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ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF MISS SITWELL'S LATER STYLE

NOT even the most enthusiastic admirers of Miss Sitwell's earlier poetry—and the present writer has loved it since his school days—can have foreseen the development of her work during the last six or seven years. With the appearance of *Street Songs* and *Green Song*, those who care for poetry recognized a true poetic and prophetic cry which had not been heard in English since the death of Yeats. This was not merely exquisite poetry: it was great poetry; we felt once more the excitement of having amongst us a poet who could give us back our sight and our belief in the human heart, a poet on Shelley's definition. And, naturally, we are anxious to know by what steps this new eminence has been achieved.

Miss Sitwell's earlier poetry was written from a strange secluded world. We picture her imprisoned in an enormous kitchen garden where, to her childish eyes, the flowers, leaves and fruits are all of giant size. At one end of the garden is a summer house in the Chinese taste, faded and ramshackle, a few bells still tinkling from its eaves, and on its wallpaper, faintly discernible, Chinese ladies and gentlemen saluting one another with elegant *desinvoltura*. No human beings enter this garden, except a governess and an ancient, wrinkled gardener, who remains for long the most important figure in her imagination, but in the corner is a gazebo from which it is possible to catch sight of the neighbours, queer, country eccentrics, as they go to call on the great house.

In this garden the young lady lives in a kind of trance of sensuous receptivity. She sees, smells, touches and reads; and all her senses become confused and united. 'My senses', she wrote later, 'are like those of primitive peoples, at once acute and uncovered—and they are interchangeable!' This interchange is the basis of her early poetry. It accounts for the immediacy of her images, and from it develops that rarest of all sensibilities, the

feeling for texture. When, long afterwards, Miss Sitwell writes of Pope that 'had his verses been transformed into flowers, he could have told lily from rose, buttercup from cowslip, in no matter how starless and moonless a night, merely from touching one petal', we can be sure that this is not critical fantasy, but a description of her own experience.

Picturing this young lady, we are reminded of another lonely child, nervous and over-bred, sitting in a forsaken garden, mesmerized by the sensuous quality of words, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Throughout Miss Sitwell's poetry a Swinburnian element persists. We are conscious of it in her elaborate technique, in her uncanny sensibility to the texture of language; and also, I dare say, in an occasional diffuseness, and in a feeling that the central core of her meaning is veiled in mist, and will dissolve if we approach it too closely. Miss Sitwell herself has accepted this kinship with Swinburne, and in the introduction to her anthology of Victorian poetry, she has described how the young lady from the enormous kitchen garden, complete with reluctant governess, laid a pagan offering, milk, honey and bay leaves, on the poet's tomb in the Isle of Wight. Miss Sitwell's appreciation of Swinburne's verbal mastery, which follows the account of her pilgrimage, is one of the most illuminating of all her critical studies, and one of the most personal. Many young people adored Swinburne in the early years of this century, but few mature poets would have admitted to an equal admiration in 1932.

But this parallel must not be carried any further; for the essential limitation of Swinburne is that his mind never expanded; his emotions never deepened, and his genuinely poetic impulses were always those which had been absorbed in childhood and youth. He never grew up. The extraordinary fact about Miss Sitwell, and the one which concerns us now, is that she did. We have no right to ask how Miss Sitwell came to leave her *hortus conclusus*. Perhaps she herself has given all the answer we need in a short poem called *Poor Young Simpleton*:

Once my love seemed the Burning Bush
The Pentecost Rushing of Flames;
Now the Speech has fallen to the chatter of alleys
Where fallen man and the rising ape
And the howling Dark play games.

For she leaned from the light like the Queen of Fairies

Out of the bush of the yellow broom . . .
 'I'll take out that heart of yours,' she said,
 'And put in your breast a stone.
 'O, I'll leave an empty room,' she said,
 'A fouled, but an empty room.'

The immediate results of this experience are expressed in that terrifying poem called *Gold Coast Customs*, of which Miss Sitwell says, 'it was written with anguish, and I would not willingly relive that birth'. It is, in fact, a cry of horror at the spectacle of evil, and all the images of fear which have ever oppressed a nightmare, all the unspoken moments of horror which dustbins and back streets, old books of travel and ethnographical museums have stamped on the sensitive retina, are accumulated and repeated, as if there never could be enough to relieve the mind of its loathsome burden. The horror of the images is intensified by the terrifying tom-tom rhythms in which the poem is written, rhythms varying from the sinister rhythms of the jungle to the infinitely degraded, hollow, tom-tom rhythms of Jazz, the music of nothingness and futility. In spite of her anguish of spirit, Miss Sitwell has been able to command all the technical skill of what I may call her Chinoiserie poems; indeed, there was in these poems a peculiar spikiness of rhythm, and an occasional black shadow of sound which by a slight twist, were perfect instruments for her new purpose. As a work of art, *Gold Coast Customs* suffers from being too close to an appalling spiritual shock. It leaves us in the chaos of despair, and art is the opposite of chaos.

But yet if only one soul would whine,
 Rat-like from the lowest mud, I should know
 That somewhere in God's vast love it would shine;
 But even the rat-whine has guttered low.

At the end there is a chink of hope, but it is vague, improbable and unsatisfying:

Though Death has taken
 And pig-like shaken
 Rooted and tossed
 The rags of me.

Yet the time will come
To the heart's dark slum
When the rich man's gold and the rich man's wheat
Will grow in the street, that the starved may eat.

After *Gold Coast Customs*, it is not surprising to find that Miss Sitwell wrote no poetry for many years. She was recreating her spirit, seeking a belief or a vision which would enable her to transcend the evil and misery in the world; and, during these years, evil was moving towards its catastrophe. We must suppose that much of her time was passed in reading, for these are the years of her anthologies of poetry with their critical introductions. And here I may say in parentheses that these introductions seem to me, within their self-imposed limits, to be among the most valuable pieces of modern criticism, and a merciful relief from that sheep in wolf's clothing, Taine's *English Literature* in a new disguise, the sociological criticism of Marxism. It is true that they endow the reader with a very subtle ear and demand from him very strict attention; and few readers, perhaps, can have followed Miss Sitwell in her discrimination of every nuance of sound. But anyone who has attempted to do so must have had his capacity for enjoying poetry increased beyond measure; and what more can we ask of criticism? As well as English poetry, her reading must have included Donne's sermons, Burton's *Anatomy*, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Meister Eckhart and Schopenhauer; also the Homeric hymns, Pindar and other sources of classic ritual. It is as if, after the chaotic black magic, the tom-tom magic of *Gold Coast Customs*, she needed the white magic of the mystics or the golden magic of Demeter.

During this long night of poetic inspiration, or perhaps we should say this dread of accepting poetic inspiration, like a child who dare not sleep for fear of its dreams, Miss Sitwell also wrote a novel *I Live under a Black Sun*. In choosing for her subject the life of Jonathan Swift, the great protagonist of universal disgust, she was certainly guided by a therapeutic instinct, and some of her own horror and indignation were eased by absorption in the tragedy of this heroic nihilist. In the same spirit, she wrote descriptions of human wretchedness, more poignant than anything in *Gold Coast Customs*, which show how closely the shock of her spirit had been connected with the spectacle of poverty. The novel also contains, to the bewilderment, it may well be,

of the regular novel reader, strange rhapsodic interludes, which seem like incidental music between the various sections of the narrative; and in these we feel that she is making her way back to poetry. Words and images float in and out, which are to re-appear in *Street Songs*—the Potter's Field, the River of Lethe, the Man in Armour on the Roman Road, the Priests crying for Rain—and beyond these there are whole passages which are later to be reworked in poems.

I Live under a Black Sun was published in 1936. In the same year Miss Sitwell published a volume of collected poems in which the observant reader might have noticed one new poem, strangely different in style and content from the rest of the collection, significantly entitled *Prelude*. In spite of very great beauties, it is not a completely successful poem: it is too literary, the fruit of too much reading. Many of its lines seem to come from an unknown classic of English literature; they are not quite in Miss Sitwell's new voice, and the few lines it contains in her old voice are ill at ease in this traditional company. Yet *Prelude* is of crucial importance, for it introduces the two fundamental changes in her later poetry. First, the lines have an entirely different movement. Gone are the rhythms of the Chinese wall-paper, gone the decorative details, the diminutives, the pretty Christian names, and gone, thank God, the tom-tom beats of darkness. All these have served their purpose, but they have enchanted or frightened us with a mirage; the new vision requires an ampler style, a rhythm capable of sustaining simple, passionate and prophetic statements of belief. And *Prelude* contains the first consciousness of this belief, which has been growing during these years of darkness.

'... the winter's shade
furred my cold blood wherein plant, beast, are laid,
In that dark earth from which shall spring the soul.'

To discover Miss Sitwell's expression of this faith is not difficult; for her later poetry has the peculiarity that those ideas and images which mean most to her are constantly re-appearing in slightly different, sometimes even in identical, form. As some medieval craftsman with a store of precious jewels and antique cameos, the objects of his deepest delight, is constantly re-setting them that he may achieve absolute finality in the expression of

his visionary world, so Miss Sitwell resets her most precious images. And when we find one of these re-appearing several times we may be sure that it is at the centre of her experience. Such are the closing lines of *Prelude*. They occur in almost identical language, but with the necessary modifications of prose, in the second chapter of *I Live under a Black Sun*; they re-appear again about six years later in the poem called *An Old Woman*. It is significant that this last version contains lines from the prose passage which Miss Sitwell was not able to assimilate into the stricter and less assured prosodic structure of *Prelude*. Clearly, this is of unusual importance to her, and I therefore quote it in full in its (till now) final form. To those interested in Miss Sitwell's technique, and in the creative process generally, I recommend a comparison of the three versions; it is a lesson in composition—although I may confess to a slight regret that 'crooked' took the place of 'cripple' in the tenth line, an improvement in texture at the expense of vividness.

'For when the first founts and deep waterways
Of the young light flow down and lie like peace
Upon the upturned faces of the blind
From life, it comes to bless
Eternity in its poor mortal dress—
Shining upon young lovers and old lechers
Rising from their beds, and laying gold
Alike in the unhopeful path of beggars
And in the darkness of the miser's heart.
The crooked has a shadow light made straight
The shallow places gain their strength again—
And desert hearts, waste heavens, the barren height
Forget that they are cold.
The man-made chasms between man and man
Of creeds and tongues are fill'd, the guiltless light
Remakes all men and things in holiness.'

The other key to the evolution which we are studying is the poem called *Metamorphosis*. Once more the title implies consciousness that this is a poem of transition, and in fact the poem itself was to suffer a complete metamorphosis which is revealing. It was written just before *Gold Coast Customs*, and is a disturbing, unfused mixture of the old Chinoiserie and the coming poetry of

anguish. Both contain great beauties—indeed, Miss Sitwell's Rococo has never been more perfect than at this moment when the black wave of misery was about to engulf it. But the value of the poem lies in its other hemisphere, in the lines where death and the cold have already fastened upon the poet's mind. These are the clearest of all anticipations of her later style, and it is not surprising that when that style was mastered she should have returned to the poem and re-written it with the omission of the Rococo passages. She also omitted a few verses which perhaps she thought were sufficiently expressed in *Gold Coast Customs*, but which are so magnificent in themselves that they are worth rescuing.

'I too from ruined walls hung upside down
And, bat-like, only saw Death's ruined town
And mumbling, crumbling dust . . . I saw the people
Mouthing blindly for the earth's blind nipple.
Their thick sleep dreams not of the infinite
Wild strength the grass must have to find the light
With all the bulk of earth across its eyes
And strength, and the huge weight of centuries.'

The wonderful image of the grass (which is retained in the later version) brings us very close to the beliefs from which her later poetry springs. So does the last stanza.

'Come then, my Sun, to melt the eternal ice
Of Death, and crumble the thick centuries
Nor shrink my soul, as dull wax owlsh eyes
In the sun's light, before my sad eternities.'

A comparison with the two final stanzas of the later version is like a step back from the eighteenth into the seventeenth century. The strict heroic couplets in which the first version was composed yields to a line based on rhythmic stress and not on numbered accents; the address is more passionate and more direct, and we are conscious that she has brooded on the experience of the mystics.

'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.

B

He comes, our Sun, to melt the eternal ice
Of Death, the crusts of Time round the shrunken Soul
Coming again in the spring of the world, clothed with the
scarlet coloured
Blood of our martyrdoms—the fire of spring.'

These examples show that Miss Sitwell's later style was evolved in the ten years between *Gold Coast Customs* and 1939, and was not, as is sometimes supposed, the result of the war. Nevertheless the catastrophe and the events which led up to it may have helped to focus more clearly her new poetic inspiration, and in *Serenade*, *Street Song* and *Still Falls the Rain*, she wrote the greatest poems of the war. They succeed where others have failed, because in them she is able both to feel the tragedy and to transcend it. Like the great religious poets of the past, she has achieved the consciousness that all creation is one and is kept in motion by Love. In the expression of this consciousness she has evolved certain images. For example, Love is spoken of as the Sun or Gold, the heart of man, 'that second sun'.

'Fires on the hearth! Fires in the heavens! Fires in the hearts of
Men!

I who was welded into bright gold in the earth by Death
Salute you! All the weight of Death in all the world
Yet does not equal Love—the great compassion
For the fallen dust and all fallen creatures, quickening
As is the Sun in the void firmament.

It shines like fire. O bright gold of the heat of the Sun
Of Love across dark fields—burning away rough husks of Death
Till all is fire, and bringing all to harvest!

For as the Sun buries his hot days and rays
To ripen in earth, so the great rays of the heart
Are ripened to wisdom by Death . . .'

In such passages Miss Sitwell speaks with a startling directness and much of her recent poetry is of unexpected simplicity—for example, the beautiful third stanza of *Eurydice*, the poem quoted above. But this simplicity is delusive, like the simplicity of all prophetic utterances; and two stanzas further on her imagery becomes mysterious, though no less beautiful, and, as we feel immediately, no less true to experience. In particular her image of death has taken on a new and mysterious meaning

for her. It has become a source of peace and wisdom, a necessary state through which we must pass before love can be reborn; and her last volume opens with an Invocation to this once-dreaded darkness. Yet it would be shallow to suppose that the desperate unhappiness of *Gold Coast Customs* has been completely overcome. The same horror, expressed with far more mastery, inspires her terrifying *Lullaby*; and *The Song of the Cold* itself is a cry of anguish, though in the end the poet feels strong enough to say:

'I will cry to the spring to give me the birds and the Serpent's
speech
That I may weep for those who die of the cold—
The ultimate cold within the heart of man.'

For, beyond all Christian or Pagan mysteries, all planetary rotations, or transcendental philosophies, Miss Sitwell is moved by an immense tenderness of heart. It is this which gives reality to her war poems, and warmth to her sybilline speech. Of this tenderness she has achieved a perfect expression in that marvellous poem, *A Mother to her Dead Child*, which is surely one of the most moving poems ever written by a woman. How easily it might have come to grief. But it is lifted far beyond sentimentality as the mother's sorrow is raised to a general pity for human misfortune. And then it is the work of a masterly technician.

Anyone writing about Miss Sitwell would be wise to avoid technical questions, for he can certainly not bring to them the knowledge and the delicacy of perception which she has shown in the introduction to her own *Selected Poems*. But it is important to stress the fact that the later poems, which teach us and awaken our pity, are every bit as beautiful in texture as the poems which were written solely to delight. Nothing in her early work is finer in technique than *Green Flows the River of Lethe-O*, where the smooth-sliding opiate texture of its opening stanza leads us with sinister delicacy to the abyss. In her adaptation of an elaborate technique of sound and imagery to simpler and more passionate expression, Miss Sitwell is at one with the symbolist poets of the last half century—Rilke, George, Blok and Yeats; and in fact her development has much in common with Yeats, the greatest of her immediate predecessors. I do not know how far he has influenced her directly, though that magnificent poem *The Poet*

Laments the coming of Old Age certainly owes something to his inspiration, both in its imagery—‘wisdom caught like a hare in the golden sack of the heart’—and in its rich declamatory rhythm. It is almost impossible to read the last two lines except in an Irish accent. But there is an important distinction. Miss Sitwell does not, like Yeats, use symbols with fixed meanings. She has said of her poems that ‘all expression is welded into an image, not removed into a symbol that is inexact or squandered into a metaphor’. The result is that although her poems may sometimes be vaguer than those of a strict symbolist, they are more vivid and more flexible, and they never become mere riddles, as are some of the minor poems of Mallarmé.

In spite of Swinburnian and symbolist characteristics, it is clear from her latest poems that Miss Sitwell’s place in English literature is with the religious poets of the seventeenth century. Again and again the audacity of her sensuous images reminds us of Crashaw; she has Traherne’s rapture at created things, and Vaughan’s sense of eternity. The likeness is less due to direct influence—in fact these poets are seldom mentioned in her pages—than to a similar poetic temperament working under similar conditions. Miss Sitwell is essentially a religious poet; that is to say, she has experienced imaginatively, not merely intellectually, the evil and misery of the world and has overcome that experience by the conviction—the full, imaginative conviction—that all creation is one under the Divine Love. In expressing this conviction she has inevitably been led to use the symbols of Christianity and of that older mystic poetry which it supplanted, combining them, as Botticelli did, from a sense of their beauty and human relevance, without the dogmatic niceties of neo-Platonism.

In her last published work *The Shadow of Cain* Christian symbols have gained ascendancy. This craggy, mysterious philosophic poem, in which the poet looks down from a great eminence of time, is at the furthest remove from the lyrics of the *hortus conclusus*. The world without love, the world of absolute zero, is split in two by some such disastrous convulsion of matter as now hangs over our heads, and there are left two protagonists of humanity, Diyes and Lazarus. The dialogue between them with which the poem ends, is her deepest and most passionate statement of her concern with original sin.

' . . . we cry

To Dives: "You are the shadow of Cain. Your shade is the primal Hunger."

"I lie under what condemnation?"

"The same as Adam, the same as Cain, the same as Sodom, the same as Judas."

And the fires of your Hell shall not be quenched by the rain

From those torn and parti-coloured garments of Christ, those rags

That once were Men. Each wound, each stripe,
Cries out more loudly than the voice of Cain—

Saying "Am I my brother's keeper?"

This is the true cry of our time, the cry of all those whose imaginations are still awake and whose hearts are still uncalcined. Miss Sitwell is a religious poet because only thus could she continue to write for this generation without being overcome by despair. She is growing in power and confidence, so that we wait thirstily for each new poem, which, by its beauty, its compassion and its belief in the eternal processes of recreation, can help us to endure the world's fever.

OSBERT SITWELL

FATHER AND SON

By disposition I was fond of nature, but preferred to it then, as I prefer today, the study of art and the enjoyment to be obtained therefrom. And in nature itself, I was more interested by those things that approached nearest to art, flowers and shells and trees and falling water. Outwardly, my character had altered: for when I had gone to school, I had been intensely sociable, but now I had grown shy as well: and, by another contradiction born of my schooling, had become both melancholy and gay, being as silent with those I disliked, as talkative with those I liked. I loved the solitude as much as I enjoyed, too, the life of cities. Extremely high spirited, my greatest advantage was that my constitution did