve-controls”
and “the head” of his schematic body politic can only refer to the parliamentary
government, so he is clearly writing about treasonous acts. Yet while Day Lewis
presents terror as the only practical option, he does not quite endorse it, leaving
“Jonathan”, the young revolutionary, to draw his own conclusions.

Though the tone is difficult to judge, it is important to note that there seems to
be a certain sardonic edge to Day Lewis’s dictums, and it is perhaps unfair to take his
discussion as being written entirely without a sense of irony or critique; at the same
time, the question he presents to the young idealists, “What sort of revolution do you
really want?” is clearly intended to sort the men from the boys in terms of commitment.
Day Lewis instructs the cosseted, bourgeois student to spend his “outrageously long
holidays” in three ways: “investigating the temper of the people”, “investigating the
methods of capitalism”, and “promoting the will to obey.”43 Here, Day Lewis’s
insistence upon submission to the will of revolutionary force conveniently avoids that
question which goes to the heart of the communist position: all must obey, but who will
command? It is one of many objections that the essay fails to answer, but the general
statement which it makes is obvious: it is a call to arms in the guise of a statement on
the state of the nation.

Day Lewis’s contribution illustrates a fundamental distinction between his
discourse and Spender’s (by this I include their verse) – Day Lewis is willing to enter
into a discussion of the practicalities of revolution, while for Spender it remains a
troubling abstract; Spender is reluctant to sacrifice his individualism to the dictates of
communism, or to fully accept the means by which the proletariat must seize power.*
At the same time, Spender’s essay, which concentrates on the relationship between the
poet and the revolution, is effectively a counterpart to Day Lewis’s piece, providing an
aesthetic reply to the intimations of terrorism and street battles. The contextual
relationship between the two essays within New Country effectively characterises

* Day Lewis would later begin to share Spender’s hesitancy in his view of the purpose of verse and
political prose, recognising (and advocating) a shift towards “ideals of poetic integrity and artistic
individualism”, and away from an “over mechanized vocabulary” and “slapdash technique” which he
fears has characterised his and his peers’ work (A Hope for Poetry, Oxford: Blackwell, 1936, p. 83.).
Spender’s essay, de-emphasising its abstraction and highlighting its association with practical notions of insurrection.

“Poetry and Revolution”

It is a truism that many authors’ critical writing is revelatory more of their own creative conflicts than those of their subject, and this is manifested in Spender’s prose contribution, the piece that he had dismissed as a “bad essay” in a letter to Isherwood shortly after submitting it to Roberts. The essay is an abstract discussion on the relationship between contemporary poetry and radical ideology, yet there is no question that it fails to deliver a clear analysis of the subject, or to accurately pinpoint a practical solution for poets who are compelled to be propagandists for communist revolution. On the contrary, the general implication is rather contradictory to the title: that poets should not engage with politics at all.

In the course of his discussion, Spender states allegiance to several mutually exclusive ideological positions without ultimately providing an effective synthesis. Despite, or rather as a consequence of its non-integration of ideas, the essay is invaluable to the analysis of his early 1930s poetry: caught between irreconcilable positions, Spender provides a comprehensive formulation of the paradoxes and justifications that provide the contradictory rhetoric and contrasting stylistic modes of Poems and Vienna.

The essay is organised into four sections which examine what Spender considers to be the most pertinent issues facing politicised poets in the present climate: the definition of propagandist poetry, the inescapably bourgeois nature of art, the absence of an influential contemporary proletarian art, and finally the validity (and credibility) of bourgeois individualists like Spender who align themselves with the class struggle. More important than the explicit content of the essay is the fact that Spender reveals significant details about his self-portrayal as a poet, and his sense of the moral responsibility of writers who employ the imagery of revolution. There are characteristic references to the work and politics of Beethoven and Shelley, and a direct confirmation of the enduring 1930s trope, developed through the two editions of Poems, that Spender
associates the human will that is manifested in political action with the human will that is manifested in technological achievement and in art.

The opening paragraph of the essay, in the highly politicised context of *New Country*, is wilfully contrary: Spender propounds a direct rebuttal of the presumed aim of his own work and that of his politically-conscious contemporaries, declaring that art and politics can never be reconciled:

> Of human activities, writing poetry is one of the least revolutionary. The states of being a rentier, a merchant, a capitalist, contribute their bits to revolution: they actively crumble. But the writing of a poem in itself solves the poem’s problem. Separate poems are separate and complete and ideal worlds. If a poem is not complete in itself and if its content spills over into our world of confused emotions, then it is a bad poem, and however much it may impress people at present, soon it will be forgotten and will cease to be a poem at all. This is what people mean when they say that it is impossible to write propagandist poetry. A work of art cannot reach out into everyday life and tell us whom to vote for and what kind of factories to build, because injunctions how to act in a world that has nothing to do with the poem destroy the poem’s unity.  

This idealisation of the inviolable “unity” of the poem establishes a Platonic absolute which the rhetoric of the essay will never be able to negotiate; in Spender’s value-system, political discourse and poetic achievement are utterly exclusive. From the outset of the discussion, the inclusion in poetry of the “confused emotions” of the world is regarded as a corruption of pure art. Spender is playing devil’s advocate of course, establishing the vital opposing argument to the young communist readers of *New Country* by presenting the prejudices of the more reactionary reader; but it seems that there is also in this essay a genuine expression of regret that his own sensibility has been infiltrated by the “passing” concerns so frowned upon by Eliot and Woolf. As he suggests in the second sentence, Marxist determinism ensures that the agents of capitalism will do more to bring about the system’s collapse than those who simply speak out against it.

At the same time, despite his own utilisation of propagandist motifs – albeit refracted into a visionary mode – Spender is implicitly of the opinion that his own poetry is not actually propagandist *per se*. But the distinction is uncertain, and the highly self-reflexive assertions of “Poetry and Revolution” stand as evidence of Spender’s anxiety that his 1930s work may be sacrificing its potentially “timeless”
value for historical specificity. This is something he later came to believe with considerable conviction, and his revisionist attitude to his oeuvre in the latter half of his career is nascent, perhaps unconsciously, in these self-critical arguments of 1933.

Spender's formulation of the inherent conservatism of the poetic form met with the approval of Grigson, who felt that the essay accurately portrayed the “present hardship of the poet” who is so regrettably called toward political commitment. Conversely, it was to enrage Charles Madge, who declared in *New Verse* that each one of Spender's statements is the opposite of the truth, and that poets, above all people, are obliged to allow the concerns of the time to feed into their work. Of course, despite his declarations otherwise, Spender had indeed allowed his political ideas to affect the form and content of his poetry just as Madge advocates, and this is partly what is so perplexing about "Poetry and Revolution": it establishes a position which is quite contrary to Spender's own output during these years. It is as if the essay is intended to state a rationalised rebuttal of his own poetic tendency.

Spender's hypothesis for a potential fusion of propaganda with poetry is highly modernist, and directly anticipates the method of *Vienna*; he proposes that propagandist poetry might be possible by use of the collage method – in essence, employing propagandist material as one colour in a wide palette of imagery from which the poet might draw. When he comes to describe poetry which can be propagandist without compromising its aesthetic purity, the phrase which he uses is telling: the poem would have to be “inoculated so extensively with propaganda that essentially non-poetic material came to form a pattern which was like poetry.” Political imagery and rhetoric are a kind of contemporary infection that must be administered in a carefully controlled manner, in order that the local, short-term effects are always subordinate to the timeless aspiration of the verse.

Although he insists that its achievement is only a remote possibility, Spender posits a hypothetical propagandist poem, and how it might be constructed:

I can imagine a poem written by a Communist in which a list of abuses under the capitalist system was recorded, and in which finally there was some simple, clear, and definite statement or command, such as “These things must change.” I think that in this way a pattern might be produced which would not have the obvious falsity and sentimentality of most propagandist poetry.
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The essence of the propagandist verse he proposes is that it should contain no emotive “trickery”, but only material fact; it must state and not attempt to manipulate. This is a rather unorthodox definition of propaganda, which – by its very nature – is invariably biased, sensationalist and reductive, i.e. false. Sentiment, of course, is germane to Spender’s work, in which the poet’s compassionate eye, his individualist sense of guilt and obligation toward those who suffer, is as much the subject of the poem as the injustice it portrays.

Spender persists with his idealisation of the poem as “free-standing” and inviolable, and while this is clearly a fundamental belief which motivates his poetic aspirations, I hope to have demonstrated that it is the uneasy interrelation of contemporary historical fact with his lyrical idiom which provides the defining characteristic of his poems. There is no question that his poetry is not propagandist – it is far too celebratory of liberal individualism to conform to communist standards – yet it incorporates propagandist platitudes in a manner very close to his proposed collage technique, and, in its visionary exhortations, frequently propounds an endorsement of social revolution.

Spender draws an analogy between pure propagandist poetry and a musical score: it delineates proposed action, it is an itinerary of implied responses to injustice in the social arena outside the writing and reading of the poem. Ironically, it is this visionary myth that he exploits in Poems and Vienna where, like Day Lewis, and albeit with occasional notes of cynicism, he advocates revolutionary action. Spender’s regular exhortations to a timeless justice beyond that of society demonstrate a deliberate transcendance of materialism which is not tolerated by Marxist thought. Unlike his own work, pure propagandist poetry has “no meaning in itself” and is entirely dependent upon “ensuing action” for its existence. Presumably, without ensuing action, propagandist poetry does not earn its right to be classified as poetry at all, and thus is inextricably bound to its place within a chain of socio-historical events. Spender concludes that propagandist poetry is not a contradiction in terms, and – according to his current political leanings – it is an acceptable compromise: “A kind of poetry must be written which is complementary to action.” Again, somewhat contrary to Spender’s attempt at categorisation here, it is my contention that his own poetry is non-propagandist while it employs propagandist tropes, and yet its most sophisticated effects
can only be observed when it is seen within a context of socio-historical events in the
decade in which it was written.

Having established the poetic ideal of inviolate verbal perfection, part II of the
essay sees Spender devote himself to the counter-argument, and he discusses poetry as a
retreat from social concerns. Like all art, he argues, and music above all, poetry tempts
the artist away from the social world into an idealised realm of abstract aesthetics.
Echoing Eliot's theories of the irrational, rhythmic origins of the poetic form, Spender
iterates that poetry is, essentially, the enemy of materialist ideology:

...the poet, often a potential revolutionary, is able to escape from the urgent problems of
social reconstruction into a world of his own making. This world is a world of the
imagination only bounded by the limits of the imagination. Music is an even more
powerful drug and means of escape than poetry, in fact it is perhaps the most powerful
of all the idealist drugs except religion, and in the elements of tune and rhythm which
music and poetry have in common, rather than in the thinking element, lies the power
which withdraws the artist from the world.\textsuperscript{50}

Here Spender is touching upon the relationship between Marxist thought and Romantic
theories of literature; even the most rigorous materialist viewpoint would not stop the
act of writing a poem from becoming "the very type of idealist activity which is
tactically dangerous to Communism." To believe in poetry as a form is to believe in art
which aspires to timelessness, and to subscribe to faith in conservable aesthetic
standards. In the abstract reverie of the imagination, detached from their mundane
actuality, even materialist concepts become aesthetic tropes. Spender's logic of
absolutes leaves no room for synthesis: a propagandist poem – if it is a poem – must
inevitably betray its materialist origins:

...the people who had read these poems would linger over certain aspects of
materialism, they would forget, in the course of their meditations, the social revolution,
and here, in the very heart of materialism idealism would creep, offering its dangerous
delights and consolations.

Developing his counter-argument to the ideas expressed in Part I, Spender then
makes the case against the writers of his own generation and those from whom they
have inherited their literary ideals – the high modernists Wells, Lewis, Joyce, Yeats,
Eliot and Woolf. As Roberts has suggested in his introduction to the anthology, by
1932 Bloomsbury is established (in the eyes of its critics) as the archetypal representative of politically-impotent modernist art, intellectualism which has detached itself from the essential concerns of the whole society, catering only to the sensibilities of an indulged minority. In the class struggle, bourgeois artists are the exploiters, the class-enemy, and their individualist work is a weapon which sublimates creative, revolutionary energy against the aims of the proletariat:

The creators of that art are isolated potential rebels, individualists, who, instead of turning against the society that cannot make them happy, have withdrawn into themselves and built up their little worlds of the imagination. The existence of such individuals is dependent on such a state of society, so in so far as these people justify their own existence they may be said to be in effect counter-revolutionary propagandists.\(^5\)

Spender implies that the work of the *New Signatures* and *New Country* contributors is, by the exacting standards of communism, similarly operating against the interests of the underclass: “The art which is being and which can be created to-day is not in any sense proletarian art. It is not easy to think of any writer to-day who is an artist and whose work appeals to a proletarian audience.” D.H. Lawrence, he argues, was educated into producing bourgeois art that appealed to a bourgeois readership, despite the fact that Lawrence frequently made the visceral, “suppressed” proletarian forces with which he identified the subject of his writing.

Spender proffers a bleakly realistic analysis of the readership of his generation’s work: it represents, and communicates to, a severely limited social class. Even the war poetry of Owen, which might have greater appeal to the common man that the introverted aesthetics of Bloomsbury, “if it is read at all by proletarians is only read by those who have obtained scholarships so that they could enter the cultural tradition of the middle classes.”\(^5\) Spender argues that education is cultural indoctrination, and that it is a one-way process: the communist who practises art cannot escape the fact that art is a bourgeois medium. To truly endorse the communist movement one must abandon art as we know it. This is the dilemma Spender had portrayed so pointedly in “The Funeral”, in which the impersonal positivism of an imagined world state compares absurdly, and unfavourably, with the melancholic Romanticism of European culture. And yet the contemporary writer who “sympathises with Communism”, in order to be
heard at all, must immerse himself and wholly operate within a bourgeois tradition.  

Doggedly pursuing this "anti-art" theme, Spender states that the bourgeois rebel—in the Shelleyan and Rimbaudian mode—is the worst sort of class enemy, redolent of extreme individualism which ultimately provides no viable alternative to the class system: he only helps to define and entrench the orthodox bourgeois position and its prejudices. The Bohemianism of literary modernism is thus an ineffective perversion of the revolutionary instinct in as far as it will never transcend the limitations of its class perspective. Spender's assertions are directed towards the writers of his generation, but most forcibly express his personal sense of having a constricted viewpoint: "the artist to-day feels himself totally submerged by bourgeois traditions... finds himself becoming simply the bourgeois artist in revolt, in short, the individualist." Moreover, while Spender voices the dilemma of "the artist" in general, in fact he identifies the precise tenor of his own lyrics: "he is tempted to feel that the artist should go into politics now as there is no need for art." The artist cannot transcend his bourgeois mentality while he wishes to remain an artist, and thus Spender honestly accepts that he must be, and must remain, bourgeois.

So, in the first two sections of the essay, Spender has effectively employed irreconcilable absolutes to illustrate a total impasse for any writer who sympathises with communism. Firstly, pure propagandist poetry which is not sentimental or false might be possible, but, by being poetry, it would ultimately act against the materialist aims of Marxist thought. Secondly, the only avenue of creative dissent for the bourgeois "rebel" is Romantic individualism, which is an ineffectual cul-de-sac in terms of the class struggle. Having demonstrated (or at least asserted) that a synthesis is not possible, Spender goes on in the third and fourth parts to explore what is the possible future for the (necessarily) bourgeois poet who acknowledges the ideological challenge to capitalist society. In doing so, perhaps unsurprisingly, he reveals significant ideas relating to the composition and themes of Poems (1933 and 1934), and adopts a traditionalist position which makes explicit his refusal to abandon his cultural heritage to the purge of a communist world state.

In Part III, Spender finally declares his non-orthodox position: he is a fellow-traveller with the communist cause in the truest sense, but it is on aesthetic grounds that he dissents from revolutionary ideology; he rejects the two fundamental notions of
propagandist thinking; one: that communist propagandist literature will inevitably become a proletarian art which has hitherto not existed, and two: that bourgeois art is necessarily bourgeois propaganda. Spender’s tradition is the bourgeois tradition, and for all his utilisation of radical motifs, he will not abandon his literary heritage for the exigencies of social revolution:

...to suppose... that it is necessary to renounce all literature that has been written up to the present day is absurd. The root of the Communist dislike for bourgeois art is the misconception that bourgeois art necessarily propagates the bourgeois 'ideology.'

This is an issue upon which Spender will not compromise, and it provides an incontrovertible indication that the portrayal of a culturally-sterile communist world order in Poems is meant ironically, or at least with an implicit critique. “The Funeral”, and Michael Roberts’s communist reading of it, is perhaps the touchstone for the “amenability” of Spender’s poetry to Leftist radicalism, in contrast with the more conservative ideas present in his prose discussion. His refusal to accept the basic tenet of communist doctrine -- that bourgeois literature must necessarily be the class weapon which is used to oppress the proletarian class -- is founded upon a Romantic and traditionalist definition of art.

Spender, in an anti-materialist manner, conceptualises art and literature as superior to, and resultantly impervious to, the fluctuations of historical circumstance; in his analysis, poetry is quite detached from the material circumstances of its production, except in its most superficial qualities: “It will then be seen that bourgeois art is not bourgeois propaganda, it is simply the life history of the phase in our society when the middle classes were cultured.”

Discussing bourgeois art in general, Spender goes on to justify his own middle-class position. Rather in the manner of Roberts’s introduction, he makes his case to a reader who is presumed to be communist and sceptical of the New Country writers and their bourgeois contemporaries. He insists that, although middle-class artists must inevitably “describe the environment which has created them”, this does not mean that they are dependent upon the survival of capitalism, or that they are necessarily propagandists for their class. His position is essentially one of faith – or rather lack of faith in communism – and as a result of this his argument is simply not assimilable to
the thoughts of a truly communist reader. Of course, the real audience of this debate is not the communist critic but Spender’s own left-wing conscience. Just as Day Lewis’s essay was essentially a monologue which struggled with his own uncertainty over the cruel demands of revolutionary action, so too Spender’s essay is an inner negotiation of his anxiety that his traditionalist ideas are utterly objectionable to the demands of communist thought. Revolutionary socialism is the only contemporary movement to tap into the heroism and anti-establishment tropes of Romantic poetry, but it is a movement which challenges the very validity of this art, denouncing it as a bourgeois tool of counter-revolutionary oppression.

When Spender opts to bring forward examples of middle-class artists who have furthered the revolutionary cause despite being members of “the class enemy”, he chooses Beethoven and Shelley, the iconic figures so germane to his own conception of poetic ambition, and his ideas inevitably reflect the method and intention of his own work. He describes Beethoven’s sympathy with Napoleon’s drive to remodel France which had inspired the *Eroica* Symphony, yet the visual terms in which he formulates the music draw imagery directly from the 1930s milieu of *Poems*:

> The first movement of this symphony might be taken as a model to revolutionaries, and a model of action easily translatable into terms of everyday life. In the first few bars of this movement, in which the first theme is stated, we are at once aware of the proportions of the task which Beethoven has set himself. The symphony begins with the dignity of a huge locomotive and we know that nothing can stop it until a certain task has been performed. The effect created is rather the same, but less stereotyped, as that created in some Russian films by photography of machinery moving, in which the action of the machine is really a model of the action of the human will.37

The anachronistic, “dignified” locomotive which Spender extrapolates from Beethoven’s symphony is a version of his own “Express”: a manifestation of unstoppable will captured by Soviet propagandist cinema. *Poems* repeatedly employs such imagery as the metaphorical representation (and the externalisation) of human will, but there is an uneasy equivocation between the *individualist* will of the visionary artist, or the “great man” (the dictator, benevolent or otherwise) and the *collective* will of organic society, which seeks justice for the greatest number, and according to which social revolution is inevitable and innately justified. In Spender’s formulation the
middle-class artist is entirely capable of divining the collective will of the proletariat (which is, in a sense, the bourgeoisie's own sense of what is just – its class guilt) and manifesting this in a Romantic call to arms. He implies that there is nothing inauthentic or hypocritical about this process. Spender sees Beethoven's symphony as an abstract manifesto which both celebrates the libertarian ideals of revolt, and actively incites it.

"Until a certain task has been performed," Beethoven's musical pronouncement that human justice must be done will continue to demand action. Spender's own poetic celebration of newness and change, epitomised in "The Express", fuses artistic experimentalism with industrial achievement and political revolution; in this way his poetry suggests that the bourgeois artist can absolutely be an exponent of the proletarian cause: "To pretend that Beethoven was writing bourgeois propaganda in this movement is absurd." On the contrary, Spender suggests that Beethoven's symphony – and by extension his own work – is revolutionary art at its most effective.

Spender's argument has a certain Romantic allure, but the role which he delineates for the artist is not so different from the Rimbaudian or Shelleyan bourgeois rebel he has dismissed earlier in the essay. From a communist perspective, a dissenting middle-class artist remains middle-class as long as he remains an artist, regardless of his political sympathies. It is worth noting that Spender's high modernist predecessors, themselves pioneers of formal experimentalism and the aesthetic avant-garde, were politically reactionary, their literary daring countered by strong conservatism and adherence to aristocratic structures – I am thinking primarily of T.S. Eliot and Wyndham Lewis in this regard. As Spender was to lament in later decades, he felt that his own generation had been caught between the ideals of pure, literary art and a political ideology which radically dissented from this traditionalist, aristocratic thinking. A successful fusion of such contradictory impulses, both redolent with idealism and built upon fundamental notions of non-compromise, cannot be achieved. "Poetry and Revolution" manifests the incompatibility of these twin ideals.

Spender's enduring passion for "unfashionable" Shelley and his libertarianism will not be relinquished, and along with Beethoven, Shelley is the very type of the artist to which he aspires. The Romantic "escapism" so objectionable to materialist revolutionaries is, according to Spender, the very driving force of the will to reorder society, rather than an evasion of material responsibilities:
Shelley is not in vogue now, and, of all poetry, except that of the very late romantics, it is truest of his to say that he created a world of unreality and escape. Yet even to-day one meets and hears of people whose lives have demonstrably and materially been affected by the principles of Shelley, and these at all events were not middle-class Victorian principles...

Spender protests hard to make his case for the individualist who refuses to write straight propaganda. As he will attempt to demonstrate in *The Destructive Element*, it is the great bourgeois individualists, Henry James and T.S. Eliot among them, who have effectively tapped into the “decline” of western capitalist society, whilst communicating purely within their own social class: “It is true that bourgeois art has been written by the bourgeois about the bourgeois for the bourgeois; it is not true that this art has all been counter-revolutionary propaganda.”

Spender’s argument is that the individualists must continue to be indulged, and given a free thematic rein in which to explore their art. Good artists will inevitably produce work that expresses essential truths about the historical development of culture – in this case, its decline – and it is these artists, these fellow-travellers, who are the most reliable comrades of the foot-soldiers of revolution:

…it is still very important that we should have good artists to-day and that our artists should not be led astray into practical politics, because art can make clear to the practical revolutionaries the historic issues which are in the deepest sense political.

Just as the “rentier,” “merchant” and “capitalist” of his introduction further the inevitable collapse of the old order, Marxist determinism similarly implies that art cannot avoid delineating “what is wrong.” And yet, paradoxically, Spender’s verse seems to iterate the notion that revolution will come about autonomously, as a result of historical processes which do not require the artist’s encouragement. A recurrent theme of *Poems* is the equivocation between conceptions of active revolt and inevitable decay, and it is certainly symptomatic of Spender’s lack of total commitment to revolutionary thought.

Part IV does not resolve the issues or attempt a synthesis of the preceding arguments; in lieu of a comprehensive conclusion it instead proffers Spender’s traditionalist definition of the poetic form. His categorical eschewal of materialist
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doctrine sees him falling in line with Grigson's non-partisan critical outlook, and the
New Verse editor was wholly to approve of Spender's assertions, as shall be examined
below. On the one hand, he claims that poetry is a linguistic by-product of cultural
history: "...a function of language, it records the changing uses of words and fixes their
meaning, it preserves certain words in their pure and historic meaning, it saves the
language from degenerating into looseness."60 On the other hand, Spender sees poetry's
higher function to be its ability to transcend localised concerns, moving the poet and the
reader beyond their immediate historical-material situation: "...it is the language of
moments in which we see ourselves or other people in our or their true relation to
humanity or to nature."61 The inevitable outcome of this particular claim, though it
contradicts Spender's earlier argument, is then delivered: since it must incorporate an
element of "pity" for the human condition, poetry must necessarily be "counter-
revolutionary":62

Spender's attempt to define "revolution" — specifically the imminent (and
seemingly inevitable) social(ist) revolution — is a shrewd explication of the
philosophical premise which informs Poems. He makes it clear that the individualist is
integral to the forward march of history; in other words, the morality of revolution
dictates that the conscious will of the individual — the politician and the artist — is
required to spur the masses into action. Thus the revolutionary will is not merely
organic collectivism but a potential force which is perceived, harnessed and released
with a decisive "push" from an intellectual leader:

Revolution is to be accomplished by an act of the will on the part of some, by a
paralysis of the will on the part of others, but it cannot be assisted by censoring the
truths of art or artists. Philosophers, statesmen and artists have always been and always
will be individualists; what we suffer from is not the individualism which can merge
itself into the belief of many people and direct the life of the state, but everyone being
an individualist and the wrong kind of individual getting to the top.63

Spender's latent assumptions are continually hinted at: here he suggests the allure of
benevolent dictatorship as the ideal government, but it is unclear whether this means the
dictatorship of the proletariat or that of an inspired individualist who merely makes a
superficial nod toward collectivism. Spender's political stance is wholly informed by a
fear of the erosion of literary standards; in the face of total socialist iconoclasm, he calls
for the appreciation of great forebears who were defiantly individualist and resolutely bourgeois.

Indeed, Spender claims that the refusal to align oneself absolutely with any one ideological system is the most heroic stance of all for the artist; the “individualist rebel” is free from allegiance to an external ideology yet at the same time isolated, “forced to create a system of beliefs of his own.” The orthodox Marxist response to this claim (and one that Spender has declared earlier in the essay) is that the individualist rebel, for all his declarations otherwise, is actually inescapably beholden unto bourgeois mentality (“the worst kind of rebel”) and this is a rhetorical impasse that Spender is unable to argue his way out of. He seems to accept, in conclusion, that the lot of the artist in an increasingly politicised climate is to keep his mind clear of his political responsibilities, to disregard the fact that he is himself the class enemy, and simply to describe the world as he knows it:

...the majority of artists to-day are forced to remain individualists in the bad sense of that word. But by making clear the causes of our present frustration they may prepare the way for a new kind of society.  

Ultimately, Spender has advocated his own position. He asserts that bourgeois liberal individualism is the only option, regardless of a writer’s class origins. Once again, his conclusion appears to be that even though a writer may sympathise with communism, this does not mean that communism and literature necessarily have anything to do with one another from a compositional point of view. He sees “practical politics” as a dangerous temptation to the artist, precisely echoing Eliot’s injunction to the young generation regarding the “religion” of communism; and yet the thematic content of Spender’s verse indicates a powerful, conscientious tendency to acknowledge the demands (and admonishments) of materialist thought. And despite his professed suspicion of overt political allegiance his verse paradoxically implies an advocacy of practical methods (i.e. revolution) to combat the injustices of capitalism.

The thematic development across the two editions of Poems is a lyrical embracing of visionary revolution which gives way to a growing scepticism and suspicion of the aims and psychological motivations of political movements; “Poetry and Revolution” depicts
the midpoint of this transition. And yet Vienna (1934) and Trial of a Judge (1938)
would continue to make immediate contemporary politics their subject. The uneasy
conclusion of Spender’s discussion is that no writer should be obliged to pursue
political themes in his work, or to have his subject matter dictated by a political
movement, yet at the same time he feels that it is important to express within his work
sympathy with the revolutionary cause. The uncertain argument essentially dramatises
his own troubled belief: that poetry and revolution need not necessarily be interrelated,
but that (if only because of the title of his essay) he is unable to extricate them from one
another.

Samuel Hynes considers “Poetry and Revolution” to be an important delineation
of the bourgeois artist in crisis: “Spender’s essay is an act of self-defence against an
invisible but easily-imagined antagonist – a hard-line communist, with a set of
accusations and demands that are new to literary discourse.” Hynes also pinpoints the
conflict which makes the essay so intriguing, and thematically germane to Spender’s
1930s verse: Spender’s self-contradictory rhetoric hints that he is aware that he is
discussing matters of faith and not of fact; his knowledge of Marxist doctrine means that
he is fully aware of every objection which can be made to his argument, and yet he is
unable to give up “the last bourgeois illusion” that is so fundamental to his Romantic
sensibility, i.e. the belief in individual freedom. In its contemporary context, “Poetry
and Revolution” manifests the debate which raged between Roberts and Grigson’s
visions of the role of literature: the irreconcilable notions of “language-as-art” and
“language-as-propaganda.” Though he bravely suggests that a synthesis is possible,
Spender’s intuitive conclusion is that it is not. As Hynes describes: “Spender, in urging
the function of poetry as a preserver of pure meanings, was being conservative and
counterrevolutionary, in spite of his expressed political sympathies.” The entire
essay is based upon an insoluble collision between mutually-exclusive artistic and
political beliefs, and it portrays Spender’s realisation that this is so.

Nevertheless, Spender’s failure – at the time – to rationalise a working
relationship between politics and literary endeavour does not mean that this was not
achieved. On the contrary, his 1930s verse – and, indeed, prose such as “Poetry and
Revolution” – exemplifies the late modernist period in its consistent pursuit of the
aesthetics of political discourse; political and propagandist language becomes a trope
within the literature of the period, infusing it with ideas in popular cultural currency quite unlike the hermetic, symbolist structuralism of high modernist writing. Late modernist verse sees a weakening of literary form which corresponds with a new ideological uncertainty, and an ever-increasing sense that “inviolable” art – and, most importantly, the individual artist – is increasingly reproached by a socio-political responsibility that has hitherto been neglected.

The “sneaking” suspicion that his logic might be flawed seems to have established itself fully by the time Spender wrote to Isherwood in January prior to the essay’s publication. And in December 1933, when he provided the end of year review for the Bookman, his reservations were yet more pronounced: New Country is subjected to stern ideological critique, all the more stern considering it comes from one of the volume’s best-known contributors.

“Politics and Literature in 1933” sees Spender discussing the varying degrees of commitment to Marxism of Upward, Isherwood, Lehmann, and Madge, as portrayed in their contributions to New Country.* And what he observes seems to arise from the troubling implications of his own essay: “What is most interesting,” Spender notes, “is the uneasy relationship of their communism with their writing.”67 Perhaps Spender does not want to be accused of being “soft” on his co-contributors, but his criticism is directed implicitly at his own work as much as at theirs.** In the case of Auden, Spender’s critique is as applicable to his own visionary propagandism in Poems (“oh young men” and “Not palaces...” in particular) as it is to Auden’s “A Communist to
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Others":

Mr. Auden's communist poems are at best experiments, and at the worst they tend to become parodies of themselves, and politically they tend to verge on anarchism when they are trying most to be communist. They are never as successful as his unpropagandist poems. Spender pursues this self-directed critique at greater length, and he seems to conclude that the New Country writers' dalliance with politics, while being well-intentioned, is fundamentally constricted by their bourgeois experience:

The truth is that being a communist does not make one politically minded in the widest sense, and many of these writers seem to have assumed that it does. But when they write about politics they only reveal that, in spite of being good communists, they have no knowledge of working class conditions, and still less sense of international relations and the effect of propaganda.

Spender's position would remain quite constant over the next two years. Writing in The Left Review in February 1935, "Writers and Manifestoes" yet again takes up the question of the relationship between art and propaganda. Spender's stance has crystallised into a more explicit rejection of the efficacy of propaganda, and a belief in the indirect propagandist potential of good art. "What he [the writer] should ask is: Does this communist approach lead to a greater and more fundamental understanding of the struggle affecting our whole life to-day?" Spender's conviction, as The Destructive Element had claimed for the work of James and Eliot, is that "good art", by "making clear the causes of our present frustration," does just that.

He reiterates his contempt for the "gross accumulation of wealth" that is encouraged and facilitated by capitalism, but once again can only insist that a love of artistic individualism is not necessarily counter-revolutionary: "All I want to emphasize here is that if one is on the side of the greatest possible degree of freedom, if one insists that one should write as one chooses and about what one wishes, one is not a traitor to the cause of world socialism." The fact that Spender must repeat the argument he

* Spender is replying to Alec Brown's response in "Controversy", Left Review, 1, 3, December, 1934, pp. 76-77, where he had suggested slogans including "ALLUSIVE WRITING IS CLIQUE WRITING: WE ARE NOT A CLIQUE" arguing for the total proletarianisation of literature. Spender reiterates the (cntd.)
made in “Poetry and Revolution” is symptomatic of the fact that Leftist thought was not at all amenable to “the greatest possible degree of freedom,” and that “Left Wing Orthodoxy” continued to be a palpable and considerable force during the decade.

More evidence of the generation’s myth-making occurs in the American quarterly *Hound & Horn* in the spring of 1934. “An English Letter” by Peter Quennell bolsters the ever-strengthening inter-war myth (growing intimations of impending conflict continue through the decade - a portentous myth which would ultimately be realised, and to which Spender’s prophetic “In 1929” had contributed): Quennell suggests that the literature of the early 1930s is symptomatic of a literary culture in transition between distinct generations and styles:

> We seem to be living in an interregnum – during the uneasy but, at the present moment, not wholly uncomfortable inter-space that divides two great periods of the world’s history. What next?[^72]

*New Signatures* and *New Country*, in Quennell’s estimation, constitute the first buds of a distinct literary period, but one that is, as yet, far from being fully-formed. On the contrary, the new-born movement is tainted by its origins in the preceding epoch, and its strong ties to the ruling class compromise its ideological stance. Quennell’s verdict is similar to Spender’s description of *New Country* in the *Bookman*; the new writers are,

> ...tinged, rather patchily and spottily, with the new shade of ideological red, yet fail to carry it off with much conviction. I mean that the beliefs they express seem somewhat external, somewhat too obviously, even mechanically, superimposed on a basis of Oxford-and-public-school middle-class culture. These young writers know as little of the class-struggle, as they are deeply versed in the traditions it is to supersede.^[73]

Quennell claims that Auden and Spender are of particular note; they have yet to find their footing, but they are “bold and refreshing” and their prolific output is to be applauded: “They are not afraid to publish. Not for them, that paralysing poetic diffidence which is characteristic of so many modern writers.”[^74] Quennell then goes on to suggest the

[^72]: individualist sentiment of “Poetry and Revolution,” and once again insists that this stance is not counter-revolutionary.
literary-historical myth which was soon to establish the "Auden Generation" as the next phase in a linear tradition of modern verse: "it was very proper that poets should learn to hold their peace, that Eliot should lead youth into the desert. But it is now time that a few bronzed and exhausted survivors began to reappear from the waterless expanses of The Waste Land..." Quennell, though suspicious of a certain lack of authenticity in their communist declarations, applauds their attempt to pull poetry back towards material concerns after the philosophical dead-end of Eliot's modernist wilderness. He is quite accurately pinpointing the transition from ascetic high modernism to late modernism's preparedness to "get its hands dirty" in the arena of contemporary political discourse.

New Verse

Though he had grave reservations about Roberts's political agenda, Geoffrey Grigson was an admirer of Spender's essay in *New Country*, approving of the poet's developing conviction that high artistic standards are infinitely more valuable than political acumen, and that the best art will always serve humanity more effectively than mere propaganda. "Poetry and Revolution" had provided a caveat that Grigson would echo in his *New Verse* editorials; its cautionary claim that political affiliation tempts the writer from pure artistic achievement anticipates the original ethos of Grigson's magazine.

As Samuel Hynes has noted, the editor of *New Verse* possessed "a moral ferocity", and although he was relatively loyal to Spender through the decade, he continually deplored the poet's tendency to allow politics into his verse. Despite the correlative infusion of politics into the magazine's content in general (an infusion which, according to its contributors and the temper of the times, was absolutely unavoidable) Grigson maintained his rigorous aesthetic standards right throughout the decade, until the last number appeared in January 1939. Grigson's verdict regarding the success of his high-minded ambition, upon the publication of a memorial *New Verse*

"Left Wing Orthodoxy," which appeared in *New Verse*, Autumn 1938, expands Spender's argument, in which he increasingly views the greatest artists as those who were most singularly individualist, even neurotically so.
anthology in 1939, was level-eyed and pragmatic:

I think it is possible to trace in the poems as they came out in *New Verse* this gradual emergence of a criterion, formed by an amalgam of science (in scraps), Freudian theory (in scraps), Marxist thought (in scraps), the political and economic situation of the world, the practice and precept and perspicacity of Mr. Auden (and Mr. MacNeice and Mr. Spender) and the load of reaction and attraction which the time I belong to has inherited.\(^\text{77}\)

Grigson portrays his editorial role much as the poets of the 1930s would subsequently characterise their own fates: as that of a conduit for political and cultural ideas that were carried upon the inescapable currents of history. Like Spender, who felt that his private life was "swamped" and "hounded" by public events, Grigson's high ideals were ambushed by the materialist concepts which the crises of the decade had encouraged the intellectuals to embrace.

The first number, appearing in January of the infamous year 1933, sees Grigson championing poetry as an egalitarian art form, as economically-modest as it is profound and edifying. The "object" of *New Verse* does not require a prohibitive investment: it can be bought for "sixpence – the price of ten Players or a brief library borrowing of *Angel Pavement* or a 'bus fare from Piccadilly Circus to Golders Green."\(^\text{78}\) Moreover, *New Verse* is not simply an apolitical venue for the cultivation of contemporary poetry, but a deliberate alternative to the censorious criticism of F.R. Leavis and his conservative, backward-thinking contemporaries who stifle rather than encourage young talent:

It favours only its time, belonging to no literary or politico-literary cabal, cherishing bombs only for masqueraders and for the everlasting "critical" rearguard of nastiness, now represented so ably and variously by the *Best Poems of the Year*, the Book Society and all the gang of big shot reviewers.\(^\text{79}\)

But even by the second number which appeared in March, Grigson's editorial (entitled, portentously: "Politics: and a Request") reveals that already the tide of political allegiance cannot be held back from the last bastion of pure artistic pursuit. Grigson's tactic is, rather wisely, not to outlaw the introduction of political themes, but instead to assert that *New Verse* is to align itself with no politics whatever, and that
ideology will be entirely the business of individual contributors, while Grigson and *New Verse* get on with the more important business of sorting the good art from the bad:

> Individualism is required. If there must be attitudes, a reasoned attitude of toryism is welcomed no less than a communist attitude. This is not two-faced, since poetry is round and faces all ways. Readers are asked to remain aware of this, and not to damn *NEW VERSE* politically where damnation is invalid.\(^\text{80}\)

Here, Grigson encourages the same liberal individualism that Spender had asserted in "Poetry and Revolution", and Spender’s arguments are obviously at the forefront of his mind. In the same issue, pursuing this theme further, Grigson writes on *New Country* and *The Magnetic Mountain*. As discussed previously, Grigson displays nothing but contempt for Roberts’s agenda: "I condemn in this first book its union clamping disunion and its editorial ideas of ‘novelty.’ He has no respect for Roberts’s prefatory exploration of the communist theme of *New Country*, regarding the project as flawed at its inception: “He [Roberts] does not think. He feels without thought, and feeling without thought is passive. It is sentimentality. It is not action in politics; or action in literature, which is art.”

Consistent with his editorial policy, Grigson immediately sets about sorting the wheat of Roberts’s anthology from its chaff, pulling out the favoured few for celebration while dismissing the others, unnamed:

> Those who feel only can be united, if they wish, in any book, any club, any party; but it disgusts me to find feeling made more than art and the good artist styped here with sentimentalists or ineffectual propagators. Spender is a good artist. Auden is another. Upward, who alone creates anything among the prose-writers, appears to be a third.

It is Spender’s essay alone which seems to redeem the anthology for Grigson, and he reiterates its fundamental assertion that art, at its best, makes propaganda defunct:

> Briefly the best propaganda is art; and Day Lewis is too able to wither himself a poet by being politically active. He (and all who imitate him or Auden without their ability) would gain by most thoroughly submitting to the truth of Spender’s “Poetry and Revolution”. Spender recognises danger. In unambiguous, sensuous words he valuably exposes it and usefully explains a present hardship of the poet.\(^\text{82}\)

While Spender has not quite avoided ambiguity, his essay does indeed express the
anxiety of the artist who feels the pull of political obligation.

In the following number, May 1933, Charles Madge is allowed to retort. Grigson, true to his promise that “poetry is round” and all views will be allowed their expression in his magazine, hands over the editorial space to Charles Madge, who relishes the opportunity to reject and contradict everything that Grigson (and Spender) have argued. “Poetry and Politics” presents the (quite intentionally) antithetical viewpoint: “As controversy,” Madge begins, “Stephen Spender’s essay might be contradicted in every line.” He goes on to invert the opening lines of “Poetry and Revolution”: “Of human activities, writing poetry is the most revolutionary. A successful poem does not call a halt. It gives order to march” and so on. Madge certainly demonstrates that Spender’s arguments are easy to contradict, but he also reveals this does not provide a satisfactory solution. Essentially, he takes the politicised stance that Grigson had deplored in Day Lewis, and which inevitably must condemn the failure to match one’s political sympathy with corresponding positive action. In this regard, Spender is dismissed as non-committal, even lazy: “Spender’s dictum ‘our artists should not be led astray into practical politics’ seems just a temperamental aversion to activity.”

Madge then quotes (with implicit approval) the last lines of Upward’s “Sunday”: “He will at least have made a start.” Madge thus matches his pragmatic, unromantic political stance with a refusal to idealise the poem, as Spender does, as a perfectible object detached from the milieu of its origin and transcendent of its imperfect author. As Madge suggests by his self-conscious inversion of Spender’s tropes, the two positions are irreconcilable, and yet they do not dispute the importance or relevance of poetry: they disagree in their definition of the purpose of the poem. For Spender (and Grigson) it is an ideal object continually to be pursued, superior to short-term interests; for Madge it is imperfect, imperfectible, and temporary in its aims and effects, and ultimately subordinate to the political welfare of society.

This issue of the magazine also includes Allen Tate’s praise of Spender’s
Poems, an important contribution to the "Spender myth" of New Verse, bolstered by Grigson's praise. Meanwhile Spender himself delivers a pointed ideological critique of Louis Aragon's The Red Front (translated by E.E. Cummings):

It seems to me that in spite of its effective cinematographic imagery this poem fails, because it does not convince one that the writer knows why the proletariat should kill and oppress the bourgeoisie except because the bourgeoisie is now oppressing the proletariat. He assumes that there is some absolute value in the proletarian which makes his atrocities glorious whereas the atrocities of the bourgeoisie are sordid.^^

Here, while praising the literary effect, Spender refuses to accept the communist dogma of Aragon's poem, consistently drawing a distinction between the aesthetic and the propagandist effect, and prioritising the importance of the former. It is important to note Spender's critical method: his disapproval of Aragon's moral stance does not invalidate his appreciation of the technical achievement of the verse; as shall be discussed in the next chapter, Spender's admiration for writers like Wyndham Lewis and H.G. Wells is a manifest refutation of the idea that he allowed political values to determine his literary judgements.

Grigson was adamant that, unlike the existing publishing establishment, New Verse should continue to be a testing-ground for new talent, and that it should be generous to emerging strains in contemporary poetry. This means that he will inevitably run the risk of encouraging some poets of uncertain ability, but he sees this as an acceptable side-effect, and it is a generosity quite contrary to the stylistic strictures of reactionary papers like Scrutiny. In fact, Grigson would attack Scrutiny regularly, and with bile: "If Scrutiny is not to be the perfect body-builder for prigs it must change its formula. To risk a few bad plants from a few seeds is better than to water all the garden with weed-killer."^^ He responded particularly strongly when there was harsh criticism of Auden and Spender. And despite his demands for the highest aesthetic standards above all else, Grigson's editorial open-mindedness also saw him making every effort to grasp subjects of contemporary significance - he would provide surveys and discussions...
of proto-movements and individuals who must be "dealt with" one way or another. For example, two years later in the summer of 1936, *New Verse* No. 21 attempts to get to grips with Surrealism. Similarly, in Spring 1937 an entire issue (No. 24) is devoted to the Mass Observation experiments of Madge and Humphrey Jennings. There is even a double issue (Nos. 26 and 27) in November of the same year entirely dedicated to the praise of Auden by his contemporaries.

It is in the "Auden Issue" that Spender once again addresses the criticism that has been levelled at himself and at other "Oxford" poets like Auden, and with particular regard to his own insistent stance as a *bourgeois* poet:

> From the point of view of the working-class movement the ultimate criticism of Auden and the poets associated with him is that we haven't deliberately and consciously transferred ourselves to the working class. The subject of his poetry is the struggle, but the struggle seen, as it were, by someone who whilst living in one camp, sympathises with the other; a struggle in fact which while existing externally is also taking place within the mind of the poet himself, who remains a bourgeois.®

Spender acknowledges that "from the point of view of the working-class" nothing he says can be convincingly demonstrative of solidarity. Yet he believes that the inner struggle of the bourgeois artist's conscience corresponds authentically to the social struggle. Even in 1937 he maintains the viewpoint of "Poetry and Revolution": that, in the present time, there is no art other than bourgeois art.

*New Verse* is never merely celebratory however. Towards the end of its life, another double issue (Nos. 31 and 32) in autumn 1938 includes a rather cruel "obituary" for T.S. Eliot penned by Charles Madge with an evident Marxist subtext. Eliot is the fallen God of the younger 1930s poets; he was once the literary icon of modernist angst and cultural decline, but now Eliot's pageant play *The Rock* is used as evidence that the poet of *The Waste Land* is creatively dead, a spent force in modern verse. The visceral, despairing "cockney horde" given voice in Eliot's seminal poem has now become a "pastoral" pastiche of quaint, ignorant poverty, indicative of Eliot's own lapse into the conservative, feudal worldview of Anglicanism.
In 1937, Michael Roberts, with some years' perspective on the troubled declarations of his early 1930s anthologies, provides an analysis of the intellectual shift towards scientific determinism and away from religion which he shares with many of his contemporaries. Yet he is now willing to elucidate the uncertainties which he had previously been keen to suppress:

...nearly all of us to-day have an uneasy feeling that scientific knowledge does in some way conflict with the doctrines of religion. If we try to escape by saying that religious doctrines are poetically true, we are haunted by a feeling that poetic truth is less real than scientific.

[...] We find ourselves assuming that anthropology can take the place of a moral tradition, and that a knowledge of psychology can remove the need for an authoritative church.\textsuperscript{88}

In his contemporary study \textit{Poetry of the Present}, published in 1949, Grigson attempts to answer the question: "Why is it that poetic generations, poetic revolutions nearly, are coming after one another so quickly in our age?" And, with the hindsight of the war, he is beginning to grasp the relationship between the poetry of the 1930s and the monumental political events that were escalating across Europe. Grigson feels that the communist stylistics of the decade were fundamentally an offshoot of Auden's early flirtation with political themes, a rebellious literary fad, the practitioners of which failed to grasp the complexities – or moral implications – of their "revolutionary" speculation:

Some of Auden's early work, seeping into Spender and Day Lewis, and then spreading widely abroad, had its bizarre consequences in political verse and prose. It would be unkind to do much more than recall now, for example, the naivety of Day Lewis's \textit{Letter to a Young Revolutionary}...\textsuperscript{89}

At the same time, Grigson concludes that this shift into left-wing thinking, whether rigorous or reckless, was not exclusively the indulgence of the poets; on the contrary, it was a nation-wide phenomenon, and the "naïve communist optimism" which the 1930s poets exhibited merely reflected a wider current in society. It becomes increasingly clear that the poets' fascination with the possible social redemption offered by communist ideology was very much a characteristic of their age group, particularly of

\textsuperscript{*} The intertextual relationship between \textit{The Rock} and Spender's \textit{Vienna}, including the response to these texts in \textit{The Left Review} and \textit{New Verse}, will be discussed in the next chapter.
5. The “Spender Myth”: 1932-1935

those of a middle-class education, and though their dalliance with Leftist thought may now appear incautious and misguided, their poetry is an invaluable document of this brief period in literary discourse, and should be cherished for all its idealistic errors and hope.

In his 1984 memoir, Grigson would confirm his 1930s opinion of Spender, which was that, above all political considerations, the poet was most firmly concerned with artistic standards, and the expression of compassion which did not exploit the sentimentality of propagandist literature: “In the celebrated triarchy and hierarchy of the Thirties Stephen stood for lyricism without soppiness and for the dutiful behaviour of the artist.” But his verdict at the close of the 1930s, and an impressively astute verdict it is, is that Spender’s talent could only have achieved its effective balance between idealistic lyricism and level-eyed materialism in that particular decade. Sadly, Grigson’s impression of Spender’s poetic achievement has declined since the mid-1930s, but once again invoking the persistent “Rupert Brooke” trope, he explicates the uniqueness of Spender’s verse, and its absolute interrelation with its particular socio-historical milieu:

In ability, I doubt if there is so very much between Stephen Spender and Rupert Brooke. Brooke was an optimist turned outwards…
[...] Stephen Spender on the other hand, is an agile, fluid, obviously more sensitive man, turned inwards. Had he been born like Brooke in 1887, what superlative horrors of silliness he might have committed! He would have handed himself over, no doubt, to Inspiration, to diffused religious or cosmic ‘influences’, or, like Yeats, to a search, via Blavatsky and the Golden Dawn, for esoteric knowledge and the Secret of the Universe. But now materialism prevents him from hunting too many chimeras of too much extravagance, it concentrates his feeling, dispatches him to the analyst, and helps him, if not to be a very skilful poet, to struggle at least towards objectivity. So if their talent is in some ways about equal, the value of Brooke to humanity is much less than the value of Stephen Spender.

As he bids farewell to the decade, and to the magazine which had nurtured and encouraged his small coterie of disunited writers, Grigson seems to proffer Spender as the archetypal New Verse poet: worth nurturing, and despite his idealisation of the poetic form, seemingly bound to the politicised era of his first public recognition. And Grigson, critically severe to the last, asserts that Spender’s lyrical Platonism could not have kept him on the common ground of literary communication had he emerged in a
less fraught period than that of the 1930s Depression: "If Spender had been born about 1890, nothing, I repeat, could ever have saved him. He would have frittered himself away into vagueness and reaction."\(^92\)

In 1978, accepting his double-edged mantle as the "Brookean" bard of the Great Depression, Spender is realistic about the limitations of his 1930s endeavour, now that history has clearly demarcated the cultural currents which seems to have made his and his contemporaries' politicised stance inevitable and necessary. As the decade progressed, their opposition to the growing menace of Hitler's regime was the final, inescapable compromise of their literary ideals:

The thirties poets who had sneered at Rupert Brooke and whose feelings about war had been absorbed from the poetry from the Western Front written by Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon -- and from Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That* -- were rather embarrassed to find themselves in one respect like Rupert Brooke: that is to say, writing poetry in support of war against Germans -- although these Germans were not Kaiser Wilhelm's spike-helmeted Prussians but the Nazi SS. They remained, of course, repelled by the manner and matter of Rupert Brooke's famous war sonnets. In the event, what they wrote was anti-fascist poetry which was profoundly influenced by the diction and attitudes of Wilfred Owen -- a kind of anti-fascist pacifist poetry.\(^93\)

Nevertheless, it is this very compromise, this obligation to confront the threat of Fascist oppression which created the 1930s poetry and its new mode of late modernism, in which political discourse in verse attains aesthetic status. Spender, quite naturally, was not really to move beyond the ideal of high modernism in his critical writing or in his estimation of his own career; the idols of his youth -- the literary pioneers of the early century -- set a standard which could not actually be maintained beyond the war years. It was Spender and his generation who attempted to confront the political threat, and to employ materialist ideas, while the older generation insisted upon conservatism or non-involvement.

As Grigson observes, Spender, Auden and Day Lewis were quite typical of their generation in their enthusiasm for, and subsequent disillusionment with, communism. In this light, the "Spender myth" is actually symptomatic of the need for hope and idealism in the decade, and it is ultimately unsurprising that the myth should have reached its zenith around 1935 and then gradually have declined as the inevitability of world war became apparent, and the brutal actuality of Soviet Russia was gradually
apprehended across Europe. The emergence of the truth of Stalin's regime permanently destroyed the image of communism as a viable opposition to Fascism, and retroactively miscast the young poets' desire to challenge social injustice as reckless propagandism and bourgeois hypocrisy. But there is nothing hypocritical about a naïve response to the totally unprecedented assault on liberty which the 1930s witnessed, and which so many others failed to acknowledge.

1 New Verse, No. 2, March 1933, p. 15.
4 Ibid.
5 Valentine Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties, p. 107.
6 Ibid., p. 106.
7 New Verse, No. 15, June, 1935, p.15.
8 Ibid.
9 Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation, p. 82.
11 Ibid., p. 12.
13 Ibid., p. 18.
14 Ibid., p. 19.
15 Ibid.
16 The Auden Generation, p. 83.
17 Ibid., p. 20.
20 Ibid., p. 10.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 New Country, p. 11.
25 Ibid., p. 11.
27 Ibid., p. 13.
28 Ibid., p. 14
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., pp. 15-16.
31 Ibid., p. 21.
5. The “Spender Myth”: 1932-1935

33 Hynes, p. 109.
34 Hynes, pp. 112-113.
35 Ibid.
37 New Country, p. 25.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p. 27.
40 Ibid., p. 28.
41 Ibid., p. 30.
42 Ibid., pp. 35-36.
43 Ibid., p. 41.
44 Ibid., p. 62.
45 New Verse, No. 2, March 1933, p. 17.
48 Ibid., p. 63.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid., p. 64.
51 Ibid., pp. 64-65.
52 Ibid., p. 65.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., p. 66.
55 Ibid., p. 67.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., pp. 67-68.
58 Ibid., p. 68.
59 Ibid., p. 69
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., p. 70.
64 Ibid., p. 71.
66 Ibid., p. 106.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
71 Ibid., p. 150.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., p. 266.
75 Ibid.
76 Hynes, p. 114.
78 New Verse, No. 1, January 1933, p. 2.
79 Ibid.
5. The "Spender Myth": 1932-1935

81 Ibid., p. 15.
82 Ibid., p. 17.
84 Ibid., pp. 3-4.
85 Ibid., p. 25.
86 New Verse, No. 4, July 1933, p. 2.
87 New Verse, No.s 26-27, November 1937, p. 10.
92 Ibid., p. 18.
6. **Vienna (1934)**

Stephen Spender's *Vienna*, his only published long poem, appeared in November 1934. Casting a sardonic eye back to the time in his autobiography *World Within World*, Spender identifies it as a period when the spectre of Socialist Realism had been in ascendance over his "literary social life of luncheons, teas, and weekends in country houses." *Vienna* was an attempt, only months after the event, to provide a modernist verse portrayal of the socialist uprising that had taken place in Austria the previous February. This was a period when political commentators and the British government were largely failing to perceive the sinister implications of Hitler's rise to power, and the scope of his militaristic ambitions.*

Spender's poem seeks to define the nature of heroism in the midst of a contemporary political crisis. It is a complex and demanding poem, which perplexed readers on its appearance; *Vienna* appears to endorse Marxist action, and the critiques which it received were naturally characterised by the political and aesthetic affiliation of the publications where they appeared. The confused and contradictory responses disturbed Spender, who was himself uncertain of the success of the piece, and there was mutual agreement between Faber and himself that *Vienna* would not be republished. Yet it is a unique poem which is reliant upon specific historical events; its collision of styles contains unpolished verve, unusual flashes of hope and cynicism that are true to their context, and all the more effective for their inherent contradiction and irresolution.

In the history of the social upheavals that ultimately led to the Second World War, the February Uprising and its rapid suppression were as symptomatic of the

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* Vernon Bartlett, foreign correspondent for *The Times* and the BBC, provides a typically optimistic appraisal of the European situation at the close of 1933: "Even though Germany has decided to leave the League [of Nations] and has in fact left the Disarmament Conference for the second time, I doubt whether we are any nearer war than we were a year ago, and each crisis solved, or in some cases even postponed, without fighting makes fighting much less probable. "And think for a moment how greatly Germany, unwittingly and generally unwillingly, has welded the other European nations together. In the hope of keeping Austria independent, France and Italy have found themselves co-operating for the first time since the Peace Conference. France would like Dr. Dollfuss to be a mascot for the democratic ideas of the French Revolution, while Italy would like to dress him in a black shirt; but both would hate to see him 'go Nazi.' For the same reason the relations between Italy and the Little Entente are now, if not cordial, immeasurably better than they were a year ago." ("Peace Around the Corner", *Bookman*, Vol. 85, December 1933, pp. 156-157.)
inexorable rise of Fascism as the tragic outcome of the Spanish Civil War would prove later in the decade.* The small but fervent liberal London intelligentsia (centred around Geoffrey Grigson’s *New Verse* and its critical adulation of Auden) seized upon the importance of such events, and Spender attempted a full-length work on the Austrian conflict. In this period, he was beginning to move closer to orthodox communism.

Although he remained, throughout almost the entire decade, merely a passionate fellow-traveller, Spender, like Cecil Day Lewis, would increasingly state that communism was the only logical stance against the extreme Right. The years 1933 and 1934 constitute the height of his deployment of unequivocally partisan material within his poems. But his talent was primarily lyrical, and as has been discussed, the tradition of lyric poetry is inherently reactionary, even counterrevolutionary. Spender’s critical writing during these years is dominated by the dilemma, identifying the fundamental conflict between literary tradition and radical ideology. It would be the gradual realisation of the grim actuality of life in Soviet Russia which would finally erode his faith in the practicalities of a socialist state, and leave him something of an apologist for the naivety of his younger self. In the early 1930s, the sharp contradiction was that he sought social revolution (ideally pacifist) by means of literature, at a time when his literary idols included Eliot, Woolf and the late D.H. Lawrence, high modernists who championed the cultivation of an individual sensibility that divorced itself from the political environment, and regarded with scorn any artist’s involvement in transient politics.

In this context, *Vienna* takes up a considerable challenge – to explore the psychological significance of the uprising within a modern idiom, while providing a political argument. It is a challenge that the poem dramatises rather than solves, and it stands very much as a practical demonstration of the aesthetic and ideological crisis which Spender repeatedly outlines for socialist writers in his 1930s prose when he

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* After the events of 1939-1945, Spender chose to revisit the location and events of *Vienna* in *Returning to Vienna*, 1947. He describes the city of the 1930s in its historical context: “*Through summers of between-war dream / Vienna lay upon its plain / Each war one hand on the horizon’s rim.*” (*The Edge of Being*, London: Faber and Faber, 1949, p. 20.)
examines the function of propaganda within a bourgeois writer’s work. An allegiance to
Socialism was emphatically the emblem of anti-Fascism, and the onus was on writers
and artists to write the untold stories of heroism in the face of persecution and death.
The *Brown Book* made clear the responsibility of the intellectuals:

The story of the heroic stand made by anti-Fascists in the struggle for German
freedom has still to be written: the story of fighters who stood their ground in spite of
the menace of murder; the story of prisoners who met the death sentence with a proud
declaration of their loyalty to Socialism; the story of tortured victims who sang the
“International” in spite of steel rods and truncheons…

Vienna was a city with considerable resonance prior to the uprising; historically,
it was the capital of Europe’s musical heritage, and the birthplace of Dr Freud’s new
science, psychoanalysis. Analytical introspection is a theme of the poem, partly in
homage to its auspicious setting. In terms of the world crisis – the economic slump –
Vienna also held the ignominious honour of being the site for its commencement when
the Credit Anstalt Bank collapsed in May 1931. After the Wall Street Crash of 1929,
the failure of the Anstalt instigated the spread of the Depression across Europe, and the
escalating crises that enabled the rise of Hitler and his romantic-authoritarianism as an
alternative to communism.

The specific events that captured Spender’s imagination were as follows:
Engelbert Dollfuss had been appointed Chancellor in May 1932, and suspended
parliamentary government within a year, in fear of a revolt by the socialists, and at the
prompting of Mussolini. A demonstration by the Social Democrats in early 1934 led
Dollfuss to order a pre-emptive strike on the workers’ neighbourhoods in the Viennese
suburbs. The socialist troops were well armed, but after a civil war that lasted several
days they were defeated, and with a huge death toll. It is the romanticism of this public
revolt against Fascist oppression, countered by a brutal realism of defeat and political
betrayal, that provides the contrary texture of the poem.

Spender visited Vienna several times during the year, and it replaced Berlin as
his regular European destination:
When I read of 30th June 1934, I was sitting on the grassy bank of a road in the Wiener Wald at a place called Sulz-Stangau, waiting for a bus; the murder of Dollfuss was for me the waves of excitement which I felt in the crowds surging through the streets of Vienna.³

He had come to the city with Tony Hyndman in May 1934, just as Dollfuss began to implement a new Austrian constitution that was essentially Fascist (although he was as unpopular with the Austrian National Socialists as he was with the Marxists). The Austrian Nazis were intent on union with Hitler's Germany, but Dollfuss, caught between Mussolini's guidance and the threat of German rule, resisted. While the socialists were executed, and driven underground or abroad, those Fascists who objected to Dollfuss's rule terrorised the city. Dollfuss was ultimately assassinated by the Austrian Nazis during an otherwise unsuccessful coup in July. By this time, in the midst of these partisan struggles of the city, Spender had begun work on the poem. He wrote it rapidly, and it was published in the autumn of the same year.

His story “The Two Deaths”, which is closely based on his experiences in Vienna, is evocative of the paranoid atmosphere of the city in the aftermath of the socialist defeat, where, “in the spring of 1934 the streets were often shuttered with the darkness of the police vans carrying political offenders to their trial.”⁴ Spender describes his role within the environment – that of an “untouchable” foreigner: protected by nationality and financial security, while local revolutionary intrigues operate beneath the state propaganda:

I was an untouchable amongst events which moved many of the people whom I passed in the street. Some of the wounded from the February disorders of that year were still lying at home or in hospitals. Others were in prison awaiting the trial that was either savage and quick, or else indefinitely postponed; an immense organization of secret propaganda, with newspapers, speeches, lightning demonstrations, existed, as it were, beneath my feet; while, within the floodlit level radius of the eyes, at every corner, were the posters and demonstrations organized by the Government: Government newspapers, Government speeches, Government broadcasts, Government party uniforms.

[...]

It did not take me long to become aware of this sense of struggle. This struggle affected me more powerfully than I had imagined any public event could do. Yet I felt completely an outsider.⁵
The menace of wider political currents was ever-present, and Spender was the outsider in a city where the events in Germany were visibly infiltrating and overbearing the local political struggle. Michael Burleigh evokes the unrelenting pressure that Hitler’s regime was starting to impose on its European neighbours in Vienna:

Hitler decided to use the power of the German holidaymaker and an enhanced propaganda campaign to destroy Dollfuss, who at a mere four feet eleven inches tall was an almost ridiculous opponent for a leader about to take on extremely tall British patricians. Tourist visa fees for Austria were increased to one thousand Reichsmarks, which meant that eight thousand Germans holidayed in Austria in July 1933, in contrast to ninety-eight thousand the year before. Tourism fell tenfold. German aircraft dropped leaflets urging Austrians to withhold taxes and withdraw deposit from the banks. Radio Munich broadcast a stream of propaganda, while loudspeakers boomed more over the land borders. Candle-lit swastikas floated down the Danube.®

John Lehmann had also spent time in Germany and Austria during 1933 and 1934. He had been in Berlin when the Reichstag was burned, and in Vienna at the time of the quashed uprising. His collection of poetry and prose poems, *The Noise of History* (1934) made these turbulent social events the backdrop to its lyrical sketches of the private life within; he describes the same sinister springtime that provides the setting for Spender’s *Vienna*, with echoes of the “cruellest month” of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*:

In the days before Easter, the haze vanishes early before the sun, and innumerable tips of branches are set glowing with a soft green flame. But when we look out of our windows, we see the trees as if they were dripping blood.®

The literal “noises” of history are, for Lehmann, the same as Spender’s: the sound of distant explosions, uproar, and the sense of a latent revolutionary workforce which is ready to act but uncertain how to proceed:

There was the echo of a vast crowd roaring, mixed with the crack of rifles and hiss of flames, from the streets of a capital far away in the north-west. And to thousands who stood by their machines in factories and generating-stations, it was like a sudden call to action. A low mutter, too, rose from many secret meetings and councils, where workers met their leaders, from groups at the street-corner and before the labour exchange, bitter words, and one more often than others, *Treachery*.®
The secret meetings suggested here by Lehmann also permeate Spender's *Vienna*; he evokes the "life of moles" which had, by the time of his arrival, replaced the swift and tragic heroics of the fighting. The situation in Vienna, like the Reichstag Fire Trial which would take place the following autumn, was regularly reported across Europe. It is obvious that, even in Britain, which was notoriously slow to respond, the Austrian crisis was developing into a litmus test for future events in continental Europe. The BBC’s Vernon Bartlett broadcast a despatch from the city in the week of Dollfuss’s death and the execution of his fascist assassins:

It would be absurd to pretend that the workers of Vienna have forgiven him for his ruthless action against them last February, and I noticed very few black flags hanging from the windows of the poorer districts on Saturday. But I think there probably is a development of the feeling that Austria should be for the Austrians... I have always felt that the link of a common culture between Germany and Austria was very strong – all the stronger because the Powers that won the last war tried to pretend that it did not exist. But Austrians with whom I have talked during the last few days are fully convinced that their country will become a battlefield if the Nazi movement cannot be checked. Feeling runs too high in Italy and elsewhere to make it possible for Austro-German relations to be limited to Austria and Germany.

Written in this pervading atmosphere of imminent events, *Vienna* is an English, liberal intellectual’s attempt to portray the libertarian aspirations and the inherent tragedy of the struggle against the Fascist regime; with this in mind, the extent to which the psychology of a foreign poet abroad can elucidate the ideological struggle of the oppressed Austrian workers is the crux of the endeavour. The usefulness of the bourgeois artist to the proletarian situation is the persistent concern of all ideologically-minded literature and criticism of this era, not least the critics of Spender’s poem. "Poetry and Revolution" had, as discussed, given the impression that Spender’s faith in the Russian system was accompanied by a suspicion of straight propaganda; in the essay he states the predicament of the artist confronted by political necessity:

... the artist to-day feels himself totally submerged by bourgeois traditions, he feels that nothing he could write could possibly appeal (in any country except Russia) to a proletarian audience, and therefore he finds himself becoming simply the bourgeois artist in revolt, in short, the individualist. He feels that nothing of any real interest can
now be produced in this tradition, and yet there is no way of reaching outside it; all his judgements are ruled by it, and to be an exception to it is only a way of emphasising his individualism. For these reasons he is tempted to feel that the artist should go into politics now as there is no need for art.\(^{10}\)

After his retreat from communism at the end of the decade, and subsequently throughout his career, Spender was to take a more sardonic and critical view of his fervent inner-debate of the 1930s. Writing in 1978, he would emphasise that he and his fellow poets really had been preaching primarily to an already converted audience, and a very small one:

The writers of the thirties were often sneered at because they were middle-class youths with public school and posh university backgrounds who sought to adopt a proletarian point of view. Up to a point this sneer is justified. They were ill-equipped to address a working-class audience, and were not serious in their efforts to do so. (If their poetry strikes one as addressed to anyone in particular, it is to sixth-formers from their old schools and to one another.)\(^{11}\)

For some time, Spender had been urged by his older mentors to attempt a longer work with wider scope than simply fragmented portraits of the liminal self. Virginia Woolf, particularly, bemused by Spender and his liberal contemporaries, felt that he should write a work of more substantial length.\(^{12}\) Wyndham Lewis, whom Spender had met several times since the late 1920s,\(^*\) and whom he admired despite their ideological disparity, specifically criticised Spender’s Poems (1933) on the basis of its fragmentary quality:

\[\text{The impression that your book has left on me, then is of a collection of beautiful – or often beautiful, sometimes rough and impressive – fragments. I do not myself object to this: but it might be worth while taking into account such a sensation. It may merely be that the traditional compact lyric has an air of being self-contained, whereas these longer-waved, less regimented, units of rhythm [sic.], have an air of breaking off. […]}
\]

\[\text{… yet I do not think that there is inherent in these particular pieces something suggestive of fragments knocked off, sometimes neatly and sometimes at random, from a larger whole, of some sort. A result of the largeness, and looseness, of the handling, I}
\]

* Lewis partly lampooned Spender as Daniel Boleyn in The Apes of God (1930): “Mr. Daniel Boleyn has a very great future – of course as yet he is too young to have done much, but he has written one most lovely poem.” (The Apes of God, Santa Barbara, CA, 1981). The character is an amalgam of several young poets and Lewis would have met Spender relatively late in the novel’s composition.
daresay? There are some of these pieces that seem to belong in a play – passages in
some preferably tudor, or romantic, drama: or else they look like fragments from a
sonnet sequence. […] If these were pictures in an exhibition, again, instead of poems
in a book, I should feel that you had not paid enough attention to the ‘hanging’. 13

A hand-written note, possibly sent at around the same time, reiterates Lewis’s
recommendation that Spender write a longer piece, and suggests that Spender has
mentioned the developing work on the Viennese conflict:

My dear Spender,

[…] What I really meant was that I thought you should do a play (or something longer)
& I am very glad to hear that you are working on one now. You are always called the
lyrical member of your coterie, & it [unreadable] as lyrics I was speaking of your
pieces which I have just read again + like more than before even. 14

This advice as to the “hanging” of his work was to persist throughout Spender’s poetic
career. Through his verse play Trial of a Judge (1938), the subsequent volumes The
Still Centre (1939), Ruins and Visions (1942), even the Collected Poems of 1953 all
show an intense concern over the thematic, structural organisation of the poetry into a

** Lewis appends the letter with thanks for Spender’s gracious review of One-Way Song in the Spectator
(December 1933): “It is not, I think, an everyday occurrence for a young writer like yourself to offer his
fervent support to one whose spurs were won so long ago as mine, and upon such a different sort of
Pegasus! I would like you to believe that I appreciate this graceful paradox at its full worth.” Spender’s
praise had been a characteristic appreciation of literature-as-art, across a political gulf: “…Mr Lewis
remains inveterately the Enemy: and of enemies, he seems to me the one whom it is most possible to
respect. His whole book is stamped with a passionate egotism. But a passionate egotism is the only kind
of egotism that is not ultimately flippant…” (reproduced in The Thirties and After, 1978, p. 39.)

The same month Spender had provided a year-end review for the Bookman which once more
praised Lewis’s art despite the two writers’ considerable ideological divide: “Mr. Wyndham Lewis wrote
a book on Hitler some years ago which is full of the frankest admiration he has ever expressed about
anything, but in his recently published ‘One Way Song’ he seems anxious to refute this. Indeed it is
difficult to label any writer as definitely fascist; it is only that in many quarters one sees growing up an
admirations for the fait accompli in Germany and Italy, and a willingness to surrender liberty to

Spender is being too generous, and there is perhaps a latent sarcasm in Lewis’s advice and
politeness, i.e. “I would like you to believe” (my italics). Spender’s poor review of Lewis’s Men Without
Art, which included a sideswipe at Roy Campbell, was to appear in the Spectator in October 1934 with
ensuing animosity and scorn, and he was to have ongoing problematical relationships with these hard-right
men, exacerbated by his declared admiration for their work, and Campbell’s scathing accusations that
Spender and his Audenesque colleagues were duplicitous, bourgeois cowards: “well-paid poltroons…
who pushed better men to the fight while they sat back and banqueted for Marxism.” (Quoted in Alister
Kershaw (ed.) Salute to Roy Campbell, p. 43.)

Whatever Lewis’s position in 1933, it would be only six years before he would produce, on the
eve of war with Germany, The Jews, Are They Human? (1939), a tract against anti-Semitism with an
ironic (but incendiary) title that demonstrated both his gradual realisation of Hitler’s ideological faults and
his continuing taste for cultural debate at its least subtle.
greater whole. Vienna thus abandons the fragmented and enigmatic lyrics of Poems and takes as formal models Eliot’s The Waste Land and Auden’s The Orators; its four sections delineating a contemporary consciousness in the midst of a conceptual terrain of troubled history and disparate voices.*

Despite Spender’s obvious sympathy for the socialists, and his contempt for Dollfuss and his fellow party leaders Fey and Stahremberg, Vienna is not a directly propagandist piece. The poem interweaves its treatment of the political conflict with Spender’s personal experience in the city during the year that followed the uprising and which culminated in Dollfuss’s death that summer. He had embarked upon a relationship with Muriel Gardiner, who lived in Vienna, and whom he had met weeks before at a holiday retreat in Mlini, near Dubrovnik. A divorcée, she had come to Vienna with her daughter and was undergoing psychoanalysis and taking a medical degree with a view to qualifying as an analyst herself. Financially well-off, Gardiner assisted the underground socialist movement extensively after the February Uprising, and she continued to do so during her relationship with Spender and while he worked on the poem: “She put her flat and a good deal of her money at the disposal of a group of Austrian Socialists whom she herself joined. Part of this group moved across the Czech frontier and opened an office in Bratislava. Here they were able to print material which could then be smuggled back across the frontier.”* Vienna is dedicated to Gardiner and her contribution to the struggle.

Gardiner’s autobiography Code Name Mary (1983) opens with a scene that is shrewdly emblematic, not simply of the events in Vienna, but of the general situation of the liberal intellectual in the Europe of the 1930s. It is a personal snapshot that wryly manages to fuse, or at least to ally, individualist, bourgeois preoccupations with the plight of the workers in the face of oppression by a Fascist regime:

I was at my psychoanalytic session with Dr. Ruth Mack Brunswick at her home in The Hasenauerstrasse, in Vienna’s eighteenth district, on Monday, February 12, 1934, when

* Spender would insist that The Orators was not a source for Vienna, and this may be true, but the two works share an idiom of disembodied voices and dark themes for which Eliot’s poem had set a modern precedent. See: “Errors of Fact and Misreadings of Texts in Stephen Spender: A Portrait with Background by Hugh David”, a manuscript response to David’s unauthorised biography held at the British Library.
the shooting began. Army units and police of Dollfuss’s Fascist government had begun to attack the large apartment buildings where they suspected armed members of the Socialist Defence League were assembled. The Hasenauerstrasse was not far from some of these workers’ homes, and we could hear the guns distinctly. When, moments later, we heard the tat-tat-tat of the machine guns quite close, Dr. Brunswick, putting reality and human concern ahead of any principles of analytic technique, told me that we would break off the hour and that she would ask her chauffeur to drive me home.16

Here, the civilised room in which Gardiner is undergoing psychoanalysis is a hermetic, controlled space that symbolically sets itself apart from the world – a clinical, mental realm beyond the contingencies of daily life. It is also a manifest luxury of the moneyed classes. Gardiner had come to Vienna hoping to be analysed by Freud himself, and a consciousness that the city is the very home of psychoanalysis informs the psychological themes of Spender’s poem. Yet, in Gardiner’s narrative, the protected realm of the analyst’s couch cannot escape disruption by the distant sound of a serious civil disturbance; history refuses to wait patiently while the neuroses of an individual are calmly identified and analysed. “Reality and human concern” induced by the volatile actuality of social events necessarily overtake the bourgeois luxury of therapeutic introspection.

Gardiner was hardly aloof or indifferent to the events in the city. But, as a bourgeois professional, just as for writers or artists of means, her involvement in the struggle of the workers and unemployed against the Fascist government was the result of a moral decision to act, rather than an absolute situational necessity. Her position was therefore very closely analogous to that of Spender – a self-consciously bourgeois writer who felt compelled to address his contempt for the injustices meted out to those who were oppressed economically and politically during the depression.

Spender experienced Vienna through Gardiner, and he presumably learned a great deal about the socialist struggle from her. Although it is fuelled by the same revolutionary ideals that provided the ebullient Poems (1933) with its enthusiasm and visionary optimism, Vienna is shot through with an entirely new tone of regret, defeat, and sarcasm. It communicates a sense of realism about the workers’ struggle, and its doomed outcome. In her memoir, Gardiner suggests that the willingness to fight on in the face of insurmountable injustice was felt even at the inception of the revolt:
I knew at once, in February 1934, that the brave Socialist resistance to Dollfuss and the Austrian Fascists was doomed;

[...] 

... pity and despair overwhelmed me. But they could not cancel out the feelings that had been building up within me these past few days: indignation, anger, and an imperative need to continue the struggle, hopeless though it might be.¹⁷

Although she is writing with the perspective of decades, Gardiner expresses a notion close to the essence of Spender's poem: that he is detailing, often with the visionary fervour of a romantic revolutionary, an uprising which has already ended in tragic failure. Gardiner, with hindsight, suggests that even at this early stage she felt that the resistance was "doomed", and that the only human response was to struggle on, however futile the effort might prove to be. She writes later in her autobiography that she and Spender had actively pursued their appreciation of music, literature and nature despite the tumultuous social events taking place in Austria, and the impending disaster that they anticipated:

I think neither Stephen nor I was ever able really to escape from these fateful events and our fears of a doomed future. We did not try to escape. But, even though we could not be carefree, we were happy in our love and understanding of each other and in our mutual dedication to the cause of freedom.¹⁸

Perhaps it is this all-pervading sense of a "doomed future" that explains why so little of the sense of their relationship is expressed in the poem. Vienna is dedicated to "Muriel", yet its description of their affair is symbolically swamped by Spender's mission to express the confused intensity of the political situation: that the psychological oppression of the Fascist rule overpowers emotional life of the individual.∗

Though it has moments of Spenderian affirmation regarding the future victory of the oppressed, and sections of lyrical beauty and clarity, Vienna still contains a

* Lehmann's The Noise of History (London: Hogarth Press, 1934) similarly juxtaposes its portrayal of recent, symbolic public events with intense private relationships in Berlin and Vienna: "Lehmann nowhere says that love and politics are related; nevertheless the poems do seem to suggest that the ability to feel about other people can have both private and public consequences." (Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation, pp. 143-144.)
considerable proportion of obscure verse. It is not merely "Blakean" in its opaqueness, or arcane in the manner of Eliot or Auden. Rather, it possesses images and lines that are wilfully difficult, and grammatically fractured in order to limit, rather than to expand meaning. The manuscripts of the poem show Spender repetitiously drafting sections and forcing the language into an abstract form. Although it swiftly follows the publication of the second edition of Poems, Vienna is a genuine sideways shift for Spender, a radical linguistic experiment. The fractured style, combined with repeated references in tone and idiom to Eliot's work were seen by some contemporary critics as being merely derivative, and inappropriate to the poem's political subject.

Significantly, Vienna - as an interpreted text - briefly served as a critical barometer: the most telling confrontation between aesthetics and politics occurred unsurprisingly between Grigson's non- (or even multi-) partisan New Verse and the socialist Left Review, both recently established forums for this very "thirties" debate. "Fey, Dollfuss, Vienna" by D.M.T. in New Verse dissects Spender's poem with little sympathy, regarding its deliberate ugliness as objectionable and unconstructive:

The propaganda is bad, to be condemned, and even despised, by the real communist, whether he be intellectual or not. Here we have a revolutionary poem published by Faber and Faber, i.e. published, one supposes, without the disapproval of the author of The Rock, which dignified pageant was written for a church fund, blessed by a bishop, and attended by Royalty. Obviously not that which would have any effect, but rather that of the stand-in-the-corner, pat-on-the-back young man who, by his insistence on the crudities of language and the tin thunder of naughty images, sets himself up immediately as the communist-intellectual type, pigeon-holed by Punch.

Vienna is a bad poem;

[...]

lines, passages, images, and clusters of images of a falsity and affected ugliness as uncommon to the past Mr. Spender as they are common to the present political poets to whom he lends - for how long it is still not our concern - his moral weight and literary gifts.

The grudging praise which Spender receives at the close initially suggests that D.M.T. may be a pseudonym for Grigson himself, an admirer of Spender, though not of his politics, nor of Michael Roberts's suggestion that the disparate talents of Auden, Spender and their contemporaries represented a united political front. Alternatively, though, the reviewer may simply be echoing Grigson's critical stance towards Spender:
"D.M.T." is surely the young Dylan Marlais Thomas (recently turned twenty-one) – a new recruit to the amorphous New Verse community who had just made his own debut with Eighteen Poems. D.M.T. clearly regards the fractured harshness of Vienna as false and poorly crafted: the unfortunate result of a lyrical talent lured into propagandist work. Similarly, the poem's endorsement by Eliot appears to damn it as inauthentic, or at least severely limit its ideological credibility.

Montagu Slater's essay "Vienna, February Days" (in the Left Review, December, 1934) pursues its author's disagreement with the New Verse review. Fuelled by a distinctly orthodox socialist fervour, Slater assesses the relative successes and failures of Spender's poem. In Slater's estimation it is at least a step in the right direction. With a certainty that the revolution is inevitable, he justifies the slightly dubious fact that Vienna has been published (and presumably endorsed) by Eliot, the archetypal figure of the reactionary old guard:

It is the force of history and not the taste of this or that publishers' reader or director which makes revolutionary themes break into unexpected publishers' lists. They will break into bigger strongholds yet before the last strongholds yield.21

Again, aligning himself in a position precisely contrary to the judgement of New Verse, Slater suggests that a surprised Eliot has been unable to stop the relentless drive of revolutionary ideas into the Faber house; he goes on to assert that Spender's successes of the previous year were derived not from his emotional, personal lyricism, but from his descriptive appreciation of the "futurist" machine age, amenable to the workers' imagery of factories and drive-belts:

It was noticeable that in Poems Stephen Spender wrote the more powerfully when he was turned away from personal problems to the world outside, describing with singular simplicity and liveliness an express train, pylons, a port, the landscape near an aerodrome...22

Here Slater expounds the party line precisely as he goes on to quote the final lines of "The Landscape Near an Aerodrome", with its gauche closing condemnation of the emblematic Church, which is "blocking the sun."23 This very line is likely to be have been one over which the New Verse reviewer had reservations, its simplistic stance
marring the lyrical achievements of *Poems*; on the contrary, for the *Left Review* such a correlation of organised religion with economic oppression and urban decay is not merely to be praised, but it is a high achievement of the verse.

Thus Spender's most attractive attribute for Party members is undoubtedly his atheism; it sets him significantly apart from Eliot, and other members of the Auden generation:

But along with this personal struggle there has gone in all these poets an exploitation of the more open insignia of revolution, "sound of guns in the city, the voice of the demonstrator." It was certain that one or other of them should be impelled sooner or later to visit the scene of an actual revolutionary struggle; likeliest that Stephen Spender, on the wing of the group and one of the least "religious," should lead the way. He went to Vienna soon after the February rising. This poem is the outcome.²⁴

This is an unsubtly propagandist slant on Spender's situation, suggesting that for him to "visit the scene" he is somehow engaging in the practicalities of the struggle more directly. To some extent, certainly in terms of locale, this was true. But Slater's characterisation of Spender's physical journey to Vienna can't help but romanticise his "involvement" in recent events, and bolster a misleading, "Rupert Brooke" resonance of Spender as an emblematic soldier-poet.

Most tellingly, where *New Verse* had condemned *Vienna* for its bad propaganda and its "affected ugliness", the *Left Review* celebrates the political theme while regretting any hint of lyricism that has intruded upon the text:

*Vienna* is disfigured occasionally by a poeticism of images, an unreal prettiness; but this is of small account against its determined reaching out towards the world as it is. The static landscapes of *Poems* have been exchanged for pictures of action; vague revolutionism is exchanged for reports of actual struggles.²⁵

Ultimately, and necessarily for a periodical absolutely committed to socialism and the coming revolution, Spender is finally criticised for not being socialist enough; his politics are found lacking since they are not accompanied by decisive action; Spender is reluctant to abandon the ambiguities of literary exploration in favour of the dogmas of political activism:
For this kind of writing which intends to and does go deep, the outlook of the undecided fellow-traveller is not enough. Poetry is a kind of objectivity achieved from the inside. It comes of direct experiences. It is based on practice, and intimate knowledge. That Stephen Spender is applying himself with seriousness to the questions involved is evident… But these theoretical difficulties are not to be solved in solitude. Thinking is also an act. It needs the experimental test of direct comparison with action in other forms.  

The verdict of Left Review is that Spender’s infusion of socialism and recent history into the Faber tradition is admirable, but falls short.

In “Poetry and Revolution”, Spender had accurately identified both the advantages and the limitations of writing from within a dogmatic system of belief, be it political or religious:

The writer who lived in an age when society was organised was in a much stronger position than the writer of to-day. Even to-day a writer who is religious or a Communist has the advantage of not being an individualist rebel forced to create a system of beliefs of his own. But the religious writer easily loses touch with the world and withdraws into a church where he prays with the rest of the congregation that the building will be strong enough to withstand the disaster which is going on outside. The Communist suffers because it is economically impossible for him to be a Communist before the world revolution; he must always be either a rentier or a capitalist hireling.

Here Spender is arguing that the artists’ and writers’ mission is to reflect the situation, rather than to directly propose action. Thus, Vienna’s fate at the hands of the aesthetic and political critics of its own milieu was to have frustrated both parties, New Verse inevitably deplores the inherent ugliness of depicting “the causes of our present frustration”, and Left Review regrets the lack of an additional propagandist gesture: unambiguous, proscribed revolutionary action, which a mere fellow-traveller cannot provide.

Spender’s year-end review in the Bookman had directly prefigured the critical response to Vienna; he states the problems of falling short of both targets – the ideological and the artistic:

Whether the attitude of any particular group of writers is important in a political sense may be doubted. It is obvious that any writer who forces his particular talent into a propagandist style to which he is unsuited is putting himself at an enormous
disadvantage; and if his writing shows only his zeal and his lack of political sense, he is probably doing a disservice to the cause for which he is writing. If he wants to be an active revolutionary, he would probably do better to abandon writing altogether and devote himself specifically to politics. Or if he is determined to remain a writer, perhaps he may console himself that the socialist state will be grateful for writers who are good writers...

As artists, what is most important to writers to-day is their freedom. The warning of Germany is clear enough to show them that the enemy of that freedom is fascism.

It is fascinating that Spender, so eloquently aware of the pitfalls, should only months later have rushed into the midst of this very problem; undoubtedly he consciously remains on the side of writing itself, falling short of orthodox revolutionism other than in romantic celebrations of heroism and martyrdom; but still Vienna's explicit flirtation with the revolutionary position is unquestionably open to charges of propagandism.

The tradition underpinning Spender's poem is stated from the outset: it is Eliotian despair. Mindful of his idols and the tradition within which he finds himself, Spender begins Vienna with a self-conscious indication that he is writing in the shadow of Eliot's achievement in The Waste Land. Just over a decade earlier (and at a profoundly formative moment for those of Spender's generation) Eliot had delineated within an experimental but profoundly personal poem a general malaise. It evoked a landscape of cultural and individual disillusionment which captured the imagination of young post-War readers. Specifically, Eliot had identified the landmarks of an eroding culture:

What is the city over the mountains
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air
Falling towers
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria

* Spender's review is a full page with a photo-portrait of Spender by Tony Hyndman as its centrepiece. There is no doubt that Spender is being promoted as the charming face of young literary socialism, and as much as this might pique the interest of the politically conservative reader (considering Spender's un-Bolshevik respect for his traditional forebears), it would certainly also rankle with those firmly committed to the necessary iconoclasm of the Left. Nevertheless, his analysis of the predicament remains consistent almost twenty years later: "Hitler forced politics on to non-political groups who suddenly became aware that they had interests in common. Not only the Jews, but also the intellectuals, because their position was directly attacked, and through sympathy with their colleagues who lived tormented under Fascism, acquired an intensity of vision and a fury in their non-political politics which the professional politicians did not share." (World Within World, p. 190.)
Vienna London
Unreal 39

Vienna is there, penultimate only to Eliot’s adopted London in a short, westward panorama of civilisation; the resonance of Eliot’s evocation of the Austrian city as a relic of fading grandeur certainly informs Spender’s Vienna: it is as much a symbol of spiritual decline as of the current material struggle. As he was to write: “the old imperial Vienna was a gigantic carven shell of past pretences in a city where no one pretended any longer.” With Eliot’s poem as a model, Spender wanted to tackle a pertinent political subject which held profound significance for liberally-minded intellectuals, but he also wanted to compose a poem that portrayed an intensely personal experience of contemporary life.

As we have seen, the more purely aesthetic of Vienna’s readers felt that he had erred too far on the side of transient politics, while the more politicised insisted that he had been too self-indulgently personal, and not nearly propagandist enough. His desire to align himself with a political cause, combined with his refusal to abandon the subjectivity of an individualist aesthetic, creates a poem that juxtaposes – but does not fuse – collective rhetoric with abstract statements of personal emotion. Just as in his earlier poem “Not palaces, an era’s crown” (1933), Vienna delivers, in A. Kingsley Weatherhead’s words, “a curious counterpointing of ugly self-consciousness, brutish ‘program,’ and pure lyrical poetry”. 31

The opening of Vienna is a conscious recapitulation of the rhythm and language of “What the Thunder Said” from The Waste Land. Spender commented later that the modern writers’ endgames had been his generation’s starting point, and it is literally the case here. Eliot’s refrain portrays stoic resignation:

He who was living is now dead
We who are living are now dying
With a little patience. 32

* “In no European town did the shabby contemporary life contrast so with the grandeur of the background of the past as in Vienna. [...] To go to the Vienna Opera and see the weary audience like dwarfs against an ornate interior which demanded the parade of uniforms and splendid dresses, was to see the condition to which Vienna had fallen.” (World Within World, p. 199.)
With the deliberate insertion of a light – the light of life and revolutionary hope, Spender commences the first section, “Arrival at the City”, with an explicit homage to Eliot that is to be repeated throughout the text. *Vienna* commences in the existential wilderness where *The Waste Land* ended:

Whether the man living or the man dying  
Whether this man’s dead life, or that man’s life dying  
His real life a fading light his real death a light growing.  

The image of the “growing light” of the dying man recurs at intervals: it signifies the developing flame of a political resistance inspired by tales of the revolutionary heroes. Spender depicts the uprising as a contemporary myth of epic bravery and sacrifice. The dying man is a patient in the ward where Tony Hyndman was undergoing surgery for appendicitis:

...the tube stuck in his stomach, and the rotten waste  
Dripping in flasks; eyes red, jaw dropped, his mouth  
A printed o; his kind hair flourishing  
Wild above the wreck, like grass tall on a ruin;  
Beard tufts from crannies of experience bristling.

In the first section he goes on to sketch, in a fragmented idiom further reminiscent of *The Waste Land*, “Pension Beaurepas”, where the English persona that seems to be the observing consciousness of the poem is exposed to snippets of bizarre conversation that hecatalogues without explication. The owner of the pension is portrayed as a petty authoritarian, an implicit critique of Chancellor Dollfuss; he sits,

...at the head of our table  
Mister proprietor, oh our king and prime minister  
Our wet dream dictator, our people’s president  
Printed in papers and cut out with scissors

The style is deliberately obscure and disjointed, akin to the “telegraphese” shorthand employed by Auden, and more austere than the rolling lyricism of *Poems*. The poet-observer is apparently identified as “a stranger” (p.14) who has come to Vienna,
6. Vienna (1934)

...this city
With statues of desirable angels
Whose tears are solid worlds; with palaces;
With songs buried beneath the ground like rotted leaves...

The speaker aligns himself with the dead, the “statued” figures of the city’s history, and those who have died in the recent conflict. The elderly inhabitants are aligned with a deathly acceptance of the oppressive regime. Within all this comes an enigmatic allusion to Spender’s relationship with Gardiner:

A word, a brink, like the first uttered love.
Upon the pulsing throat springs the hot tiger.
Instantly released, in joy and sorrow they fall,
Escaping the whole world, two separate worlds of one,
Writing a new world with their figure 2.
Accepting the dreaded, the whispered happy postures
They dive into their dream with dreamed of gestures.

The lovers are united “in joy and sorrow”, “Accepting the dreaded” – which signals both the ill fate of the country, and the previously-feared heterosexual act. Gardiner was Spender’s first female lover, and this compounds the notion that such lines, woven throughout the text, describe their relationship. It is a strange coalition of social history and intensely personal experiences that is being established here and elsewhere, within individual lines of the poem. Around the couple, the city is a realm of the living dead, those who accept the Fascist regime, while the martyred heroes of the uprising possess the light of life and revolutionary hope – manifested in the will and actions of their followers, and in the reverie of the poet whom they have inspired.

Despite its obscurity and its continual shifts of tone, the first section contains much vivid imagery, and compelling “snapshot” portrayals of a city in the midst of social unease:

The live ones are
Those who, going to work early, behold the world’s
Utter margin where all is stone and iron,
And wrong.
Part II – "Parade of the Executive" – shows Spender at his most satirical. It is a dialogue of representations of "The Executive" and "The Unemployed". The former is sarcastically portrayed, in a voice that hovers between the absurd statements of the Executive itself and the utterances of a sardonic commentator. The Executive is particularly keen on the pomp of its grand marches and displays of organisation, which it employs,

In order to create order, in order
To illustrate the truth that we are your ancestors

Of course, the "truth" here is not the "truth" that has been encountered, without irony, in Spender's earlier oeuvre. The "truth" of the Fascist Executive's propagandist display is paper-thin and cynically performed. Spender is frequently emphatic of the need for spiritual ancestors, those – like the revolutionaries – who have died for the freedom of their spiritual descendants who, in turn, inherit the gains of that sacrifice. Spender insists that the deceitful and falsely authoritarian Executive deserves no such respect, and he communicates vehement contempt for the leaders; the sardonic tone is unusual in his oeuvre, and unrestrained:

Let no one disagree let Dollfuss
Fey, Stahremberg, the whole bloody lot
Appear frequently, shaking hands at street corners
Looking like bad sculptures of their photographs.

As a counterpoint to "The Executive", Spender provides a straightforward, dialectical representation of "The Unemployed", who are unceremoniously marginalised and forgotten from sight by the impressive showmanship of the ruling body, which (although Spender deems it unnecessary to outline this obvious fact) is responsible for their unemployment in the first place:

Dispersed like idle points of a vague star:
Huddled on benches, nude at bathing places,
And made invisible by crucifying suns.
Spender, the bourgeois poet, is unafraid to put words into the mouth of the proletariat with whom he sympathises, and he relates their intellectual indifference to the themes of his poem, the political and the historical struggle:

Is history ungrateful? Do books
Ignore us? Can a government be unimportant?

Spender's portrayal of the unemployed continues, as in *Poems*, to fuse conceptions of the literal body of the people with their place in the dialectical, Marxist-conceived society. As in *Poems*, Spender fuses social compassion with an aesthetic and sensual representation. The mass of unemployed is an army of naked, beautiful, but socially redundant bodies:

there is left only beauty
Of merest being, of swimming, of somehow not starving:
[...]

...Pathic
Strength of marble thighs. Greek chest, a torso
Without purposive veins travelling to hands.

They may be "ignored by books", but neither are they portrayed as a class that is eager, or even half-eager, to learn, or to think. Spender is sketching at images, but in his representation the purposeless workers tend towards decorous desirability. The unemployed is not a "purposive" class, literally or emblematically.

Despite the fact that its orthodox Christianity puts it at a considerable ideological distance from Spender's poem, Eliot's *The Rock* (1934), a pageant for the Sadler's Wells Theatre on behalf of the Forty-five churches fund of the London Diocese, provided Spender with a formal precedent for his dramatic delineation of the Unemployed and the Executive. In its review of *Vienna*, *New Verse* had mentioned the ideological disparity of these two works, coming from the same publishing house within a few months of one another and both under Eliot's editorship. But there are many close formal and thematic parallels. In fact, there is an obvious intertextual relationship between the two works which deserves examination.
There is no doubt that Eliot makes specific reference to Spender and his contemporaries in *The Rock*, and Spender takes up the gauntlet with a direct recapitulation and adaptation of Eliot’s text. Eliot presents various social groups who approach the Chorus (which seeks to rebuild the crumbling Church), including socialists and fascists, and he alludes to Spender and his Leftist generation with irony:

REDSHIRTS [*in unison, with military gestures*].

*Our verse*

*is free*

*as the wind on the steppes*

*as love in the heart of the factory worker*

*thousands and thousands of workers*

*all working*

*all loving*

*in the cities*

*on the steppes*

*production has risen by twenty point six per cent*

*we can laugh at God!*

*our workers*

*all working*

*our turbines*

*all turning*

*our sparrows*

*all chirping*

*all denounce you, deceivers of the people!*

*CHORUS.*

*Alas! there is no help here.*

*Yet they are young, with fairly intelligent faces.*

Eliot delivers a wry pastiche of the various exhortations to “comrades” which permeate Spender’s *Poems* and Day Lewis’s *The Magnetic Mountain*; the “factory”, “turbines” and “sparrow” effectively mimic the unusual juxtapositions of Spender’s idealisation of the post-revolutionary socialist state. The Chorus’s sardonic judgement suggests the bemused Bloomsbury response to the socialist fervour of the young poets, perplexed

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1 The pageant was performed in May and June of 1934, and Faber published Eliot’s text simultaneously.
that the young and "fairly intelligent" should be so fixated upon such notions as mass-
thought, and undisturbed by the cultural emptiness proposed by communism.

Conversely, the fascists are portrayed as racist drones:

BLACKSHIRTS.
Your vesture, your gesture, your speech and your face,
Proclaim your extraction from Jewish race.
We have our own prophets, who're ready to speak
For a week and a day and a day and a week.
This being the case, we must firmly refuse
To descend to palaver with anthropoid Jews.45

The apolitical, pro-church conclusion is consistent with Eliot's longstanding
philosophy; that religion, like art, must keep itself aloof from the incidental allegiances
of politics:

CHORUS.
There is no help in parties, none in interests,
There is no help in those whose souls are choked and swaddled
In the old winding sheets of place and power
Or the new winding sheets of mass-made thought.46

Similarly, Eliot gives voice to the Unemployed, and his portrayal is reminiscent of the
forlorn, piteous figures that had hovered on the peripheries of Spender's Poems:

VOICE OF THE UNEMPLOYED [afar off].
In this land
There shall be one cigarette to two men,
To two women half a pint of bitter
Ale...

CHORUS.
What does the world say, does the whole world stray in
High-powered cars on a by-pass way?

VOICE OF THE UNEMPLOYED [more faintly].
In this land
No man has hired us. . . .

CHORUS.
Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed The Church?\

The philosophically circular conclusion is symptomatic of Eliot’s belief in austere religious order as a social foundation; unsurprisingly, the pageant was to get short shrift in the *Left Review*. Edgell Rickword’s essay “Straws for the Wary: Antecedents to Fascism” analyses the latent right-wing tendencies in modern literature, and true to Rickword’s socialist affiliation, identifies Eliot’s endorsement of Christianity as the acceptable public face of an insidious and cruel conservatism, the masses’ opium:

> Since the economics of fascism inevitably leads to want, the ideology of its literature is full of eulogies of the beauties of sacrifice (in a world overstocked with everything) and the superiority of spiritual to material enjoyment. “None of you is without a ‘ome,” the “serio-comic” workman exhorted us in Eliot’s *The Rock*, “but God ‘as no ‘ome. Build ‘Im one.” And this was at Sadler’s Wells, within two minutes walk of some of the most abominable slums.

Similarly, Charles Madge, writing in the avowedly apolitical (but practically socialist) *New Verse*, poured scorn on Eliot’s embracing of Christian dogma, and *The Rock*’s implicit disdain for the workers manifested in weak “cockneyisms”:

> Mr. Eliot has thought it necessary, in a world menaced by Communists, Fascists and Plutocrats, to make propaganda for the Church of England, and incidentally for Major Douglas and ‘modern’ church architecture. He has therefore written down to the level of his audience, but it is difficult to see what he imagines his audience to be. Is it Stephen Spender’s audience? Or J.B. Priestley’s? Or is he simply playing to a gallery of curates? ... The most depressing thing about it all is the anti-intellectualism of the choruses.

There is clearly a sense, which emerges from this critical dissection in 1934, that there are opposing writers in the class struggle who represent successive generations and whose weapon of choice is modern verse. The portrayal of the Redshirts and of the

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* The *Listener*, for whom Eliot is a regular and respected contributor, has nothing but praise for the pageant in its editorial: “‘The Rock’ most certainly does entertain; as well as its choruses and historical pictures, it has Cockney back-chat, topical references to Redshirts and Blackshirts and the Douglas Credit Scheme, a music-hall song and dance, and even a ballet (of Whittington and his Cat) [...] Those to whom Mr. Eliot’s name is synonymous with ‘modernist’ and ‘difficult’ poetry may be surprised that audiences of
workers, the implied audience, and the failure to acknowledge the practicalities of the European crisis are perceived as signals of allegiance against the Left – which, certainly, they are. Eliot’s crime, moreover, is regarded as doubly damning since it is a betrayal of the apparent intellectual cynicism which had fuelled *The Waste Land*, that continually-invoked Ur-text for Madge and Spender’s generation. Madge regrets that “the death instinct which in ‘The Waste Land’ became poetry and in ‘Ash Wednesday’ became religion has for the time being overwhelmed the poet.”

Taking its cue from the spectrum of partisan utterances in *The Rock*, the fascists are given a voice in *Vienna*. Here they are the right-wing government, and their speech provides a crude outlining of their procedural policy. The propagandist language that Spender employs – cruel euphemisms for the administration of death – anticipates Auden’s “Spain”:

‘...the moulding of History
‘Invests truth. Murder is necessary.
‘A scalpel excellently reduces
‘Warts, rebels...’

In his seminal essay on the politics of 1930s literature, “Inside the Whale”, Orwell reacted scathingly to Auden’s detached and indifferent use of the phrase “necessary murder” in his delineation of the operations of the Spanish resistance against Franco. “Necessity” had become the cynical euphemism for the political exigency of murder, and ultimately of genocide. In *Vienna*, Spender gives the phrase to the Executive rather than the resistance. But the fact that such phraseology is so easily attributed to oppressors and revolutionaries alike is perhaps indicative of the moral quandaries faced by writers of the 1930s – the age demanded that they choose allegiance in an unavoidably violent conflict.*

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* It was Spender’s “In a new land lynching is necessary” (the opening line of “The Victim”) that had first impressed Auden several years previously at Oxford. In classic Auden style, he suggested that Spender

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bishops, aldermen, church workers, school children and ‘general public’, most of whom are probably unfamiliar with his other works, should be able to join in anything written by him as they do in the last chorus of all. Those, however, who remember the smart rhythms of ‘Sweeney Agonistes’, or the clear lines of the ‘Journey of the Magi’, will not be in the least surprised; but simply pleased that a great contemporary poet should have been given the opportunity of writing directly for a popular audience.” *(Listener, Vol. XI, 6 June 1934, p. 945.)*
6. Vienna (1934)

Spender continues in this section to provide compelling delineation of the social strata of the city. At times, the speaking consciousness is hard to identify. Here, the Executive is implied, although the quotation marks which have signified its public utterances are absent:

If only one can silence every voice,
Assertion of the primitive crocus,
Flooded with snow, but melting not to water,
Melting into summer.

We listen at the walls of wombs. Does life
Contradict us? Life? Life? In oil-tarred pissoirs
(Not so) amongst cartoons? In back streets,
In rooms with bugs, in courts with sunless flowers
Where radio crazily jazzes
And the gross arms of women beat their carpets?

Why did one dying, among their wounded,
In a dark groaning attic, suddenly sing?
And there moved as actively as on a movie screen
Before their eyes the May Day celebrating;

Memory of sky as blue as woman’s veins
But with veins of red, sky blue and yellow
Rejoicing with them, and the blood flags streaming,
The crass grass for lovers’ pillow.\(^\text{23}^\)

There is an effective and modern idiom being employed here: the disaffection of the masses and the paranoia of the oppressive government are played out amidst a wholly modern city, where “radio crazily jazzes” and cartoons and cinemas provide the chaotic, chattering backdrop; meanwhile the irrepressible, rebel life-force of the people – the “primitive crocus” – has been seeded.

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keep this striking line and discard the rest of the poem. The full first stanza of this unpublished poem actually makes “necessity” – that ever-recurring 1930s trope – its theme:

In a new land lynching is necessary.
Necessity the hundred-jawed machine
Twists to humanity the one man’s eyes
But has no eyes, his stare at no companions.

(M.S. sent to Gabriel Carritt, circa 1930.)

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The question which the poem poses in the aftermath of the insurrection: "What is wrong?", is ultimately answered by the appearance of "The Stranger". The Stranger is described variously as "One totally disinterested" (p. 24), and "a witness free from danger". Spender is of course the stranger in a strange land, the impartial poet-observer who is in no particular danger in the midst of tumultuous native social events. His answer is simple – that "fear in armies / Breeds death" (p. 25), a reference to the multiple armed partisans of Vienna – the Army itself, the Socialist rebels, the pro-German Nazis – that make catastrophe inevitable.

The final lines on the Stranger, however, suddenly throw his identity into confusion:

Would he forgive us?

Would he
Glance at a minister who smiles and smiles
‘How now! A rat? Dead for a ducat.’ Shoot!\(^54\)

This is a reference to the assassination of Dollfuss, identified previously as the incessantly smiling showman. There seems to be some form of sympathy on the part of the poet for the leader’s assassins; or at least it is being suggested that Dollfuss’s death was inevitable, either at the hands of the Socialists themselves or by some other party.

The messianic, “sandalled” Stranger is, as Samuel Hynes has noted, a character of various guises who is common to 1930s literature, an apocalyptic figure of uncertain allegiance, but of clear vision, a counterpart to Auden’s mythic “Airman” in The \textit{Orators}.\(^55\) Such Christ-like characters are both the types and anti-types of the dictators coming to power in Europe during these years. They are those clear-sighted individuals who see – or claim to see – solutions to the social crisis. Once again, Spender is almost certainly referencing Eliot’s pageant, in which the Stranger proves to be St. Peter, the eponymous “Rock”, and foundation of the Church:

\textbf{CHORUS LEADER.}
Silence! and preserve respectful distance.
For I perceive approaching
The Rock. Who will perhaps answer our doubtings.
6. Vienna (1934)

He who has seen what has happened.
And who sees what is to happen.
The God-shaken, in whom is the truth inborn. 56

Significantly, in Spender’s analysis, the all-seeing Stranger is one detached from the
local situation, from local nationality, and also from the shackles of religion. The
“truth” he provides is that of the detached observing eye, separated from the struggle by
nationality and class but united in a shared quest for liberty; of course, the belief in the
“truth” of revolutionary action and the “truth” of the “God-shaken” have similar
limitations. Spender’s declared desire for a seismic re-ordering of society to form an ideal state is not wholly dissimilar to the Christian desire for a “final order”,
perpetually on the verge of being established. The former requires human action, the
latter only God’s will, but in both cases, as Frank Kermode has argued, the apocalypse is always immanent, but not necessarily imminent. 57

Spender’s drafts of the poem associate the prophetic Stranger more closely with
the poet himself; Vienna is intended as a warning to English society – a purpose which Spender chose to leave only implicit in the published version. The drafts repeatedly address Spender’s own countrymen:

Island and Englishmen
I see a barrier divide
Your existence in two halves 58

In this way, like Auden’s The Orators, Spender’s assumed role as social prophet is explicit:

Hear me, O hidden under sleep
Energy and need, exiled into dreams
[unreadable] and desire: O sea
And landscape buried under aims
Of the machinery of man’s will: dive deep
With me beneath the surface of what seems
To the real... 59

Spender’s “underground” is the subterranean world of the resistance, the world of individual truth, and the “tectonic” future state of the poem’s climax, which does not
acknowledge the present nationalist boundaries that enable the present conflicts. This realm, partly inspired by Owen’s “Strange Meeting”, is where the messianic Stranger’s unified society will be forged.

Part III, “The Death of Heroes”, is a fragmented narrative, written from the point of view of the surviving socialist rebels, the “lesser” heroes of the uprising. Most have been imprisoned, and some are awaiting execution by the government. There are many revolutionary slogans throughout this section of the poem, all recalling the “light” of the dying man. It is difficult to ascertain how sincere Spender is being in his use of revolutionary platitudes. A repeated motif in this section is the familiar notion that the cause is greater than any individual life, and that to die for the cause is to further the cause and hence transcend a meaningless death:

We in prison meditate much on the rare gentian
Are terrible in our envy of the beasts’ freedom
Become dangerous as birds, as flowers. The dead, as stones.
Rosa Luxembourg wished finally to be a bird,
Watched grass and dreamt of orchids. Uttermost life is birds
Or undying anemone, as the dying man saying
‘Here the insurrection ends, here revolution begins’,
His saying this, not dying.\footnote{60}

The characteristic lyricism would suggest that Spender is not being ironic in such passages; but after the cynical portrayal of the Executive, the change in tone is hard to accept. The formal chaos of the verses seems to act against the introduction of orthodox communist statements. And Spender’s own, bourgeois position makes the determination of tenor rather difficult. The reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* felt this particularly:

> An apparent identification of himself with the Viennese workers arouses a faint scepticism in the mind of the reader... We are led, on the whole, not only to pity for these Socialists, but also to a view of the poet himself in the act of feeling pitiful.\footnote{51}

This is a difficulty that Spender encountered in his earlier work; there is a very fine line between the enactment of pity, and the self-dramatisation of being pitiful, particularly when there is a clear personal and social division between the speaker and his subject.
The named heroes of the uprising have historical counterparts: Weissel (who smuggled guns through the sewers), and Wallisch, who carried weapons across the mountains with his wife. Here, Spender is directly and purposefully mythologising individuals who were active and heroic in the uprising.

Despite the lyrical sections, much of the verse is abrupt, even anti-poetical, at points reminiscent of the catalogues of bravery in epic sagas, as it lists the actions of the rebel heroes. It is not hard to see why contemporary critics of the poem, of various aesthetic and political positions, were so perplexed. Spender’s previous published work had successfully fused pastoral and lyric modes with modern, industrial subject matter, but here the language itself is given the abruptness of modern industry. It borrows the pseudo-documentary style of Auden’s *The Orators*, creating a Joycean synthesis of epic heroism and modern events. It is a shame that Spender seems to have so readily acceded to the reviewers’ bewilderment at its form, and did not allow *Vienna* to be republished. Its collision of styles contains a great deal of unpolished verve, and unusual flashes of hope and cynicism that are true to their time, and all the more effective for their inherent contradiction and irresolution. Clearly, Spender is attempting to incorporate the direct statements of news reports and propagandist narratives of the struggle into his verse; this is, in a sense, an attempt to de-personalise the text, or at least to infuse the individual consciousness of the poem with those external, objective facts of history which have assailed his personal experience.

Virginia Woolf’s “A Letter to a Young Poet”, one of the Hogarth Press open letters series, had addressed itself to an amalgam of Auden, Spender, and John Lehmann, and had urged them to absorb the facts of external life into their solipsistic meditations, while acknowledging that the nuts and bolts of modern material existence seem antipathetic to verse:

> But how are you going to get out, into the world of other people? That is your problem now, if I may hazard a guess – to find the right relationship, not that you know yourself, between the self that you know and the world outside. It is a difficult problem. And there are a thousand voices prophesying despair. Science, they say, has made poetry impossible; there is no poetry in motor cars and wireless. And we have no religion. All is tumultuous and transitional.
6. Vienna (1934)

This is actually a fair description of the aesthetics and imagery of Vienna. As a “way forward” for youth who are interested in verse, Woolf advocates a new kind of poetry which must incorporate this mechanisation of life:

That perhaps is your task – to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity, to absorb every experience that comes your way fearlessly and saturate it completely so that your poem is a whole, not a fragment...⁶³

This is a similar sentiment to Wyndham Lewis’s advice – that the poetry should transcend the fragment, or that the fragment should be part of an organised whole that has its own comprehensible sensibility; this is the very essence of high modernism. It is entirely significant that the two writers who seem to have had the most to propose regarding Spender’s developing poetry were contemporary novelists who had limited interest in poetry as a medium and who advocated, above all, the cultivation of a sensibility that had essential observations to make about modern existence.

Spender’s aim was rather different from that of a novelist: the inner tension of Vienna is that the lyrical ambiguity which is vital to the verse is harmful to the specific political moral that the poem implies; the gesture of writing a poem about the uprising is itself a political statement, regardless of its conclusions, poetic or political. Writing to Woolf from Vienna while writing the poem, Spender alludes to Woolf’s published letter, and indicates that his thoughts are very much occupied with the connection between the novel and poetry:

I remember that your books – the ones I most like – seem to be poetry. Still, poetry is what I want to do, if I can only break away from the dead rut of most contemporary stuff. In this poem I have tried to make the daffodils dance (was it that? I forget) with the taxis.⁶⁴

His ambition is clearly to work up some kind of synthesis of abrupt diction and lyrical style according to Woolf’s challenge; though Woolf herself was not to be impressed by the resultant poem and declined to review it.
In “Poetry and Revolution” Spender had theorised what might be possible with the incorporation of propaganda into poetry, and Vienna constitutes his most explicit attempt at this kind of fusion of forms:

I think propagandist poetry might be written, if the poem were inoculated so extensively with propaganda that essentially non-poetic material came to form a pattern which was like poetry. The mistake made in most propagandist poems is that the writer half the time is trying to create a poem which is self-contained, and the other half he is trying to drag us away from poetry into the real world. He should abandon the essentially “poetic” aim, that of constructing a self-contained poem, altogether. I recommend the programme as an example of literary form which might be developed.®

While he does not set out to establish an unambiguous political “programme” in Vienna, Spender certainly does employ elements of programmatic language within the text to form “a pattern which [is] like poetry”; just as the artful montage of literary allusions in The Waste Land had depicted a culture – or a learned consciousness – in tatters, so too Spender’s poem depicts an unstable society in economic crisis and extreme ideological flux. Vienna lacks the playful explanatory notes of Eliot’s work, and perhaps a glossary of names, locations and events (both historical and particular to Spender’s own experiences) would have suggested his intention, or have clarified the relationship between the “self-contained” aesthetics and “the real world.”

Part III ends on a note of bathos: the lack of heroic glamour in the underground resistance; the indignities inherent in being part of a fractured and secretive organisation:

Lucky, those who were killed outright: unlucky those
Burrowing survivors without ‘tasks fit for heroes’:
Constructing cells, ignorant of their leaders, assuming roles;
They change death’s signal honour for a life of moles.  

Due to the evasive tone and the invisible transitions of the speaking persona, it is difficult to ascertain whether this statement of regret belongs to the rebels themselves, or is being attributed to them by an observer. In either case, what is expressed is a preference for the romantic and propagandist “signal honour” of a dramatic death to the unseen machinations of the “mole”. Is Spender actually suggesting that martyrs are
infinitely preferable to unsung heroes? It seems unlikely, but his reticence about clarity of meaning, on such a significantly propagandist subject, makes it apparent why the poem was to offend both the politically astute and the poetically rigorous reviewers alike.

The final section, "Analysis and Statement" shifts the poem towards resolution. It introduces "Five Voices" that initially appear to belong to members of the socialist resistance, but their assiduously apolitical statements gradually reveal that they are aspects of the poet's consciousness:

Beneath the lower ribs and the navel
I hold the desert, dividing my health
With five voices.

"Analysis and Statement" constitutes the fusion of the personal – albeit obscure – aspects of the poem with the more overtly historical passages, by means of the repetition of established phrases and motifs from different sections. Spender achieves more lucidity than he himself believed after the poem was published, reeling from the smart of baffled and disappointed reviews. While the final section does begin obscurely, it then gradually modulates towards a resolution of its established motifs. Spender introduces "Five Voices" that initially, in their context, suggest the abstracted personae of partisans of the socialist resistance, but their assiduously apolitical statements imply that they might rather be aspects of the poet/speaker/stranger's consciousness.

It is impossible to ascertain precisely the nature of each of the speakers, whether or not they represent specific aspects of a single personality, or merely ideas, but it is quite easy to rationalise them as follows: "A" could well be describing Spender's relationship with Gardiner in the midst of the political turmoil:

* World Within World would illuminate the nature of Spender's disillusionment at the reality of underground revolutionary activities: "Now when I went to stay with Elizabeth [Muriel Gardiner], I was sometimes present at meetings of the 'cell'. [...] They had in common the kind of anonymity which casts a certain drabness over even the most eccentric, when they are bound together by exile, persecution and anxiety. They lived hunted lives. Despite their courage, they were exposed to a kind of corruption which was a result of their circumstances." (WWW, p. 198.)
A.: 'Amongst friends, and therefore very alone,  
‘Our understanding is a recognizable saviour...

The friends and lovers, together in a friendless city of multifarious partisan groups. “B”, in its abstract simplicity, might refer to the absolute poet’s vision; and an aesthetic faculty which is beyond moral or social concerns:

B.: ‘The immeasurable eye an instant wide  
‘That feeds on fields of white and separates  
‘The countless dark: I value its  
‘Album of snaps.’

There is also a suggestion, consistent with Spender’s “Movietone” imagery elsewhere of the flickering projection screen, recording history – the personal “snaps” and the panorama of unfolding events. “C” perhaps refers to the homosexual aspect of the speaker’s personality, with its suggestion (recalling the highly physical portrayal of the Unemployed in part II) of a vain and intense relationship:

C.: ‘I love a friend  
‘Who is external...  
‘... I have become  
‘A singular phantom  
‘That haunts his constant dream.’

“D” seems to portray a personality that has been betrayed in love, perhaps one member of the group which included Spender, Tony and Muriel; but it simultaneously suggests Spender’s characteristic all-encompassing romantic sympathy, which might extend to various parties in the political conflict as well as his personal life:

‘There is no question more of not forgiving  
[.]  
‘Yet sometimes I wish that I were loud and angry  
‘Without this human mind like a doomed sky  
‘That loves, as it must enclose, all.

His sympathetic liberalism is rarely “loud and angry”, and here is identified as a limiting compassion which tends to reconcile disparate elements beneath “a doomed sky” rather
than rigidly delineate – and keep separate – the conflicting elements. "E" describes the empty pomp of the Fascists leaders, stating that:

`At last we count only on corruption
'That men live from admiration;`

These personae are not unambiguously drawn, and do not ultimately described precise emotional or political positions; their significance is the disparity and disconnection which they represent; they are internal utterances which form part of a developing continuum of consciousness that has been divided and assigned arbitrary alphabetic labels. The personal, political and psychological divisions are not ideal: after recapitulating the Eliotian motif of the opening lines, the poem identifies the single source of the five voices as the poem's speaker:

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Beneath the lower ribs and the navel
I hold the desert, dividing my health
With five voices.68
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The notion of non-integration of subject and personality is thus explicitly delineated. The idea (as Spender himself has latterly asserted) that he felt he had failed to fuse the personal and the public, should not be taken to suggest that the poem itself presumes this success. On the contrary, the dislocated language and splintered personae of the text plainly state that the uprising and the psychology of the writer are not to receive any reductive treatment.

Spender's poem contradicts the suggestion of Michael Roberts (who was at this time still an orthodox communist*), in the month of Vienna's publication, that a sense of the determinedly heroic and active had returned to poetry after the "paralysis" and self-questioning neuroses of the twenties:

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These figures represent something essential in humanity, magnified to heroic proportions. They represent the answer to doubt, uncertainty, and indecision, and the reintegration of divided personalities. The returning hero, the man who knows his own mind and is certain of his own desires is the antithesis of Eliot's Prufrock.69
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* See the previous chapter for a more detailed assessment of Roberts's "orthodoxy."
Although *Vienna* features heroes (and villains), with sources in real historical events, and even a mysterious “Stranger” with relative clarity of vision, it also asserts absolute disintegration of the self, an uncertainty of mind and desire far more extreme than that of Prufrock. It appears that Spender is willing to lay bare the non-integration of his disparate parts – his homosexual personality, his heterosexual personality, his aesthetic vision, his social and political conscience. And he repeatedly juxtaposes a fractured and wilfully difficult idiom with a contradictory, direct and optimistic lyricism. *Vienna*, at this point, is a statement of irresolution. It is closer to the non-integrated and self-diagnostic strain in high modernism which the *Left Review*’s Edgell Rickword had characterised in Spender’s idols Eliot, Lawrence and Joyce, all of them conservative, and according to the *Left Review*, latent fascists at the very least.\(^7\)

However, in the final verses, the *Vienna* adopts a new synthesis of the preceding chaotic elements. Referring to “a woman / With dark eyes neglected”,

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Our sexes are the valid flowers
Sprinkled across the total world and wet
With night. It surely was my father
His dry love his dry falling
Through dust and death to stamp my feature
That made me ever fear that fortunate posture.\(^7\)
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It is a sexual resolution of sorts; a self-consciously Freudian re-construction of the sexual self in the heterosexual act. In fact, the “valid flowers” here are a reference to the intense sexual idealism of D.H. Lawrence, a profound formative influence on the younger Spender. In fact, he continued to be an influence throughout the decade, not least on Spender’s story “The Island”, which retains the Dionysian echoes of Lawrence’s “The Ladybird” and other of his intense stories of the dark neuroses which are cured in heterosexual coupling.

Auden claimed Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922) as a dubious influence on the strange psychological analyses of *The Orators*, and this text was unquestionably a powerful – and admonishing – influence on the effete, homosexual
Vienna (1934)

Spender. In World Within World, albeit with the foreshortening of two decades, he vividly recalls Lawrence's hold over his ideas while at Oxford:

Meeting is a dark mystery, a kind of godliness, and even within the fusion of the sexual act the separateness of man and woman remain. This paradox of a fusion of existences which cannot become one another is for [Lawrence] the creative mystery. For from the contact of the individual with what is outside him, with nature, and with other people, there is a renewal of himself.72

Spender's fixation on the relation between the internal and external world, whether in politics or relationships, would continue to inform the schematic phenomenology of his poetry, and would even provide the title of his autobiography. It has particular bearing on his self-criticism with regard to the normalcy, or even health, of his sexuality and social class:

Lawrence, besides opening my eyes to a world that was just not potential literature, also seemed to challenge my own existence, my mind and my body. I felt the force of his criticism of his contemporaries and did not feel that I myself was spared his condemnation of Oxford undergraduates and namby-pamby young men. Worst of all, I felt that my work must suffer from that which was lacking in my own physical and mental being.73

Lawrence's Fantasia seems certainly to be one of the sources for Spender's formulation of the "valid flowers" of heterosexual sex, with its archetypal restatement of the Platonic ideal of physical love between the sexes:

Sex surely has a specific meaning. Sex means the being divided into male and female, and the magnetic desire or impulse which puts male apart from female, in a negative or sundering magnetism, but which also draws male and female together in a long and infinitely varied approach towards the critical act of coition. Sex without the consummating act of coition is never quite sex, in human relationships: just as a eunuch is never quite a man. That is to say, the act of coition is the essential clue to sex.74

In an era of passionate auto-didacticism, with intellectual dictators such as Lewis and Wells as well as political dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini, it is unsurprising that Lawrence's socio-sexual theories frequently gave way to politics. The next step
after a healthy coition, is to have a shared goal with working male comrades, but one quite different from the socialist ideal:

The next relation has got to be a relationship of men towards men in a spirit of unfathomable trust and responsibility, service and leadership, obedience and pure authority. Men have got to choose their leaders, and obey them to the death. And it must be a system of culminating aristocracy, society tapering like a pyramid to the supreme leader.

All of which sounds very distasteful at the moment. But upon all the vital lessons we have learned during our era of love and spirit and democracy we can found our new order.75

Lawrence's ideal social order is for comradeship under the rule of a righteous dictator. Seemingly, there must be a relation between the politics of a writer and their views on human relationships, and in Spender's case his visionary idol was confusing the issues yet further, and to the detriment of Spender's self-definition.

The profound sense of admonishment which Spender felt as a result of reading Lawrence affected his sense of his own sexual health and his judgement of his own bourgeois social class. Just as in his appreciation of literary idols whose politics he disagrees with (Lewis and Campbell), Spender continues to affiliate himself with aesthetic and political ideologies which likewise judge him harshly, a kind of ideological masochism. He goes on in World Within World, aligning the disapproval he felt from Lawrence with that he felt was pointed at him by orthodox socialism:

This lack of confidence in the quality of my own nature was reinforced later by Communism. Perhaps I was the type of cerebral modern writer condemned by Lawrence, or perhaps the bourgeois serving the interest of a class which imprisoned me in its own decadent social environment, condemned by the Communists.76

A letter written to Geoffrey Grigson during the composition of Vienna in August 1934 gives evidence that during the writing of the poem, with its depiction of his strangely idealised relationship with Gardiner, Spender's sexual definitions were under assessment. He discusses the long poem and Tony's appendicitis, and in an aside on the idea of marriage he suggests:
I want that [marriage] chiefly on account of my work, because I stifle in a buggers’ world, and I feel more and more that whether I myself am normal or not (that doesn’t matter much) I must live in a world of men and women.  

It is clear that while writing the poem Spender was intellectually moving towards the Lawrentian ideal of heterosexual symbolism. At the same time, his description of “Liars and buggers under the dark lid of centuries” suggests distaste at the furtive world of homosexual society, whether he felt this or not. Still, a conclusion is not reached, and the five personae must be regarded as being symptomatic of a deliberate dissociation of the poet and the poem, and mark most clearly its difference from the work of Eliot which it evokes so consistently. Eliot had employed “different voices” in The Waste Land, but he had not done so in an effort to delineate political arguments or a particular inner conflict. And while Spender might be unlike his Leftist contemporaries in this unpropagandist indulgence of the divided self, he does not attain the philosophical assuredness of Eliot, who was fortuitously timely in his portrayal of profound uncertainty, and, as a poet, perhaps more shrewdly knowing of his own neuroses.

It is certain that this sexual theme is central to the text, an emotional core to which the revolutionary activities are a “surrounding” phenomenon. In October, shortly before Vienna’s publication, Spender wrote to Christopher Isherwood regarding “the change”, observing that despite his affection for Tony he feels that heterosexual sex is more satisfying. In a letter to Isherwood written from Vienna in January 1935, even before many of the poem’s reviews had appeared, Spender regrets the fact that his abrupt de-personalisation has given the poem too little emotional context, and suggests that transforming it into a drama might clarify the personal themes:

I am turning Vienna into a play. All the part that is in the poem is background, seen through the eyes of the three protagonists, who are, roughly, Tony, Muriel, & myself. The whole approach of the poem was direct in a sense that made it obscure. The conditions under which I was describing [what] was seen were all omitted, and without the poem being thus conditioned it had no foreground. I can’t tell you how I repent about that.
6. Vienna (1934)

Despite the "directness" which leads to obscurity, all of the relevant personal information is present in the text of the poem; and in the final section Spender makes it quite explicit that the confusion is being drawn within a wholly psychological terrain. Spender himself is the "protagonist" negotiating the chaos of emotional and social upheaval. The final, phantasmagorical journey is once again reminiscent of the end sequence of The Waste Land:

Across the sliding tracks of shale
And through the fossilized ribs of a gaunt valley
To a pass where the cars make their crossing
I continued my travels through an unknown, mental country.

This "mental country" is an eerie fusion of the modern landscape with the human form, a literalisation of the dual thematic aims of the poem. After a catalogue of decadent and apocalyptic images that occasionally elide the "underground" revolutionaries with a covert homosexual culture: "That final war cuts off the hydra heads / Of our young nations"; "Those who hang about / At jaws of lavatories, advertising their want of love"; "Liars and buggers under the dark lid of centuries", the poem ends on a characteristic sequence of uplifting, Spenderian rhetoric, which attempts to unite the various threads of the preceding poem and also to suggest a note of hope, for what the superior Stranger might be able to achieve:

Outside their stalking inner worlds, the dead man's life,
The real life a fading light the real death a light growing;
Berlin, Paris, London, this Vienna, emerging upon
Further terrible ghosts from dreams. He greets the
Historians of the future, the allies of no city,
O man and woman minute beneath their larger day;
Those burrowing beneath frontier, shot as spies because
Sensitive to new contours; those building insect cells
Beneath the monstrous shell of ruins, altering
The conformation of masses, that at last conjoin
Accomplished in justice to reject a husk.
Their walls already rest upon their dead, on Wallisch

*I see Eliot as an extremely isolated artist of great sensibility, whose work at one moment, in The Waste Land, achieved a wide objectivity; but his poetry narrows on the one side back to Prufrock, on the other (cntd.)
6. Vienna (1934)

Trapped in the mountains, on Weissel the engineer
Who lied to save his followers ‘I forced them after
‘With my revolver’. On all the others. These are
Our ancestors.⁸¹

There is no doubt that Spender is alluding to the portentous roll-call of city names in
The Waste Land, but he imagines beyond its “closing time” finality to a new world amid
the “shell of ruins” which the underground resistance is building. Spender completes
the fractured poem: a faith in the unknown frontiers of some unified future is what
encourages the libertarian rebels to fight on, but ironically it is also this faith which
drives them to destruction at the hands of ignorant and reactionary oppressors. The
rebels are “Our ancestors” in as far as we wish to inherit a unified, and un-dialectical
future.

It is easy to see how a simple inversion of terminology transforms cynicism and
critique into celebration and romantic adulation. Cecil Day Lewis was a more orthodox
communist at this time, and his calls to arms in The Magnetic Mountain are far more
explicit and immoderate than Poems, yet his imagery and terminology are of a similar
order to Spender’s. This stanza from poem 25 is a disparaging attack on a lost youth
which Vienna’s idealisation of the dead rebels has rhetorically inverted:

Consider these, for we have condemned them;
Leaders to no sure land, guides their bearings lost
Or in league with robbers have reversed the signposts,
Disrespectful to ancestors, irresponsible to heirs.
Born barren, a freak growth, root in rubble,
Fruitlessly blossoming, whose foliage suffocates,
Their sap is sluggish, they reject the sun.⁸²

Whether depicted with optimism or pessimism, the revolution is to be a revolution of
generational division, as Eliot had depicted in The Rock. With echoes of
Shakespeare’s Histories, it is to be the new “blossoms” of youth that will determine the
world’s fate at the hands of the Right or the Left; unfortunately, as Eliot also shrewdly
noted, the young were wearing not just Redshirts but Blackshirts, and it would be the
weight of numbers which would determine the victory in Europe.

side forwards to Ash Wednesday and Marina.” (The Destructive Element, London, 1935, p. 17.)
6. Vienna (1934)

I would argue that at Vienna's conclusion, as in much of his early political prose, Spender employs rhetorical gloss to enable an eschatological vision of the future, which masks the historical impasse the poem has identified. As Valentine Cunningham has described, Spender's early 1930s poetry is somewhat guilty,

...of the wish-fulfilment that continually infected the writing of '30s Leftists: who tended to slip easily from what was, to what they wished were the case, an elision eased by their confused rhetoric of a future always coming into being.83

This is exactly how Vienna ends. Having described the actions and the failure of the uprising, it then turns away from modernist introspection, instead to envision the final "conjunction" of disparate elements – of poetic texture as well as of class divisions.

If Vienna can be regarded as a piece of Marxist discourse – even though it is clearly not orthodox in its Marxism – Roland Barthes's discussion of the nature of this literature is useful; the contradictory elements of Spender's poem meet the definition exactly:

... all the discourses of Marxism are present in its writing: the apologetic (glorify revolutionary science), the apocalyptic (destroy bourgeois culture), and the eschatological (desire and call for the undivision of meaning, concomitant on class undivision).84

Spender certainly finishes with a drive towards the "undivision of meaning", maintaining an "apologetic" pride in the modernity of "express trains" and "pylons", an "apocalyptic" desire to bring "death to the killers", implicitly a desire for a class undivision which will see a bourgeois poet properly united with the European workers.

Vienna concludes with an attempted eschatological resolution of the political dialectic, yet Spender's preceding Prufrockian uncertainty, and his insistence upon obscure psychological complexities make the lyrical revolution unconvincing. It is a propagandist gloss on a text that has already made explicit its inability to cohere. Edwin Muir, writing in the London Mercury, saw the problem in terms of an inappropriateness of the form to the tragic subject:
Mr. Spender's pathos and irony are sometimes admirable, and his indignation produces some fine satirical lines; but the poem reads like a comment on a lost battle, and though he expresses hope at the end, the prevailing tone is one of defeat. That would not have mattered had the defeat been felt definitely, as tragedy.  

Samuel Hynes identifies that the poem’s main fault arises from its urgency: the fact that, like left- and right-wing propaganda, it aims at producing an “instant mythology”, rather than allowing one to emerge. He sees the narrative of “The Death of Heroes”, with its black and white morality of dualistic conflict, as manifesting “the death of moderation”, which is quite antipathetic to Spender’s compassionate understanding elsewhere. There is undoubtedly an ideological, or emotional inconsistency throughout, which recalls the violent revolutionary paradox which was stated so baldly and convincingly in “Not palaces...” in the previous year. The Vienna Uprising was a palpable tragedy with huge loss of life, but the rhetoric of tragedy and the rhetoric of revolution are not compatible. O'Neill and Reeves have observed that the poem displays a mind “moving incoherently between extremes of doubt and hope”, and it is certainly highly symptomatic of Spender’s problematic relationship with orthodox communist ideology and its refusal to compromise with the more general, liberal compassion that his poetry manifestly portrays.

In the wake of the Spanish Civil War Spender was to write on the subject of “Left Wing Orthodoxy.” He accepted Wyndham Lewis’s charge that there was such a thing, and went on to suggest that the greatest political writers are essentially those who do not consciously have any pragmatic or social aims in their work:

Very introspective writers, like Kafka, or say, Eliot, who seem completely isolated, yet through the exploitation of their own unhappiness, arrive at remarkable comments on society: the neurotic is after all only a social symptom, and if he analyses his own neurosis profoundly enough, he arrives at roots which are growing into the life of his time.

With a few years hindsight, it is arguable here that Spender sees that his analysis of his own neurosis in Vienna was too caught up in the detailed politics of the subject to be convincingly affecting, on either the general or the personal level. He certainly failed to discover a meaningful conjunction of his personal life and the political context for it; the
“roots” of his passionate interest in the political struggle were not the same as his love relationship, merely coexistent in the situation with Muriel in Vienna. Gardiner’s memoir shrewdly delineates the milieu of the poem’s genesis: an atmosphere of “doomed future”, and the couple’s shared, reactive stance: a “dedication to the cause of freedom”. These elements come across clearly enough in the poem, but they refuse to cohere with Spender’s vision of a curative loving relationship in the midst of a city troubled by momentous and tragic events.

Spender was convinced that Vienna was not worth saving; the contingencies of its production were very far from the ideals of detachment and deft synthesis that Eliot, Woolf and Lewis would advocate; he felt that the confusion which it had inspired in readers was evidence of its failure, rather than that he had effectively portrayed a confused situation. Eliot, Poetry Editor at Faber, wrote encouragingly and tactfully, with some helpful advice at the close of 1934:

I sympathize with your present feeling of discouragement about Vienna, but of course that feeling is in relation to your own standards and ideals rather than to those of the reader. I was inclined to feel myself that the poem could have been strengthened if it had been kept a little longer, and revised by the author at a somewhat greater distance in time from the occasion which provoked it. That is apt to be the case with any piece of work which has been definitely promised for a particular date – not, in general, the best thing to do with poetry, but for that we are as much to blame as you, and the poem has some very fine things in it. I don’t think in the least that it will damage your reputation, but on the contrary will increase the curiosity about your next work.99

Characteristically avoiding a discussion of ideology or textual detail which might have occasioned the poem’s poor response, Eliot’s essential recommendation is for greater length in which to delineate a clearer argument, and the adoption of a certain philosophical detachment. The latent argument of Vienna may not necessarily have benefited from expansion in verse form; it is possible that, in the light of novelists Woolf and Lewis’s suggestions, that translated into a prose narrative Vienna might well have made a novel far more suited to the critical tastes of the period, where prose was a known quantity, and there was still a great deal of suspicion of poetry which attempted to fuse the formal attributes of verse and propaganda.
Vienna (1934)

Woolf finally got round to disclosing her response to Vienna the following summer; Spender had been eagerly requesting her opinion for some months, and this is sufficient indication that the work was very much in his mind even during the following year. Woolf had received a copy in October but, unimpressed, she prudently declined to review it in the London Mercury in November. She explains her reasons to Spender in a letter of June, 1935:

It seems to me that artists can only help one if they don't try to. Again, living writers are to me like people singing in the next room — too loud, too near; and for some reason I am so exacerbated by their being flat or sharp; as if I were singing my own song, and they put me out.

[...] This will lead me back to Vienna, about which I expect to feel something confused; as that you've not got the elements yet rightly mixed; that your desire to teach and help is always bringing you up to the top when you should be down in the depths. That hints at the reason why I feel it jerked broken incomplete. The transitions from poetry to prose are not natural yet. But I'm sure its vigorous and on the lines of something big, which is more than most of them are. Here again my hatred of preaching pops out and barks. I don't think you can get your words to come till you are almost unconscious; and unconsciousness only comes when you've been beaten and broken and gone through every sort of grinding mill. But then for your generation the call to action in words is so much more strident than it was for mine.

Woolf is criticising the self-conscious "will" to preach and to act which proliferates in Spender's work at this time, and which he would increasingly shift away from, even denounce embarrassedly, after the partisan conflicts of the decade had subsided.

Vienna's most vehement enemies all had some element of justifiable critique of its confusing confluence of ideas and styles. Of course, the disagreements are essentially over what a poem should contain, and whether such a poem is obliged to possess a distinct political conclusion. Spender's self-criticism in his autobiography proves as shrewd as that of his critics. He explains the collision of history and personal relations that he had attempted to portray in the poem:

I meant to show that the two experiences were different, yet related. For both were intense, emotional and personal, although the one was public, the other private. The validity of the one was dependent on that of the other: for in a world where humanity was trampled on publicly, private affection was also undermined.
After the war, Spender revisited the scene of the uprising and his relationship with Muriel in the poem "Returning to Vienna, 1947." With the perspective of a decade and a half, he formulates the original poem's effect: "The tears and bloodshot vein of seeing / The outer world destroy the inner world."^93

Spender's verdict, that his poem had failed to "fuse the two halves of a split situation, and attain unity where the inner passion becomes inseparable from the outer one" is symptomatic of this overwhelming pressure to employ his poetry as a political tool. Such utilitarian idealism harbours practical problems for writers of his social class and nationality: those who are politically aware and committed, but who are employed, who are not oppressed, who live successful, bohemian lives: "Throughout these years I had always the sense of living on the circumference of a circle at whose centre I could never be."^94 Spender was to discover an alternate "centre" in subsequent years by which to orient his poetic work: the "still centre" of the apolitical, individualised self. But, in 1934, Vienna serves as a vivid portrait of a conscientious aesthete struggling to make his art confront the very real horrors suffered by the oppressed.

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1 World Within World, p. 142.
3 World Within World, p. 192.
4 Spender, "The Two Deaths" in The Burning Cactus, Faber, London 1936, p. 185. (Previously published as "The Strange Death" in London Mercury, August 1935.)
5 Ibid. pp. 190-191.
8 Ibid., p. 55
9 Vernon Bartlett, Broadcast from Vienna on July 31, published as "From Broadcasting House in Vienna" in The Listener, Vol. XII, 8 August 1934, p.218.
13 Wyndham Lewis, typed letter to Spender, December 3, 1933, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.
14 Wyndham Lewis, handwritten note, undated, perhaps early 1934, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.
15 World Within World, p. 198.

259

Ibid. p. 3

Ibid. p. 54

MS in Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

"Fey, Dollfuss, Vienna" in *New Verse*, No. 12, December 1934, p. 19.


Ibid., p. 185.


Ibid., p. 187

Ibid.


*World Within World*, p. 199.


*Vienna*, p. 13.


Ibid.

Ibid. p. 15.

Ibid. p. 16.

Ibid. p. 17.

Ibid. p. 19.

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Ibid. p. 20


Ibid., p. 44.

Ibid., p. 46.

Ibid., p. 51.


*New Verse*, No 9, June 1934, pp. 16, 18.

Ibid., p. 18.

*Vienna*, p. 22.


*Vienna*, p. 23.

*Vienna*, p. 25.


Notebook containing drafts of *Vienna*, Harry Ransom Center, Austin Texas.

Ibid.

*Vienna*, p. 30.
6. Vienna (1934)

63 Ibid. p. 230.
64 Letter to Woolf, July 4, 1934, from Gardiner's apartment, Frank Gasse 1, Vienna. In the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
66 Vienna, p. 36.
67 Ibid., p. 39.
68 Ibid.
71 Vienna, pp. 39-40.
72 World Within World, p. 97.
73 Ibid.
75 Ibid., p. 182.
76 World Within World, pp. 97-98.
77 MS Letter in Berg Collection, New York Public Library.
78 Letters to Christopher, p. 68.
79 Letters to Christopher, p. 71.
80 Vienna, p. 40.
81 Ibid. pp. 42-43.
83 Valentine Cunningham, British Writers of the Thirties, p. 29.
86 Samuel Hynes, The Auden Generation, pp. 147-149.
88 "Left Wing Orthodoxy" in New Verse, Autumn 1938, p. 12.
89 T.S. Eliot, Director, Faber and Faber, Letter to Spender, 10 December 1934, Estate of Stephen Spender.
90 Woolf, Letter to R.A. Scott James, 5 November 1934, Letters V, p. 344.
92 World Within World, p. 192.
93 The Edge of Being, London: Faber and Faber, 1949, p. 23.
94 Ibid.
7. Spender's Revisions

7. Spender’s Revisions and the “Claims of History”

The main thrust of this thesis has been to establish that Spender’s early 1930s verse exhibits a thematic and stylistic integrity that is germane to the period of its publication. Spender’s approach to his published work was always to bring it in line with his current thoughts on the aims and effects of his autobiographical oeuvre, and as his published output diminished after the publication of his autobiography in 1951, followed by his Collected Poems in 1955, his desire to rewrite or to discard his earliest verse increased. In an interview in 1970, Spender discusses his emotional response to criticism:

I find that everything that anyone says about me or writes about me - and this is another reason why I have not published a book of poems for so long - is just something I can’t deal with. I feel extremely embarrassed. After all, one writes poems to give a little pleasure, fundamentally, and you find yourself being treated as if it is a crime or an offence to do so, and this is a situation I simply can’t deal with at all. I just tend to withdraw and not want to publish things. It is an unresolved problem, I think.¹

There does seem to be a sense in which, as his celebrity increased as a lecturer, editor, and cultural commentator, Spender’s confidence in himself as a poet was damaged; though he continued to draft verse, he developed a reticence to publish other than occasionally, and this creative withdrawal seems to have come about in response to negative criticism which arose from unfashionable associations of the 1930s “movement” whose politics and aesthetics significantly changed after the Second World War. Certainly, Spender and his contemporaries’ explicit rejection of communism in the 1950s seems to have had the effect of undermining the moral authority of much of their 1930s work; Auden’s role in this is fundamental: as his stature as an eminent twentieth-century poet was established, he followed Eliot in embracing the formal dogma of Christianity and was openly critical of his past involvement with Leftist thought, famously disowning a number of his definitive poems.

Edward Mendelson, Auden’s literary executor, has discussed at length the problematic relationship between a poet’s final wishes as author, and the claims of publishing history.² The difference between literary authorship and, for example, the authority of an artist who paints a later version of the same image is distinct: while the painter creates a new object, the author attempts to reform a single, definitive version of
his work, and hence to re-establish his authority over the text. Poetry, a linguistic form, is inherently translatable, in as far its text can be disseminated, reproduced or replicated in a way that an original painting cannot; yet the politics of the publication of a living poet (if he is fortunate enough to stay in print) invariably require a single, authoritative version of his life's work. The authorial "dictatorship" which a poet exercises over his work is his inalienable right; but while revisions are often made for the sake of "taste" – an inevitable outgrowth of the maturation of the poet's aesthetic self-criticism – yet such changes never fail to be significant. Although literary critics' inevitable charges of ideological self-censorship and autobiographical re-invention may infuriate the author who seeks to craft his oeuvre to his own aesthetic standards, nevertheless it is the case that the published work has passed over from the author's sole possession into the culture of published literature; indeed, it has become the property of that culture. Thus, while an individual's beliefs – be they political or aesthetic – may be modified, revised, reversed or regretted, the literary works which that individual has created can only be "taken back" with the greatest of difficulty.

While the unresolved "problem" of negative criticism did not prove to be permanent barrier to subsequent publication, there is no question that Spender allowed critiques of his past work to influence his desire to revise it, whether that revision involved slight adjustments of phrase or image, or the abandonment of entire poems. In the 1980s, to coincide with his knighthood, Spender revised his Collected Poems from the comprehensive (and slightly revisionist) 1928-1953 edition (1955) by publishing Collected Poems 1928-1985 (1985) in which his oeuvre is reduced from 110 poems to only 99, with new poems (from The Generous Days which had appeared in 1971, and several more recent pieces) replacing discarded ones, plus six choruses from his 1985 verse translation of Sophocles' Oedipus trilogy.

Once again, the 1985 edition sees Spender casting poems into an autobiographical pattern: its section titles suggesting a chronological form which is the thematic arrangement of his life: "I: Preludes," "II: Exiles," "III: Spain," "IV: A Separation," "V: Elegy for Margaret," "VI: Ambition," and so on. As previously discussed, from an early stage in his career Spender regarded himself very much as "an autobiographer in search of a form." Of the thirty-three poems of the original 1933 volume, thirty-two survive into the 1955 collection ("Those fireballs, those ashes" is
7. Spender's Revisions

discarded), yet a further nine are left out of the 1985 collection, most notably the other "programmatic" pieces: "After they have tired," "The Funeral," and "From all these events." While "Not palaces, an era's crown" is included, its morally ambiguous final stanza has been excised.

Spender's stated rationale for the volume in its preface suggests an aesthetic that is rather different from the "mystic" revolutionism and imagist abstraction that had been the driving force of the young Romantic who had composed the original 1930s poems:

I now think that my best poems are those which are extremely clear and that, perhaps without my being fully aware of it, clarity has always been my aim. At any rate, the poems I have thrown out are those which seem to me confused or verbose. Those that I have put in, for the most part are simple and straightforward.

Whether the "aim" of clarity had in fact been informing his writing throughout his career, or this is rather the projection of a later analysis onto his early work (with the perspective of decades), is impossible to say. The art of autobiography is to form one's life experiences into a synthesised whole with a retrospective viewpoint, and it seems to me that Spender's 1980s endeavour is to craft his life's work into new, direct, economical, and stylistically uniform narrative of his verse career. But since his poetry never rigorously adhered to the discipline of formal structure, his aesthetic standard becomes the rhythm of lyrical utterance, and occasionally it is the unfashionable "pretension" of his heightened 1930s rhetoric which is toned down in favour of a certain ruminative intimacy of diction.

Although direct comparison between Spender and Auden can be misleading, in the case of their contemporaneity and political stance (in the 1930s), the two friends and peers obviously share a similar history over an identical period, and their attitude towards revision and ideology reveals similar beliefs. Though he is more honour-bound to the requirements of objective form, Auden had provided a very similar authorial justification of the changes and omissions in his own revisionist Collected Poems:

Critics, I have observed, are apt to find revisions ideologically significant... I can only say that I have never, consciously at any rate, attempted to revise my former thoughts or feelings, only the language in which they were first expressed when, on further consideration, it seemed to me inaccurate, lifeless, prolix or painful to the ear.
Yet Mendelson, as Auden’s editor, proposes a balance between “the claims of errant history and those of timeless goodness” in his judgement of Auden’s revisions. Certainly, the poet’s declaration that no conscious revision of thought has taken place is dismissed by Mendelson as simply untrue:

Auden applied a moral standard to his earlier poems – and, some critics have charged, tried to rewrite his own history in the process – when he revised or discarded some of his most famous work, either in an effort to make it conform to his later standards of precision and clarity, or, more notoriously, to rid it of statements he had come to regard as hateful and false.5

In this way, Auden discarded his definitive 1930s celebration of “new styles of architecture” because he didn’t actually like new architecture; the poem “Spain” because he felt that its partisan moral was crude and false; and “September 1, 1939” because its famous declaration (that “we must love one another or die”) was “presumptuous and untrue.”6

To coincide with his new edition, Spender provided 1955 and 1985 versions of four poems for comparison in the Paris Review: “To Manuel Altolaguirre,” “The Sign Faehre nach Wilm” (“At the end of two months’ holiday”), “Perhaps,” and “The Uncreating Chaos.” Spender also provided a short commentary (and defence) of his rationale in revising:

Readers often appear to be irritated with poets for rewriting their poems. Causes of annoyance are –

a) when a poet changes a poem to make it conform with beliefs different from those which he held when he wrote it

b) when changes consist of a poet smoothing away some original roughness which the reader may prefer to a later more polished surface

Also, readers may resent changes in a text simply through their conservatism, because they are familiar with an earlier version and feel that it is being taken away from them. Out of consideration for this feeling I have made only miniscule changes in poems which have been much anthologized. These poems no longer belong to me.7

This is a shrewd anticipation of the readers’ response, but Spender glosses over an important issue here: while the reader may “feel” that an earlier version is being taken away from them, that is also literally the case when the Collected Poems replaces the
volumes as they have appeared. Certainly, most libraries will hold only the *Collected Poems*; in Spender’s case the larger 1955 edition has been superseded by the 1985 edition, and this and *Dolphins* are his only verse titles currently available for purchase.

Spender’s reinvention and re-formulation of his personal experience of the 1930s, “At the end of two months’ holiday” (which was discussed in Chapter 4) provides a useful example of his revisionist aesthetic approach to his early work. The original version from *Poems* (1934) is as follows:

```
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. 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:
Painted on enamel beneath the moving glass
Unreal were cattle, the wave-winged storks, the lime:
These burned in a clear world from which we pass
Like *rose* and *love* in a forgotten rhyme.8
```

In 1985, the poem is re-titled “The Sign *Faehre nach Wilm*” (indeed, the original opening line – and *title* – is rewritten), and there are more significant changes:

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At the end of our Ruegen holiday, that night,
I lay awake. Waves’ ceaseless fretful scansion
By imagination scourged, rose to the height
Of the town’s roar, trafficking apprehension.
I was in a train... On a film’s played back spool
I watched speeding reversed the things that heal
*Angst*. The sign ‘*Faehre nach Wilm*’.
The pink cottage by the lake, shone brilliant, yet unreal.
Real were iron lines, track smashing the grass,
Wheels on which we rode, and, on our wrists, time.
Unreal were cattle, wave-winged storks, the lime.
These glowed in a lost planet seen through glass,
Like ‘*Rose*’ or ‘*Friend*’ in a forgotten rhyme.9
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Formally, a line has been dropped – the poem is no longer a conventional sonnet, and the historical context of the experience has been made explicit: Ruegen Island, the Baltic playground of the young “children of the sun,” and the celebrated destination of Spender and Isherwood, is now identified to confirm the poem’s relation to the established social history that had informed the literature of the 1930s.

The revised poem has the more relaxed, fluid style of spoken English, but while it maintains the rhythmic narrative progression of the original, it has undergone the interjection of starkly different concepts. “Sea” has been replaced by “waves”, a syllabic substitution which is minor considering the time elapsed between the two versions; “fretful” replaces “fretless”, and “sadness” becomes “angst” – a hint of wry judgement of the younger poet’s indulgence in depression. Yet the “clear world from which we pass” has become “a lost planet seen through glass”, and this is, I feel, a space-age conceptualisation which the 1930s Spender would never have intended. I have discussed in Chapter 4 how this poem is indicative of several contemporary stylistic tropes, whereas the new version contextualises these historical elements and even translates them into a simpler, more low-key idiom. For example, the vivid “compelled time” of the original, suggesting a host of modernist concepts (the train’s relentless motion, the inevitability of industrial progress, the metropolitan urgency of the city-bound traveller, and the transience of the holiday experience) is downplayed to the literal meaning which the original had abstracted: “on our wrists, time.”

After fifty years, it is made clear that the “enamel beneath the moving glass” had referred to the passengers’ watches, yet the resonant 1930s tropes which this abstraction had encouraged are made redundant by the literal identification of the watches, and the line (and hence the contemporary resonance of the poem) is lost. Indeed, the present-tense location of the poet’s consciousness on a 1930s train (“cars in which we ride”) becomes a perfect-tense remembrance (“Wheels on which we rode”).

Spender’s justification for revising is to assert that the intervening fifty years have had no effect on his recollection of the experience which occasioned the initial writing of the poem:
The poem, which I wrote in the early thirties, seemed to me completed in 1932 when I first published it. Christopher Isherwood and I had taken a summer holiday on the Island of Ruegen in the Baltic, at the end of which we returned to Berlin. The night before doing so I could not sleep and had the sensations described in the poem. But after it had been published I did not feel that the poem succeeded. In the 1985 version I go back to the original feelings which are only noted down in the 1932 version.\textsuperscript{10}

The implicit rationale is that Spender’s oeuvre is – as far as he is concerned – a series of modified drafts in which experiences that have been “noted down” may be returned to and elucidated; he does not date the work and externalise it as a written record of his poetic voice; in other words, he does not to consider his work to be a verse autobiography which portrays a writer’s development as it has developed. As discussed in the introduction, this resilient belief in the constancy of the authorial self, and the resultant refusal to allow his experiences to find their final objective form in an imperfect poem fundamentally obscure Spender’s creative development and confuse his contribution to the textual literary history of the decade.

In his study of Spender’s verse, Sanford Sternlicht suggests that the 1985 revisions are “unfortunate” in as far as, rather than achieve a poetic “clarity” which Spender claims has always been his aim (intentionally or otherwise), the changes are actually obfuscatory, diminishing the homosexual connotations of the early love lyrics for example, and “toning down other early poems to make them seem less radical.” Sternlicht’s conclusion is precisely the reactionary conservatism (borne of past admiration) that Spender had anticipated in his notes in the Paris Review. But Sternlicht’s regret at the changes must be taken into account – his response is valid and important. He feels that: “The result is generally poetic loss.”\textsuperscript{11} And though Spender does not acknowledge it, there is a compelling argument that it is not simply the “much anthologized” poems which no longer “belong” to him, but all those versions which have taken their place in publishing history prior to his revision.

In many instances, Spender’s revisions are clearly informed by changes in taste; for example, there is a certain reserve which replaces the adjectival exuberance of his 1930s originals. But in many instances these stylistic modifications inevitably alter the fundamental meaning and imagery of the poems. For example, in “What I expected”,

\textsuperscript{10}
the “dazzling crystal” of the final line becomes “faceted”.* The notion of the
crystallisation of an experience into the verbal form of a poem is a persistent image
which dates back to 1928 and Spender's meditations on the relationship between
experience and the composition of poetry in the abandoned novel "Instead of Death".**
While the revision brings the poem in line with later theoretical ideas as portrayed in
*World Within World* and such essays as “The Making of a Poem”, still the very visual
essence of the final line has been utterly changed from hyperbolic luminescence to rigid,
constructed solidity: this is the transition from an observer’s apprehension of the crystal
(“dazzling”) to a more objective assertion of its physical form (“faceted”), the clarity
and intricacy of its wrought detail. It is also, of course, a transition from the naïve,
imprecise, *energised* romanticism of the 1930s to a more crafted formulation of the
“created poem” with which the crystal is associated. This visual-conceptual reversal is
germane to Spender’s maturing aesthetic, but it is a contradiction of his earlier style.

Other revisions see simple substitution of words which nevertheless radically
alter the overall tone that was integral to the original. “The Landscape near an
Aerodrome” (discussed in Chapter 3), in which the air passengers “may see what is
being done” in the suburbs below (my italics) substitutes that they “can see”. Thus an
imperious inspection, suggestive of both aerial and social superiority, becomes a passive
observation, glanced through the window of the plane. “oh young men” is re-titled
“Us” and maintains its general form, while having numerous nouns and adjectives
substituted with synonyms. “The Port” is autobiographically contextualised by its new
1985 title “Hamburg, 1929”, it also has many adjectives replaced, and not without
considerable tonal and thematic effect: “night outdoors” replaces “dark outdoors” in
line 9; the “pretty cups” of the lily boys become “guilty cups” in line 8; and the
merchants’ gardens, which were “fat” by association with their owners, become simply
“lush” in line 13.

In “Van der Lubbe” the level of abstraction is altered considerably, and
historical terms are substituted for vague allusions. Like the crystal of “What I

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* This change was introduced in the 1955 version of the poem.
** "As they walked on, Benjamin saw the image: the row of experiences like pearls strung through all the
days of his life; each pearl containing its concentration of a pressure which finally, in his adolescence,
broke through the rounded surface of a hidden lust.” (From "Instead of Death", reproduced in *Oxford
expected,” the “dazzling steel” which will behead the Reichstag arsonist loses its effusive adjective. And the “dear Movietone”, towards which van der Lubbe had directed his nihilist whispers, becomes “dear microphone.” It may be that this is a more accurate representation of the physical events of the trial, but still the visual evocation of the 1930s news media is lost.

It is the imagery and phrasing of the final stanza, which provide the moral of the poem, that undergo the most revision:

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

Becomes:

The twisting of justice, the stuttering of guns
Splintering trees where once on their branches
Truth greenly balanced, are what I am –
Whom you sentence to death and spits at you in fun.¹²

Characteristically, the imprecise “exploding” becomes “splintering”, a more accurate description of the machine guns’ effect. But in his revision Spender is removing the visionary stylism suggested by the use of present tense in the original; with the historical hindsight of the revised version, the “truth” has already been lost, while in the original version – contemporary with van der Lubbe’s trial – the truth still “greenly balances”: the outcome of these events, during the trial in 1933, was uncertain.

Perhaps the most significantly revised versions – since they are two poems which define Spender’s 1930s mythography most demonstrably – are “In 1929” and “Perhaps.” The former had already undergone changes since its appearance in Twenty Poems, and continued to be altered throughout Spender’s two reconsiderations of his oeuvre. The revisions of “Perhaps” portray a historical poem being transformed, with hindsight, into a meditation on what might have been, with its abstract imagery considerably altered. It is ironic that Spender should have wanted to revise these poems so heavily when they were – at the time of first publication – self-consciously prophetic and visionary, and the accuracy of their prediction hardly seems to be of primary importance; for the reader, the interest resides in their intimation of momentous
historical events *in progress*. Writing in 1994, Spender was to reiterate that the young writers of the 1930s “proved to be more truthful prophets than the politicians in the democratic countries of that era”, and it is unfortunate that he should have allowed his later aesthetic judgement to obscure the innate portentousness of his own early verse.13

“Written Whilst walking down the Rhine” / “In 1929” is subjected to numerous minor modifications of phrasing in its various versions. For example, line 19 in 1933: “no feud / Like prompting Hamlet on the castle stair”; becomes in 1955: “no feud / Like Hamlet prompted on the castle stair”; and then in 1985: “no feud / Like Hamlet’s, prompted on the castle stair”. These revisions, spanning half a century, and focussing on subtle adjustments of phrase, could just as easily be modified drafts written on the same day.

Again in lines 20-22, Spender makes changes that are subtle, perhaps even unnecessary:

1933/1955: There falls no shade across our blank of peace,
We being together, struck across our path,
Or taper fingers threatening solitude.14

1985: There falls no shadow on our blank of peace,
We three together, struck across our path,
No warning finger threatening each alone.15

An alteration of far more thematic significance comes in lines 24-27:

1933: Our fathers’ misery, the dead man’s mercy,
The cynic’s mystery, weave a philosophy
That the history of man traced purely from dust
Was lipping skulls on the revolving rim
Or the posture of genius with the granite head bowed.16

The 1955 version sees a slight adjustment of tense, and the translation of the “dead man” into the “ghost” of line 7. But the 1985 version has a substantial alteration of meaning:

1985: Our fathers’ misery, their spirits’ mystery,
The cynic’s cruelty, weave this philosophy:
That the history of man, traced purely from dust,
Is lipping skulls on the revolving rim
Or war, us three each other’s murderers.\textsuperscript{17}

The “dead man’s mercy”, evocative of the soldiers in Owen’s “Strange Meeting” who feel their partisan differences dissolve as they pass into the underworld, has become the “mystery” of the fathers’ spirits. The cynic’s “mystery” has moved into active “cruelty” at the revelation of the poem’s empty moral. These alterations are followed by the rather drastic revision which was discussed in Chapter 2: it is a suppression of the allusion to Wilfred Owen’s imagery of subterranean “granite” which was integral to the function of the 1930s version; and the substituted line constitutes a conscious transformation of the poem from enigmatic portent to retrospective meditation. Moreover, the excision of the penultimate line 30 (“A stratum unreckoned by geologists”) has a dual effect; while the 1985 version has a grimmer, more visceral conclusion, with its movement from the falling trio of youths in the penultimate line directly into the violent action of the spade into the soil which they have become (an even starker refutation of Brooke’s romanticisation of death on the battlefield than the original), yet the exhortation to (and implicit critique of) materialist thought – the scientific determinism of geology which demotes the young victims of war from individuals into mere sod – is a pertinent 1930s trope which had fundamentally characterised the logical movement of the original.

“Perhaps” (1934), across the two editions of \textit{Collected Poems}, sees a repeated reinvention which explicates the events which provided the initial inspiration for the poem by reducing the level of abstraction, but alters the tone by completely reformulating the original metaphors. In 1934, the first stanza is an abstract evocation of paranoia and the media-manipulation of portentous events:

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)
the parliament building their own side set afire
and then our party forbidden
and the mine flooded, an accident, I hope.\textsuperscript{18}
In 1934, the sense of heady immediacy requires no explanation: Spender assumes a familiarity with the events being described – this is contemporary reportage refracted into verse form. In 1955 it is unchanged apart from the alteration of “forbidden” to “banned”. But the 1985 version, in keeping with Spender’s declared preference in his introduction (for “clarity”) is shorter, and more explicit.

The explosion of a bomb –
The submarine – a bubble pricked by water
Dollfuss clutching his shot arm –
The Reichstag that the Nazis set on fire –
And then our Party forbidden –

The historical context – perhaps less obvious from the perspective of 1985 – is clarified: the Reichstag and the Austrian Chancellor are named; yet the characteristic 1930s paranoia (“Perhaps / a put-up job” and “an accident, I hope”) has been removed, while the Nazis’ role in the burning of the Reichstag is emphasised. Yet the resonance in 1934 of “their own side”, and of “the Nazis” in 1985, with the hindsight of that decade’s events and the ensuing war, suggests a polarised (and clarified) morality that is not quite comparable.

The description of the summit at lake Geneva is progressively modified in a gradual, draft-like manner; 1934: “top hats talking at edge of crystal healing lake / then mountains” becomes, in 1955: “top-hats talking at edge of silk-blue lake / then, the mountains” and then, in 1985: “Top hats plotting at the lake’s edge / And the Alps beyond”. Spender is clearly working at a single distinct image here – one from a newspaper photograph, and the alteration of the sense and theme of the poem is minor in this instance. However, in the next stanza the 1930s evocation of a chaotic and confusing news media undergoes radical revision which fundamentally alters the tone and meaning of the poem.

1934: We know this from rotating machines
from flanges stamping, cutting, sticking 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 run on.
We know things from rotating machines
from flanges stamping, cutting, unrolling sheets from rolls.
Newsmen are points of compass: their arms are
the four winds carrying printed legends.
Our eyes, fish wrapped in newspaper.21

Spender is reformulating a metaphor which represents – and critiques – the reportage of political events and its effect on the civilian consciousness: it is a wave-like process of news dissemination which reaches the confused perception of the populace. In 1955, the elision of reading with the next stage of the newspaper’s life cycle – i.e. wrapping fish and chips – is a wry comment on the transience of the process and the civilian’s limited role in events. But then, in 1985, the perceiving “eyes” and their implicit moral are discarded:

Headlines pour from rotating cylinders
Sheets from newspaper rolls.
Newsboys spread in compass points across
Maps, the four directions of the winds.22

More successive revisions belie Spender’s developing interrelation with the favoured imagery of his younger self:

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 edge of antarctic?
(1934)

Was that final when they shot him? Did that war
lop off dead branches? Are the young men splendid?
Is it The Shape of Things to Come, that revolution
nosing whale-like at Antarctic edge?
(1955)

Was that final when they shot him? Did that war
Lop off dead branches? Are we the bright new shoots?
Is it Leviathan, that revolution
Nosing through icebergs of the Arctic wastes?
(1985)
7. Spender’s Revisions

In 1955, Spender seems keen to downplay, and to contextualise, his 1930s Wellsian thinking, his youthful, apocalyptic apprehension of momentous events. “The Shape of Things to Come” is a translation of – and comment upon – the portentous mode of his 1930s verse. The second version is in fact an answer, or counterpoint, to the original. But by 1985 he seems to urge the relation of his theme to the vegetable myth of The Waste Land’s “Burial of the Dead”, and to re-emphasise the original concept: that his “whale” is the apocalyptic beast of the Old Testament.

The final two stanzas are subjected to similar revision and clarification, with the final four lines being completely reformulated:

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.  
(1934)

Maybe deception of things merely changing. Out there Perhaps it is the dead above the plain Who grow; not our time bombs but Time monstrous with stillness like that Alpine range.  
(1955)

Can be illusion of things merely changing Perhaps some Unknown God is newly risen Beyond the lake, or crucified

Perhaps our time is

Monstrous with stillness like that Alpine range.  
(1985)

The development of this visionary depiction of a “timescape” beyond that of short-term (and short-sighted) political crises (as represented by the time bomb) across five decades is not merely a clarification of imagery but a complete reinvention of its basic concepts. The “growth of humanity” becomes “the dead” and then “some Unknown God”, representative of Spender’s conception of ideal “Time”. It was this “Time” which had provided the cosmic perspective on the struggles of Poems. Importantly,
Spender's final version is in direct opposition to his declared intention in revising. He is reaching for immediacy and accuracy – the mountains are indeed the Alps, and the "Himalayan" figuration perhaps encourages a geographical confusion which he had not originally intended. He claims that above all it is the subjective truth of feeling which he is attempting to record in the poems, and that he never forgets the original occasion and intention of each piece. And yet a subjective truth that can be portrayed with metaphors that draw upon the Old Testament, H.G. Wells's scientific prophecy and the messianic Christ respectively, has given rise to three distinct literary texts which, while they may share a title and an author, are manifestly not equivalent.

Obviously then, the degree to which "Perhaps" (1934) and "Perhaps" (1985) can really be considered the same poem is open to debate. It is, perhaps, surprising that at intervals of twenty and thirty years respectively, Spender did not opt to make even more radical revisions, but it does beg the question of whether the work, so obviously dealing with pertinent events at the time of original composition and publication, is not more authoritative in its first incarnation than in a much later revision. Infelicities of phrase or metre aside, I believe it is hard to argue that the economical, more metrically fluid, clarified 1985 versions provide a more useful or effective portrayal of Spender's achievement; by explicating contemporary references he paradoxically deflates their metaphoric potential; by providing the hindsight of the history of the twentieth century he undermines the prescience and visionary accuracy of his younger self, who was writing prior to the mythic events of the Second World War. This is not even to discuss those 1930s poems, so uniquely energised by their complex flirtation with radical ideology, which he chose not to preserve.

What must be considered then, is the competing authority between the versions of Spender's poems – the author's final intentions and the objective published record of his oeuvre. Edward Mendelson's editorial rationale in The English Auden and Auden's Selected Poems is to acknowledge the historical sensibility of literary critics, which can seek to undermine the author's primacy:

Critics who find the changes deplorable generally argue, in effect, that a poet loses his right to revise or reject his work after he publishes it – as if the skill with which he
brought his poems from their early drafts to the point of publication somehow left him at the moment they appeared, making him a trespasser on his own work thereafter. This argument presupposes the romantic notion that poetic form is, or ought to be, "organic," that an authentic poem is shaped by its own internal forces rather than by the external effects of craft; versions of this idea survived as central tenets of modernism.\(^2\)

But this counter-argument itself presupposes a continuity of perfectible "craftsmanship" which does not change throughout the lifetime of the author. Both Auden and Spender justify their authority with the notion that "lapses" in terms of style or taste in earlier years were a corruption, or \textit{deformation} of pure, pre-linguistic sentiments which subsequently could be fine-tuned; yet it is equally arguable that this refinement is in itself a stylistic element which would probably have rung false to the sensibilities of their younger selves. The idea of an innate \textit{continuity} of the self is a myth which authors cling to with considerable determination, and while it is understandable, it should not be allowed to obscure the legacy of their published work.

Mendelson's essay, "'We are changed by what we change': The Power Politics of Auden's Revisions" pursues the notion I have illustrated here – that revisions are \textit{always} significant.\(^2\) The analysis of a writer's revisions and changes – particularly at their seemingly most trivial – while interesting enough to the fellow writer or the literary critic, tends to undermine the writer's authority in some manner, working against the solid assertion of their published texts. Certainly, it is true that Spender's repeated willingness to "worry at" the minutiae of phrasing of poems over fifty years old cannot but undermine the stability of his oeuvre rather than strengthen or streamline it, as was his intention. In his revisions, Spender echoes Auden's tendency to "liquidate images and deport phrases" in subtle but significant ways which fundamentally alter the textual effect.\(^2\)

Spender's \textit{Collected Poems 1928-1985} is merely the last in a series of snapshots which reveal his own changeable view of his oeuvre; the collection is the product of his "final ethical and aesthetic intelligence," yet a chronological volume of Spender's published work through the decades of his career in its original form – which is currently unavailable – would provide a narrative in which that ethical and aesthetic intelligence might be observed in its development, and such a representation is equally valid.\(^2\)
editorial approaches – the acknowledgement of the author’s “final intentions,” and the representation of publishing history – have their own validity, and while the debate between their primacy cannot (and should not) be resolved, it is important to redress an aesthetic imbalance (largely a result of omission) that Collected Poems 1928-1985 encourages.

Textual critic Jerome J. McGann’s notion of “versioning” texts is the only practicable editorial solution to an œuvre which has various texts competing for “final” authority. As McGann has argued – and as Spender concedes when discussing his “much anthologized” poems – literary work cannot ultimately “belong” to the author alone:

Authority is a social nexus, not a personal possession; and if the authority for specific literary works is initiated anew for each new work by some specific artist, its initiation takes place in a necessary and integral historical environment of great complexity.27

Similarly, Spender acknowledges that external criticism has played a part in his revision, or abandonment, of his early work. And as a result, the changes that he has made to his poems do not “spring from a single fons et origo.”28 Accordingly, the decision regarding which parts (or versions) of the poet’s œuvre should be preserved must be made in a “generous social context”, and the author’s final intentions must not be given sole authority.

Of course, the unavailability of a chronological representation of Spender’s work is not simply a result of his own final authorial stance in presenting his Collected Poems, but an economic issue. Auden’s poetry is still in much demand and his appeal to a popular readership – as well as to academic study – enables a market for two editions of his life’s work, one of which intentionally disregards his final intentions to favour instead the claims of literary history.

Michael O’Neill and Gareth Reeves have deplored the unavailability of Spender’s historical texts, acknowledging that the contemporary reader who needs access to the 1930s poems is most likely (by necessity) to turn to the 1985 collection for reference. O’Neill and Reeves have called for a collection “which either prints poems as they were published in the major volumes of the thirties or includes textual apparatus which allows the reader access to these early versions.”29 This was an “urgent” call in
1992, and ten years later, and after the death of the author, such an edition is still unavailable. For a poet whose primary textual conflict was rooted in a tension between political allegiance and aesthetic aspiration, and whose early verse manifested the specific tonal character of its era, an historical edition of the work that preserves the linguistic struggle in its original form is absolutely necessary.

5 Mendelson, Preface to W.H. Auden – Selected Poems, ibid.
8 Poems (1934), p. 16.
16 Poems (1933), p. 27.
18 Poems (1934), p. 49.
20 Poems (1934), p. 49.
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