

Stephen Spender's World

WORLD WITHIN WORLD, by Stephen Spender; Hamish Hamilton. English price, 15/-.

(Reviewed by M.H.H.)

STEPHEN SPENDER belongs to a generation much tormented by politics. His confessions are therefore in some ways an intenser form of an experience shared by many intellectuals whose autobiographies are likely to remain unwritten, or at least unpublished. The book brings back the emotional tone of the thirties, a decade in which writers everywhere heard from their back rooms or private towers the rising wind from Spain and Germany. Like many of his contemporaries, Spender moved forward from liberalism; but although at one time he became a member of the Communist Party he could not in the end surrender his poet's individualism. He resisted the idea that his conceptions of freedom and truth must be dictated by class influence or Marxist expediency. "However much a projection of class interest the mind of the individual may be, I was persuaded there was a point where he chose simply

to witness truths which served no interest."

From some parts of the book may be taken an impression of vagueness, even of weakness—as if Spender were never quite sure what he believed, but passed from the influence of one strong personality to another. At Oxford, for instance, he seems to have been dominated by W. H. Auden; in Germany he was overshadowed by Christopher Isherwood; and in his work for *Horizon* he dwindled a little in the presence of Cyril Connolly. Yet the impression of vagueness is misleading; it may in fact be a tribute to Spender's honesty. He bends and retreats, but finally he reaches and holds his own attitude. His intellectual diffidence makes him show himself among inner uncertainties which possibly conceal the man as he must have appeared in full outline to his friends.

The same integrity may be found in his treatment of personal relationships. He is candid about his first marriage, and painfully anxious to understand and explain his friendship with a young man who became nominally his secretary. His detachment is never quite complete (it is faintly tinged with self-deprecation);



STEPHEN SPENDER

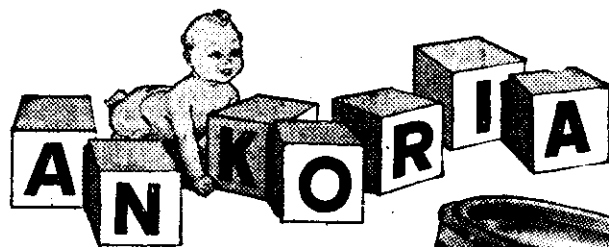
A generation tormented by politics

and the negative strain reminds one of Keats's "chameleon" theory of the poetic temperament. As was to be expected, Spender himself has much to say about poetry; but his scattered insights, although stimulating and sometimes profound, would be better understood if they were drawn together in a single statement. One of the most in-

teresting references to the subject is a précis of a conversation with André Malraux, who believed that poetry as a great art was being destroyed by the loss of spiritual symbols under the impact of machines.

Portraits of other poets and writers, sprinkled liberally through the book, are penetrating and sometimes disconcerting. Yet it is unreasonable to expect writers to be always above themselves: they are like the rest of us when they are dismounted. Spender has moved more than most people among the writers of his time, and in one passage he comes to the heart of the matter: "But people who felt as I did communicated their experience in books, and not in conversations with one another. They were the people whom I knew to be alone. I came to recognise a certain humour, flippancy even, as a sign of the highest seriousness. So that when in this book I touch on the amusing conversations of Virginia Woolf, the malice of Yeats, the wryness of Eliot, the buffoonery of Auden, the farcical play-acting of Isherwood, I am touching on something which indicates its serious opposite, much as in another period the peacock laugh of Shelley, the satiric wit of Byron, and the punning of Keats did."

This book goes deeply into the life of our times, especially in art and politics. The writing is not always what one expects from a poet, and there are



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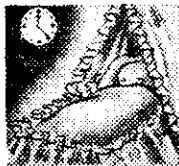


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