WHY MEMORIALIZE? STEPHEN SPENDER'S AESTHETICS OF REMEMBRANCE IN *VIENNA**

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ASBTRACT

Drawing from current theorization on aesthetics and from the heated debates of the representation of war and violence in arts, humanities and the media, this paper engages with the issue of art (and literature) and its condition in the world today, always at risk of masking the extremity or reality of suffering, either by suffocating it or assimilating it and turning it into an object of pleasure for the reader or spectator. With a reflection on issues on mourning and trauma, and within the domain of cultural memory, we take Stephen Spender's poetry, and his long poem *Vienna* (1934), as a prime exponent of cultural production where loss and its aftermath—crucial as well in subject formation—becomes constitutive of the aesthetic, formal, and material properties of a good number of poems.

KEY WORDS: War poetry, Stephen Spender, mourning, cultural memory, melancholia, trauma.

RESUMEN

A partir de la teorización actual sobre estética y de los acalorados debates sobre la representación de la guerra y la violencia en las artes, las humanidades y los medios de difusión, este artículo incide en la problemática de la representación de todas estas cuestiones en el arte y la literatura en la actualidad. Arte y literatura corren el riesgo de enmascarar situaciones extremas de sufrimiento, bien acallándolas, bien asimilándolas y convirtiéndolas en objeto placentero para ser observado y examinado por lectores y espectadores. A través de una reflexión sobre cuestiones de duelo y trauma, y dentro del marco de la memoria cultural, ilustramos estos debates mediante la poesía de Stephen Spender, y en concreto, de su poema largo *Vienna* (1934) como exponente de primer orden en el que la pérdida y sus secuelas —cruciales también en la formación de la subjetividad—se convierten en constitutivas de la propiedades estéticas, formales y materiales de éste y otros volúmenes del mismo autor.

PALABRAS CLAVE: poesía de la guerra, Stephen Spender, duelo, memoria cultural, melancolía, trauma.

Somewhere I felt that there was a place which was
at the very centre of this world, some terrible place
like the core of a raging fire. Perhaps it was in a cell
where some helpless old man was being beaten to death,
perhaps it was in a café over some frontier where exiled

leaders were plotting to return. If I could ever
approach it, I felt it would be the centre where
the greatest evil of our time was understood
and endured, But at this thought I was appalled,
for it made me realize that the centre of our time
was perhaps the violent, incommunicable
death of an innocent victim.
Stephen SPENDER, *World* 192-93.

1. MEMORY, MOURNING, PERFORMATIVITY

Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* sets up the basis for any current discussion on art and literature situating both cultural productions as forms of critical understanding. Adorno's crucial concept of negative dialectics (or of the negativity of aesthetic experience) summons the critical faculties of art, such that a view of art as reflective, as merely "yield[ing] positive understanding" is undermined (qtd. Alpen xv). As such, art can incite, and illustrate, the negation, the failure, the subversion of the nevertheless unavoidable effort at understanding. In light of Adorno's frequently misunderstood post-World War II dictum, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," (*Prisms* 34) the act of positioning art, or aesthetic expression/representation, as an agent of "critical understanding" or "the subversion of [positivist] understanding" becomes one way of linking art not to the kind of aestheticism that turns disaster into pleasurable or seductive beauty, but to a thought, which, in Adorno's words, is "measured by the extremity that eludes the concept." Thus, art is always at risk of masking the extremity, or reality of suffering, either by "drowning" it or assimilating it and turning it into an object of pleasure for the spectator. The challenge to art, as well as to "cultural criticism," as Adorno puts it, is to face "the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism" (*Prisms* 34)—and the positioning of "poetry" within this dialectic is what is often overlooked by those who choose to interpret "no poetry after Auschwitz" as a totalizing claim.

Unless art takes on the role of challenging understanding, of going beyond its own function as reflection, object, abstraction, it thus cannot fill a social or ethical function. However "autonomous" art, which critic Ernst van Alpen describes as not "independent of context" but as having "an agency of its own" can, it seems, enact a relationship of exchange and response with the spectator: "If art 'thinks' and if the viewer is compelled, or at least invited, to think with it, then art is not only the object of framing ... but it also functions, in turn, as a frame for cultural thought" (Alpen 16). This is what he calls "performativity" of certain kinds of art.

In this paper I would like to argue that art can mourn, or at least perform a work of mourning, through which it is politicized in its capacity to represent social,

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cultural and political histories of traumatic loss. What I am suggesting is that art can perform, through its own (aesthetic) form and structure, a response to trauma and loss consisting of the simultaneous reflection and enactment of psychic processes of mourning (akin to the grieving process conventionally understood to be taken by a human subject, or person subjected to bereavement and loss). And as such it becomes possible to speak of the "work of mourning"[1] both as the labour and process of grief and as a work of art.[2] But I am ascribing to the work of art a sense not so much of subjectivity as agency, I am proposing a performative reading of works of art and literature, such that, without necessarily taking the place of human subjects or being thought to be "like" the human psyche, they can be understood as being able to act, to enact a process of mourning, and to bring about an active response in the reader or beholder.

The performative "work" and "object" I present in this paper is taken from poetry, and the case study I have selected to engage in dialogue with these theories centres specifically on the performative nature of the language of poetry devoted to war by poet and essayist Stephen Spender's testimonial poems about the interwar period in Europe, drawing attention to the complexity of representation in such an ideologically laden terrain. As a tentative conclusion I argue that loss and its aftermath becomes constitutive of the aesthetic, formal, and material properties of the poem, and of all poetry engaging loss and trauma. My reading of Spender's *Vienna* is necessarily a depressingly realistic one, and certainly makes sense in the light of Spender's own feelings about bordering artistic failure, having spent several years making art that aspired to heal a sick world and to help prevent an oncoming war. With war seemingly inevitable, Spender's idealizing ambitions had come to grief and his art revealed as useless or, worse, irrelevant. The poem offers a powerful and personal articulation of his resigned conviction, that indeed, as his friend and mentor W.H. Auden would write "poetry makes nothing happen."[3]

As Judith Butler has authoritatively pointed out, Freud came to see that "incorporation, originally associated with melancholia, was essential to the task of mourning" (*Precarious* 21). Melancholy incorporation, thus, may be read as the refusal or reluctance to let go of loss. Ultimately, this process of incorporation by which I am transformed by the lost other, then, may, in one version, be understood as the work that mourning performs. Or rather, perhaps grief itself does not "work" or perform the labour of mourning; maybe the "work" consists of the transformation undertaken or endured by the mourning subject in allowing the relation to the (lost) other to shape the continuing self. If so the notion of "Trauerarbeit" consists of the incorporation of loss rather than the gradual detachment from a lost object.

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[1] "Trauerarbeit" in Freudian language. Freud theorizes on "Trauerarbeit" in "Mourning and Melancholia."

[2] I take the English language conflation of the term work that in Spanish, among other languages, is divided into two categories: Trabajo (Arbeit, travail) vs. Obra (Werk, oeuvre).

[3] W.H. Auden included this line in his well-known elegy, "In Memory of W.B.Yeats," 248.

Along the same lines, Mieke Bal, describes "cultural memorialization as an activity occuring in the present and future." In particular, Bal draws on the potential of cultural memory "to mediate and modify difficult or tabooed moments of the past—moments that nonetheless impinge, sometimes fatally, on the present." Further, Bal argues that "cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer, but something that you actually *perform*, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and willfully contrived" (vii).

Framing memory in terms of narrative, Bal suggests that the relationality of "narrative memories" (which are "memorable," "affectively coloured," and "active and ... situated in the present") is shattered by traumatic memory, as well as by the difficulty of "incorporating trauma into narrative memory" (xiii). Bal juxtaposes linear or comprehensive versions of narrative with the "'timeless' duration, relentless repetition, and narrative splitting off associated with trauma," in order to suggest that the "drama" of traumatic memory, in which the self may have been an "actor," is not necessarily something the self can possess or otherwise "master" (ix). Bal calls these inter-relational forms of remembering and taking account of the past "acts of memory," which can contribute to "the emergence of narrative" (x). Thus, the "origin" of cultural memory, as Bal conceives it, is constituted by trauma and by the very failure, or loss, of narrative. "The origin lies at a place of inevitable loss," Foucault writes (143). It appears as though this can be argued for the emergence of the ego/subject, as well as for processes of cultural memory, and the conditions of melancholy grief. Memory and mourning are intimately connected; if mourning is the paradoxical process of incorporating loss, memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting.

Our aim in this paper would be to show how Spender in *Vienna* managed to identify a case of overwhelming political urgency and his poems acted as witnesses to the massacre of civilians and of socialist freedom fighters against the rise of Nazism. In John Sutherland's view, one of the crucial issues Spender confronted in this volume was whether democracy could mobilize and assert itself sufficiently to resist the onslaught of totalitarianism (171). Rather than taking an explicitly anti-civil war stance, *Vienna* insists upon facing the civilians' lived experience of war. Spender attempts to come to terms with the psychic wounds inflicted by the cruel struggle, which, in his view, were still far from healing.

2. SPENDER'S *VIENNA*: WHEN "POLITICAL" MEMORY BECOMES PERSONAL

At this point I would like to turn our attention to poetry in order to suggest that cultural memory is also preserved in poetry[4] and that there are poetic genres, such as the elegy, which have traditionally been associated to mourning and death.

[4] There are many instances in history in which poetry has acted as a reservoir for cultural memory focusing on the collective. The twentieth century is particularly ripe with instances in which

My suggestion is to look into Stephen Spender's long poem *Vienna*, published in 1934. The poem focuses on the events that led to the defeat of the socialist insurrectionists in February 1934 in Austria, where Spender had travelled shortly after it occurred. This was socialism's first battle and its first defeat. *Vienna* constitutes the only major literary work in English devoted to the event. It opens with a passage from Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting" as epigraph; "They will be swift with swiftness of the tigress. None will break ranks, though nations trek from progress"(*Vienna* 7). Owen, from the generation of poets of the Great War,[5] and much read by Spender, addresses thematically in "Strange Meeting," the same concepts that he attempts to theorize in the Preface to his book: two soldiers meet in Hell, one German, and one English. Owen stages this scene as a moment of recognition: "I am the enemy you killed, my friend." Insofar as the dead man, now facing his killer, demands mourning, he does not want to be mourned for his death, but for what died with him: "I mean the truth untold, / The pity of war, the pity war distilled." His testimony dies with him, and it—the truth he has to tell— is what has the power to heal the wounds of war. One way to read the phrase "the pity war distilled" is to consider that, for Owen, the profound knowledge of death that war had taught him took the form of pity. In his case, his emotional response to those traumatic events best articulated the knowledge he had gained from that experience. But the line also points out that war is not simply a tragic event, it actually fits the structure of tragedy.[6]

The war poets' refusal to treat death in war as heroic, or even to offer a traditional memorial to the war dead, led directly to W.B. Yeats' well-known rejection of their writing. Yeats dismissed their work—Owen's in particular—with his proclamation that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies... If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering" (*Oxford*, xxiv-xxv).[7] Yeats contemptuously called Owen "a revered sandwich-board Man of the revolution" (*Letters*

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traumatic memory has come to the fore as in the case of war poetry on different fronts from Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, to W.H. Auden, Spender, C. Day-Lewis, Anna Akhmatova, Denise Levertov, and Holocaust poetry with the work of Paul Celan, Miklós Radnóti, Charlotte Delbo, Charles Reznikoff, W.D. Snodgrass, and Czeslaw Milosz.

[5] We can certainly identify a generation of soldier poets—usually called trench poets—who addressed the devastation and suffering of the war out of their own experience in which we should include Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Julian Grenfell, Herbert Read, and Robert Graves.

[6] "Pity" is a key term for Wilfred Owen. Given the deliberate classical reference of the term, Owen clearly identified the power of his writing with its cathartic function, its ability to distill overwhelming emotions down to their essence. He sought out the point at which those feelings threaten to become unbearable in an attempt to confront a truth which is buried in that experience.

[7] In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats explains that he substitutes Herbert Read's *The End of a War* for the work which he finds more representative of the trench poets as a whole. He does, nevertheless, include a few poems written by other soldiers. They are Siegfried Sassoon's "On Passing the New Menin Gate" (written after the war), Julian Grenfell's "Into Battle" and Edmund Blunden's "Report on Experience." The most notable exclusion from the anthology is Wilfred Owen.

124), and omitted him entirely from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. His rejection of the war poets indicates both the depth of the resistance to the trench poets and the degree of force that was required to repulse their challenge to traditional conceptions of war poetry. At issue in the modernist debate surrounding the trench poets and Yeats's exclusion of them from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* is the question of what is required for poetry to be considered tragic. From Yeats onward, critiques of this poetic generation have centred on the issue of poetic form, arguing that they failed to represent the Great War adequately because their writing did not move beyond the lyric form, which was unable to contain or express the full experience of war. The precedence given to the personal suffering of the soldiers by the trench poets was seen as a direct effect of the lyric form. In effect, Yeats's argument faulted the trench poets for failing to ensure that their writing helped to reinscribe the values that support war. His criticism deliberately conflated formal and thematic issues; he argued that these poets' theme of passive suffering was not proper to poetry because passive suffering is not tragic. But the Aristotelian notion of tragedy does not finally rest upon an active form of suffering—a heroic self-sacrifice—rather the emphasis in classical drama is upon the representation of suffering itself, and the cathartic response it evokes in the audience.

At this point, the question is not, "Why did their writing fail to attain the level of tragedy?" It is tragedy which has failed the war poets. Their poetry discloses the newfound conviction that their prior belief in abstract concepts such as heroism and patriotism—concepts for which, up to the war, literature had been a major means of representation—was one of the irrecoverable losses of the war.

For the war poets, poetry became a space for expressing the emotions which they had dissociated while the event was actually occurring. Nevertheless, the transformation of pain into an artistic expression can take many forms and is not always healing; while for the war poets art provided a means of working through trauma, others, such as Spender, express the concern that the aestheticization of pain can be a form of repression, allowing the culture to reify the sacrifices of war and deny the suffering it entails.

Vienna, Stephen Spender's first book-long narrative poem, is divided in four parts, and presents images of the political life of Austria and details of the fighting, particularly the heroic episodes of the capture, trial, and killing of Kalloman Wallisch, the socialist mayor of Burck-an-der-Mur and leader of the socialists in Austria. Along with this public material and awkwardly associated with it, the poem presents Spender's love affair with an American woman whom he calls Elizabeth in his autobiography, *World Within World*. In his view, poetry must always engage with some level of personal experience, "[B]ut in part also it was concerned with a love relationship, I meant to show that the two experiences were different, yet related. For they both were intense, emotional and personal, although the one was public, the other private. The validity of the one was dependent on that of the other: for in a world where humanity was trampled on publicly, private affection was also undermined" (*World* 192).

As Samuel Hynes points out, "Vienna is a poem not so much about the history of the uprising as about the mythology. It is not a narrative, though it includes narrative passages: it does not tell the whole story, it ignores chronology, and

it does not explain. What Spender seems to have aimed at was the expression of his own personal sense of Vienna." (24). In Vienna, Spender proclaims "The place meets the time" (*Vienna* 17). He plays with the ideas of life and death within the microcosm of the Austrian capital, where the old grandeur mixes with the new, and,

> Whether the man living or the man dying
> Whether this man's dead life, or that man's life dying
> His real life a fading light his real death a light growing. (*Vienna* 13)

We can certainly say that *Vienna* engages also in some sort of theoretical statement that Spender rounds up with a metacommentary, corresponding to the fourth section in the poem, "Analysis and Final Statement." The five voices within this last section continue their almost monological exchange with no synthesis: the dialectic of the one isolated among the many, even if those are friends, since the war knows no friends.

In *The Destructive Element*, the book Spender was writing alongside *Vienna*, he identified three principles as necessary for the modern writer. First, the modern writer must take risks—it was in this spirit that Spender introduced himself in the underground life of Berlin, and now, in 1934, he was in the front line in *Vienna*. The second necessary thing was to forge a style both politically subversive and artistically distinct. The third necessity, to which the final section of *The Destructive Element* is devoted, is "proper subject," and increasingly for Spender this could be glossed as political subject. Upon completing his long poem, *Vienna*, Spender intended to demonstrate he was guided by these three principles. The historical significance of Austria and the struggle on the streets of Vienna in 1934 certainly provided a privileged vantage point to reflect upon the future of Europe.

The poem is devoted to the uprisings in several Austrian cities in February 1934. The differences between the Social Democrats and the Republican organisation (prohibited in 1933) on one side and Christian-Socialists, in other words the government, on the other, escalated between February 12 and 15, 1934 to a civil war when the Social Democratic party headquarters resisted a weapons raid with armed force conducted by their political adversaries in Linz ("Hotel Schiff" in the poem). Preceding the raid, Mussolini had repeatedly called on the Austrian Chancellor Dollfus to take action against Marxists, the heads of the Chamber of Labour had been dismissed, and several noteworthy members of the Social Democratic party arrested.

The conflict in Linz was followed by uprisings in Vienna and other areas, all of which were crushed by military force. The unorganised protest movement failed mainly because the general strike called by the Social Democrats went unheeded. Several leaders of the protest movement were executed (G. Weissel, K. Wallisch, K. Münichreier among the most prominent), others were able to flee the country. As a result of the uprisings, the Social Democratic Party, trade unions and all representative bodies led by the Social Democrats on the municipal and provincial level were banned, and the May Constitution of 1934 was declared, establishing a corporate estate.

Vienna is divided into four sections: "Arrival at the City," "Parade of the Executive," "The Death of Heroes" and "Analysis and Final Statement." Spender confronts the emotions following the suppression of the Socialist Party in Austria due to the abuse of power and the political upheaval against fascism and its leaders, Dollfuss, Fey and Starhemberg. The poem signals the beginning of the socialist clandestine activities and oscillates between the political and the personal moving to a more intimate dimension in which the poet finds himself in the middle of a love triangle with Tony Hyndman and Muriel Gardiner (under the pseudonyms Jimmy Younger and Elizabeth, as we know from *World Within World* 192).

Spender finally read *Vienna* as a failure, a composite of two split halves that never got to fuse "The poem fails because it does not fuse the two halves of a split situation, and attain a unity where the inner passion becomes inseparable from the outer one. Perhaps the world in which I was living was too terrible for this fusion to take place: the only people who attained it were the murderers and the murdered" (*World* 192). In *Vienna*, Spender had tried to fuse the story of the workers with the story of his own sentimental affair, and had been unable to move these two elements beyond his first initial design. Later on, in a new project, *The Edge of Being*, he would return to the memories of Vienna and recognize that his mind will not assimilate such disparate experiences: the "crystal bowl" of the love affair is flawed by the reality,

> There was reality, the flaw
> Within the golden crystal bowl, where life
> Was not entirely love nor even
> Baroque frozen in dolphin attitudes
> But was the unemployed who starved. (*Edge* 21)

Part I "Arrival at the City" reports on Vienna as perceived by the poet upon his first visit in the mid 1930s. This is a period of profound and significant changes in Spender's life. For the first time he falls in love with a woman and becomes aware of how men and women play complementary roles and their relations go beyond the usual comradeship among men,[8]

> Love for a friend expressed a need for self-identification. Love for a woman, the need for a relationship with someone different, indeed opposite, to myself. I realized that self-identification leads to frustration if it be not realized; destruction, perhaps if it be realized a certain sterility if it be realized...I could not develop beyond a certain point unless I were able to enter a stream of nature through human contacts, that is to say, through experience with women. (*World* 185)

[8] In *Vienna*, a strong sentiment of guilt arose for Spender out of his love affair with Elizabeth, because it conflicted with his feelings and his duties toward this secretary, T.A.R. Hyndman. In *World Within World*, we learn that Elizabeth and Spender discussed his guilt, and he wondered whether their explanations, "which made [his] 'psychology' responsible for everything, did not actually increase [his] sense of guilt" (*World* 197).

Throughout the poem, there is an oscillation between description of the outside objective world and description of inward sentiments; both efforts may employ concrete imagery; and thus the movements from one thing to another are not easily noticeable.

"Arrival at the City" presents us with an almost domestic scene at the Pension Beaurepas, where his patron brings to the poet's mind that "many men so beautiful" lay dead while the vulgarian lived on, and he compares him implicitly with Wallisch, whom he makes the hero of the rising. After some fragments of self-revealing dialogue from the women residents of the Pension, the poem proceeds to force the paradox that the life of the patron is insignificant while the wounds and the death of the hero are an "Opening to life like a flower him overarching" (10). Of these two instances, the poet says he chooses "the wholly dead," and adds, "Their courtesy like lamps through the orange fog, with a glazed eye/ Can preach still" (11); and the image is the source of the idea Spender develops later in his well-known poem, "Exiles from Their Land, History Their Domicile," a poem in *The Still Centre*, in which the dead, in his own words, have "obtained for their lives a symbolic significance which certainly passed unnoticed when they were living" and have imposed on the imagination of posterity a "legend of their unity of being." (*Collected* 14). It is not death we fear, the poem goes on, but disloyalty to an ideal memory of peace in the past and disloyalty toward the dead.

Finally, Part I closes with the same lines as those it opened with: "Whether the man living or the man dying, / Whether this man's dead life, or that man's life dying" (13).

Part II, "Parade of the Executive"(14-27) illustrates the construction of a fully-fledged fascist state in Vienna in 1934. The "Executive" and the "Unemployed" are the two main characters whose exchange tells about the conditions of life in the city from opposite views. The Executive justifies the illegitimate seizure of power by the new regime, manipulating the truth, calling on the authority of the ancestors, organizing parades, holding up flags, with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. He tries to conceal the frequent outbreaks of violence underlying a façade of peace and order. Beneath the appearances of absence of conflict and harmony, we come to know Dollfuss' fascist methods: elimination of his political enemies, torture, circulation of biased propaganda. The workers and their grassroots movements and political parties are thus neutralized now as much as they will be in the future,

> ... We say Vienna
> "Tenements were a fortress built by the workers
> "So we killed the workers to save the workers—
> "And when those houses were put up we said
> "The building materials used by the socialist municipality are of such inferior quality that the new working class tenements will soon fall to pieces." (17-18)

The Unemployed, relegated by the new government to invisibility and indifference, still shows courage and determination, and retains the memory of the revolutionaries massacred by the new regime. His strength and resilience is still

disconcerting for the representatives of law and order, as when they ask themselves, "Why did one dying, among their wounded, / In a dark groaning attic, suddenly sing? / And there moved as actively as on a movie screen / Before their eyes the May Day celebrating" (18). Mention to May Day instantly triggers the work of memory, "Memory of sky as blue as woman's veins / But with veins of red, ..."(18). At the end of this part, Spender introduces a figure called The Stranger, the observer of the political scene, who is objective and impartial. "Would he forgive us?" the poem asks, returning at the end to the sense of obsessive guilt that pervades this section.

In Part III, "The Death of Heroes," the poet identifies with the revolution and meditates upon the causes of its failure. The poem describes the retreat of Wallisch to the mountains and how he was hunted down and caught by ski-patrols, then his defense in court, his death, and finally how sympathizers brought flowers to his grave and to the graves of the other dead revolutionaries. The man in charge of these cruel actions is Vice-Chancellor Fey.

This section aims at memorializing the defeated, the massacre of civilians and the resistance of the workers and their leaders. Throughout this part we witness the effects of local struggles, and listen to a wide range of anonymous voices which oscillate between blind obedience to the military and harsh critique. The experience of those who suffered remains in the testimonies we are given:

> "From other windows
> we fired down.
> "I turned and spoke to my son. He said 'Listen,
> "'The howitzers begin'. 'Ha!' That is Fey's joke
> "'Making his big thud into February
> "'When the ice echoes so.' It was no joke to hear
> And see my son lied dead. That was at 12." (23)
>
> "[A}t Meidling our leader refused
> to serve out arms "I refuse to send men to the slaughter house." (23-24)
>
> "I forsook the workers to kill the workers because
> "I was fed by these traitors. Now kill me." (25)

"The Death of Heroes" can be understood as a poem of grief, mourning the loss of the men tortured and killed, and the crushing of the proletarian movement now suffocated. The poet blames the fascists and their repressive methods, and he also mentions some treacherous leaders of the workers movement and the movement itself for strategic mistakes and miscalculations (21-22). The poem glosses the last moments of confrontation between fascists and workers, and the surrender of the latter: "At Schlinger Hof, the police drove out all the women and children in front of the building, and threatened to fire on them. The workers surrendered" (24).

The poet remembers the episode at Florisdorf, the uprisings in factory workers´ barracks and the hand-to-hand combat on the streets. The massacre of civilians, and the destruction of the town, gestures toward a new beginning, "...as the man saying / 'Here the insurrection ends, here revolution begins'" (24-25).

We are told that when the federal army moved forward, Wallisch had to withdraw into the mountains with a group of men. After a few days he was identified and imprisoned, and shortly thereafter he was placed before a court martial and sentenced to death. He was charged with having instigated a battle against the police and was executed on February 19, 1934. The memory of Wallisch is retrieved in the story of his life as some sort of confession, one prior to his sacrifice for the ideals he had always lived up to,

> "At the age of 11 I became a mason's apprentice
> "I was exploited even as a child.
> "At 16 I became an assistant and at age 17
> "I made my travels in Austria and Germany
> "And saw oppression of the workers.
> "From 1914 to 1917 I fought in the War
> "And gained some distinction. I have been a socialist.
> "I have devoted my whole life to the workers
> "To serve their cause. I have enemies only
> "Because I fought for the workers as faithfully,
> "one must be ready to do all,
> "Ready to sacrifice oneself, even to lay down one's life" (28)

The final lines of this section take up the promise of regeneration, "We built / Upon their earth the wave of a new world / From flowers: each morning when light spelled / Its crested certainty, the police, afraid of daisies / trampled the flowers." (29). This is certainly the earth of the dead and buried. Spender uses plants and flowers as metaphors that conjure up images of resilience and rebirth. But the fallen world after the defeat is no longer a place for heroes. What follows is the end of section III:

> Lucky those who were killed outright; unlucky those
> Burrowing survivors without 'tasks fro heroes':
> Constructing cells, ignorant of their leaders,
> Assuming roles;
> They change death's signal honour for a life of moles. (30)

According to David Leeming, Spender makes room for "the rise of a new necessary communal struggle" (90). The poet justifies the objectives and the rationale behind the revolutionary workers' movement and expounds the reasons and arguments that legitimise their struggle.

The majority of the reviewers of *Vienna* concentrated their objections on the images in part attributed to the affiliation of Spender with other political poets. Tom Wintringham found Spender "unable to associate himself with the living stuff of the revolution," whose inability produced in Vienna, "a remoteness, a coldness of image..." (158). Edwin Muir, one of Spender's most sensitive critics, argued that in *Vienna* there was no natural voice and nothing seemed to be felt with definiteness, such feeling was being muffled "in the latest kind of poetic diction." (qtd. Weather-

head 71). This muffling was probably intentional. In the poem there is certainly a self-conscious restraint, and Spender's images may seem remote and cold, but there is no reason to attribute this to a lack of an engaged response in politics.

In *Vienna*, Spender wanted to keep the past inviolate; but it was not to be so. In his next book of poems, *The Still Centre*, the piece "Returning to Vienna, 1947" proceeds to link the poet's love affair with the architecture and the sculpture of the old city; but the "seeming permanence was an illusion," and

> ...what was real was transitory dust
> true to our time dust blowing into dust
> The dust a vital inward spring with power
> To shatter history-frozen visions
> And burst through cities and break down their walls (*Edge* 22)

In other poems of this volume, dust appears again as the destroyer. One recalls the showers of acrid dust that followed the explosion of bombs in the air raids that Spender witnessed as a fireman at the time of the writing of some of these poems.

The Still Centre introduces us to new conflicts that Spender's foregoing volumes had variously revealed. We could even say it is, in general, the same conflict, but finds new terms and new images: in the early poems there are traditionally good and beautiful things, nature and culture, on the one hand, and progress and communism, on the other; there is the world of will and that of sensibility, there is a continuity between the ruined world and the visionary from *Ruins and Visions*. Now, and as a corollary to the fallen and devastated world of the massacres of war, we are exposed to the 'destructive dust.' In the last stanza of the last poem of the volume, "Time in our Time," Spender writes, "Oh save me in this day, when Now/ Is a towering pillar of dust which sucks / The ruin of a world into its column" (56).

3. CONCLUSION: THE NECESSITY TO MEMORIALIZE

The relationship between poetry and its audience is directly implicated in what is, for Spender, one of the most important questions raised by the poets of his generation: how might poetry provide an adequate response to the tremendous trauma of the war and the loss of so many lives? The responsibility to find a way to represent that experience is one of Spender's foremost concerns, dictating such formal considerations as diction, tone, imagery, and poetic form. More radically, Spender believed that this responsibility impacted, not only upon his own work, but upon the entire field of poetry in his contention that English poetry was not yet fit to speak of the war. Spender saw his own writing as an attempt to bridge that gap, by taking over from the previous generation of poets of the Great War and continuing to make English poetry speak to the soldier's experience. From early on in his career, Spender recognized that the trauma of war would, through the writing of the soldier poets, leave its mark upon literature just as it had left its mark upon those who

lived through it. Significantly, trauma and memorialization are processes inscribed upon the field of poetry in the same way that those are experienced by an individual: as an irrevocable break. The writings of the war poets are positioned on the far side of the abyss of history. The war has forever sundered them from the tradition of war poetry that preceded them. Because the war had emptied out terms like nationalism, patriotism and truth of both their meaning and their function of conferring meaning onto one's life, the war left everyone at a radical loss for a way of coming to terms with their experience. The war poets were highly self-conscious of the radical disjuncture between their experience of war and the traditional poetic language, for expressing that experience. Out of their poetry, they forged a new vocabulary for describing war. However, their writing also speaks to the traumatic impact of the war as more primarily a failure of comprehension than a failure of language. The main reason why the "unspeakable" agonies of their experience could not be spoken was not because such things should not be talked about, but because they themselves hardly recognized what was happening.

Up to the Great War, the primary function of war poetry was to record a self-authorizing history—that is, to narrate the events of battle so that they serve as their own historical justification. In such writing, war is represented as the guarantor of history and history as the fulfillment of war's promise. Instead, Spender's poetry navigates a very different relationship to history, making its way through a course that has been ravaged by trauma. His poetry emphasizes an experiential understanding of history over a comprehensive one; rather than record the outcome of important battles, Spender presents his experience of the uprisings in Vienna as overwhelming and difficult to comprehend cognitively, much less see it from an objective viewpoint situated somewhere outside of the unfolding of events.

After the unanimous favourable response of the critics to *Poems* (1933), Spender was overwhelmed with the negative reaction to *Vienna* (1934). As I.M. Parson's wrote in the first important review of the poem published in November 1934, "Mr Spender, we cannot help feeling, is in a sense too involved in his material" (qtd. Sutherland, 173). In our view, not only did Spender have to deal with the massacre on the streets of Vienna and the loss of innocent civilian lives, but he also had to say farewell to a love relationship never to be fulfilled. Apart from the elegiac quality[9] of several sections in the poem, *Vienna* stands as a historical monument and fulfils the project of the generation of the 1930s, no longer documentary but meditative, it reaches audiences as a test case on the scope and value of political poetry in those troubled times.

[9] This elegiac quality also shows in sections devoted to Muriel Gardiner, such as what follows in section four: "I think often of a woman/ with dark eyes neglected, a demanding turn of the (head / And hair of black silky beasts / How admirable it is / They offer a surface bright as fruit in rain / That feeds on kissing. Loving is their conqueror /That turns all sunshine, fructifying lemons./ Our sexes are the valid flowers / Sprinkled across the total world and wet / With night" (*Vienna*, 33-34).

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