



## ***Spender's Journals***

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# Spender's *Journals*

Letter, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 March 1986, 247

## Spender's 'Journals'

Sir, – Ian Hamilton, reviewing Stephen Spender's *Journals 1939–1983* and *Collected Poems 1928–1985* (November 22), falls into the trap each generation sets up for its predecessors by believing its aesthetics and ethics superior to those of the now grey. He chides Stephen Spender for self-effacement, the lack of self-assertion, uncertainty, tentativeness and self-reproach – for the qualities most precious in human nature, for the qualities which indicate that at least in this individual humanity has not yielded the upper hand to ambition. From the cut-throat's point of view, those are deficiencies; the world, however, isn't as yet small enough for us to embrace cut-throat values. Even England isn't, although Hamilton makes it look so. Spender's life in letters is his own, not someone else's; its very uniqueness, by eluding his critics' categorizations, creates a precedent and enlarges the room. And in that room, as everywhere else, hatred defines only the hater, not his object. The most dismaying example of Hamilton's critical acumen is his failure to comprehend the nature of the Spender–Auden relationship. Hamilton finds it strange, “strange from the start”, being unable to conceive of one poet's love for another greater poet; of love that is not an investment.

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TO THE EDITOR, *THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT*

All Souls College, Oxford

Sir, – Miss Mary MacCarthy's deeply felt comment (Letters, February 14)<sup>1</sup> on Joseph Brodsky's noble letter about that notorious review of Stephen Spender's *Journals* speaks for me, and doubtless for many of your other readers too. It makes me feel ashamed for not having tried to say something of this myself, if not half so well.

Isaiah Berlin

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<sup>1</sup> 165b, praising Brodsky's letter in the issue of 27 December 1985, 1481a.