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Baroque: The Poetry of Edith Sitwell

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THE MOST grateful task of the critic is the discovery and bringing to light of merits in work not well appreciated because not understood. Such was the task of F. R. Leavis in regard to the poetry of Ezra Pound, of F. O. Matthiessen for the work of Eliot, and R. P. Blackmur for that of Wallace Stevens. The most ungrateful task for the critic is the exposure of shoddy or ill-judged work in the arts. And the critic of true vocation is only too happy to leave such work to the obscurity that time will bring. Unfortunately one does not always have his choice in the matter. For there are artists of limited talents who, for one reason or another, have such command of the organs of publicity that they will not let themselves find their level in the course of nature. They force themselves, or they are forced, on the attention of any one seriously concerned with excellence in the arts, so constantly and with such fanfare, that the self-respecting critic feels obliged to put in his caveat, as the meekest of men feels obliged in the drawing room to state his position when challenged by some particularly dogmatic assertion of obscurantist views in politics.

Thus with the poetry of the three Sitwells, one would be glad to grant it its not dishonorable, if distinctly minor, place in the vast diversified output of this century. One would be happy to exclaim over the appearance of three poets in one family, and to signalize the strong individual quality of each one of the three.
In the case of Sacheverell, one might even be inclined to make a point of his special charm and individuality, his stimulating modernism, in view of the present tendency to underrate him in comparison with his sister Edith. But the tendency to underrate Sacheverell is not shared by his sister, who in her *Aspects of Modern Poetry*, devotes a whole chapter of extravagant and unilluminating praise to her brother's poetry, placing him squarely with Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot and Pound as one of the most distinguished of modern poets. And in general, the vogue of the Sitwells since Megroż published his "critical study" of them in 1927, has been so inflated, so honey-tongued and undiscriminating, and so much confused, one feels, by snobbish and irrelevant considerations; that any one sincerely concerned with evaluation in esthetic matters is virtually driven to register some measure of dissent.

The distinction of the Sitwells does not depend on overvaluation of their poetry. The series of autobiographical books by Sir Osbert, of which the most recent is *Laughter in the Next Room*, is among the most readable of such chronicles. It reveals the man of taste, of an individual cast of mind, and capable of penetrating psychological insights; and it does constitute, as he intended, a highly significant exhibit of English social life in his time, though it does not exactly prove his point that the democratic levelling down of today is an end to civilization and culture. The long fight which the young Sitwells had to put up against the philistinism of the aristocracy, as well as the *bourgeoisie*, of England, set as they were against artists and intellectuals, is enough to throw doubt on his conclusion. And the character drawn of his father, Sir George, which is as good in its way as anything in Dickens or Meredith, is not precisely a recommendation of aristocratic individualism. In numerous essays, short stories and novels. Sir Osbert has explored many odd corners of the arts, of manners and human nature, with the independent spirit of one not committed to the standards of the mar-
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In the whimsical terms of his biographical sketch in Who's Who, he

For the past thirty years has conducted, in conjunction with his brother and sister, a series of skirmishes and hand-to-hand battles with the Philistine. While out-numbered, has occasionally succeeded in denting the line, though not without damage to himself. Advocates compulsory Freedom everywhere, the suppression of Public Opinion in the interest of Free Speech, and the rationing of brains without which innovation there can be no true democracy.

The father of the Sitwells, Sir George, was a notable antiquarian, who located the first use of the word “gentleman” as a class designation, author of a learned and charming book On the Making of Gardens, who spent vast sums on his own gardens and in making fancy additions to his several houses in England and his Italian castle. He was certainly a “case,” and the younger Sitwells had to fight him at every turn in order to establish themselves in their chosen vocations. But the label that most neatly applies to all three of the present generation is the same that would apply to their father. They are all remarkable specimens of the species, English Eccentric.

This was in their case a fortunate circumstance; for in their reaction against the stodginess of the social set into which they were born, they were among the first in England to champion the work of modern painters, composers, and showmen—like Diaghilev of the Russian ballet—artists in all fields who seemed contemptible to their more timid contemporaries but have since established themselves as classics. In the case of Sacheverell, in particular, this independent spirit took the form of extensive research into relatively neglected provinces of art, resulting in many delightful and informative volumes, such as Southern, Baroque Art and The Romantic Ballet from Contemporary Prints. If these are not always to be classified as “standard” treat-
ises on their several subjects, it is simply because the technical features of, say, baroque are given so elaborate a setting of manners, psychology and history, and often so smothered in lush passages descriptive of seascapes, cloudscapes, and gardens drowned in moonlight and nightingales.

The sister Edith is also in her way an antiquarian and exploiter of “period” subjects, mainly from the eighteenth century. In literary criticism she is the English counterpart of Amy Lowell, shrill marshaller of the cohorts of modernism and slapdash propagandist of a school of poetry. She has, in addition, the gift of Vachel Lindsay for putting across to public audiences poetry strong in accentual beat and somewhat lurid in coloring and imagery. During the present season she has brought to America her special technique for reciting poems from her Façade, more than once tried out in London with some success in the twenties, when the Sitwells were fighting hardest for recognition by an indifferent English public. It would indeed be fortunate for poetry in our day if it might have the benefit of public presentation, as the epics of Homer had at the Panathenaic festivals. Unhappily the best poetry of our day is of so fine a grain and close-wrought texture, and so lacking in dramatic outline, that it cannot be taken in by the ear by audiences not thoroughly familiar with it through previous reading. It is true that the poetry of Façade has little of this subtlety, though it is given a kind of surface sophistication by the note of irony, as in “I do like to be beside the seaside,” or in the piece beginning

WHEN

Sir

Beelzebub called for his syllabub in the hotel in Hell.

Altogether, the three Sitwells make up a constellation of great interest and justified eminence in the world of taste, providing, in the words of a subtitle to one of Sacheverell’s volumes, many a
notable "entertainment of the Imagination." It is mainly in regard to their reputation as poets that one is inclined to indicate reservations.

Sir Osbert, like his sister and brother, has written many lyric poems featuring satyrs, fauns, dolphins, pterrots, fountains, joyous ecstasies and the "dim valleys of sleep." Sometimes he suggests the earlier imagism of John Gould Fletcher; in "Nursery Rhyme" there are echoes of Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker." His lyrical vein is perhaps adequately suggested by the following from his "Song of the Fauns," in which I have ventured to italicize a few of the less original phrases:

When the woods are white beneath the moon
And grass is wet with crystal dew,
When in the pool so clear and cool
The moon reflects itself anew,
We raise ourselves from daylight's swoon.

But the poetical reputation of Sir Osbert rests mainly on satirical poems from his first volume, *Argonaut and Juggernaut*, in which he registers his protest against the unchristian butchery of the first World War and against the complacency of business men who profited by the war and allowed other people's sons (and even their own) to become the victims of Juggernaut. These satires had a certain journalistic effectiveness in their day, though they show no particular refinement or originality of imagery or verse form, and the wit is not of a quality to stand up, with Dryden's or Byron's, against the fading effects of time. The Church comes in for its share of blame for supporting the War. In "Armchair" the poet refers, in an ingenious pun, to those who lost their legs on the field while the Church favored their arms and so brought them to their knees.

And our great Church would work as heretofore,
To bring this poor old nation to its knees.
Throughout his writing Sir Osbert has never ceased to reproach the Western World for the two devastating wars. He sometimes seems to imply that they were undertaken by "democracy" with the express purpose of levelling down all distinctions of caste and merit and bringing about the vulgarity of mob rule. But he never, that I can find, suggests what the western powers could have done, short of fighting, to stop the fires started by imperialistic and totalitarian Germany. So that, however much one may sympathize with his liberal and pacific sentiments, one is left with the feeling that his pacifism is but another expression of his dominant passion for setting himself against the spirit of his age.

Literary opinion has undoubtedly been right in putting a higher valuation on the poetic output of Edith Sitwell. But even here, the fantastic exaggeration of her merits, culminating in Louise Bogan's surprising testimonial in the New Yorker and the bringing out of a Celebration for Edith Sitwell by the usually more discriminating New Directions Press, suggests nothing short of a conspiracy of critical infatuation.

It would be invidious to dwell long on the poetry that appeared in her first four or five volumes, between 1915 and the early twenties, including Bucolic Comedies (1923). Miss Sitwell has retained in The Song of the Cord, as representative poems from this unripe period, "Said King Pompey" and five of the "Twelve Early Poems." Here one may get a notion of the doggerel measures, based on nursery rhymes, which prevail in the earlier poems, and which often recur in later and more ambitious pieces such as "Gold Coast Customs." There are also the burlesque rhymes and whimsies proper to children's poetry,
along with the exotic and period touches, and the touch of ironic disillusion, that are supposed to lend their "modernism" to these poems through the introduction of dissonance, as in the French poetry of the late symbolists, Jules Laforgue and Tristan Corbière, or in some of the early poems of T. S. Eliot. "By the Lake" is in obvious imitation of a famous lyric of Verlaine's, but lacking the evocative power of Verlaine, and "modernized" by the intrusion of inappropriate features such as Midas-asse's ears, Lowellesque pagodas, and (mere rhyme-word) codas. As a general clue to the effect sought in much of the early poetry of the Sitwells, we should have in mind their extreme fondness for clowns and pantaloons, with the wise and melancholy humor of the circus spotlight. Perhaps they thought the mere assumption of motley an excuse for any amount of clowning.

It was in The Sleeping Beauty (1924) that Miss Sitwell brought to her esoteric reputation for modernism the support of a poem of considerable length and pretentiousness. For kernel of her story she employs the opening episodes of Perrault's famous fairy tale. But the story is badly told, with none of the simplicity attaching to proper folk tales; and while Megroz finds occasion to compare Miss Sitwell's effects to those of De la Mare, her work has really nothing of the imaginative consistency of that poet, none of the rightness and sureness of tone and pitch which in his poetry lead any reader, of whatever age, to take his offering with "willing suspension of disbelief." For Miss Sitwell Perrault's tale is the slightest of frameworks on which to hang flowers of fancy of the most assorted and incongruous species. Childhood memories account for the peculiar aspect of the chief characters, of the "palaces," dairies, the orchards, pools, and forests that form such a tangled and jangled Raphaellesque pattern. And the noble grandmother and great-grandmother who sit as models for the Queen Mother and the evil fairy of the tale—and who are often so hard to tell apart—
are bizarrely fitted out with every grotesque appurtenance of Queen-Anne chinoiserie. The "classic" satyrs, Pans, and naiads and the Gothick unicorns are as much in evidence as the standard equipment of fairies (real fairies often indistinguishable from the figurative kind invoked for the animation of trees and flowers), all stewed together in a characteristic Sitwellian olla-podrida.

There is also plentiful provision of vague and impenetrable allegory. The warning of the old gardener against the allurements of the imagination (of poetry?) would seem at first to convey the moral of the poem. But later on we are led to think that the poem is either (a) a lament over the inevitable loss in maturity of childhood faiths and insights (against the indulgence of which the gardener has warned), or (b) some more profound intimation of the corrupting and withering effects of Evil. At one point the thought protrudes in the baldest of abstract words.

And there are terrible and quick drum-taps
That seem the anguished beat of our own heart
Making an endless battle without hope
Against materialism and the world.

Unhappily there is nowhere any "objective correlative" for this particular thought, or rather perhaps there are too many obscure leads in too many directions. Indeed the story is very ill-adapted to bear so heavy a weight of spiritual meaning as the author seems to intend.

As for the "texture" of the verse (to use a favorite word of Miss Sitwell's), one may say—to be brief—that, apart from a lavish indulgence in assonance and rhyme, often desperately forced and brash, Miss Sitwell does not show a fine ear for verse music. Except in the "songs," the Mother Goose rhythms have largely given place to joggy anapaests, of which the following (descriptive of a stuffed parrot) is a fair example:
And therefore the bird was stuffed and restored
To lifeless immortality; bored
It seemed, but yet it remained her own;
And she never knew the bird's soul had flown.

After *The Sleeping Beauty*, the chief milestones in Miss Sitwell's poetic pilgrimage are *Gold Coast Customs* (1929), *Five Variations on a Theme* (1933), and *Green Song and Other Poems* (1946)—all but the latter well represented in *The Song of the Cold* (1948). It was probably with *Gold Coast Customs* that she first came to be thought of in certain quarters as a major poet. And this was probably more because of the religious strain and the "social consciousness," which here began to make their appearance, than for anything in the poetical technique or imaginative quality of the piece. The technique, however, is peculiarly modern. It is a good guess that this poem, like Crane's *The Bridge* and Ronald Bottrall's "Festivals of Fire," was inspired by the brilliant success of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. All of them make large use of Eliot's method of abstract composition, in which contemporary and realistic material is arranged, in a contrapuntal pattern of contrast and correspondence, with themes from primitive legend and other traditional poetic matter, which serve to give it a symbolic background and a broad representative character.

In the title poem of *Gold Coast Customs* Ashantee cannibalism, as described in Schweinfurth's *Heart of Africa* and interpreted by Hegel in his *Philosophy of History*, corresponds (in Eliot) to the Grail legends of the Waste Land as interpreted by Jessie Weston, and (in Bottrall) to the myth of Baldur as interpreted by Frazer in *The Golden Bough*. Lady Bamburgher's London slumming parties parallel the savage orgies of African Negroes; her decayed visage corresponds to the painted skin-and-bones scarecrow fetish which presides over the cannibal rites; her sentimental love affairs (mere twichings of a dead
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soul) are inspired by the same cruel god of Death and Sin; and the prostitutes and starving men of the sailors' quarter under-line the fact that social misery and vice are the fruit of commercial exploitation by the heartless rich.

This interpretation is arrived at only after strenuous study of the poem; for the symbolical parallelisms are in many points so confused and forced that only the most resolute of scholars can work out their intention. In certain passages, it is true, the poet compensates for the confusion of her image-patterns with the baldest of abstract statement.

For Africa is the unhistorical
Unremembering, unrhetorical,
Undeveloped spirit involved
In the conditions of nature.

In some places the indebtedness to Eliot is particularly obvious, as in the theme of purgation by fire and in the list of fallen or falling cities:

Bahunda, Banbangala, Barumbe, Bonge,
And London fall.

In a final concluding passage, added in the new volume, a touching tribute is paid to American hymnology:

For the fires of God go marching on.

The way in which Mrs. Howe's figure has here been stretched and mutilated may serve as reminder of the frequently misfire modernism of Miss Sitwell's rhetoric. One imagines that Mr. Eliot would not be too well pleased with this example of the working of his system. Miss Sitwell's images are too often daubs of garish paint where a finer art would give us an inner shining and translucency. To the ear they are often the flat tones of percussion instruments where we expect the resonance and over-tones of woodwinds or stings. The comparison with Bottrall is
all to his advantage. "Festivals of Fire" is not among the finest of his poems; it is a little too obviously an exercise in Eliot's manner. But his work is often of high distinction. And even here he has something of Pound in his style as well as of Eliot—their extension of poetic measures with the discreet use of prose rhythms, and their enrichment of poetic style with locutions and tonalities borrowed from good colloquial prose. Miss Sitwell has certainly a flair for theatrical effect, but she can hardly be said to have a sense for style. The movement of "Gold Coast Customs" is lively and effective in a popular way. The irregularity and spasmodic jerkiness of the verse may be said to have an appropriateness to the theme; but it should also be said that she seems rather to have surrendered to the Ashantee tone than to have assimilated it to the finer uses of poetry.

The Five Variations may conveniently be discussed along with Green Song. The theme is the same—the passing of Love and Beauty, with all the "anguish of the skeleton," into Death—with, sometimes, the sudden unexpected emergence (like an afterthought) of Christ, the immortal spirit, out of the eternal vitality of nature.

So, out of the dark, see our great Spring begins
—Our Christ, the new Song, breaking out in the fields and hedgerows,
The heart of Man! O the new temper of Christ, in veins and branches.

The main difference between the two volumes is that in the long poems of the earlier one the basic measure is the heroic couplet, whereas the poems in the later volume are shorter, conceived more as songs, and with loose irregular meters. In the Five Variations Miss Sitwell practises the smoothness of iambic pentameters, but her couplets lack the witty definition of Pope's usage. They are strung together at great length and with more of the romantic enjambement; and with the constant repetition of...
images and adjectives of musical suggestiveness, they do have a certain languorous elaboration of musical effect.

It is indeed a rather sleepy music, with the constant marimba-tinkling of the jeweled sounds that have always been favorites with Miss Sitwell. She is always lavish with precious stones and metals; and here there are plenty of rubies, garnets, topazes, diamonds, sapphires, and gold, amber, coral and porphyry. To sustain the suavity of her iambics she is extremely fond of attaching to each noun vaguely suggestive stock attributives such as rich and deep, strange, gold, vast and dim. Within a very few pages you will find each of these adjectives applied innumerable times to a great variety of objects. Rich is applied to rose, heat, splendor, trees, and light; deep to heaven, tears, horizon, seas; green to rains, heat, world, century, fingers, shade. Often she requires two of these adjectives to make her effect: rich gold leaves, vast universal night, hyacinthine waves profound. She is extremely devoted to plumes, and to pomp in all combinations: pomp and splendor, pomp and pleasure, pomp and empery—everything but pomp and circumstance. Poets have used these words before. One remembers that rich is a Keats word ("Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows"). But this stands out with startling distinctness in Keats, whereas nothing very much stands out in the iterative monotony of verse like this:

Then you, my gardener, with green fingers stroked my leaves,
Till all the gold drops turned to honey. Grieves
This empire of green shade when honeyed rains
And amber blood flush all the sharp green veins
Of the rich rose?

Green is still dominant in Green Song, and cold becomes the key word of the following volume, to suggest the frigidity of Sin and Death. But the later poems are less purely descriptive and elegiac. There is a marked disposition to dramatize the religious theme by means of personified abstractions that carry on
dialogues with one another. The personifications are not very distinctly made. Thus in the title poem of *Green Song*, we have now the “lovers” speaking and now “the youth of the world.” Opposed to them is “an envious ghost in the woods,” who turns into a “naked Knight in a coat of mail.” And none of these keeps to his part or speaks in character. The voice of the poet drowns out that of her dramatis personae, as where the ghost in armor remarks to the young lovers:

My frost despoils the day’s young darling.
For the young heart like the spring wind grows cold
And the dust, the shining racer, is overtaking.
The laughing young people who are running like fillies...

In one poem we have a man addressing his dead wife. These two are supposed to be actual persons; but it is often impossible to tell whether the poet is referring to an actual dead woman or to personified Death.

This is a radical defect of imagination with both Edith and Sacheverell Sitwell. The figurative counterpart of a person, an object or an idea is more vividly realized than the thing it stands for; and often neither figure nor thing has enough substance for the mind to rest upon. So that they tend to nullify one another and vanish together into thin air.

To Edith’s phrasing there still clings a whiff of the cliche and derivative, even in these later poems. There is a good deal of this sort of thing: “spring in the heart’s deep core,” “the young orchards’ emerald lore,” “immortal things in their poor earthly dress.” The strength of her later poems is in the impression they convey of the pain and ignominy of growing old. To persons of a certain bent they appear as being deeply “mystical” and even “metaphysical.” They certainly have little of the sound of the seventeenth-century religious poets. They are too conventionally rhetorical for that, and too loose-knit in thought. Her religious conclusions do not seem, to the non-mystical reader, to
follow from her premises. They are more like rabbits pulled out of a hat. There is too little suggestion of what would be the ethical content of the “spirituality” to which she is driven by her sense of the vanity of life and the imminence of death.

The basic fault of her work would seem to be a lack of structural design adequate to support the load of superimposed decoration. One is reminded of the important work done by the Sitwells—and above all Sacheverell—in bringing into repute the baroque and rococo in architecture and generally in the fine arts. It is not customary now as formerly to use these terms in an indiscriminately pejorative sense. But it can hardly be denied that, however much fine and impressive work was done in these styles, there was a frequent tendency in them to overlay the functional in structure with irrelevant elaborations of surface detail, to confuse effects with strained mixtures of incongruous thematic material, and to bring the secondary into greater prominence than the primary in architectural and decorative schemes. In any case, the odds are always against the craftsman who undertakes to secure in one art the effects appropriate to another medium—the poet who attempts to make words perform the office of legs in dancing, oils in painting, or vibrating strings in music.

Sacheverell Sitwell is, in my opinion, a much more original poet than his sister, an artist of genuinely poetic endowment. But there is something in his method that results in his having impressed the reading public far less than his sister. If I were to attempt to trace the causes of his failure to produce notable classics of poetry, I would pursue the analogy here suggested. I would suggest that his failure is in part due to an ill-judged attempt to apply in poetry the principles of rococo, that extension or exaggeration of baroque art. When it comes to Edith Sitwell, it might not be too fanciful to suggest that her faults mainly derive from esthetic tendencies for which the most approximate term is baroque.