

The Modern Spirit and a Family Party

The Sitwells, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell, as Exponents of the Note of Beautiful and Grandiose Buffoonery

By ALDOUS HUXLEY

IT is only in literature that the academic tradition survives. No one dreams of taking the Academic seriously in painting, sculpture or music." Mr. Osbert Sitwell, the author of this remark, is one of those who make it their business not to take the literary academicians seriously. He throws stones at the singing birds whose nest is in the London Mercury and elsewhere; he waves loud indecorous rattles at them while they are warbling.

Mr. Sitwell's latest bird scaring exploits are recorded in the pages of a little tract called *Who Killed Cock Robin?*—a pamphlet in which the academics and the nature-and-water poets are dealt with in an agreeably lively fashion. Read, for example, his paragraphs on the dreary, derivative nature poetry which still gets poured out in such enormous quantities, for no better reason than that Wordsworth once wrote some very beautiful poems about natural objects. Leading off with a quotation from one of the song-birds of the London Mercury, "The Nightjar spins his pleasant note," he goes on:

"Poetry is not the monopoly of the lark-lovers nor of those who laud the Nightjar, any more than it belongs to the elephant or the macaw.

Because a good poem has grown out of the emotion felt by a poet who realized a lark or a green tree, it does not follow that other verse writers, by babbling continually of larks and green trees, will write good poems.

The lark has overstayed its welcome and migrated. It may return again one day. Many young poets have a bird in their bonnet.

One swallow does not make a poem."

Poets and Propagandists

THIS is admirably put. *Who Killed Cock Robin?* is the brightest piece of anti-academic propaganda that has appeared for a long time. Propaganda is important and the Sitwells—for Mr. Osbert Sitwell has a brother and a sister—have a special significance as propagandists. But propaganda is only theoretical doctrine and the tree is known by its fruit, the artistic creed by its works. The Sitwells practise the anti-academism that they preach, and from their rival lyric in *Wheels* they whistle a counterblast to the strains that issue from the Mercury. Their poetry has an intrinsic significance quite apart from any propagandist values. It is worth while examining it in some detail; for it is in many respects very typical of the contemporary spirit. But before we go any further, we must ask ourselves a question: What is this contemporary spirit?

We live today in a world that is socially and morally wrecked. Between them, the war and the new psychology have smashed most of the institutions, traditions, creeds and spiritual values that supported us in the past. Dadaism represents, in the sphere of art, that complete disintegration of values. Dada denies everything; even art itself, that last idol which

we all tried so pathetically hard to keep standing when everything else—the soul, morality, patriotism, religion—has been laid low, even art itself was assaulted by Dada and smashed.

Dada was an exhilarating spectacle when it first appeared on the scenes. One enjoyed it

and values. The only possible synthesis is the enormous farcical buffoonery of a Rabelais or an Aristophanes,—a buffoonery which it is important to note, is capable of being as beautiful and as grandiose as tragedy. For the great comics, like the two already mentioned,

like Chaucer, like the Shakespeare of Falstaff, and the Balzac of *Contes Drolatiques*, like Goya and Daumier, are those who, almost miraculously, combine the hugely, the earthily grotesque with the delicately and imaginatively beautiful. One of these days we shall see the new Rabelais putting all the broken bits together in an enormous comic whole. Meanwhile, we have his forerunners who are already adumbrating the nature of his future achievement.

Poems for a Megaphone

IN the light of this digression into generalities, let us proceed to examine the particular case of the Sitwells. The best, the most finished writer of the three is certainly the sister, Miss Edith Sitwell. She has evolved and brought to queer, disquieting perfection a very individual style of her own. One can think of nothing that is quite comparable to her glassy brilliance, her wit, her beautifully grotesque expression of thought and emotion. On a small scale—for Miss Sitwell is a minor poet who does not attempt to be universal in scope—she has achieved that comic synthesis of which we have spoken. Read for example the astonishing nonsense rhymes in her last published work *Façade*.

Jumbo asleep!
Grey leaves, thickfurred,
At his ears keep
Conversations blurred.
Thicker than hide
Is the trumpeting water;
Don Pasquito's bride
And his youngest daughter
Watch the leaves
Elephantine grey;
What is it grieves
In the torrid day?
Is it the animal
World that snores,
Harsh and inimical
In sleepy pores?
And why should the spined flowers
Red as a soldier
Make Don Pasquito
Seem still mouldier?

All Leconte de Lisle is in that nonsense tropical forest and what a wealth of Wordsworthian philosophy is telescoped into those four last lines! "Why should the spined flowers red as a soldier make Don Pasquito seem still mouldier?" This is the twentieth century version of:

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our Middling intellect
Mis-shapes the beautiful forms of things—
We murder to dissect.

These poems in her little *Façade* volume were written by Miss Sitwell for recitation through a megaphone to musical accompaniment; and they are consequently less polished, (Continued on page 98)



EDITH SITWELL

Sister of Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell; the most finished of a family of poets, who, in her verse has achieved a glassy brilliance, a fine, grotesque expression of thought and emotion. This portrait, which is by Guevara, now hangs in the Tate Gallery

as one enjoys the sight of crockery being smashed by a music hall comedian; it gratified that childish love of destruction which lurks in the hearts of all of us. But after a while this crockery smashing grew a little tedious. It was time to pick up the bits and make something new. The only question was: what? The question still hangs over us. What is the new artistic synthesis going to be? It is too early to be able to answer definitely. But one can guess. The work of the Sitwells and a few others in England, of Cocteau, Morand, Aragon, MacOrlan and the rest of them in France, helps one to make that guess. The new synthesis that will reassemble, in an artistic whole, the shattered values of our post-war world, the synthesis that will reflect the disintegration in an artistic unity, will surely be a comic synthesis. The social tragedy of these last years has gone too far and in its nature and origin is too profoundly stupid to be represented tragically. And the same is true of the equally complicated and devastating mental tragedy of the break-up of old tradi-



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The Modern Spirit

(Continued from page 55)

have less literary brilliance than other works intended for perusal in the calm of the library. Read, for example, her *Lady with the Sewing Machine*.

Across the fields as green as spinach,
Cropped as close as Time to Greenwich,
Stands a high house, if at all,
Spring comes like a Paisley shawl—
Patterings meticulous
And youthfully ridiculous.
In each room the yellow sun
Shakes like a canary, run
On run, roulade and watery trill—
Yellow, meaningless and shrill.
Face as white as any clock's,
Cased in parsley-dark curled locks,
All day long you sit and sew,
Stitch life down for fear it grow,
Stitch life down for fear we guess
At the hidden ugliness.
Dusty voice that throbs with heat,
Hoping with its steel-thin beat
To put stitches in my mind,
Make it tidy, make it kind;
You shall not! I'll keep it free.
Though you turn earth, sky and sea
To a patchwork quilt to keep
Your mind snug and warm in sleep.

There is still much in Miss Sitwell's work which is merely the contemporary disintegration unsynthesized. There are poems which are no more than records of sensations, poems that are compounded merely of coloured lights and restlessness. But there are others, and a respectable number of them, in which the broken bits have been worked, by a process of intellectual or emotional unification, into a patterned whole—fantastic grotesque and beautiful.

Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell is potentially a more considerable poet than his sister; but his achievement still lags behind his conceptions. He aims at nothing short of a huge comic synthesis of Rabelaisian dimensions. That is, at any rate, what one would gather from his recently published *Dr. Donne and Gargantua and Parade Virtues for a Dying Gladiator*. A certain diffuseness of speech and of thought prevents these poems from completely "coming off." His most successful achievements have been in minor poems. I cannot refrain from quoting his beautiful *Fountains*.

This night is pure and clear as thrice refined silver.
Silence, the cape of Death, lies heavy
Round the bare shoulders of the hills.
Faint throbs and murmurs
At moments growing to a mutter, then subsiding.
Fill the night with mystery and panic.
The honey-tongued arguings of fountains
Stir the air with flutes and gentle voices.
The graven fountain-masks suffer and weep—
Curved with a smile, the poor mouths
Clutch at a half-remembered song.

Striving to forget the agony of ever laughing—
Laughing while they hear the secrets
Echoed from the depths of Earth's
meath them.

This half-remembered song,
This flow of sad-restrained laughter
Jars with the jets of youthful water
Springing from the twisted masks;
For this is but the birth of water;
And singing joyfully
It springs upon the world
And wanders ceaselessly
Along its jewelled valleys to the sea,
Rattling like rolls of drums
The shells and pebbles down its bed

The endless argument of water ceases
A few drops fall heavily, splashing on
the marble.
A sultan with his treasures
Seeking to gain the goodwill of his love,
Pouring before her chains of crackling
pearls
And weeping heavy jealous tears
Because she will not hear him.

This and a few other short poems are perhaps the most complete works of art Mr. Sacheverell Sitwell has produced. But the later long poems aiming, as they do, at a large, philosophical, comic synthesis are more important in design and conception, if not so completely finished as works of art. When Mr. Sitwell completely realizes these conceptions something of real importance will have been achieved.

Mr. Osbert Sitwell, the principal propagandist of anti-academism, is at his best in what we may call Applied Poetry—in satire, in occasional pieces, in wit and diatribe. It is a long time since satire has been practised in England, but the author of *Mrs. Kinloot* and the political pieces has shown that it is not a lost art. I quote a few lines from his admirable *Sheep-Song*.

We are the greatest sheep in the world,
There are no sheep like us.
We come of an imperial bleat;
Our voices,
Trembling with music,
Call to our lambs oversea,
With us they crash across continents.

We will not heed the herdsman
For they warned us,
"Do not stampede!"
Yet we were forced to do so.
Never will we trust a herdsman again.
Then the black lamb asked,
Saying, "Why did we start this florid
Gadarene descent?"
And the herd bleated angrily,
"We went in with clean feet,
And we will come out with empty
heads."
We are stampeding to end stampedes.
We are fighting for lambs who are never likely to be born.

Washington Without a Wig

(Continued from page 43)

But in the mouth there appears a certain firmness, a hesitant primness as of a man afflicted with puritanical scruples and consideration of etiquette. The mouth seems very small, too, and almost feminine. Only the big irregular nose—the mark by which Napoleon said that he chose his generals—suggests the man of powerful action.

Mr. Wilkinson intends to take his treasure to London to be restored, and he has not decided what to do with it in the future. His line is racehorses rather than portraits, and

he is very modest about this discovery. "I don't know very much about painting," he told me, "but when I saw the patched and battered old thing with that look of ghostly reality, I had a hunch that it was a thoroughbred." Mr. Wilkinson's hunch has been absolutely verified by the leading experts in Paris, and he has already received an offer of \$50,000 for his picture, which cost him about \$45. The only thing he has to worry about, it seems to me, is that Paul Ragenau, who got the \$45, is such a remarkably good shot.

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