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Stephen Spender as a social poet

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STEPHEN SPENDER AS A SOCIAL POET

A THESIS
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BY
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. WASTELAND INFLUENCES IN SPENDER</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. SPENDER'S POETIC CREED</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE INFLUENCE OF SPENDER'S CREED ON HIS POETRY</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When Stephen Spender's *Poems* appeared in 1935, the volume precipitated much discussion among the critics of English poetry. These critics, remembering the pessimism and spiritual decadence in the *Wasteland* poetry of ten years before, looked upon Spender as the spokesman of a new poetic attitude. The basis for the commentators' reaction was, of course, Spender's new and vigorous conception of twentieth-century history and its more obvious sociological implications so far as a total view of human life is concerned. Certainly the members of the "lost generation" had possessed and expressed an impression of society in the 1920s. But from theirs, Spender's was essentially different. The *Wastelanders* were lacking in spiritual belief, they were without hope, without faith in any aspect of modern life. Spender gave himself and his poetic consciousness over to the belief that human values lay under the sweeping and powerful social forces of the world in which he lived. Certainly the years in which Spender's poems first appeared were times of violent and sweeping social developments. The time of the Great Depression, the Soviet treason trials, the Madrid "rehearsal" of World War II were trying, symbolic, meaningful years in which it was difficult to form an objective, to say nothing of an artistic, view of society. Poetry which related itself to such broad implications took on a quality and style irrefutably its own, and it is this fact which lends such poetry artistic significance. Spender related himself to
this movement with vigor and sincerity. It is the purpose of this paper to trace the development of Spender's social poetry as it relates to his conception of modern life and history.

The poems used in this study have been selected on the basis of their social nature. They include Spender's exhortatory poems, his poems written against social injustice and his socio-psychological poems. This, of course, excludes the poet's very personal work such as his poems to his wife and son and his impressionistic poetry which deals with the development of a spiritual sensibility.

In Chapter I, the work of two Wasteland poets and its influence on Spender's poetry have been studied. Spender's use of these effects in his own poetry and their contribution to his development as a social poet compose the primary concern of this section. Chapter II has to do with Spender's formation of a poetic creed. Two aspects of this creed have been pointed out, the impulses behind his earlier poetry in which the social scene is the important element and his later work in which the emphasis is changed from the scene to the individual reaction. Chapter III proposes to analyze Spender's social and socio-psychological poetry in the frame of reference provided by Chapter II. The conclusion reviews the problem, summarizes the findings of each chapter and ends with a summary statement of the whole study.

In each chapter there has been made an attempt to relate Spender's work to the four large symptoms of social
disorganization in the twentieth century—the first World War, the Great Depression, the Rise of Totalitarianism and the second World War—for these events greatly affected Spender's poetic consciousness. This has been done directly and explicitly in Chapters I and II, but the treatment of World War II in Chapter III is done by inference, for the facts in that conflict have not been clearly delineated.

It was necessary to use the method of rhetorical analysis in studying Spender's poetry, because, so far as the writer knows, there has been no extended analytical study of his poetry. Aside from reviews and periodical comments (which in themselves are general) the criticism on Spender is as yet in the impressionistic stage.

No collected edition of Spender's poems has been published and for this reason the verse used here has been taken from four volumes of poetry: Poems (1935), Ruins and Visions (1942), The Poems of Dedication (1943), The Edge of Being (1949). Quotations from his criticism have come from The Destructive Element (1935), European Witness (1946), and various periodical essays. The citations from T. S. Eliot are all taken from his Collected Poems 1909-1935. Ezra Pound's verse has been quoted from the collected edition of his work, The Cantos of Ezra Pound (1948).

The writer wishes to express her deep gratitude to Mrs. Lucy C. Grigsby, whose assistance in reading the manuscript and guiding the development of this paper has been immeasurably
helpful. Thanks are due to Mr. N. P. Tillman for his advice in the analysis of twentieth-century methods of criticism and for his guidance in the definition of the plan and subject of this paper.
CHAPTER I

WASTELAND INFLUENCES IN SPENDER

The purpose of the present chapter is to note the effects which Wasteland poetry had on the verse written by Stephen Spender. This is necessary because it will aid in realizing the immediate tradition that Spender brought to his poetry. The poets selected for analysis are Thomas Stearns Eliot and Ezra Loomis Pound, both of whom were instrumental in the development of twentieth-century poetry in general, and of Wasteland poetry in particular. First the social conditions from which Wasteland poetry arose will be considered, for these conditions, as this section will show, lent a definite coloring to the artistic thinking of the time. The literary milieu that gave the Wastelanders their heritage will be discussed partly to emphasize the fact that the social backgrounds were only a part of the Wastelanders' poetic motivation and partly to give to their literary contributions a substantial background. This data will also aid in defining the Wasteland mood in poetry.

The first World War left a tragic state of mind in Anglo-American society. Those who were able to see the facts steadily and wholly soon realized that this War had not been fought to make the "world safe for democracy," but for the same old

---

reasons of nationalistic pride: the expansion of a world market and the broadening of imperialistic gains.\textsuperscript{1} Thinkers and writers saw that ideas such as balance of power, territorial expanse and social control often lay under the more euphemistic terms such as "freedom," "democracy," and "conquest for liberty," while sovereign nations moved to the defense, not so much of human dignity as of the dollar, the mark, or the pound note.\textsuperscript{2} Much of the disillusionment that arose in the immediate post-war world came from the fact that in spite of the War and subsequent treaties, many of the complex problems underlying the War were still either unsolved or even more hopelessly muddled.\textsuperscript{3}

After the War, with the onset of the twenties, Americans went on amassing great fortunes, as the international emphasis on material gain sifted down to the personal level.\textsuperscript{4} Materialism and pragmatic ambitions moved into the thinking of many citizens, who, suddenly aware of their own inadequacies as social agents, threw their energies toward the acquisition of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{2}H. G. Wells, \textit{The World Order} (London, 1941), p. 12.
\item \textsuperscript{3}Paul Valery, \textit{Reflections on the World Today} (New York, 1948), p. 27.
\item \textsuperscript{4}Magnus W. Alexander, "America's New Era of Economic Power," \textit{Current History}, XXIII (October, 1925), 56.
\end{itemize}
the "almighty dollar."\textsuperscript{1} It seemed to many to be the only thing left in a world that had lost its moorings. The strenuous competition engendered in this attitude brought on ingroup hostilities such as gang wars, mob violence and unscrupulous business tactics.\textsuperscript{2} Bootlegging, grand larceny, and embezzlement were widespread.\textsuperscript{3}

Thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic realized that, by and large, the War had been only one of the symptoms of an ailing world.\textsuperscript{4} Injustice, spiritual sterility and bloodshed were still present in civilized societies. Such a situation gave rise to a psychology that held little hope. Despair, disillusionment and mental instability surrounded and imprisoned those writers who wished to interpret a disappointing world.\textsuperscript{5} Indeed, if they interpreted it at all, they could only picture a wide, waste stretch of sterile desert. They were sorely disappointed over post-war social conditions.\textsuperscript{6}

It is not true, however, that four years of war suddenly

\textsuperscript{1}Leo Huberman, "From Rags to Riches," \textit{We the People} (New York, 1947), p. 253.

\textsuperscript{2}Mark Prentiss, "War on the Growing Menace of Crime," \textit{Current History}, XXIII (October, 1925), 2.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., p. 4. See also W. Bruce Cabell, "Is Prohibition a Success After Five Years?", \textit{Current History}, XXII (August, 1924), 54.

\textsuperscript{4}Wells, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 14.


\textsuperscript{6}Loggins, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 4.
left the poets disillusioned and spiritually lost. Long before the War, in the scientific inquiry and intellectual analysis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there had been elements of fact, theories, and experiments that in their searching inquiry caused man to question his own potential goodness.¹ Freudianism and psychoanalysis comprised only one of the means by which man turned in upon himself.² Critical realism in the novel pictured him as only a cog in a mechanical universe, stripped of free will or spiritual nobility.³ As a result, poets saw the human figure victimized by a mechanical world, imprisoned by his own impulses as well as by his achievements.⁴ Poets sought a middle ground of rationality. They "became scholars exploring the golden past of arts and letters and wrote of the sterility and vulgarity of this our present country."⁵ This intellectuality, depressed and cold, precise and analytical, almost nullified emotional spontaneity in American poetry.⁶ In the following lines, taken from various

¹Anderson and Walton, op. cit., p. 197.
²Ibid., p. 198.
⁵Anderson and Walton, op. cit., p. 190.
poets, to show that they are typical, may be seen the drift of the Wasteland idea:

Who can think of the sun costuming clouds
When all the people are shaken
Or of night endazzled, proud,
When people awaken
And cry and cry for help?¹

I honestly believe (but really an alien here; trust me not)
Blind war, compared to this kind of life,
Has nobility, famine has dignity.²

Strengthened to live, strengthened to die
for medals and position victories?
They're fighting and fighting, fighting
the blind man who thinks he sees,--
who cannot see that the enslaver is enslaved; the hater harmed. 0
shining 0 firm star, 0 tumultuous
ocean lashed till small things go as
they will, the mountainous wave makes
us who look, know depth. Lost at
sea before they fought³

This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.⁴

The doubt, disillusionment, insecurity and loss of hope,
seem in such phrases as "cry and cry for help," "blind war has nobility," "fighting the blind man who thinks he sees," and "This is the way of the world ends, Not with a bang but a

³Marianne Moore, "In Distrust of Merits," ibid., p. 257.
whimper," are symptomatic of the Wasteland psychology, because they reflect a world without belief and express the loss of faith existent in the thinking of the time.

Critics have termed these writers the "lost generation", for they had lost all that to them could mean positive and concrete belief. They felt and expressed the spiritual aridity in their environment. They found little, if anything, that gave them hope. Needless to say, these poets had been practised writers long before the War. The attitude of futility in their writings, however, became evident near the end of the War and grew in intensity until it reached its climax in about 1922, the year in which Eliot published his poem, "The Wasteland."

In matters of technique, too, the Wastelanders' heritage was diverse. One cause for the lack of stability in the poetry of this period was the fact that twentieth-century verse was undergoing a change in formal technique as well as in mood and content. Poets found it difficult to fit the subject-matter of a complex modern experience and the broadening scope of knowledge into the rather sedate forms used for so long in poetry. The sonnets, the Georgian verse forms were sorely in

1Alfred Kreymborg, "The Moon is Dead," The Saturday Review of Literature, January 27, 1934, p. 435.
2Anderson and Walton, op. cit., p. 191.
3Lucy Lee Clemmons, "The Redemptive Nature of the Poetry of Archibald MacLeish" (Unpublished Master's thesis, Department of English, Atlanta University, 1941), pp. 3f.
4Ibid., p. 5.
need of re-vitalization. Ten years before, the Imagists had attempted to simplify poetic diction, but

...The hue and cry over simple diction died almost as soon as it had been raised by the Imagists....Poetic language became more complex because of the rapidly accumulating associations gathering round each thought and object in a complex civilization.¹

It was necessary, then, that the writer who had a sense of his own time and of intellectual responsibility towards his own experience should attempt to digest into his poetry these types of disorder.² To do this, he had to seek an organic loosening of poetry so far as diction and expression were concerned. This would involve a movement away from conventional forms to freer ones, so that the new language of mechanized life might come into poetry. Causes, effects, colorations, unconscious reactions, all had to be recorded some way on paper for the expressions of the Wastelander, who was a man "of feeling."³ As a result, the Wastelanders used subtler poetic techniques such as paradox, unusual verbal juxtapositions, sounds, colors and placed more emphasis on the "auditory imagination."⁴ They wished to express their very complicated

¹ Anderson and Walton, op. cit., p. 196.
reactions to a world that pushed too many "fragments of the truth" toward them at once.¹ There was a two-fold task assigned to the serious Wastelander: one phase of the task was a loosening of poetic form, the other the invention of a method of synthesis, a correlative. In respect to technique, there follows a discussion of the contributions of Ezra Pound, whose technical innovations influenced the work of many younger poets, one among whom was Stephen Spender.

Ezra Pound possessed a complex of literary interests, devoting himself almost wholly to literature, setting it up as his ruling value.² Having been long aware of the limitations of poetic conventions, he was interested in fitting poetic form to the subject-matter of a matter-of-fact, mechanized society.³ Look at the following lines from Pavannes and Divisions:

Go, my songs, to the lonely and the unsatisfied,
Go also to the nerve-wracked, go to the enslaved-by-convention,
Bear to them my contempt for their oppressors.
Go as a great wave of cool water....
Speak against the tyranny of the unimaginative,
Speak against bonds.⁴

In these lines, Pound dedicates his "songs" to the elimination

²Schwartz, op. cit., p. 326.
⁴Untermeyer, ibid., p. 164.
of all types of literary tyranny. The "enslaved-by-convention" refers to poets, to their sensibilities, to their critics who are bound by worn-out, archaic rules of poetry. He wished that his poetry might speak out against the "unimaginative," the "bonds" of free poetry, "as a great wave of cool water." The older forms of poetry were drained of vitality, were dead. They were forms from which had long since leaked all experience and most of the poetry.\textsuperscript{1} In them, nothing was left but a form. For Pound, the experience of "true" imagination, or the experience of modern life could not enter into the older forms because they were too rigid. He was one of the "pitiless antagonists of the mawkish and treacle-dripping verse that was being manufactured under the gaudy label of poetry....\textsuperscript{2}

Pound started his experiment from the very shell of the poem, the form of poetry as seen on the printed page. Note the following lines:

\begin{verbatim}
In Partibus Thetis...vineland
  land tilled
  the land incult
  pratis memoribus pascius
  with legal jurisdiction

  his heirs of both sexes,
  ...sold the damn lgt six week later,
  Sordellus de Godio.\textsuperscript{3}
\end{verbatim}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} Archibald MacLeish, "Poetry and the Public World," Atlantic Monthly, CLIX (June, 1939), 829.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Untermyer, op. cit., p. 157.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Ezra Pound, "Canto: XXXVI," The Cantos of Ezra Pound (New York, 1948), p. 30. All subsequent references to Pound's poems will be made to this text, unless otherwise designated, and are entered without the name of the author.
\end{itemize}
And they continue this error. "Bonaparte... knowing nothing of commerce... or paupers, who are about one fifth of the whole..."

Guiding her with oar caught over gunwale, saying:
"There, in the forest of marble,
the stone trees—out of water—
the arbours of stone—"

Word by word following on a line, line following line in strict order, were not, according to Pound, necessarily indispensable to good poetry. His innovations in typography show the starting point of experimentation in using the resources and graphical representation of pure language on the page, the aim being to prod the reader out of the lethargy and complacency which Pound thinks are fostered by the conventions of verse-form and page arrangement.

The following lines show the extent to which Spender uses experiments in typography:

We know this from rotating machines
from flanges stamping, cutting, sicking out
sheets from paper rolls.
The newsmen run like points of compass: their
arms are
gusts that carry sheets of mouldy paper:

This aristocrat, superb of all instinct,
With death close linked

1Cantos, p. 6.
2Ibid., p. 78.
Had paced the enormous cloud, almost had won
War on the sun;
Till now, like Icarus mid-ocean-drowned,
Hands, wings are found. 1

Terms such as "rotating machines," "flanges," "stamping," do not possess the easy internal rhythm of words like "nightingales," "raven," "rolling ocean." But the former terms are mechanical, while the latter are details of external nature. Since the mechanical terms had little or no internal rhythm, then it was necessary to arrange the line so that the rhythm might emerge through sound (and not seem forced or contrived) in such a forceful and realistic manner that the jazziness or irregularity of the verbal rhythm is almost unnoticed, or at least does nothing to hamper the import of the poem. Thus the jagged, shuttling rhythm of machinery is brought into poetry by the loosening of verse limitations to embrace new verbal sound, but this is done in such a subtle manner that the idea is not subjugated to the form.

Pound also questioned the traditional view that every line in a poem should begin with a capital and be rigidly punctuated. He realized that capitals, like punctuation, tend to modify language meaning just as do spacing and page arrangement. The absence of capitals and strict punctuation constitutes another phase in his attempt to cut away linguistic and poetic restraints:

with usura hath no man a house of good stone

1 Ibid., p. 9.
each block cut smooth and well fitting
that design might cover their face,
with usura\footnote{Zohanne da Rimini has won the palio at Milan with our horse and writes that he is now on the hotel, and wants money.\textsuperscript{2}}

From Spender comes the following example:

\begin{quote}
oh young men oh young comrades
it is too late to stay in those houses
your fathers built where they built you to build
to breed
money on money it is too late\textsuperscript{3}
\end{quote}

Can be deception of things only changing. Out there perhaps growth of humanity above the plain hangs: not the timed explosion, but of Time monstrous with stillness like the himalayan range.\textsuperscript{4}

Here Spender utilizes Pound's method to convey the impetus of war and revolution without the use of linguistic modifications. Both poets are using the force of pure language, allowing it to emerge as the important phase of the poem, assuming that capitals and punctuation hamper the freedom of thought development in the poem and color the meaning for the reader. Because Spender is expressing a revolutionary call to arms in the first four lines, only the presentation of the idea is necessary. Thus his reaction to an unjust social system is not mere propaganda; it is dynamic poetry, because whatever

\begin{footnotes}
\item[1]"Canto XLIV," p. 23.
\item[2]"Canto XXIV," p. 110.
\item[3]Spender, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 44.
\item[4]\textit{Ibid.}, p. 50.
\end{footnotes}
impetus the poem affords comes as much from the reader's thinking and reaction as it does from the presentation of the message itself. In the last four lines, because the rest of the poem deals with history as being made in the newspapers, Spender achieves journalistic effect by not using capitals at the usual points (note also the scarcity of conjunctions and punctuation, or the "rocket-line" lack of clarification). In these instances, he tries to convey the deadliness of revolution and war through the use, not of the obvious linguistic modifications, but by the use of effective word spacing and the force of sheer meaning.

Pound's second great contribution was the introduction of new subject-matter into the poem.¹ Note the following quotation:

And there was the other type, Warenhauser,  
That beat him, and broke up his business,  
Tale of the American Curia that gave him,  
Warenhauser, permission to build the Northwestern railway 
And to take the timber he cut in the process;  
So he cut a road through the forest,²  
Two miles wide and perfectly legal. ²

That they mustn't shoot craps in the hall of the council, nor in the small court under pain of 20 danari, be it enacted:³

The concern with money, legal transactions, railroads and dice in this poem are examples of new subject-matter that would

¹Clemmons, op. cit., p. 7.
³"Canto XXV," p. 115.
hardly have been used in post-Victorian or Georgian poetry. Pound's sense of his own time made him realize that men think of day-to-day, matter-of-fact things such as prices, bank accounts, sex and other details of basic experience. Thus he saw that they might well be used in poetry; not as background material only, but as the core idea as well. "It was Ezra Pound's great service to modern poetry to rescue the lyric from musical prettiness by his reaffirmation of the direct presentation of actuality."\(^1\) In the short poem, "The Bath-tub," Pound compares a lovely but frigid woman to a "procelain-lined" bath-tub. Among his other poems which deal with new and unusual subject-matter are "Our Contemporaries," "The New Cake of Soap," "Coitus;" many of this type are short satirical poems.\(^2\) In the Pisan Cantos, he introduces musical notation into poetry.\(^3\)

Stephen Spender, "while a remnant of the Georgians were still invoking literary laverocks, lonely lambs, and dependable nightingales, was writing 'come let us praise the gasworks.'\(^4\) In the following lines he treats the flight of an airplane in lyrical tones:

More beautiful and soft than any moth

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\(^1\)Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 66.
\(^3\)"Cantos," p. 28.
With burring furred antennae feeling its huge path
Through dusk, the air-liner with shut-off engines
Glides over suburbs and the sleeves set trailing tall
To point the wind. Gently, broadly, she falls
Scarcely disturbing charted currents of air.\(^1\)

Another example of the new subject-matter follows:

motorcycles wires aeroplanes cars trains
converging at that one town Geneva
top-hats talking at edge of crystal healing lake
then mountains^\(^2\)

The poem "Pylons" expresses his sense of the modern love for
speed, dynamics and energy, as contrasted to the "emerald
countryside" of England.\(^3\)

Spender, concerned as he was with absorbing and expressing
the details of modern life, was able to bring such changes
as were made by Pound into his own poetry with a certain a-
mount of felicity. As the examples show, Spender's dealings
with the new subject-matter, charcoal batteries, motors,
airplanes, railway halls, traffic, all show his ability to
synthesize modern phenomena into newer lyric forms. Spender's
synthesis may have been considerably hampered had Pound not
made certain pioneering changes. As a result, Spender became
able to "praise the gasworks." "The difficult and ineluctable
task is to say something intelligent and just about modern ex-
perience and to be sure that modern experience [actually lives]\(^7\)

\(^1\)Spender, *Poems*, *op. cit.*., p. 55.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 57.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 49.
in the poem."¹ This is the challenge which one critic gives to modern poets. The innovations discussed above made the younger poet more poetically aware of the actual, often mechanical modern experience as palpable poetic material. Above all, they made Spender more able to give a just and realistic background to his social poetry.

The second aspect of poetry contributed by the Wastelanders, that is, the synthesizing element, may be seen through the discussion of Eliot and his "objective correlative." Eliot, though he is very important for his delineation of the Wasteland ideas and mood, was concerned with technical proficiency in modern poetry too. His concern with the unity of sensibility on the printed page may be seen in a critical essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which he expressed his affinity for form and classicism in a time when serious poets were trying to fuse the old with the new.² Before Eliot, this had been hard to do; many poets went back to the Elizabethans, Chaucer and the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets for a tradition that offered them literary guidance and moorings; others stopped with Whitman and Emerson.³ Poets and critics tended to go to either extreme, that of leaving the tradition, or that of trying to fuse the new subject-matter.

¹Schwartz, op. cit., p. 333.
²Noyes, op. cit., p. 327.
with traditional forms,¹ Georgian or other. Many felt the need for some link between the old and the new and openly experimented (or at least advocated it); others were cautious. Eliot stood midway between the two, often; but even more often, he leaned toward those who felt that there was much in European tradition that could deepen and enrich modern poetry:

Tradition...involves the historical sense, and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his whole generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.²

In essence, this quotation resembles very much Pound's theory of the contemporaneity of all literature.³ Both writers realized that a modern poet's task included bringing to the printed page a unified sensibility. Eliot did this by utilizing the whole of European tradition, drawing images from the vast wells of human experience, not from one country or era alone, to give one panoramic example of modern man's struggle for survival.³ Now, to notice one example of this effort in Eliot's poetry:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces
After the frosty silence in the gardens

³Matthiessen, op. cit., p. 35.
After the agony in stony places
The shouting and crying
Prison and palace and reverberation
Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

These lines show a reminiscence of many instances of struggle and martyrdom. "After the torchlight,..." refers to the meeting of Judas and Christ in the garden just before the Crucifixion. The next two lines ("frosty silences," "agony in stony places," for example,) refer to the quest of Percival or Galahad, to Adonis, Osiris and Orpheus as well, to the contemporary spirit of struggle, martyrdom, death and revolt in Russia, South America, finally Spain and China ("Of thunder and of spring over distant mountains").

This inductive method in poetry, this fusion, this "Timeless moment" has been called epiphany, a synthesis of time and space through the force of belief, a combination of human experience related only in ultimate effect, action and reason, rather than time or place. Eliot has called this synthesis the "objective correlative":

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts which must terminate in sensory experience, are given,

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1Eliot, Collected Poems, op. cit., p. 86.
2Matthieson, op. cit., p. 37.
3Ibid.
4Loggins, op. cit., p. 320.
the emotion is immediately evoked.¹

Spender uses the objective correlative in the opening
lines of "Perhaps,":

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-job for their own photographers)
the parliament their own side set fire
and then our party forbidden
and the mine flooded, an accident I hope.

motorcycles wires aeroplanes cars trains
converging at that one town Geneva
top-hats talking at edge of crystal lake
then mountains.²

To see the complete correlation, it would be necessary to
quote the whole poem. But in the lines above one may see the
juxtaposition of mechanical and warlike symbols ("bombs, sub-
marines, shot arm, mine flooded, wires, aeroplanes," etc.) to
convey in eleven lines the picture and impact of war as it
affects the chancellor, the photographer, the parliament, the
party member and the mine worker. The three words, "Geneva",
"top-hats," "talking," attempt to show how diplomats talked of
peace near the mountains. The correlative in this instance
portrays for Spender one whole phase of the twentieth century
social scene without the use of thoroughly-developed narrative,
whereas those details in Eliot's poem belong to many centuries.

Another example of Spender's correlative is:

¹Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," Selected Essays: 1917-
1932 (New York, 1932). Quoted here from Mark Schorer, Criticism:
the Foundations of Modern Literary Judgement (New York, 1949),
p. 268.

²Spender, op. cit., p. 49.
I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit clothed from head to foot
in song.
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

In these lines, Spender approaches something of an egocentric
correlation in that he sees the greatness of others through
his own ambition. This, it is true, is not an objective cor-
relation, but it is a correlation in that he fuses human great-
ness with such phrases as "remembered the soul's history..."
"their lips, still touched with fire...tell of the spirit
clothed in song." The older poet is different in that he moves
out of his own feelings to take the isolated instances ("a
chain of events") of human experience, combines them into a
complex of imagery to form a larger, more kaleidoscopic symbol
of the human struggle for survival. Spender's correlative is
egocentric and personal, measured by his own feeling, while
Eliot remains fairly objective.

What did the "objective correlative" do as a technical
device in Spender's development as a social poet? If Pound's
loosening of poetic form aided Spender to absorb the images
that portrayed modern life honestly, the younger poet still
needed to render his social poetry the sort of organic unity
necessary among the incongruities of modern experience. The

1Ibid., p. 45.
"correlative" aided the younger poet to present numerous facets of the truth, of fact and feeling, of action and reaction, of war, revolution, death and imprisonment without the use of narrative and without the danger of becoming overly sentimental. Spender, because he sought to deal with these incongruities needed a sense and method of synthesis; not that which involves the oversimplification of allegory, but a correlation that analyzes as well as portrays, going to the very heart of the modern social problem of injustice and war. Thus, Eliot gave to Spender a synthesizing element that helped him to present modern life with a high degree of sincere, realistic analysis. As may now be seen, the technical innovations of both Pound and Eliot contributed greatly to Spender's ability to absorb, analyze and portray the complexities of the twentieth century social scene. Yet the portrayal of the scene and a felicitous technique do not necessarily give the complete "unified sensibility," which includes ideas also. Eliot's contributions in the area of Wasteland ideas as they affected Spender is the discussion which follows.

One of the most elemental features of Eliot's poetic thinking is his belief that the twentieth century world is more sordid, ignoble and aimless than that of former times, when spiritual faith gave man more to believe in and made him a more noble figure.\(^1\) Consider these lines in which he gives

an impression of a city at dusk and at dawn:

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days....

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands....
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.¹

The sterility seen in such images as the "burnt-out ends of smoky days," "faint stale smells of beer," "sawdust-trampled street," "muddy feet," and "all the hands that are raising dingy shades, in a thousand furnished rooms," reflect the city at the end of the day as well as at dawn. In earlier poetry, dawn was often symbolical of hope, but not so here. Such emptiness and despair result in lack of purpose and direction, as is seen in the following lines:

Miss Nancy Ellicott smoked
And danced all the modern dances;
And her aunts were not quite so sure how they felt about it,
But they knew that it was modern.²

The poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" expresses the sterile affair of a middle-aged man who wished to capture some of the passion, fire and meaning of a love affair. Note the following lines:

²Ibid., p. 34.
Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And saw-dust restaurants with oyster-shell:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.¹

The invitation in these lines is the psychological expression of a desire on Prufrock's part to do what his inhibitions prevent him from attempting. The specific nature of the desire may be seen in lines four through nine. The sordidness is not so much a part of the intent itself as it is a figment of Prufrock's own beliefs. It is this reasoning that motivates his asking the lady not to say "what is it?" Such guilt feelings come from a conflict between social decorum and Prufrock's desires. There is no passion, fire or meaning for the man because he believes that his own desires are sordid; there is no longer any spiritual beauty in man's love for woman. The women are affected and vacuous:

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.²

In the meantime, Prufrock suffers from the lack of purpose and concrete belief that come from an aimless, an empty life. ("Do I dare disturb the universe?") In feeling this,

¹Eliot, ibid., p. 11.
²Ibid., p. 12.
he is later obsessed with the fact that he is growing old:

But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald)
brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat
and snicker,

I grow old...I grow old...

This lack of purpose recurs throughout the poem. Again and
again there is a swinging from the meticulous and boring life
that Prufrock knows well ("I have measured out my life with
coffee spoons") to a distinct state of emotional uncertainty.
The whole poem is a study in frustration and emotional con-
fusion, a psychological monologue by a man mentally imprisoned
by social decorum and inhibitions. In spite of his early
poetry's obvious concern with despair, Eliot did not succeed
in presenting a complete picture of Wasteland despair until he
wrote "The Wasteland."

This poem takes its name from a mythological kingdom
that became barren because its ruler, as a result of an in-
jury had become impotent. The most obvious attainment of the
poem is the manner in which it grasps and conveys the frustra-
tion of all levels of society. The opening lines give an air
of desert-like dryness:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land....

1Eliot, ibid., p. 15.
2Wilson, op. cit., p. 344.
What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish?¹

Here the emphasis is on the atmosphere, tone and setting of the poem. Part II, "A Game of Chess", shifts the emphasis from the environment to the individual. It shows the complicated barrenness which exists in the lives of three women. The first is a wealthy lady whose conversation with her lover runs thus:

0 0 0 0 that Shakespheherian Rag---
It's so elegant
So intelligent
"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"
"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street
"With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?²

This constant asking "what shall I do?" shows the lack of direction in her life. She is a materially fortunate woman who sat in a chair "like a burnished throne" with "the glitter of jewels" before her. She is contrasted to a Cockney girl, a part of whose conversation follows:

You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.
I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,
It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)....
What you get married for if you don't want children?³

This girl, knowing the same empty existence as Prufrock and the lady above, senses the same musical despair as she relates the details of a friend's experience. The working girl, in

¹Eliot, op. cit., p. 91.
²Ibid., p. 75.
³Ibid., p. 76-7.
spite of the fact that she has a "purpose" in life (that is, the responsibilities of her job) knows no fuller existence:

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window periously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays
On the divan are piled (at night her bed)
Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
One of the low on whom assurance sits
As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.
The time is now porpitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavors to engage her in caresses
Which still are unreproved, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity required no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference
Bestows one final patronising kiss,
And gropes his way finding the stairs unlit....

She reacts to seduction in this way:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
Hardly aware of her departed lover;
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
"Well now that's done: and I'm gald it's over."
She smoothes her hair with automatic hand,
And puts a record on the gramophone.

Section V ends the poem and it expresses the disillusionment which grows out of such purposelessness as the rest of the poem conveys. Those who live today, remembering the legendary and historical martyrs of an age that had more to offer in the way of spiritual faith are:

1Eliot, ibid., p. 80.
2Ibid., p. 81.
now dying
With a little patience
In this decayed hole among the mountains.¹

The poem ends with the same desperate questioning that arises from a lack of emotional strength and spiritual faith.

In Spender's poetry, the earliest and most nearly complete expression of despair is seen in poem number 27:

Without that once clear aim, the path of flight
To follow for a life-time through white air,
This century chokes me under roots of night
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.
Watch me through coiling streets where rain
And fog drown every cry; at corners of day
Roads 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.²

This poem expresses an aimlessness in its first line. There is a sense of sterility, too, in the symbols such as "closed medieval vaults," "dungeons" and "towers long broken off from sight." He contrasts the "smoky rumour" of the "Dark Ages" to modern life when in "coiling streets the rain and fog drown every cry." "Road drills" is the symbol of man's ever searching analysis which, to Spender, only "explore new areas of pain." From this despair Spender finds his writing his only avenue of hope.

Of the empty lives of war prisoners, Spender has the

¹Ibid., p. 88.
²Spender, op. cit., p. 41.
following to say:

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.¹

A loss of the sense of reality in modern life is seen in the
following lines:

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.²

In this passage there is a tiny ray of hope. "Only my
body is real," for example. This flash of hope, a minute
image at best, is offset by the fact that "wolves are free to
oppress and gnaw" even his body. There is a pervading loneli-
ness in this poem, but there is no complete loss of hope, for
there are at least three things counted real: the rose, the
letter from home, his body. Another example of mixed emotion
may be seen here in a short love poem:

But next day stumbling, panting up dark stairs,
Rushing to room and door flung wide, I knew.
Oh empty walls, book-carcases, blank chairs
All splintered in my head and cried for you.³

The despair in this quatrain appears in the last two lines.
"Oh empty walls," walls which portray no memory of whatever has
gone before; "book-carcases, blank chairs," all are images of

¹Ibid., p. 37.
²Spender, ibid., p. 10.
³Ibid., p. 12.
emptiness, of a momentary despair. But in the earlier two lines there is energy in such lines as "stumbling," "panting up dark stairs" and "rushing," and in such energy there is a little hope.

In poem number 11, Spender deals with man's inadequacy:

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.¹

The term being carries the philosophical meaning of physical existence. Spender's use of it denotes "existence of worth." The symbols of emotional death and inadequacy are "Death-mask" and "Shadow." The phrases, "I move lips for tasting, hands for touching" show the real emptiness of a life which has no clear-cut aim. ("Time merely drives those lives which do not live.")²

Another Wasteland element is the lack of spiritual value in man's love for woman or vice-versa:

How can they sleep, who eat upon their fear
And watch their dreadful love fade as it grows?
Their life flowers, like an antique lover's rose
Set puffed and spreading in the chemist's jar.³

Spender feels the same fear in his own life as he watches:

My sight is fixed with horror, as I pass
Before the transitory glass

¹Ibid., p. 20.
²Spender, ibid., p. 60.
³Ibid., p. 21.
And watch the fungus cover up my eyes.\(^1\)

The loss of purpose so typical of the Wasteland mood may be seen in the following lines:

> Who can live under the shadow of a war,  
> What can I do that matters?  
> My pen stops, and my laughter, dancing, stop  
> Or ride to a gap.\(^2\)

In Spender's earliest poetry, we have looked at some instances of the Wasteland mood. The examples are small. There is a lack of unified or intense despair in Spender's work. There is no correlated expression of the modern world's spiritual decadence. To prove this, it is necessary to re-examine the poems, parts of which were analyzed in the section above. The poem "Never Being" ends with the following lines:

> Observing rose, gold, eyes, an admired landscape,  
> My senses record the act of wishing  
> Wishing to be  
> Rose, gold, landscape or another.  
> I claim fulfillment in the fact of loving.\(^3\)

This citation does not express despair. These images are not deathly, or skeletal, or empty. They are the images of a "rose and gold" afternoon landscape, alive with some hope or promise. To Spender, this promise is fulfilled in the act of loving. The poem ends on a note of optimism.

There is optimism in the following lines also:

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 22.  
\(^2\)Ibid., p. 31.  
\(^3\)Spender, ibid., p. 20.
Man must rejoice, misfortune cannot fall,
Him I delight in accepts joy as joy;
He is richened by sorrow as a river by its bends,
He is the swaller of fire.
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.  

Here Spender is concerned with the theme that man, no matter how oppressed, always has moments of recurring hope and self-confidence.

In the section above, in which Spender's moods of poetic despair were discussed, the example of his sadness at seeing the empty lives of war prisoners was cited. It is pertinent here to return to the poem to note its ending. These are the lines:

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.

No, no, no,
It is too late for anger,
Nothing prevails
But pity for the grief they cannot feel.  

The ending of this poem is a note of compassion, an element of Spender's poetry that is often cited as being quite consistent and native. The desire to follow them from "room to womb" is his way of showing how the prisoners' lives should have been protected from war and oppression even before their birth.

1 Ibid., p. 61.
2 Spender, ibid., p. 38.
3 Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 486.
One may justifiably conclude that in Spender's poetry there are two main elements: one of them is a sense of his own time's spiritual limitations, the other a sense of promise in the complex scene of modern life. The technical practices which Spender inherited from the Wastelanders formed part of the immediate literary tradition that he used to absorb and portray honestly the modern social situation. The ideas of the Wastelanders were not as much his medium as their techniques were. Despair, futility and disillusionment enter into his poetry only incidentally, as the symbols more and more express a youthful, almost energetic, hope.

Spender's ability to relate himself to the whole of human experience through the projectionist mood of his poetry renders him compassionate instead of cynical and what might have been despair becomes a momentary, personal sadness. His disillusionment becomes, therefore, a means to an end used in the process of poetic reasoning. The poet discusses this difference between himself and Eliot in his critical volume, *The Destructive Element*, in which he begins to form his own poetic creed. But the materials of this phase of Spender's thinking compose the next chapter.
CHAPTER II

SPENDER'S POETIC CREED

The evidence in the preceding chapter showed how the Wasteland period of the post-World War I years affected the poetry of Stephen Spender. The findings indicate that, though Spender benefited greatly from the technical changes instigated by two influential Wasteland poets, his early work was not consistently expressive of a thoroughly disillusioned Wasteland mood. Since this is true, it becomes necessary to understand the motivations behind Spender's poetry that make his ideas different. It is the purpose of this chapter to show Spender's poetic creed.

As a starting-point, it is necessary to see the nature of Spender's reaction to the Wastelanders as shown in his criticism. Of one of the Wastelanders he has the following to say:

The poetry of the future will start from the position of Eliot and his poem "The Wasteland." He is the first English poet to realize the catastrophic nature of the world in which we live today; a world of tyranny, murder, espionage and corrupt political systems. He realizes fully the catastrophe and he sees religion as a way out. Although this religious poetry is an authentic note of release for Eliot, there is no synthesis that transforms and includes the people in the "Wasteland." The poet himself, and he only, has found a chapel among the ruins. It is nevertheless Eliot who broke away from the decaying traditions of post-Victorian or Georgian poetry.¹

In this passage, Spender regards Eliot as being the exponent of poetry that is irrefutably valuable because it (1) delineates truthfully the "catastrophic world" in which we live and (2) because it broke away from the "decaying traditions" of Georgian poetry. Spender believes, however, that Eliot's way out of the sterility of the Wasteland is too personal. Another comment concerns the poem itself:

Even the title of the poem "The Wasteland" strikes the imagination, for it expresses the sense of emptiness, of desolation which overcame Western Europe shortly after World War I. "The Wasteland" is thus both very much a poem of its time and beyond its time, like one of the prophetic books of the Old Testament. The inner despair of the poet of 1920 is prophetic of the tragedy which overcame whole populations in Europe twenty years later... This poem also reminds me of translations which I have read of "The Twelve" by Alexander Blok. The theme of the two poems, though treated very differently, is the same—the death and rebirth of Christianity in the modern world. Blok sees Christianity reborn in the social revolution. With Eliot the emphasis is on destruction and despair. The idea of redemption, developed later in "Ash Wednesday," and "Four Quartets" is only a glimmer in "The Wasteland."

This passage shows that Spender had a genuine respect for the poem, "The Wasteland." His comparison of it here with Blok's "The Twelve" is an attempt to discuss it as one of the most noteworthy (to say the least) poems in contemporary poetry. A comment concerning the Wastelanders as a group follows:

These writers... have all fortified their works by creating some legend, or by consciously going back to a tradition that seemed and seems to be

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dying. They are all conscious of the present as chaotic (though they are not altogether without their remedies), and of the past as altogether more solid ground... One notices further that there is a tendency in the work of these artists to regard life as an illness, and themselves as doctors or nurses, or mere affectionate holders of fading hands.¹

Spender's comments concerning the Wastelanders do not constitute a revolt in the genuine sense of that term, though he does belong to a different group of writers.² Generally speaking, it is safe to say that he feels what the Wastelanders felt and much more. He is understanding of their position, as the quotations above show, realizing that their work is valuable as the artistic delineation of a given period in human history. The world which they reflect was one without belief, one filled with destruction and fear. In simpler terms, Spender takes for granted what the Wastelanders say. Their work stands as self-evident truth, a realistic reflection of a chaotic world.

He also believed, though, that the Wastelanders did not do quite enough; they created a world which is a dead end both socially and artistically.

The mood of the Wasteland could go no further than in this poem "Sweeney Agonistes" for here the bareness and dryness is such that the poetry would be poetically false. It is a kind of

reductio ad absurdum... all the possibilities of human poetry are exhausted. With the exception of Sweeney, haunted by the Furies, the characters in these two fragments "Sweeney Agonistes" and "Fragment of an Agon" are non-human, they are bones.¹

There is no hope nor future for the inhabitants of the Wasteland. The Wasteland poets had only sought to give them a tradition, which seemed to be "more solid ground," and this left the Wastelander only a wonderful past, a creditable tradition, but no future, therefore, no hope.

His conclusive reaction to the Wastelander is:

The question is whether this despairing stage is now over, whether it is now possible for the artist to discover a system of values that are not purely subjective and individualistic, but objective and social; real in the world of a society outside the artist in the same way as Nature is real.²

The importance of this quotation is that it assumes that the Wastelanders were subjective and individualistic (Mr. Spender proves the point elsewhere in the book),³ and that the point of attack for artists who come after the Wasteland is "objective and social." Spender further elaborates:

The point is that it is almost impossible for an artist today... to live entirely in the present, because the present is chaotic. If we want beliefs, or even a view of history, we must either turn back to the past, or we must

¹Spender, Destructive Element, op. cit., p. 149. Both of the poems referred to here were written by Eliot.
²Spender, ibid., p. 222-3.
³Ibid., p. 134.
exercise our imaginations to some degree, so that we live in the future.¹

One is to "exercise one's imagination so that he lives in the future" by regarding the present as being both chaotic and symbolic of a coming future. The social events of the years contemporary with this particular work were widespread and highly influential, particularly symbolic of an even more chaotic world to come.

In October, 1929, the stock market dropped to its lowest ebb in history, causing what is now called the Great Depression.² By 1932, banks were failing at the rate of forty per day.³ Lines of unemployed laborers, white-collar workers, and professionals lost their jobs and walked the streets for free food, relief, handouts.⁴ Fortunes made almost overnight in the twenties were lost as quickly in the early thirties.⁵ Attempts on the part of controlling interests to keep the workers employed at tremendously reduced wages caused an antagonism between the two classes unexperienced before in the history of western society.⁶ Labor unions spread and (in some

¹Ibid., p. 224.
²Lloyd M. Graves, The Great Depression and Beyond (New York, 1932), p. 77.
³Huberman, op. cit., p. 259.
⁴Ibid.
⁵Graves, op. cit., p. 78, 97.
areas such as the southern United States, were beaten back, but even they were not able to alleviate conditions.¹

In Spain, the political factions of fascism and Republicanism met and clashed.² Because of the social disorganization throughout Spain at that time, because of the well-planned means of social infiltration, because, too, of their arbitrary methods of social control and persuasion and consequently, the sheer force of numbers, the fascists became the dominant political force in Spain and have remained so for fourteen years.³

The fascists were condemned not only for their beliefs, but also for the more obvious results of their methods of social control. Pogroms, rifle squads, gas chambers, and concentration camps were four of the means for obtaining strict adherence to their laws.⁴ Churches, schools, bridges, and national edifices were bombed and wrecked by the partisans.⁵

¹Huberman, op. cit., p. 78, 97.

²It is always difficult to set a date for the events leading up to a war. This is especially true of a conflict so surrounded by myth and pathos as the Spanish Civil War. Dictatorship in Spain began in about 1930 with the appointment of Don Miguel Orbaneja, Dictator of Spain. Seven years later, actual war broke. Allison Peers, The Spanish Tragedy (London, 1937), p. 190.


⁴Koestler, ibid., p. 54.

Art treasures valued for centuries were lost or permanently damaged. By 1936 the intellectuals of western society were critically concerned over the Spanish Civil War.

The depression in America, England and Germany and the Spanish Civil War were results of socio-economic conditions that fostered what is now called the class struggle. Inflation and a sudden economic "slump" caused the depression, while both social and economic inequalities caused the Spanish people to first seek refuge in the guidance of a "kindly" dictator. Then later seeing the faults of a totalitarian government, they sought to maintain Republicanism (which was never really forsaken) by force of civil war.

By this time the stronger Wastelanders had moved away from their earlier mood of disillusionment. Eliot had written certain faith-inspired works that showed a leaning toward Anglo-Catholicism and theology in general. Pound had turned to economics and fascism. Spender realized that it was time to

5. Anderson and Walton, op. cit., p. 228.
6. Ibid., p. 260.
do more than "whimper", one had to do something to avert the injustice so widespread in the world.

If we hope to go on existing, if we want a dog's chance of a right to breathe, to go on being able to write, it seems that we have got to make some choice outside the private entanglements of our personal lives. We have got to try somehow to understand that objective life moving down on us like a glacier, is an historic process, the life of people like ourselves, and therefore our 'proper study'.

It is not enough, therefore, to feel the chaos of modern life and express it. "Such is like treating the symptom and not the malady." The important thing is to treat the real malady, the cause of chaos in the world. The writer of the post-Wasteland period must be a writer of wide social influence. "He knows that if he is not to be destroyed, he must somehow connect his life again with this political life and influence it." It became necessary to add to the tradition strengthened by the Wastelanders. Spender believed that those who look forward "to a world of new beliefs in the future" are the poets who may adequately move toward a positive belief even in chaos of modern life. In such thinking, Spender emerges from the Wasteland in a broadly social manner:

I mean that one expects an intellectual who is not a political expert to endeavor to increase

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1Spender, "Writers and Manifestos," The Destructive Element, op. cit., p. 223.
2Ibid., p. 133.
3Ibid., p. 224.
understanding between people, to defend liberty, to sympathize with human suffering, to be patient of small inconveniences, to have a certain humility when he meets men and women engaged in strenuous and exhausting practical tasks, and to realize that the most important need of the world today may be summed up in one word, peace.1

Thus, Spender defines the poet's place in society:

It is a question of what in the widest sense is going to be the social or political subject of writing. If the subject of writing is political freedom and social justice, it is no longer possible with consistency to be a writer who satirizes a small clique of literary dilettanti; who insists on regarding only the surface of his characters and on having an eye which ignores the more emotive centres. . . . If, then, one believes that freedom, justice and other moral qualities are desirable, then the precise difficulty is to write about this moral life in a way that is significant: to find the real moral subject.2

The subject for writing, then, becomes political-moral. This is to say that it becomes the business of the poet to influence a growing moral awareness in a given social group. "The extraordinary public events of the last few years, the war, revolutions, the economic crisis, are bound eventually to become absorbed into the tradition of literature."3 The term "political" is used interchangeably with "social" and therefore is broadly indicative of a given community life. The term "moral" is an index to the fact that certain "qualities" (justice, freedom, liberty, etc.) should be the remedy applied.

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2Spender, Destructive Element, op. cit., p. 224.
3Ibid., p. 19.
to a world of chaos. A poet's moral beliefs must aid him in relating himself to the wider social life. It is important, not only to feel a social obligation to one's fellows, but also to allow one's moral beliefs to influence his social thinking. "The starting point is the human heart." Poets cannot let the onrush, the horror, the cold fear of external events, widespread, rapid and perplexing as they might be, blind him to the essential meaning behind them—-to the fact that the destructive element had come from the fact that men have forgotten their "obvious and palpable love" for each other. It is the duty of the poet to show again the value of human love. "The artist must insist on human values; he must be concerned with influencing a change of heart." Poetry must act upon the moral and social (political) life of a whole population:

Poetry should not create a world apart, it should act upon the world, transforming the amorphous, the ugly, the brittle, the erring, into that which is concrete, beautiful, malleable and sane. It changes the disorder of our environment into the order of our imaginations, and if we must have madness and disorder it at least makes these things significant....A modern poetry is ultimately concerned with a feasible way of living within a modern environment, and this requires, of course, a philosophy which is actually by implication from the crystal moment of the

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1 Spender uses this quote from Kafka's The Castle to make his point explicit. It has been used here in the same spirit. Destructive Element, p. 248.

2 Spender, Poems, op. cit., p. 48.

3 Spender, op. cit., p. 250.
single poem, tenable.¹

The poet, therefore, becomes a social agent. It is his duty to relate himself to the larger scope of the human struggle for survival. Above all, he must act "upon the world" and is ultimately concerned with a feasible way of living within a modern environment." The poet's duty must go further than that of reflection and reaction; these call forth pity, but pity is not adequate in modern poetry. Reflection and reaction will lead to a type of idealism, weak and illusory, or to satire, but it will do little to influence the moral life of today's human beings.² This means rather that poets must take the violent historical facts and weave into them a consistently moral pattern, so that poets may show that it is the sense of a disjointed moral life which is motivating the destructive element in today's world.

This does not mean that the poet in becoming a social agent is to become morally didactic. It means rather that he must create in his work a situation, a scene which draws forth a moral lesson of power and beauty. He is concerned with creating in poetry "the moment in which his subjective senses have experience of unity with some external event in the universe, whether this be the light on the feathers of a fowl


²Spender, Destructive Element, op. cit., p. 218.
or a political revolution which is going to make men love each other.\footnote{Spender, "On Seriousness in Poetry," \textit{op. cit.}, p. 96.} One must first realize that the deep need of human beings, of whole populations, is for human love, understanding, and political freedom.

The political-moral subject, then, may be defined as being that motivation behind poetry that enables the poet to portray the social scene honestly, and in creating such a situation, calls to mind the moral life of both the individual and the group so as to make men cognizant of their "obvious and palpable love" for each other. This is the motivation, formulated in the mid-thirties, that lies behind Spender's earlier, more obviously social poetry, which is different from that behind his later more personal poetry beginning with \textit{Ruins and Visions} (1942).

In his later poetry, Spender has gradually returned to what critics have termed the "personal lyric." In his own words:

\begin{quote}
I think there is a certain pressure of external events on poets today, making them tend to write about what is outside their own experience. The violence of the times we are living in, the necessity of sweeping and general immediate action tend to dwarf the experience of the individual, and to make his immediate environment and occupations something that he is even ashamed of. For this reason, in my most recent poems, I have deliberately turned back to a kind of writing which is more personal, and I have included within my subjects weakness, fantasy and
\end{quote}
Spender's "return to the personal" was reacted to by critics as being a sort of "about-face" motivated by the outbreak of war in 1939. Yet as may be seen in the quotation above, Spender's reason seems to be that he had come to realize the social nature of personality, which had been inhibited and "dwarfed" by social events, and by poets who "tend to write about what is outside their own experience." Thus the personal experience, the immediate environment and the effect of social events on the individual psychology gradually began to come into his poetry. The emphasis, therefore, shifts from the social scene to the individual. Whether or not this constitutes a change in the man as a poet depends entirely upon the reader's viewpoint. If the poet possessed the responsibility of both social and personal influence through his poetry, then it follows that the two (social experience and personal experience) must have had some common ground. The social poetry must have certain personal tendencies and the personal poetry some social ones. The problem immediately becomes both technical and ideological; it is the challenge of the poet to relate the individual to the group. This is in sharp contrast to

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Spender's earlier poetry in which he emphasizes the social scene, in which he could figure as agent both of the real (destruction, war, revolution) and of the ideal (human love, merciful social system), "functioning as critic and destroyer of the old order, prophet and builder of the new."¹ One critic discusses Spender's recent attempt at unifying the individual and the scene in the following manner:

His (Spender's) unique accent as a personal poet also contributed to the blend of agent with scene; his persona was, in the urgent terms of the thirties, very much a part of all that he had met. To see how this worked, set alongside "Easter Monday" the poem beginning "My parents kept me from children who were rough." Here the agents of "Easter Monday," the workers—as children— are part of the scene in which the poet's consciousness is formed.²

Another comment discusses Spender's attempt to blend the agent and the scene in terms of "center and periphery."

Both Spender and Auden may be regarded as social poets. That is to say, their chief preoccupation and the central theme of their poetry is "society."

...These poems are all achieved from the perimeter of the poet's awareness...Masters of poetry have been men who have written from the center of their existence and not from the periphery. They have not allowed themselves to become absorbed by society. It is the most telling weakness of the "social" poets of the thirties that they reveal no awareness of the fundamentals of existence. In them, everything has a social reference, even the individual life itself. Although poetry of a certain degree of validity may for a time be created out of relative and temporary adjustments between the center and periphery of

¹Frank Jones, "The Edge of Being What?" Poetry, LXXIV (September, 1949), 349.
²Ibid., p. 351.
the poet's awareness, continuous, organic creativeness depends upon an individual integrity which seriously and steadily relates the surface to the depths /the center to the periphery/ and is therefore as completely personal in its approach as in its effects.1

It may be seen, then, that Spender's shift of emphasis from the population to the personality is a necessary stage in his development as a social poet. If this is true, then the individual personality assumes a type of importance only incidental in Spender's more obviously social poetry. This importance is inferred in the quotation taken from Ruins and Visions, but it is seen even more explicitly in the following passage:

The conception of guilt cannot be isolated. Everyone is to some extent guilty for the crimes of everyone else, because everyone is to some extent responsible for the conditions which produce those crimes...we should have aims of being rather than of doing.2

The importance of "having aims of being rather than of doing" along with the idea of the conception of guilt (only one of the psychic states accompanying war) suggests the need on the part of both the individual and the group for a type of psychological rehabilitation.3 Guilt, fear, anxiety, or war hysteria are not merely group states; they begin with the

1D. S. Savage, op. cit., p. 150. It will be noticed that Mr. Savage's review was written during Spender's transitional period and does not take into consideration his fuller personal work.


3Ibid., p. 240.
individual and spread outward. Here one remembers that "the starting-place is the human heart." It becomes the poet's duty, then, to aid in this "psychological rehabilitation." He may do this by going to the center of his own experience, those states of existence that he holds in common with the citizens of the world. In doing so, he creates his own personality on paper, feeling, knowing, thinking all the things which people everywhere feel, know, and think under the impact of guilt, war, poverty and oppression. There must be a distillation "of the critical social situation through the medium of a highly sensitive individual." ¹ Spender's beliefs concerning the poet's personality entering into his writings show that he must emerge through his poetry a full individual:

...However, if, as well may be, the situation seems to require that the poet should invent such a smile, then he has to invent himself, he has to create his own poetic personality. He has to have the courage to be a monstrous egoist in his poetry....²

The personality as it appears in the poetry does two things: one of them is to help the reader understand his own feelings, his own sensibilities and psychology as they are affected by modern life; the other is to aid the poet in creating his own personality on paper, showing its relation to a

¹Harvey Curtis Webster, "Change, Within and Without," Poetry, LXXI (December, 1947), 154.
greater whole, its projection and identification with more broadly social or universal phenomena. In this way, the poet grows to a fuller relation with his time and social order, and through his poetry lifts the reader, too.

One of the elements in Spender's belief concerning the extension of the personality is the sensitivity of the poet to human values. ("The artist must insist on human values.") The poet may express compassion only when he knows it himself. It is the duty of the poet, not to preach, or to tell a lesson, it is his "duty to create a personal situation in which the lesson is made explicit, but not glaring. The poet must avoid being obvious."2

To Spender, the poet is a social agent without being a propagandist, is a personal poet without being an escapist.3 His increasing awareness (in his later poetry) of how the contemporary social situation is only a part of the total human situation, of how the total human situation is only a magnification of the personal situation of all human beings who are intensely self-aware may be seen in his later criticism and poetry. It is this view then which is the motivation behind Spender's later and more "personal" poetry. Because the

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1Spender, "On Seriousness in Poetry." op. cit., p. 96.
3Spender, The Destructive Element. op. cit., p. 160.
individual feelings, the sensitivities of war guilt and struggle are mere indices to the totality of human awareness in today's world, Spender's personal poetry assumes a social quality. One critic has this to say in support of Spender's views:

This growing realization of the complex interpenetration of the problems of humanity, society and the individual calls for a new kind of writing. It calls for poems which are more an exploration of self than an exhortation to others, for a poetry which must, perhaps, even abandon the social and exhortatory for a time, until self-knowledge has deepened to an extent that it may again become relevant, and on a more profound level, to society and mankind as a whole.¹

This is what Spender has attempted in his personal poetry. In his travels through western Europe, Spender saw, among other things, a widespread evidence of social guilt on the part of both victors and vanquished.² He learned, too, that people thrown quickly together through the rapid social change during the years of two world wars and subsequent famine, hunger, power politics and social anxiety know all too little about the feelings which exist among people of vastly different social situations.³ In his attempt to convey his reaction to such in his poetry, Spender returns to the spiritual explorations characteristic of a few of his earlier poems, in which

¹Webster, op. cit., p. 155.
³Ibid.
the poet is largely concerned with the impact of death, love and birth upon his own personality, trying to see how the age-old psychology reacts to a complex, rapidly changing world. His emphasis here is on the "moral" rather than the "political," in that he begins with the individual and moves outward, instead of striving to show the inconsistencies and cruelties of an uneven system on the individual or group of individuals.

Spender's poetic creed expresses itself in the form of a social panacea. There are to this creed two facets. One is broadly social, in which Spender believes that the poet should concern himself with that which is objective and social "outside the artist, in the same way that Nature is real." It is clear that he means much more than this. He means that the poet should concern himself with the social scene which, because of its inconsistencies, is the cause of the chaos and destruction in the world. But as Spender develops as a thinker and as a poet, he realizes that the group, the population, the scene can only be dealt with wholly when the poet considers the individual. For this reason, he shifts his emphasis from the scene to the individual. This shifting emphasis constitutes the impulse behind what various critics have called his "return to the personal lyric." In this later phase of his work, however, Spender does not reject his view of the general social scene. Instead, he related the individual to the social order, seeing the latter's effect upon the total personality of the individual. One may say, then, that Spender's poetic creed
is political-moral. This is to say that the poet seeks to distill, to synthesize, to relate the individual reaction to the total impetus of widespread social events. The effectiveness with which the poet does this will constitute the findings of the next chapter, which concerns itself with an analysis of Spender's social and socio-psychological poetry in terms of the poetic creed here discussed.
CHAPTER III

THE INFLUENCE OF SPENDER'S CREED ON HIS POETRY

This chapter proposes to analyze Spender's poetry in the light of his "political-moral" poetic creed. Both his overtly social poems and his socio-psychological poems are to be studied in this manner. This is necessary because it will give an objective view of Spender as a social poet.

In his early criticism, Spender sets up his ruling value as being the "objective and outward" life of modern man. By this he means that he intends to be consciously social. His point of attack is an unjust social system and the conditions which it creates:

The greed for property
Heaps a skyscraper over the breathing ribs:
The speedlines of dictators
Cut their own stalks.¹

The terms "greed for property" and "dictators" have a kinship here. They show that, on one hand, industry and the wealthy build cities which hamper and choke the individual needs, while on the other dictators or totalitarian governments grow with the same disregard of human dignity. Both factions "cut their own stalks," that is, cut off the life line of the people's growth and happiness and therefore breed their own

¹Spender, "Poem no. 21," Poems, p. 32. Because the quotations in this chapter are all taken from Mr. Spender's works, they have been entered without the name of the author.
destruction in the people's revolt against oppression.

Not only the active oppressors are guilty. Those who profit by their expansion, the upper middle classes which remain comfortably and complacent, because they are not really oppressed as much as the poor, and therefore feel little or no responsibility for the evils of oppression in any way, are as guilty of exploitation as are dictators and robber barons. They complacently watch injustice spread as men watch imprisoned animals:

Passing, men are sorry for the birds in cages
And for constricted nature hedged and lines,
Behind centuries, behind the continual hill,
The wood you felled, your clothes, the slums you built....
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
When the fields are covered with your more living houses.¹

Here Spender compares man with nature to show how the exploitation of man is also an exploitation of nature. The bird in the cage is a man imprisoned. Woods and trees were destroyed to build a great manor house, slums are bred to maintain this house and its spacious lawns. The "he" in line five is a composite image; it designates both man and nature, "quite destroyed" by greed which is:

The enemy of flesh, angel and destroyer,
Creator of a martyrdom serene, but horrible.²

¹"Poem no. 28," ibid., p. 42.
²Ibid., p. 43.
Therefore, those who are complacent, who, though they may never order out a firing squad or declare war, are as guilty in their indifference to social injustice as are those who commit the more positive wrongs. The idea is further developed here:

Your son grew up and thought it all quite real.
Hunting, the family, the business man's ideal.
The poor and the unhappy had his sympathy,
They were exceptions made to prove his rule.¹

This son had sympathy but nothing else for the poor. He was concerned, not with perpetuating happiness in the world, but with safeguarding his own highly profitable way of life. These are the comfortable, the well-to-do, the satisfied. But what of the "poor and unhappy"?

In railway halls, on pavements near the traffic,
They beg, their eyes made big by empty staring
And only measuring Time, like the blank clock.

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.²

The "oppressor" starves spiritually, the poor starve physically, their lives empty of purpose, concerned only with passing time. Spender's reaction to his portrayal of social injustice follows:

No, I shall weave no tracery of pen-ornament
To make them birds upon my singing-tree:
Time merely drives those lives which do not live
As tides push rotten stuff along the shore.³

¹"The Fates," Poetry, LIX (March, 1942), 313.
²"Poem no. 38," Poems, p. 60.
³Ibid.
The old order, the class stratifications, social inequalities built on superficialities such as family or exploitation are the "rotten stuff," out of place and outmoded in a world where people are constantly being drawn closer and closer together. The lives of the complacent are worthless simply because they are complacent; they are "driven" along by the passage of time ("tides"), accomplishing nothing. The poet can no longer deal with the poor as mere incidentals, as exceptions to the rule:

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

The intellectual, the man who is able to look at life steadily must come to the problem with a will to help, if no more. Instead of turning away from the starvation, the destruction in modern life to sing of glittering generalities, of transcendental beauty, or of immortality, he must see the essential meaning of war and strife (flashing brass) as being the sign of a new era, of the will of the oppressed to be free. He will need no flag, no national backing. His "polished will" is his flag "of purpose." Even the wind proclaims a new day and engraves the "flag's" symbol. These violent times must symbolize the hour before the dawn and therefore are his point

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1"Poem no. 42," *ibid.*, p. 67.
of attack:

From all these events, from the slump, from the war, from the boom,
From the Italian holiday,
From the clouds in the square at dusk, from the shooting,
From the loving, from the dying, however we prosper in death.
From all these events, Time solitary will emerge
Driving us beyond what seemed the final choking swamp,
Carrying us elate through the happy summer fields.1

From the ashes of today's chaos and war will rise a new and gratifying phoenix—men united to fight for their needs. Only at present do the events seem the "final choking swamp." The new order will emerge as "the happy summer fields." Spender further develops this idea:

In this time when grief pours freezing over us
When the hard light of pain gleams at every street corner,
When those who were pillars of that day's gold roof
Shrink in their clothes, surely from hunger
We may strike fire, like fire from flint?
Our strength is now the strength of our bones
Clean and equal like the shine from snow.2

The new order is latent in the "hard light of pain" felt by unemployed workers, by wounded Spanish soldiers, by survivors of the War. It is the strength born of starvation ("our bones"), of oppression ("shrink in their clothes"), and it is the growing determination to become "clean and equal." This exhortation to the poor is also given to the wealthy, or to

1"Poem no. 41," ibid., p. 65.
2"Poem no. 31," ibid., p. 47.
those of exalted birth:

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 bone in coal. Oh comrade, step beautifully from the solid wall advance to rebuilt and sleep with friend on hill advance to rebel and remember what you have no ghost ever had, immured in his hall.¹

Once the exhortation is made explicit, Spender defines the new order:

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.²

This is Spender's new day. Born from chaos and war, it is a world where the light of equality and justice shines from all faces with equal radiance.

To the imaginative mind, these exhortatory poems carry the implication of social revolution. The idea of social change by revolution is never clearly defined by Spender in either his poetry or his criticism. Whether he means the "revolution" of rapid and widespread social reorganization by collective resistance (such as large-scale strikes, or the

¹"Poem no. 29," ibid., p. 44.
²"Poem no. 30," ibid., p. 48.
collective refusal of taking political sides)\textsuperscript{1} or "revolution" by actual war is not delineated. It is certain, however, that he did not advocate war. It is one of his consistently developed evils:

Now...war is the most inimical to workers, because it is not to the interest of the English worker to kill the German or French worker with whom he had interests in common.\textsuperscript{2}

These lines, along with his many poems written to show the negative effects of war on society and the individual nullify the belief that Spender advocated armed warfare as a method of social change. Spender also believed that no system is perfect:

No system is complete in itself as a solution of the bad system which it supersedes...The economic system was made for man, and not man for the economic system, so that if man changes—that is to say, if he has a new and strong conception of justice—the economic system will also change.\textsuperscript{3}

This quote carries two important implications. One is that human values must be the measuring-device for social change. The other is that the ways and means of this change will come from human needs and desires, and will not be imposed by any

\textsuperscript{1}Examples of these two types of "revolution" may be seen in events of the last ten years. One is the presence of large-scale strikes and collective bargaining in the American economy, such as the coal and steel industry strikes; the other is the "passive resistance" movement in India led by Gandhi. The Russian revolutionists used the means of armed warfare but the ends and results of both were the same: a more nearly equal distribution of the wealth, or, as in the case of India, the elimination of unjust social controls.

\textsuperscript{2}Destructive Element, p. 255.

\textsuperscript{3}Ibid., pp. 229, 250.
given political group. The important thing is that men must realize the need for social change and from that impetus work toward a more just organization of society.

In his early poems, Spender defines the presence of injustice in the world by methods of contrast and inference. This definition contains enough impact for him to further define social inequality in terms of its effect on the culture, upon society as a whole.

The large-scale chaos prevalent in society has caused a gradual disintegration. Political groups, prisoners, cliques, partisans are only a few of the factions created in the culture by social inequalities. Note the following lines, in which Spender shows how he and two friends, realizing their personal inadequacies as agents of change, seek to unite:

A whim of Time, the general arbiter,
Proclaims the love instead of the death of friends.
Under the domed sky and athletic sun
The three stand naked; the new, bronzed German*
The Communist clerk and myself, being English.¹

The three people represent partisan groups which all have different ways of righting social wrongs. The German had just fought a war in which little, if anything, had been accomplished. The Englishman was his enemy in this war. In memory, these two "take arms." The Communist clerk has sought to combat social injustice by a reorganization of the economic system. These conflicting ideologies and backgrounds thwart their...

¹"Poem no. 17," ibid., p. 27.
attempt to unite:

Yet to unwind the travelled sphere twelve years
Then two take arms, spring to a ghostly posture
Or else roll on the thing a further ten
And this poor clerk with world offended eyes
Builds with red hands his heaven; makes our bones
The necessary scaffolding to peace.¹

The German remembers that twelve years before his country was at war with Spender's country (the poem was written in 1929) and the Communist clerk, at the onset of the Depression ("Or else roll the thing on a further ten") begins to map out a fight against economic inequalities. These backgrounds of war and famine render them, the Englishman, the Communist clerk and the German athlete, separated. The poem ends on a note of sadness, for they die without being unified:

Lives risen a moment, joined or separate,
Fall heavily, than are always separate,
A stratum unreckoned by geologists,
Sod lifted, turned, slapped back again with spade.²

Prisoners are another group created by oppression and social inequalities. In some instances these prisoners are political hostages, but in times of actual war, they are simply war prisoners. Spender deals with political hostages in the following lines:

Far, far the least of all, in want,
Are these,
The prisoners
Turned massive with their vaults and dark and dark.
Their time is almost death. The silted flow

¹"Poem no. 17," ibid., p. 27.
²Ibid., p. 28.
Of years on years
Is marked by dawns
As faint as cracks on mud-flats of despair.¹

These prisoners do not live, they merely exist ("their time is almost death") waiting for death. Each dawn is only a faint glow that sharpens their despair. Some prisoners of war were not even so fortunate as these were.

Remember the blackness of that flesh
Tarring the bones with a thin varnish
Belsen Theresenstadt Buchenwald where
Faces were clenched fists of prayer
Knocking at the bird-song-fretted air.
Their eyes sunk jellied in their holes
Were held toward the sun like begging bowls
Their hands like rakes with fingernails of rust
Scratched for kindness from a little dust.
To many, in its beak no dove brought answer.²

The terms "Belsen Theresenstadt Buchenwald" show that these people are in concentration camps, well known during the years of the Second World War. They are dying ("eye sunk jellied in their holes...fingernails scratched...a little dust") slowly, and they pray as they die. Many of them, as the last line shows, never knew peace until they were dead.

The third large group created by social chaos is the uncertain middle-class intellectual. This group wants to help the oppressed, but they also realize that this task requires a great deal of emotional strength and courage, qualities which are often nullified by fear. He discusses this situation in the following lines:

¹"Poem no. 25," ibid., p. 37.
The "I" can never be great
This known great one has weakness
His ill-temper at meals, his dislike of being contradicted
His only real desire---forgetting.
To advance from friends to the composite self
Central "I" is surrounded by I eating....
It can never claim its true place
Quarrelling with "I" tiring and "I" sleeping
And all those other "I"s who long for 'we dying.'

The "I" in this poem is an image showing, by repetition, the importance of the ego in a man who longs to ally himself with the immense political life and influence it for the better. This ego is torn two ways; on the one hand, it wants to join others who are willing to unite themselves for social welfare. On the other hand, it wishes to forget, wishes to develop the "composite self" alone and relatively untouched by social problems. But this "composite self" can "never claim its true place," for it hears the voices of his comrades ("we dying") who are willing to aid in making the world a better place. In Spender's thinking, man never attains true being until he moves out of the self-consciousness of his own personal feelings to unite himself with "comrades" and "claims fulfillment in the act of loving."

Spender's poems written to support his fight against injustice move from the unjust social order to the groups created in society by that injustice. The description of the first section is relatively general, often designating nothing more specific than the rich and complacent, the poor and unsatisfied.

1"Poem no. 9," Poems, p. 17.
His movement, therefore, is from cause to effect, from the social cruelties and inequalities of the system itself to the groups and factions which they create within society (the partisans, the war prisoners, the upper-middle-class intellectual who wants to be of use but is blocked by his own ego are all groups created in society by the prevalent conditions, and are not necessarily inherent in the culture). In his fight against injustice, Spender sets forth one positive panacea. This was the need for human love.

The importance of love as a factor in social consciousness may be seen here:

Then the sun scrawled
Across the white sheet of the day
Twisted iron---black realities
Broken boulevards through which humanity's
Sprawling river Styx

0 but our love was the Phoenix
Above the destroyed city reborn city
Image of our faith sustained the same.\(^1\)

The idea here is the creativeness of human love. The images, "twisted iron," "broken boulevard," "river Styx"\(^2\) show the ashes and remains of war. From these ashes a new city is reborn ("our love was the Phoenix"), through the power of unifying love, and lives again above the debris of the old city. Love, then is powerful enough to bring a rebirth of peace from


\(^2\)The river Styx is the legendary river which souls cross while going to Eternity.
war. Its power is again cited:

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

This, of course, does not mean that love may be used in the same capacity as electricity. It means rather that these details of peaceful life, factories (jobs for all), city power (conveniences for all), trains (transportation for all) may be protected from war by men who love enough to perpetuate peace and social welfare. All these social comforts would be negatively affected by war. Railroads would either be torn up by bombs or confiscated for the transportation of soldiers; city power would be restricted as it was in the "black-out areas" of the Second World War; and even in the cases of the factory and jobs for all, war would cause the economy to become so unbalanced (inflation during and directly after the War, depression afterward), that the workers in the final analysis accomplish very little in the way of economic security. Thus one may note the contrast in both instances cited above: that of the destructive element in society with the creative one.

Spender believed that love may exist in degrees. That is to say, it may only be strong enough to satisfy the individual need for it or it may be strong enough to seal together social factions:

that when I loved
Among these dead—-I did not love enough
That when I looked the murderers in their eyes

---Poem no. 5, Poems, p. 13.
I did not die enough--
I lacked
That which makes cities not to fall
the love
Which holds each moment to each moment
With architecture of continual passion.¹

These lines express the idea that love when fully developed, may attain the veritable power of insuring lasting peace ("that which makes cities not to fall"). This peace is the highest possible attainment of human love, "the architecture of continual passion" and is the means by which the group may become socially adhesive. The idea of love going further than the personal need is seen in the following lines also:

The final act of love
Is not of dear and dear
Oh no, it is the world-storm fruit.²

The image "world-storm fruit" refers back to Spender's idea of the Phoenix. Love must be strong enough to endure even war, power politics, and general social unrest. It must grow, must be the fruit of dissension and chaos because of its endurance and creative power. This reaffirms the fact that love must be positive and active, it cannot stop with mere endearment. When once love is creative, it becomes a positive force in one's social consciousness. What does it achieve after reaching its full development?

But each forgives and greets,
And their mutual terrors heal

¹"Return to Vienna," Edge of Being, p. 25.
²"Elegy for Margaret," Poems of Dedication, p. 22.
Within our loves' deep miracle.¹
It achieves the power of making men willing to forgive each other. It also makes them acutely sensitive to human problems and of how identical they are to each other.

Spender makes no conscious distinction between love of man for man and love of man for woman. Love for him is an absolute moral quality existent in the human psychology and thwarted by the destructive element prevalent in the world today. This theme is fairly consistent in his work, as any examination of his poetry shows. In his earlier poetry, it is the love of man for man, as a motivation for social justice and this is directly relative to his social poetry. In his later work, it is still this, so far as this paper is concerned. A study of social poetry could not deal with the love poems which Spender writes to his wife ("Love, Birth and Absence", for example)² nor could it deal with the poems written to his son. So far, then, as social poetry is concerned, there is no progression, only the full development of "the obvious and palpable love of man for man."

The importance, then, of love as a factor in social consciousness is that it may achieve three goals. These are the

¹"The Trance," Poems of Dedication, p. 32.
²Poems of Dedication, p. 27-35.
unity of human desires and efforts, an increased awareness of the human problem, and the use of its creative powers to build a more consistently balanced social order. Spender's one fully developed panacea for the chaos and destruction of his time is human love.

Spender's later and more personal poetry shows a shift of emphasis from the system to the individual. This is not sudden; his movement thus far has been from the system itself to the various groups in society and in the final analysis, he attempts to show the effects of social disorganization on the individual psychology. In one of his earlier personal poems, Spender shows to what extent social inequalities influence the growth of a child's psychology:

My parents kept me from children who were rough
And who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes
Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street
And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.

1 Spender assumes these desires to be peaceful. See his essay, "Wilson Among the Ruins," cited on page 41 of this paper.

2 Other panaceas offered by Spender are incidental and highly relative. It may be supposed that some mention should be made to his "leftism" but a careful examination of his poetry and criticism shows this belief to be unfounded. Spender's early and frequent use of such terms as "comrades," "fellow-travellers," or even "workers" is not proof enough to show his advocation of Communism. He has made the statement that "no system can meet all human needs." It is the desire on the part of men for peace that will bring peace. Another refutation of this would be the total refusal of avowed "leftists" to accept Spender. See Joseph Freeman, Proletarian Literature in the United States (New York, 1935), p. 332-3.
They threw mud
And I looked another way, pretending to smile.
I longed to forgive them but they never smiled.¹

"Children who were rough" are worker's children. The poet belongs to a more gentle class. He wishes to play with them, but he cannot, because his parents have prohibited him and because the children realize the class difference and display hostility. The tone of pathos in the poem strengthens Spender's message that social inequalities hamper the natural affection of children for each other. This poem is social in the sense that it points up the disparity existent between social classes; it is psychological because it shows how the experience affected the children's personalities.

The effect of social chaos on young men who go to war may be seen here:

Men freeze and hunger.
All have become so nervous and so cold
That each man hates the cause and distant words
Which brought him here, more terribly than bullets.
Once a boy hummed a popular marching song,
Once a novice hand flapped the salute;
The voice was choked, the lifted hand fell,
Shot through the wrist by those of his own side.²

To begin with, war teaches men to hate. It makes them almost animals, nervous, impulsive, quickly destructive. War nullifies human love. It has another widely known effect:

The guns spell money's ultimate reason
In letters of lead on the spring hillside.

¹"Poem no. 13," Poems, p. 22.

But the boy lying dead under the olive trees
Was too young and too silly
To have been notable to their important eye.
He was a better target for a kiss.

Consider his life which was valueless
In terms of employment, hotel ledgers, news files.
Consider. One bullet in ten thousand kills a man.
Ask. Was so much expenditure justified
On the death of one so young and so silly
Lying under the olive trees, 0 world, 0 death?

This elegy written on the death of a Spanish Loyalist soldier combines satire (the insistence on cost here shows that Spender is using the "king's ultimate reason"—money—to show how it "cost too much" to have killed this soldier) and pathos to show how meaningless war was for all concerned. The victor had to use ten thousand bullets before one killed this soldier. The poet's delicacy of touch in the midst of satire gives the tone of obvious, intentional brutality, showing the sadness of the death of youth. The brutality of killing is further brought out in the sharp contrast between pathos and satire in the poem.

The girl which a soldier leaves behind weeps, for he never returns:

Weep, girl, weep, for you have cause to weep.
His face is uprooted from your sleep,
His eyes torn from your eyes, dream from your dream.

Her life is left empty, she can only weep. His death "uproots" his face from her dreams. The wife who carries a

1"Ultima Ratio Regum", ibid., p. 804.
soldier's child is torn with fear and indecision, afraid of the world which her child is to inherit:

The life in her life
Crouching to be born
Is head-downward in a lower room.

Her clear gaze divides
The world into two worlds:
Of kings who bring myrrh
To worship this birth:
Of heroes whose rays
Murder in the womb
Prenatal generations
Of reincarnate earth
Her sons will say: Choose!1

The indecision and anxiety ("clear gaze divides the world into two worlds") come from the fact that although she wishes to bring her child into a generous, creative world ("Of kings who bring myrrh" refers to the wise men who worshipped the birth of Christ and designated those human beings who await and worship the birth of love in the world), she will have to go on living in a world where "heroes murder in the womb Prenatal generations" by perpetuating a society so unjust that a child is literally born to march off to war and perhaps be killed. The heroes represent the destructive element in the world; the kings represent the creative one.

The conditions of war and mass destruction are the responsibilities of everyone. All people are guilty as long as war goes on, for everyone is to some extent guilty for the conditions which cause war.2 Spender, who was not on active duty

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1"Madonna," ibid., p. 45.

2European Witness, p. 238.
during World War II,\(^1\) reflects the following lines concerning British pilots who bombed Berlin in 1945:

Oh, that April morning they carried my will Exalted expanding singing in their aerial cage. They carried my will. They dropped it on a German town. My will exploded. Tall buildings fell down.

Because, somewhere, long before 1945, neither Spender nor his ancestors had done anything to avert the war with Germany, because he was as guilty for the conditions leading up to war as were the pilots, he knew that every bomb that the pilots dropped was his "will", for he had done nothing positive to stop even the making of the bombs. He has guilt feelings:

And my life, which never paid the price of their wounds, Turns thoughts over and over like a propellor, Assumes their guilt, honours, repents, prays for them.\(^2\)

Two wrongs have been committed. The city is wrecked, and people are injured. The pilots have been maimed for life, some of them are dead. The poet, therefore, has mixed feelings. On the one hand the mission has been successful, for shortly afterward the War is over, so he honors the pilots as heroes. But on the other hand, he is uncertain. There is a voice in his subconscious mind which psychologically punishes him (... "my life turns over thoughts like a propellor"), so he assumes "their guilt" and also repents. The effect here is a socio-

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\(^1\)Anderson and Walton, *op. cit.*, p. 801.

\(^2\)"Responsibility: Spring, 1945," *The Edge of Being*, p. 36.
psychological guilt complex coming from the poet's belief that everyone is somehow responsible for today's destruction and war. The importance of guilt feelings in Spender's poetry is more obvious in his later phase because it is there that he deals with psychology. His early work being more obviously messianic, Spender sublimates whatever guilt feelings he had them by his attempt to "be on the side of the oppressed."  

This theme of death, chaos, destruction, war and their effects on the individual is one seen much too often in Spender's poetry to cite here. In the extremely personal "Elegy for Margaret," written to mourn the death of his sister-in-law, Spender digresses to reflect that Europe, too, is dying, comparing it with Margaret. In this last discussion Spender deals with sorrow and fear as they are felt by a great many people at once. These people are together in a unity of fear, anxiety and guilt, though they may be miles apart. Thus the unity of the individual reaction and the social reaction is achieved through Spender's poetic discussion of wartime mass psychology. Not only is the soldier fearful; so is his wife. The child who cannot play with children who are "rough" later assumes the guilt as these same children, grown now, go out to bomb a city. These experiences all have common ground; they are all reactions to the same stimuli, war and social

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injustice. They reach out, even if brutally, and bind together individuals so that they become a potent social unit. They are no longer individuals; therefore, they are a group. It is their fear of destruction and their desire for peace that make them unified. Thus Spender's personal poetry assumes a social nature. It is only that the emphasis is a different one.

Spender's social poetry moves through three definite stages. One of these is (1) the nature of social injustice as it exists in the culture; another is (2) its effect on the society within that culture, and the other is (3) its effect on the individual personality.

Inequality, injustice and oppression are the results of social disparities such as class stratifications, widespread economic insecurity and finally they become parts of and lead to the social chaos of war. The evidence of social injustice in the culture is the general unrest and dissatisfaction among workers and the increase of restraints imposed by controlling interests. Such are the effects shown in Spender's early, more obviously social poetry in which he delineates the nature of social injustice.

It is only natural that these conditions make for a lack of unity in the culture. Certain smaller factions, ingroups, partisans, political groups, and cliques are created, each fighting against the larger social illness, and often among themselves. Because of conflicting viewpoints, they find it
difficult to unite as in the case of Spender's poem beginning with the line "A whim of Time, the general arbiter." Other groups which grow more out of conditions than from any conscious attempt at social responsibility are the war prisoners, soldiers, the uncertain and anxious lower middle-class. Then there is the complacent upper middle-class.

Such disunity often breeds war (as in this case it did) and consequently the widespread anxiety state which settles in (and may best be seen in) the minds of individuals is created. Men taught to hate also learn to kill quickly and indiscriminately. Women are wounded emotionally and their bodies become less creative. The child's personality is warped into states of bigotry and prejudice by the existence of an constant reference to class differences. This is the state which Spender portrays in his later World War II poems, more personal in tone and rhetorical method.

It will be noticed that these three states of social unrest are pathology all come from the same cause: social injustice. They are all symptoms of an ailing society in an ailing world. If they are all identical in origin, then it follows that they must all three have common elements. The common element is that they all show the same fear of destruction, of anxiety for social security and a desire for peace. This, as this chapter has shown, is as true of the sick society treated in Spender's early poetry as it is in his later and most recent periods.
Spender's one consistent theme throughout this development is the need within society for a unifying element, for a concrete, active, potent concern for human values.
CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The problem in this thesis has been to analyze the nature and intent of Stephen Spender's social poetry. The study has developed through three phases. One of these was to note Spender's immediate poetic heritage by considering his work in relation to that of two eminent Wasteland poets. Another phase was to determine Spender's beliefs concerning the place of the poet in society by the method of tracing his formation of a poetic creed, and the final one was to analyze certain poems published by Spender between the years 1935-1949.

The findings of Chapter I revealed that the technical changes fostered by the Wasteland poets of the 1920s were influential in Spender's poetry. The one advantage of these techniques for Spender is that they aided him in realistically portraying the details of twentieth-century life in his writing, thus helping the poet to absorb honestly the impact of social life in the modern world. Yet the ideas of the Wastelanders were not consistently accepted by the younger poet. The spiritual sterility and lack of positive belief so essential in Wasteland poetry are mere incidentals in Spender's work. The main point of difference between Spender and the Wastelanders is his belief that these elder poets are merely reflective. That they accurately portray the state of chaos existent in twentieth-century life Spender concedes, but he believes that it is necessary for a poet living today to do more than this. Spender
spender believes, as his poetic creed shows, that it is
the duty of the poet to become objective and social in his
perspective. it is clear that he means that the poet should re-
late himself to the widespread human struggle against social dis-
organization, chaos, oppression and war. he believes that the
poet might do this by becoming an active social force through
the influence of his poetry. there are two approaches to this
problem. one is to become obviously exhortatory in his poetry,
reflecting the cruelties of social injustice by showing what
they do to the culture itself, making the portrayal as vivid
and realistic as possible, then drawing forth from this poetic
exhortation the statement of the need for social change. this
is the method of contrast and analysis. spender's other approach
is the concern with the effect of social disorganization, de-
struction and chaos on the individual psychology. this latter
is the method of inference. this is what spender attempts to
support in the latter half of his criticism, thus giving to his
"personal" poetry a social nature, reflecting the interpenetra-
tion of cultural and personal reactions to social conditions.
spender has termed his poetic creed "political-moral" and it is an
attempt to synthesize the personal and social reactions in a
cycle of social and socio-psychological emphases. this is
spender's poetic creed. the final judgement could only come
from an analysis of the poetry itself.

The poetry shows that Spender’s movement as a social poet is from social order to social psychology. His early poems are messianic in character, calling attention to the evils of social inequalities and what they do to the culture as a whole. This effect is one of gradual and widespread disintegration, causing a lack of unity in society. Friction, discontent, partisanship become so potent that they really constitute a latent type of chaos. This disunity becomes actual war. In his last stage he is concerned with the effect of social chaos on the individual psychology. The cause here is basically war, primarily because the years in which Spender conceived and wrote these poems were war years (1942-45) and also because he realized that war is the culmination, the logical end, and fullest development of social injustice. The effect in this last section is socio-psychological. Specifically, he deals with mass hysteria, anxiety states and social fear.

As background data show, Spender relates his poetry to the four great symptoms of social unrest in the twentieth century. These are the First World War, the Great Depression, the Rise of Totalitarianism and the Second World War. In this poetry Spender attempts to do three things. These are (1) to define the cause of today’s social disorganization, (2) to show the effects of social disorganization on the culture, and (3) to show the effects of social disorganization on the individual personality.

The poet finds that the cause of unrest and social pathology
is the existence of an unbalanced economy, unreasonable and unjust class stratifications, and the will-to-power with its consequences of general oppression. The other two phases of his attempt have been adequately discussed. It cannot be proved that Spender advocates change by active revolution (that is, class war) but he certainly advocates change. He does believe that the collective will of civilized people should motivate a reorganization of society. The basis for this change lies in the form of what Spender poetically speaks of as love, which, in its larger sense means the mutual consideration of human rights by all people, from the state to the individual. This cannot be attained until society substitutes a creative, unifying element for a destructive, disintegrating one.
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