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**From Restraint to Exuberance: The Quest Motif in Stephen Spender's "The Express"**

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**Abstract:**

One of the most overlooked and unexplored literary figures of the modern era, Stephen Spender is characterized with Shelleian revolt and marked by a reformative zeal against social odds. Spender is a rebel, who could ring into the ears of appeased Englishmen of the decade of 1930s. And, most significantly, he belongs to the rarest category of poets who could effectively incorporate social milieu into (free) verse. Till date, perhaps the most substantial contribution to Stephen Spender's poem "The Express" came from Richard C. Blakeslee's article "Three Ways past Edinburgh: Stephen Spender's 'The Express' ". In it, Blakeslee briefly encapsulates and analyses three genuine insights of his three students. This paper, besides penetrating deep into Blakeslee's assessment on "The Express", would further try to contribute some new findings to the poem's meaning.

**Key words:** Communism, odyssey, quest, assuagement, manifestation**Introduction:**

Spender's "The Express" describes the journey of an express train as a crescendo of speed, distance, and excitement. The poet uses terms of poetry and song because these help to convey the various sounds made by an accelerating and then speeding train, and because, having established this set of terms, he can then – t the height of speed, distance, and excitement – compare this man-made "song" of the speeding train with the more traditional songs of nature or of poets celebrating nature. (Blakeslee 557)

With these words, Blakeslee traces the conclusion of his article "Three Ways past Edinburgh: Stephen Spender's 'The Express'". Blakeslee's insight truly defined the complexity as well as the poetic authenticity of the poem. In fact, Spender's "The Express" is layered lyric commenting on the contemporary socio-political life and its plight, industrial progress and cultural decline, and the poet's literary odyssey through experiences of the Nineteen Thirties. At the first glance, the poem is all about the glorification of an express train

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– commentary of pace, race and mess – which is personified and compared to some illuminating forces around the world. It certainly addresses industrial advancement (pace), critiques the then appeared British bourgeois (race) and subsumes myriad interpretations (mess). Before delving deep into textual meaning, a cursory contextual reading is necessary. The decade of the Nineteen Thirties witnessed an unvoiced appeasement in the socio-cultural and socio-political English life. As the most vibrant spokesperson of the Auden circle, Spender played the role of an alarm to this assuaged decade of the 1930s. He befriended Auden at University College, Oxford and got acquainted with Day Lewis and MacNeice. Their motive was to generate mass consciousness. In doing so, Spender, like his fellow poets of the decade, chose colloquialism so as to reach the conciliated English bourgeois. Literature of 1930s excogitates contemporary confusion, contradiction and corruption, and Spender’s poetry subtly ruminates this feeling. The use of diverse implications and varied industrial images reveals his social awareness. Spender’s poetry, as Choudhury feels, is “organized to manifest his concern for the contemporary scene”, and throughout his career “he excludes a sober sophistication that distinguishes his work” (270). To a step further, Sutherland asserts that “[m]ore than anyone of his time Spender understood the importance of cultural milieu” (2).

**With the advent of Michael Roberts** edited *New Signatures: Poems by Several Hands*, which appeared in 1932 from Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, Spender met widespread fame. The anthology enlisted some of the striking poems of young Spender. “The Express”, “The Pylons”, “The Funeral”, “Oh Young Men” became the signature works of the time. In fact, the deconstructionist approach of New Signature Group diverted Eliotian influence on them to a radically new direction. They strived for a new mode, a new sensibility, and broadly a new school. To what extent they were successful is secondary, for, the dilemma they faced was hardly resolved. Their predicament, in Michael Alexander’s words: “They had missed the war and had no jobs to lose. Guilty about the privilege, the idea of equality, even of revolution, appealed” (366):

The decade was, as he incarnated its spirit, one of active rejection, rebellion, and radical political ideas. Spender’s generation had not, like their 1920s predecessors, been traumatized by the Great War; but they rejected everything that they associated with it. And they haunted by the premonition that an even greater, more horrible, war than 1914 – 18 was coming. As Spender later confided to Orwell, he knew from 1929 onward that ‘catastrophe’ was inevitable. (Sutherland 103)

To sympathise with reflections of the Thirties’ poets, one must aware of contemporary scenario. Carter tersely accounts that they felt an urge to mingle private life with socio-political contexts (346). In contemporary upheaval, they too were lacerated. As Spender expresses in an interview:

There are, of course, political situations so absolutely unspeakable that they become quite literally unimaginable. It would be impertinent, for example, to imagine what was happening in the concentration camps during the 1930s and 1940s. The only way to know that suffering was to be a part of it, but if you became a part of it, you were destroyed. (“Stephen Spender, *The Art of Poetry* No. 25.”)

Suffice to say, their outcome with a clear, colloquial voice was to generate “greater social awareness” (346). Among others, and even under the titanic influence of Auden, Spender shows the subtlest sensibilities in modernist terms. He was self-conceited and romantic. Auden and Isherwood’s eulogy ‘modern’ in impression definitely terms him as a neo-romantic in temperament.

From the very outset, however, Spender’s “*The Express*” carries us deep into Marxist implication in a convincing manner. Though Spender had later been disillusioned by Communism, his preference to their ideals was unavoidable at the early years of 1930s, when the poem was written. In the very first line, Spender’s use of the word “manifesto” serves dual meanings: in the first hand, it stands as a symbol, or an identity for the ‘Express’ train; in the second, it reminds us of *Communist Manifesto* (1848), a book written by economic and political theorists Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, which encapsulates Communist League’s ideals and generates anti-capitalist view by favouring socialism and communism. Through importing the pun, young Spender betrays his Leftist inclination towards their ideals, irrespective his ever-changing political positions. Though Spender was liberal in terms of politics, he found communist movement necessary at that juncture, until his disillusionment in later years, as it allows people to foster opinions. He joined Communist Party on social demand; for, Spender believed it is better to be an activist rather than shedding grudge in lonely room. As Carter aptly writes: “Spender does not appear to know how best to react, but he does feel a duty to record what he sees and to catalogue the details. . .” (347). Suffice to say, Communism, for Spender, came as a hope to render voice for the disorderly assuaged people of 1930s. Instead of that, spender’s involvement with Communism was ephemeral, the reason being Blamires’s intelligently assessment of his bewilderment in reconciling “communist social justice with liberal notions of individual freedom” (149).

Spender, like his fellow poets, too considered the necessity of mass awareness. Individual consciousness do affect in changing dried-up attitude. Politics, for these young poets, came as an effective arsenal through which they can utilize their poetry in broader respect. Seen from this angle, the poem can be read from “the rise of the proletariat” (Blakeslee 557). The train’s gradual increase of speed can be compared to the gradual advancement of the proletariat class accelerated with the advent of increasing Communism. Again, the train’s gliding emergence with milder pace from the town and beyond the country equally defines communist’s growth across nations such as in “Edinburg”, the capital of Scotland, or “Rome”, the capital of Italy (21).

Some critics on “The Express” tend to see the train as a woman experiencing sexual exuberance. There remains no doubt that the express train projects some sort of modernist attitude of such racy business. In his time, where disorder became the spokesperson, such commentary seems relevant too. Moreover, the poet’s own term in comparing the express train to a “queen” (3) supports the view that it, like an aristocratic princess in stately manner, a woman indulges in extra-marital affairs and rejoices her male partners in places:

After the first powerful plain manifesto  
The black statement of pistons, without more fuss  
But gliding like a queen, she leaves the station.  
Without bowing and with restrained unconcern  
She passes the houses which humbly crowd outside,  
The gasworks and at last the heavy page  
Of death, printed by gravestones in the cemetery. (1-7)

Spender’s use of the word “mystery” (9) and the train’s “luminous self-possession” (10), like a ship on ocean, can be seen as an attribute to her femininity. Like a ball of fire she is relishing the “wild happiness” (18) to the fullest till “night” (22). The train’s mysterious speed appears to the poet so alluring that he cannot but compare her to a “comet”, who plunges into a firing sexual indulgence: “She plunges new eras of wild happiness” (18). Her glowing skin after the racy and satisfied intercourse seems so beguiling that even the beauty of nature can easily be eclipsed.

But, here comes the problem. How does the train, being only a woman, play the role of a male in her own physical union? For, if we like to stick with male-female encounter here, Spender’s imagery of the express train ‘gliding through tunnels’ immediately projects the male sexual organ in action. This contrasting implication, however, weakens this reading of the poem from a “Freudian interpretation” (Blakeslee 557).

“The Express” is, honestly speaking, more than a ‘communist manifesto’ or a ‘Freudian’ interpretation. It is a manifestation of life. As a liberal modernist, Spender was against the concept of narrowing down his lyric’s meanings. The diverse and equally fruitful cores of this poem have been accelerated in Blakeslee’s words too:

We then wondered if a young leftist poet writing in the early 1930’s might not find it politically as well as aesthetically worthwhile to show the greater power and beauty of this triumph of man’s labor, the express train, as compared with the sentimental clichés of earlier or less enlightened poets about “bird song” and a “bough breaking with honey buds.” (557-58)

Poetry, according to Spender, “does not state truth, it states the conditions within which something felt is true” (*The Still Centre* 10). For, a poet can only express his personal impression truthfully. Commenting on how poems work, Spender holds: “Poems exist within their own limit”, but he immediately adds, “they do not exclude the possibility of

other things, which might also be subjects of poetry, being different. They remain true to experience and they establish the proportions of that experience". (10)

The title of "The Express" suggests it a poem in motion – a ceaseless movement of the poet's imaginative force until it gets manifested completely. This progress was in vogue of the 1930s. Spender's achievement as a poet also lies in his assimilation of "nonpoetic objects into poetry" (Leeming). In that, the train verbalizes contemporary response to life. The juxtaposition of mechanical images such as "black statement of pistons . . . gliding like a queen" (2-3), used as an attribution to the express train, as if, to portray the commencement of Spender's literary journey, among natural objects reveals Spender's caliber to be a leading representative of contemporary conflicting scenario. Spender's literary odyssey here in "The Express" began with youthful vigour ("without bowing" 4), and passing through ages ("houses" 5), "town" and "open country" (8), it moves beyond "Edinburgh or Rome" (21). Spender always preferred ultimate freedom and his "intellectual and artistic freedoms" (Sutherland 103) supported his creed:

I think I'm international – I've always thought that I was. When I was young, the feeling for Englishness, for being English, was so strong that I inevitably felt like a foreigner. I'm one-quarter German-Jewish, a quarter German, and half-English. In America this wouldn't mean anything, but in the England of the upper classes and middle classes when I grew up, before the 1930s, this made me feel like a foreigner. I was always very conscious of Englishness, as though it were something very beautiful, worthy of one's strongest admiration, but just a little apart from myself. I always felt twice as much alive the moment I left England. The excitement of just waking up in the morning and thinking, "This is foreign, I'm abroad," has always been very stimulating. I think that's why I've always been going abroad, getting away from England. ("Stephen Spender, The Art of Poetry No. 25.") "The Express" stipulates Spender's odyssey as a poet. For, the poem chronicles Spender's veritable shifts of mind and quest for better craftsmanship. The poet-speaker desires to acquire that "mystery" (9) by which his poetic inspiration can relish the same freedom like an unbound ship in ocean. This quest for ultimate liberty beneath the muddle of writer's block constantly troubles the young poet. Spender tries to mould his endeavour into an evergreen dimension so that it can move beyond the horizon of all slimness, with the aid of his poetic "wheels" in "elate metre" (16). In the course of the poem, he tries to achieve the desired "jazzy madness" (12) so as to be resonated in each literary corner. The crescendo of his full-fledged rhythmic humming from "low" (11) to "loud" (12) sheds divinity by deafening the beaten "tunnels, brakes, innumerable bolts" (14). Spender's poetic rhythm will achieve eternity and become an integral part of the world, Spender expects. Finally, this music—the elevated poetic process—mounting through the hurdles of "low streamline brightness/ Of phosphorus on the tossing hills" (23-24) reaches to the summit of the world where none can equal his achievement: "Ah, like a comet though flame, she moves

entranced/ Wrapt in her music no bird song, no, nor bough/ Breaking with honey buds, shall ever equal” (25-27).

Spender’s “The Express”, thus, seems to be a camouflage of the poet’s imaginative quest. Despite all upheavals, Spender, as a modernist poet, largely employed the “quest motif with consistency” (Choudhury 270) in verse. By cultivating the metaphor of an express train the poet successfully delineates the poetic creed in motion. The success of the poem, thus, lies in Spender’s ability of transporting inanimate objects into poetic voice and inviting ageless criticism:

The 1930s, for Spender, a long, restless itinerary: Hamburg, Berlin, Greece, Yugoslavia, Vienna, Portugal, Spain. It was sometimes exploration, sometimes voyage of discovery, sometimes utopian quest, sometimes merely tourism . . . Now adult and free, Spender was, during the 1930s as much an adventurer in sex as in ideas. (Sutherland 103)

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