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7. Sir Beelzebub's Syllabub: Or, Edith Sitwell's Eighteenth Century

William Butler Yeats wrote in 1930 that when he had read Edith Sitwell's *Gold Coast Customs* he felt '...that something absent from all literature for a generation was back again, and in a form rare in the literature of all generations, passion ennobled by intensity, by endurance, by wisdom. We had it in one man once. He lies in St. Patrick's now under the greatest epitaph in history.'¹ Yeats's view of Sitwell was by no means unique. In 1946, Stephen Spender characterized her later work as 'ripe and magnificent.'² In 1949, Katherine Anne Porter found in her work '...the true flowering branch springing fresh from the old, unkillable roots of English poetry, with the range, variety, depth, fearlessness, the passion and elegance of great art.'³ In 1957, Cyril Connolly wrote: 'When we come to compare the collected poems of Dame Edith Sitwell with those of Yeats, or Mr. Eliot or Professor Auden, it will be found that hers have the purest poetical content of them all....'⁴ In 1959, Marianne Moore wrote: 'Great in far greater ways, Dame Edith Sitwell is a virtuoso of rhythm and accent.'⁵ At the time of Sitwell's death in 1964, Denise Levertov remarked: 'Perhaps no one has ever lived who had a more highly developed understanding of the relation in poetry of meaning and aural values.' Allen Tate described her as '...one of the great poets of the 20th century....'⁶

Indeed, through almost half of this century, Edith Sitwell was recognized as one of the finest poets in English. Although her standing has been somewhat diminished by shifts in poetic fashion, she continues to be well represented in the major anthologies and she still has her passionate admirers. I count myself among them.

Edith Sitwell shared with her contemporary T. S. Eliot a fascination with the writers and poets of the eighteenth century. In fact, far more than Eliot's, her imagination was stocked with the literature, art, and architecture of that period and with its personalities and its cultural struggles.⁷ Her *English Eccentrics* (1933), a modern *Anatomy of Melancholy*, describes the oddities of an array of personalities, mostly from the long eighteenth century, who by their strange behavior lived out a gentle protest against deadening forces of conformity and melancholy. Her

novel *I Live Under a Black Sun* (1937) retells the story of her own unhappy love affair with the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew within the framework of the lives of Jonathan Swift and Stella. Each of these works could bear a paper of its own, but here I want to look at how Sitwell's early poetry bore the mark of her fascination with the eighteenth century; this requires that we turn our attention briefly to her biography of Pope, which was published in 1930.

When I refer to this work Pope scholars may wax irritable. Its flaws are well-known: it was assembled chiefly from secondary sources and so is seriously under-researched; moreover, Sitwell personally identified with Pope as the very type of the misunderstood genius, surrounded by calumniators and dunces, people who all too often resembled her own antagonists, such as the Georgian poet and critic John Squire. She undertook to vindicate Pope's personal and literary reputations against all comers, and the book is written at a blazing rhetorical pitch; it trashes everyone who tangled with Pope. While this hardly makes for a nuanced reading of the period, connoisseurs of the literary put-down, a much under-valued sub-genre, will find classic specimens here:

Addison was good-hearted, perhaps a little too consciously so, was kind, but rather too deliberately open and just. He might be described as the first of a long line of literary cricketers, for he was always 'playing the game' or being manly and above guile about one thing or another.⁸

She much preferred Pope's character with its 'unfortunate inhibition against speaking the truth.'⁹

In 'An Anatomy of Pope-bashing,' Donald Greene has claimed an importance for the last chapter of Sitwell's biography, 'Some Notes on Pope's Poetry.' He says that 'in spite of its flowery language, [it] should not be overlooked by any beginning reader of Pope' and he concurs with W. H. Auden that the section "'brilliantly displayed'" the beauties and variety of Pope's verse.¹⁰ Her discussion, beyond an opening nonsense about the relation between poetic form and a poet's physical strength, is, I find, particularly acute on Pope's use of the caesura and his handling of the 'speed' of a line, a facet of metrics not often considered, which she relates very plausibly to the use of polysyllables and monosyllables to achieve different effects. So readily do we now affirm that Pope's couplets are capable of great variety, we forget that in the third decade of this century they were often spoken of as monotonous and inflexible. Sitwell made her case so convincingly that it has entered the common store of unfootnoted critical certainties.

Sitwell saw in Alexander Pope a master of 'rhetoric and formalism' whose craftsmanship could be set against what she judged the sub-

Wordsworthian outpourings of many poets from the early years of her own century, the Edwardians and the Georgians:

To these men, rhetoric and formalism were abhorrent, partly no doubt, because to manage either quality in verse the writer must possess a technical capability. But in addition to this technical fault, we find in the verse of that time (as in much contemporary verse) the fault of an exaggerated praise of worthy home life, which alternated with swollen, inflated boomings and roarings about the Soul of Man. These reigned triumphant, together with healthy, manly, but rather raucous shouts for beer, and advertisements of certain rustic parts of England, delivered to the accompaniment of a general clumsy clodhopping with hobnailed boots.¹¹

And with the hobnailed boots, she's back to the problems of prosody.

Sitwell would eventually describe the project of her early verse in terms that were almost entirely formalist:

At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry immediately preceding us.

Rhythm is one of the principal translators between dream and reality. Rhythm might be described as, to the world of sound, what light is to the world of sight. It shapes and gives new meaning.¹²

In her early poetry, Sitwell engaged in elaborate and sometimes violent experiments in rhythm, involving end rhyme, internal rhyme, rhyme at the beginning of lines, shifting line lengths, assonance, dissonance, alliteration, lines of varying speed, disruptive line breaks, and other startling effects. One of her best known compositions, 'Sir Beelzebub,' demonstrates the point:

When
 Sir
 Beelzebub called for his syllabus in the hotel in Hell
 Where Proserpine first fell,
 Blue as the gendarmerie were the waves of the sea,
 (Rocking and shocking the barmaid).

Nobody comes to give him his rum but the
 Rim of the sky hippopotamus-glum
 Enhances the chances to bless with a benison
 Alfred Lord Tennyson crossing the bar laid

With cold vegetation from pale deputations
 Of temperance workers (all signed In Memoriam)
 Hoping with glory to trip up the Laureate's feet,
 (Moving in classical metres)...

Like Balaclava, the lava came down from the
 Roof, and the sea's blue wooden gendarmerie
 Took them in charge while Beelzebub roared for his
 rum.

...None of them come!¹³

While she may have mocked the Georgians for their jolly beer drinking, here she mocks certain devotees of nineteenth-century verse as temperance workers, signing *In Memoriam* like the teetotaler's pledge. But Tennyson, whom she does not absolutely despise, is misunderstood by his devotees; they offer him a tribute of cold vegetation, and they trip up his classical metres.

This poem comes at the end of *Façade* (1922), the sequence of metrically complex apparent-nonsense poems, which was set to music by the young William Walton whom Sacheverell Sitwell, Edith's younger brother, had more or less abducted from Oxford to save him from the bad influence of the music professors. He rose to the challenge of providing a jazz score for the poems, and their collaboration was a high-point in both their careers. In the first performances, Edith recited the poems through a megaphone from behind a painted screen as the music played. The audiences were mystified, to say the least.

However, the poems and the screen itself speak to Sitwell's fascination with some of the very issues that preoccupied Pope, Swift and their generation. Christopher Fox has discussed how shifting conceptions of personal identity affected the writing of the Scriblerians and their successors. Whereas the middle ages had bequeathed the notion of stable selfhood understood as identity of substance, John Locke proposed that selfhood resided in 'identity of consciousness' and, of course, Hume would express skepticism about the whole notion of an abiding personal identity.¹⁴ In the poetry of the Scriblerians we often see personal identity almost materially fashioned out of clothing and cosmetics and animated chiefly by fashionable norms of behavior — I am thinking here especially of Belinda at her toilet or Sir Plume's mincing speech. Starker examples are Swift's 'A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed' where the self is almost dismantled with its accessories, and the Houyhnhnms' horror at the discovery that there is a Yahoo under Gulliver's clothes.

Sitwell's early poetry is in *many* senses preoccupied with facades, a world of surfaces which conceal desolation and moral emptiness. Many

of her poems are set, explicitly, in the streets of Hell or its joyless lodging houses (remember Sir Beelzebub in the hotel in Hell) or at a seaside of Hellish gaiety and triviality. In the sequence *Bucolic Comedies* (1923), the sky itself remarks 'all is surface and so must die'¹⁵ and the young women, portrayed as mock-pastoral nymphs, are defined by empty-headedness. One remarks brightly to a bewigged abbé:

'I think it so clever
Of people to discover
New planets — and how ever
Do they find out what their names are?'¹⁶

Such stupidity is an ironic version of pastoral innocence, a denial of consciousness and authentic selfhood. In 'The Man with the Green Patch,' the last poem of *Bucolic Comedies*, Sitwell describes an admiral with an eye-patch, home from the sea, "'home to die,'"¹⁷ whose anecdotal chatter acts as a barrier against moral insight: he is locked inside a constructed identity. All day he sits with

 Broddingnagian asses,
Talking while the lame time passes
His patch, will never let him see
The real world, terrible and old,
Where seraphs in the mart are sold
And fires from Bedlam's madness flare
Like the blue palm-leaves in desert air;
The prisons where the maimed men pined
Because their mothers bore them blind —
Starved men so thin they seem to be
The shadow of that awful Tree
Cast down on us from Calvary.¹⁸

This man has blunted the moment's moral urgency by dwelling in some other time: 'But the ancient Admiral was loath/ To see or hear or dream of growth.' Death, however, haunts his house like a ghost, and the octosyllabics add an ironic note of false gaiety:

It seems a candle guttered down
In a green deserted town.
It can alter at its will —
Batlike to the window-sill
It will cling, with squeaking shrill
Miming Triviality.¹⁹

This is a profoundly anti-romantic kind of satire — Sitwell depicts personality not in its deep connection to the infinitudes of nature and the universe, but as an amalgam of evasions and trivialities. While there is some religion in this sequence, she has been very careful, as T. E. Hulme would say, not to spill it.

Gold Coast Customs (1929) describes cannibalistic slaughters on the Gold Coast in the early nineteenth century, committed against the poor as a funerary custom on the death of a person of distinction. However, the poem is actually about a different kind of cannibalism altogether. She wrote in an unpublished essay called 'Freak Parties,' in 1929:

Last week, two homeless men died of starvation and exposure ... having collapsed in the street. It seems strange to me, that those, to my mind, murdered spectres had Christian names like the rest of us. A short time ago, I read of the hunger marchers' famine-stricken walk to London, and then I remembered the Freak Parties given by foolish people who have no other claims to be thought original, and I cannot avoid the reflection, that vulgar and half-witted as such exhibitionists would be at any time, they are not only vulgar, but heartless now ... A new form of entertainment ... is to dress up as people much poorer than themselves ... and make fun of their simple and unfashionable pleasure ... It may be as well to point out that ... a few generations ago many members of this 'new society' might well have found themselves amongst the hunger marchers whose misery they do nothing to allay....²⁰

Gold Coast Customs turns from the description of bloodshed and cannibalism on another continent and in another century, to a description of the relations of rich and poor in 1920s Britain. Lady Bamburgher is introduced, a figure modeled on Lady Cunard, who hosted freak parties aboard a barge anchored at the Embankment. In order to get to the fun, party-goers, dressed in rags, had more or less to step over the poor sleeping on the docks.²¹

The moral disorder Sitwell identifies is communicated in the harsh drum-beat rhythms of the poem and its disjunctive imagery:

Here, tier on tier
 Like a black box rear
 In the flapping slum
 Beside Death's docks.
 I did not know this meaner Death
 Meant this: that the bunches of nerves still dance
 And caper among these slums, and prance.

'Mariners, put your bones to bed!'

But at Lady Bamburgher's parties each head,
 Grinning, knew it had left its bones
 In the mud with the white skulls ... only the grin
 Is left, strings of nerves, and the drum-taut skin.²²

There are two metaphorical deaths here: the poor by exploitation and the rich by their heartlessness. There is the grin of the skull, and there is the sociability of the party-goers. Lady Bamburgher epitomizes the corruption:

... the rickety houses
 Rock and rot,
 Lady Bamburgher airs
 That foul plague-spot
 Her romantic Heart.
 From the cannibal mart,
 That smart Plague-cart,
 Lady Bamburgher rolls where the foul news-sheet
 And the shambles for souls are set in the street.²³

This is the world of Waugh's bright young things, the world of *Vile Bodies*. But it is also the world of 'A Modest Proposal' and its viler bodies. The commodification of the poor is represented as a 'shambles for souls,' shambles being either the tables in a butcher's shop or the slaughterhouse itself. Sitwell marveled that those who died on the street had 'Christian names,' but in this economic system individual identity is erased in favor of a material scale of value, and true compassion becomes the tawdry sentiment of Lady Bamburgher's romantic heart.

On a formal level the poem offers the reader no resting place. Short lines, jangling rhythms, and shifting imagery are all used to accentuate the sense that the morals of this world are not tenable:

In the sailor's tall
 Ventriloquist street
 The calico dummies
 Flap and meet:
 Calculate: 'Sally go
 Pick up a sailor.'
 Behind that façade
 The worm is a jailer.²⁴

Here we have the false voices of ventriloquism, identities stitched out of calico, the commodification of the flesh in prostitution, and under all

such surfaces the inescapable fact of death. Although the poem does affirm a Christian world view by the end, Sitwell offers not simple consolation but a vision of the 'fires of God' coming down as judgment on Lady Bamburgher's Gomorrah.

Edith Sitwell claimed that as a young girl she had memorized 'The Rape of the Lock.'²⁵ Her fascination with the eighteenth century led her to write about it extensively in prose, and to produce poetry deeply influenced by the Scriblerians. As a formalist, she looked to Pope as the model of commitment to poetic technique. Her early poetry, like that of the Scriblerians, constantly exposes the triviality and the moral emptiness underlying many socially constituted versions of the self. She lashes vice with vigor and concentration, and her affinity with the great satirists of the eighteenth century is hinted at, however inadvertently, by Yeats:

Her language is the traditional language of literature, but twisted, torn, complicated, jerked here and there by strained resemblances, unnatural contacts, forced upon it by terror or by some violence beating in her blood, some primitive obsession that civilization can no longer exorcise.²⁶

If Yeats had characterized *The Dunciad* or *Gulliver's Travels* in the same terms, I would not argue with him.

RICHARD GREENE

Notes

- 1 *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 776.
- 2 'Poetry for Poetry's Sake and Poetry Beyond Poetry' *Horizon* 13 (April 1946), p. 231.
- 3 'Edith Sitwell's Steady Growth to Great Poetic Art,' review of *Canticle of the Rose* by Edith Sitwell, *New York Herald Tribune* (18 December 1949).
- 4 Review of *Collected Poems* by Edith Sitwell, *Sunday Times* (28 July 1957).
- 5 'Dame Edith Sitwell,' *Four Poets on Poetry*, ed. Don Cameron Allen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1959), 376.
- 6 Both Levertov and Tate are quoted in *New York Times* (10 December 1964).
- 7 Critics have remarked in passing on this aspect of Sitwell's work. See, for example, Ralph J. Mills, Jr., *Edith Sitwell: A Critical Essay* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 15.
- 8 Edith Sitwell, *Alexander Pope* (London: Faber & Faber, 1930), p. 84.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

- 10 Donald Greene, 'An Anatomy of Pope-bashing,' *The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays*, eds. G.S. Rousseau and Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1988), p. 250. Auden's remarks are found in 'Pope (1688-1744),' *From Anne to Victoria*, ed. Bonamy Dobrée (London: Cassell, 1937), p. 103.
- 11 *Alexander Pope*, p. 3.
- 12 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry,' *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. xv.
- 13 *Collected Poems*, p. 158.
- 14 Christopher Fox, *Locke and the Scriblerians: Identity and Consciousness in Early Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1988).
- 15 *Collected Poems*, p. 14.
- 16 *Collected Poems*, p. 39.
- 17 *Collected Poems*, p. 47.
- 18 *Collected Poems*, pp. 47-8.
- 19 *Collected Poems*, p. 49.
- 20 Quoted in Geoffrey Elborn, *Edith Sitwell: A Biography* (London: Sheldon Press, 1981), p. 69.
- 21 See *Selected Letters of Edith Sitwell*, ed. Richard Greene (London: Virago, 1997; rev. ed., 1998), p. 176.
- 22 *Collected Poems*, p. 238.
- 23 *Collected Poems*, p. 241.
- 24 *Collected Poems*, p. 246.
- 25 Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), pp. 38-40.
- 26 W. B. Yeats, 'Modern Poetry: A Broadcast,' *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 501.