WORLD WITHIN WORLD

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF

STEPHEN SPENDER

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DARKNESS AND LIGHT

To break out of the chaos of my darkness
Into a lucid day, is all my will.
My words like eyes in night, stare to reach
A centre for their light: and my acts thrown
To distant places by impatient violence
Yet lock together to mould a path
Out of my darkness, into a lucid day.

Yet, equally, to avoid that lucid day
And to preserve my darkness, is all my will.
My words like eyes that flinch from light, refuse
And shut upon obscurity; my acts
Cast to their opposites by impatient violence
Break up the sequent path; they fly
On a circumference to avoid the centre.

To break out of my darkness towards the centre
Illumines my own weakness, when I fail;
The iron arc of the avoiding journey
Curves back upon my weakness at the end;
Whether the faint light spark against my face
Or in the dark my sight hide from my sight,
Centre and circumference are both my weakness.

O strange identity of my will and weakness!
Terrible wave white with the seething word!
Terrible flight through the revolving darkness!
Dreaded light that hunts my profile!
Dreaded night covering me in fears!
My will behind my weakness silhouettes
My territories of fear, with a great sun.

I grow towards the acceptance of that sun
Which hews the day from night. The light
Runs from the dark, the dark from light
Towards a black and white total emptiness.
The world, my life, binds the dark and light
Together, reconciles and separates
In lucid day the chaos of my darkness.

From *The Still Centre*, 1935.

INTRODUCTION

In this book I am mainly concerned with a few themes: love; poetry; politics; the life of literature; childhood; travel; and the development of certain attitudes towards moral problems.

All these are related to the background of events from 1928–1939, and their development forms the main narrative of all except the first section. Outside this decade, I have chosen only material which concerns my own story, and I do not attempt to fill in the background of the time.

I have let the main part of the narrative develop forwards from 1928 until the outbreak of the war. I say 'I have let' it do so, because this was not my original intention. I meant at first to write a book discussing my themes and illustrating them with narrative taken up at any point in time that I chose.

However, after two or three trials, I saw the advantage of having a framework of objective events through which I could knock the holes of my subjective experiences. Given this general structure, within it I could still make excursions into the past and future.

Many autobiographies have irritated me, when I wanted to read about the writer's achievements, by beginning with a detailed account of his early days, forcing me to wade through a morass of ancestors, nurses, governesses, first memories, before I get to what really interests me. Certainly masterpieces have been written about childhood, but these are chiefly important for the light they throw on childhood in general, and they are not especially illuminating as the autobiography of particular individuals. Autobiography, however, is concerned with a particular person whose childhood will interest us, if

at all, chiefly as an interpretation of everything we have come to know about him. That autobiographers have to begin by plunging into their earliest memories is surely an unnecessary convention.

So childhood is like wheels within wheels of this book, which begins, and revolves around, and ends with it. It is end and beginning, introduction and explanation. In my First Section I seek only to establish the broad lines of a sketch to indicate the kind of adolescent I was until the time when I went up to Oxford in 1928.

An autobiographer is really writing a story of two lives: his life as it appears to himself, from his own position, when he looks out at the world from behind his eye-sockets; and his life as it appears from outside in the minds of others; a view which tends to become in part his own view of himself also, since he is influenced by the opinion of those others. An account of the interior view would be entirely subjective; and of the exterior, would hardly be autobiography but biography of oneself on the hypothesis that someone can know about himself as if he were another person. However, the great problem of autobiography remains, which is to create the true tension between these inner and outer, subjective and objective, worlds.

Here I have tried to be as truthful as I can, within the limits of certain inevitable reticences; and to write of experiences from which I feel I have learned how to live.

I have learned largely from mistakes, so that this book seems to be, among other things, a catalogue of errors. But I have tried hard to avoid putting these forward as if they were an example for anyone else to make the same sort of mistakes. I do not want my behaviour to appear attractive or fashionable. Nor do I offer any consoling picture of myself living now in detached philosophic calm, having survived my life like a grave illness. Most of my weaknesses, even if I have learned something from them, are still with me.

I believe obstinately that, if I am able to write with truth about what has happened to me, this can help others who have lived through the same sort of thing. In this belief I have risked being indiscreet, and I have written occasionally of experiences which seem strange to me myself, and which I have not seen discussed elsewhere.

The modern reader, in order to protect himself from taking in what he does not care to know, comes to a book armed with a whole

vocabulary of defensive labels. Doubtless he will have occasion to dismiss some of my experiences by virtue of an analysis based on the evidence which I provide. But I can only repeat that I have written of what seems significant in my own life in a way which I think should be useful to at least a few readers.

Where I write of the people I have known partly as public figures, for instance as writers or politicians, I have used their real names. Where they play only a private role, I have sometimes invented names for them.

Once or twice (for example in the account of the Writers' Congress in Madrid) the narrative diverges into satire. The reader, I think, will agree that this is justified, because satire is the only means of conveying certain impressions. But characters like the Communist lady novelist are portrayals of types and not of real personalities. They do justice, I think, to the type: and to the fact that people tend to become types within certain situations.

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I

I GREW up in an atmosphere of belief in progress curiously mingled with apprehension. Through books we read at school, through the Liberal views of my family, it seemed that I had been born on to a fortunate promontory of time towards which all other times led.

History taught of terrible things which had happened in the past; tortures, Court of the Star Chamber, Morton's Fork, Henry VIII's wives, the Stamp Tax, the Boston Tea Party, slavery, the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution, Bismarck, the Boer War. Weighing in the scale of human happiness against these were the Reform Act, Wilberforce, Mr. Gladstone, Home Rule, Popular Education, the United States, Health Insurance, the League of Nations. If the history books were illustrated, they gave the impression that the world had been moving steadily forward in the past thousands of years, from the vague to the defined, the savage to the civilized, the crude to the scientific, the unfamiliar to the known. It was as though the nineteenth century had been a machine absorbing into itself at one end humanity dressed in fancy dress, unwashed, fierce and immoral, and emitting at the other modern men in their utilitarian clothes with their hygienic houses, their zeal for reform, their air of having triumphed by mechanical, economic and scientific means over the passionate, superstitious, cruel and poetic past.

History seemed to have been fulfilled and finished by the static respectability, idealism and material prosperity of the end of the nineteenth century. This highly satisfactory, if banal, conclusion was largely due to the Liberal Party having found the correct answer to

most of the problems which troubled our ancestors. There were still poor people in the world, but they were not nearly so poor as their forefathers had been. If there were slum-dwellers, then there were also slum workers who were kind to them, unless, indeed, they were hopeless cases. Socialists, Communists and Anarchists were fanatical idealists who refused to recognize that everything possible had been done to improve the world. Conservatives were wilful self-seekers who attacked the great fortress of Liberal morality, Free Trade. The Americans, the Boers, the Irish, the uneducated, had all had their grievances met and removed.

When I was taught about the past, I often regretted that there were no great causes left to fight for; that I could not be crucified, nor go on a crusade, nor choose to defend the cause of Saint Joan against the (then) wicked English, nor free slaves nor kill tyrants. I thirsted for great injustices.

If, lying in bed awake, there were times when I regretted not having my arms extended on a cross with rusty nails driven through my hands, there were others when I craved for a savagery, a dæmonism which seemed to have gone out of the world. I should like to have gone naked with Picts and Celts, painted in woad or clothed in pelt and rags, shameless around fires or in dark caverns.

But I was brought up with a myth in my mind of the world having resolved itself from past history, correctly, like a sum. Yet there was also, paradoxically, a feeling that the best times were over. This was not stated in history books, but it was conveyed by the tone of existence surrounding me. My parents and the servants talked of pre-war days, as poets sing of a Golden Age. I used to ask how much toffee cost before 1914, and was told – was it fourpence a pound? My mother would describe a honeymoon journey she and my father had taken to Egypt – the pyramids – thence to Florence – Giotto's Tower – in days when 'we were rich'. There were photographs of my father with a pyramid behind him, arms folded, sepia moustache trailing on each side like fox brushes, in the faded brown print; of my mother with her motoring veil, seated in the corner of a car which looked like a minute church.

The war had knocked the ball-room floor from under middle-class English life. People resembled dancers suspended in mid-air yet

miraculously able to pretend that they were still dancing. We were aware of a gulf but not of any new values to replace old supports. What was new seemed negative: the immorality of the 'young people', the drinking, the short skirts, the pillion-riding, all of which my father deplored. We knew vaguely but surely that our generation would inevitably have less than his. My father supported Liberal causes of which there seemed little left but the idealism. He believed in the League of Nations, he opposed Protection. Within the Liberal Party itself he fought for Lloyd George against Asquith.

We lived in a style of austere comfort against a background of calamity. Little of our money seemed spent on enjoyment, but most on doctors and servants, on maintaining a standard of life. My mother, who died when I was twelve, was a semi-invalid, and her ill health provided the background to our childhood. We walked by her bedroom on tiptoe, knowing that to talk too loud was to give her a headache. Once, when we had been playing trains in the nursery, which was above her bedroom, the door suddenly opened and she appeared on the threshold with a white face of Greek tragedy, and exclaimed like Medea: 'I now know the sorrow of having borne children.'

I remember her lying on a chaise-longue in Sheringham complaining about debts, and telling me in a taxi in London that she was five pounds overdrawn. How strangely all spoken words are attached to scenes, like honey to the cells of a honeycomb! For it was in a 31 bus, on the blackened route that leads from Earls Court to Swiss Cottage, that my father told me (with the crowds standing outside the pubs of Kilburn) that my grandfather in his will had left us 'just enough money to keep us out of the workhouse'. And in some way I instantly surmised that this meant enough for me to do what I wanted with my life.

When my mother was not in her tragic mood she could be gay and companionable. She was always intelligent and sensitive. She recognized in me someone as hypersensitive as herself and snubbed me accordingly, being, like many sensitive people, unable to resist wounding those as vulnerable as herself, in revenge for wounds she suffered from the seemingly invulnerable. I still hesitate whenever I have to say either the word 'exhibition' or 'expedition': a scene

flares up in my mind. My mother is standing on the shore of the Cherwell and I am shouting to her from a punt that I am going on an 'exhibition'. To this day I hear the coldness of her reply: 'Not exhibition, but expedition.'

Childhood is like wheels within wheels of this book, which begins and revolves around and ends with it. But here I want only to establish the broad lines of a sketch of the kind of person I was before I went to Oxford.

My mother had a sense of catastrophe, but she was less afraid of life than my father. Shortly before she died, we took a family holiday at Oxford (to reach there from London we hired a lorry which we filled with members of the family, servants, dog, cat, luggage). I remember how in walks through Oxford she talked about friends, painting, travel, poetry, certain biological experiments in breeding animals, art, in a way which enabled us to share the excitement of these things with her.

She was hysterical, and given to showing violent loves and hates, enthusiasms and disappointments, which went to make us feel that our family life was acted out before a screen dividing us from an outer darkness of weeping and gnashing of teeth, immense rewards and fearful punishments. Cooks, governesses, relations, friends, were for ever entering our lives, sunning themselves in radiant favours, only to commit some act which caused them never to be mentioned again, unless with an air of tragic disapproval. The cousin who persuaded my brother Michael to let him beat his bared bottom with the back of a hairbrush, the carpenter, engaged to the cook, who was involved in a robbery, Mrs. Alger our general servant who said unrepeatable slanders – these and many others disappeared from our lives, entering a silent land of utter wickedness where I supposed them to continue openly and unceasingly the unmentionable practices, which, when we had discovered them, seemed to be revelations of their deepest natures.

My mother's painting, embroidery and poetry had a sacred, unchallenged reputation among us. If she was often moody and temperamental, her acts of thoughtfulness and her kindness to friends, governesses, school teachers, servants, expressed a touching wish to love her way into their lives, as though every stitch of some collar

which she embroidered were a thought directed towards the person for whom it was made. Although, at the age of twelve when I was at school, I thought of her face as agonized, and was amazed when I saw an early photograph that my mother ever could have looked carefree and beautiful in exactly the same way as brides whose photographs appeared in the newspapers: nevertheless I remember a still earlier time when before a dinner party she would bend over me, as I lay in bed, to say good night, and the amethysts round her white neck, the stiff satin of her golden dress, her scent, were a splendour such as today I would find in a Titian of some Venetian beauty.

With my father it was as though his sense of the dramatic made him inhabit a world of rhetorical situations. Everything for him was a scene in a play written by some hectic journalist. If I had to play football, he impressed on me that this was to harden the tissues of my character. His own accomplishments were to him difficulties surmounted with unflinching resolution at the cost of infinite pains. He spoke often in parables which illustrated the point that life was a perpetual confronting of oneself with vague immensities. He told me that once when he climbed a mountain, the peasant who kept a hut at the top asked him and his friends why they climbed. This why (*Pourquoi?* she had asked) became for my father the question at the centre of the universe. Whence the spirit of adventure? Why does man essay to scale the stars?

W. H. Auden, who was at school with my brother Michael, tells me that on one occasion when my father visited the school he read the Lesson: this happened to be the parable of the Prodigal Son. My brother was playing the organ and was seated in the organ loft at the end of the chapel farthest from the lectern, when my father, removing with a flourish his beribboned spectacles, and gazing up at my brother in the distance exclaimed in the voice of the father beholding his prodigal son: 'But when he was as yet a great way off, his father saw him. . . .'

My father's habit of mind created a kind of barrier between him and us, which asserted itself even in the most genuine situations. When my mother died, my brothers and sister and I were rushed home from our various schools. I remember entering a room and

seeing my father seated on a chair with his head in his hands. When he saw us he raised his arms, embraced us and exclaimed: 'My little ones. You are all your old father has left.' He was genuinely stricken and there was certainly no falsity in his voice or his expression. His usual expression, indeed, was deleted with grief, like a clownish white grease paint which had smoothed out the characteristic lines. Yet he communicated a situation which put him outside us by dramatizing that we were all he had.

A few days after the death of my mother, my father took me to see the headmaster of the day school in Hampstead where it was proposed that I should be sent, in order to be (together with my sister Christine, who was also brought home) a companion to him in his widowerhood. The headmaster said something to the effect that it was a loss to children to have no mother. 'Fortunately at his age, they do not realize it,' my father said. This remark had a complex affect on me. I recognized its justice. If I felt the death of my mother at all, it was as the lightening of a burden and as a stimulating excitement. Yet I was humiliated at his demonstration of my own lack of feeling. I longed to be stricken again in order to prove that next time I would be really tragic. But the only loss which I could imagine affecting me greatly was of my father himself. For this could make me that pathetic figure, an orphan. Thus I longed for my father to die in order that I might demonstrate my grief to him, as he watched me from his grave.

Soon after my mother's death there was a change of my father's role in our lives. Until this, he had been the one who championed us in revolting against the anxious fussiness of my mother. It was he who, when we were at Sheringham, as soon as he had got us out of the house, on to the cliffs or the common, would give a sigh and exclaim: 'Away from the women at last . . .', an injunction which, for me, has never quite ceased to have its appeal. The wind blew in his hair, the lines of his forehead and at the corners of his eyes wrinkled into smiles. I watched him stride forward, with one of us on each arm, as he told us adventure stories. Sometimes he had a gun and shot at rabbits, or he hunted for things cast up on the beach after a storm, or he would pretend that we were climbing with him on the Alps, traversing glaciers, attached to one another by a rope,

with the clink of an ice-axe hacking steps on the face of the ice. At such times he seemed, with his blue eyes, his sandy hair and moustache, and his chiselled nose, like a Viking.

But now, after a very brief period, during which the immediate effect of bereavement was that all controls over us were relaxed, my father's character changed. He became as anxious and concerned as ever my mother had been. My sister and I were not allowed out of the house unaccompanied, and every moment of our day was watched and worried over.

When I was fourteen, he fought in the General Election at Bath in the Liberal cause. My brother Humphrey (a year younger than I) and myself were brought down by train from London, put on the platform beside my father who made a sweeping gesture towards us, exclaiming to the audience: 'I have brought up my reserves!' We were sent round the streets of Bath in a donkey cart. The donkey had hung round its neck a placard on which was written VOTE FOR DADDY. He did not win the election.

Having been a member of the 'volunteers' in Norfolk during the war, my father had a fairly extensive vocabulary of military metaphor. Whenever one of us asked him a favour, he would hold his head down with a butting gesture, and, looking up from under shaggy sandy eyebrows, say: 'You are trying to get round my flank.'

He died when I was seventeen, certainly the age when sons react most strongly against their parents. Thus my portrait of him may be over-simplified by the fury of adolescence. To his contemporaries he may have seemed more a man of the world, more intuitive and understanding than he appears here. Nevertheless, for me his attitudes were both in a material and spiritual sense unreal. For it is no exaggeration to say that at the end his unreality terrified me. Just as Midas turned everything he touched to gold, so my father turned everything into rhetorical abstraction, in which there was no concreteness, no accuracy. It got to a stage when I was frightened of things because they were almost superseded in my mind by descriptive qualities which he applied to them. A game of football ceased to be just the kicking about of a leather ball by bare-kneed boys. It had become confused with the Battle of Life. Honour, Integrity, Discip-

line, Toughness and a dozen other qualities haunted the field like ghostly footballers.

He impressed so much on me his achievement in having passed certain examinations, that to gain a First, a Scholarship, Honours or a Credit seemed as difficult as scaling some great height. Indeed, to climb a real Alp would have been easier, because it would have presented a tangible difficulty, whereas the difficulty contained within Examinations seemed impalpable. I knew only that those who passed them brilliantly were mysterious Victors with Double Firsts, Scholarships, and so forth. Even answering a question in class became a problem, for the idea of some insuperable Difficulty lurking within the question distracted me from the question itself. I meditated on the idea of Difficulty: what was Difficult could not be easy; but if I knew the answer that would be easy, therefore it could not be the correct answer, and the question must conceal some hidden trap. How often at school the boy next to me, or the one next to him, gave the right answer, which I had known, but could not believe to be correct, just because it had appeared easy.

The answers handed in at examinations, and so carefully sealed and taken away, often in boxes, never seemed to me just answers. There was something mysterious, unknown to me about them, like the confidences made in the confessional, or like specimens of cerebral fluid extracted by the examiner from the examinees by the operation of examining. I could not believe that the people who got brilliant Firsts, double Firsts, and so on, for their General Essays, were just writing papers which had something in common with, say, articles appearing in reviews on some specialized subject.

I remember lying awake at night and thinking about Work, Discipline, and Thought itself, just as though all these activities were divorced from objects, and were quite abstract functionings of the mind.

I think that if, when I was young, I had been told, 'Go out on to that field and kick that ball', or 'Sit at that desk and answer that question': in a word, if I had been committed to particular tasks on particular occasions, I would have escaped a good deal of confusion. But the abstract conception of Work and Duties was constantly being thrust on me, so that I saw beyond tasks themselves to pure

qualities of moral and intellectual existence, quite emptied of things.

As Work was associated with Duty, I knew that it could have no connection with enjoyment. Thus when at school I enjoyed a subject, I felt that it had ceased to be Work for me, and had become a kind of self-indulgence. It was easy, and I therefore felt that I should turn to something Difficult. At the same time my whole being revolted against my own conception of Work. I did not have the courage to enjoy myself, nor the strength to force myself to act against my inclinations.

More serious than the effect of my father's rhetoric on my school work was its influence on my ideas of morality. Discipline, Purity, Duty, became abstract concepts for me, states of pure existence almost removed from particular actions. Thus they tended to seem absolute, and individual failures to work or behave well were not just separate acts which proved little or nothing about my character in general, but proofs that I could not achieve that pure goodness of existence which I sought.

My parents impressed on us the fear of being an inadmissible, unrespectable, loveless kind of person, a moral outcast. They had a special kind of cowardice, which was a fear of finding out some final wickedness in ourselves, some unspeakable shame of ultimate depravity. In all their relationships there was the sense of something which might turn up and which could never be mentioned. Ours was a morality based on a fear of discovering something horrible about others – or even about ourselves – not on a love sternly but patiently judging every separate action within its own separateness, a love sometimes confronted with pain and failure, but never withholding forgiveness, never finally withdrawn.

My revolt against the attitude of my family led me to rebel altogether against morality, work and discipline. Secretly I was fascinated by the worthless outcasts, the depraved, the lazy, the lost, and wanted to give them that love which they were denied by respectable people. This reaction was doubtless due to the fact that I wanted to love what I judged to be the inadmissible worst qualities in myself. But such a revolt confronted me with new problems, because love, although not a discipline of fear, is also a discipline. If it accepts the reality of evil, it nevertheless tries to melt it into the wholeness of

a creative purpose, and does not rest contented with what mere conventionality has rejected. Without this positive discipline, work and human relationships were no easier for me than they had been within the negative discipline of fear.

* * * * *

When I was fifteen I came under one of the most important influences of my life, that of my maternal grandmother, Hilda Schuster. My grandmother saw that my father could not understand my taste for modern painting, theatre, literature. To him, modern painting was a vast leg-pull by cynical artists, of the 'long-suffering British public'. Modern writing was largely immoral, as was the theatre. In any case, during the term, when I was in London at University College School, a day school, I was not allowed to see plays or exhibitions, as I was supposed to live under what he called a 'rigorous non-pleasure régime', which meant that I must not go to the theatre, or to art galleries.

My grandmother used, when my father was away, to take me to the theatre. With her I saw plays of Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg, and experimental performances of Shakespeare done by small theatre groups at Hammersmith, Barnes and Notting Hill Gate. We used to go to the art galleries and see modern paintings. She read the most recent novels in order to discuss them with me.

Towards all these works of art she brought a mind which in some ways seemed as innocent as my own. She was easily impressed, endlessly curious, excited, ready to be enthusiastic. If she did not understand something (for example, *pointilliste* painting or that kind of painting of models to look like inflated rubber dolls which was 'advanced' just then) she would say, 'I don't know what it means, but I can see that it is quite, quite beautiful.'

She was extremely influenced by a wish to share an experience of something 'new' and modern with me who was young, her most isolated grandson who most needed her. But whilst she was disposed to like what I liked, out of her loving sympathy for me (and because in some way she entered into my excitement without quite understanding the book or painting which was its object), she was also for ever anxious whether this was 'the right thing' for me.