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EDITH SITWELL

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HER RELIGIOUS IMAGERY

By JOHN PICK

'I... watch the dark fields for a rebirth of faith and wonder.'

The history of the poetic career of Dame Edith Sitwell is the story of her growth and development. The one thing profoundly true of her is, as John Lehman once observed, that 'Above all, she has never remained set'. Indeed, the differences between her early *Façade* and her recent *Canticle of the Rose* have tempted some critics to consider them works by entirely different poets.

When she gathered 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry' – to which we must often refer – she was really indulging in autobiography and sketching her own evolution as a poet. She herself, therefore, has laid down the main lines for any study such as this.

The very imagery of her poetry reveals her developing interests, and important among these has been an increasingly religious preoccupation.

When one turns to examine in the recently published *Collected Poems* (1957) her very earliest work, one finds the setting of 'Mandoline' to be 'Hell's gilded street' where the music is 'Tuneless and sharp as sin'.

The next poem, 'Barber's Shop', with 'Beelzebub in the chair', again is in a 'Street of Hell' and the very next poem, 'Singerie', opens with 'Summer afternoon in Hell'.

The early series of poems entitled 'Bucolic Comedies' employs frequent religious images: the leaves are 'curé-black' and starved men are

The shadow of that awful Tree
Cast down on us from Calvary.

An exception to the tendency of these early poems to concentrate in their religious imagery on hell and darkness is 'The Sleeping Beauty' with frequent images of cherubims, angels, heavenly music; in this fantastic poem the Dowager Queen 'reads Latin Missals to the peaches', the skies are 'saint-blue', lilies of the valley

Seem curls of little school-children that light
The priests' procession, when on some saint's day.

But of all the early poems the best known group – or at least the most notorious – is the poem cycle *Façade*. Behind the gay mask there is often another undercurrent. Indeed two lines from the later 'Gold Coast Customs' are applicable

Behind the façade
The worm is a jailer.

Images of hell are frequent, and the following are representative:

Her eyes –
Black angels
... the peruked sea whose swell
Breaks on the flowerless rocks of Hell
Hell
Black as a bison
When
Sir Beelzebub called for his syllabub in the hotel in Hell
Where Proserpine first fell.

There are, it is true, other religious images less hellish:

... Pietrot moon steals slyly in,
His face more white than sin
Tall houses; like a hopeless prayer
They cleave the sly dumb air
Through glades like a nun
They run from and shun.

But what comes as a surprising generalization when we examine the religious images in these early poems and in *Façade* – poems usually thought so gay – is that predominantly they concentrate on hell. No wonder that Edith Sitwell wrote in a preface to an early edition of *Façade*: 'This modern world is but a thin match-board flooring spread over a shallow hell.'

Also belonging to the pre-Gold Coast poems is such a selection as 'The Hambone and the Heart' with its

... my heart has known
That terrible Gehenna of the bone

and yet also with its image of

... the lime-tree's golden town
Of heaven.

'The Madness of Saul' takes us back in its imagery to

... some unheard wind,
Broken from Hell...

and

With those lips, red as hell, she burned the world,
The light is dead, for with her long black hair
That twists and writhes like hell's long hissing river
She quenched the light.

Among the most significant of these early poems is 'Metamorphosis' because it exists in two forms; the first, belonging to 1929, closes with the lines

Then my immortal Sun rose, Heavenly Love,
To rouse my carrion to life and move
The polar night, the boulder that rolled this,
My heart, by Sisyphus, in the abyss.
Come then, my Sun, to melt the eternal ice
Of Death...

The second version of the same poem belongs to 1946 – seventeen years later, by which time the images in the closing climactic lines have become specifically Christian:

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! Oh the new temper of Christ, in
veins and branches!
He comes, our Sun, to melt the eternal ice
Of Death, the crusts of Time round the sunken soul –
Coming again in the spring of the world, clothed
with scarlet-coloured
Blood of our martyrdoms, – the fire of Spring.

Edith Sitwell has herself remarked that the course for this set of revised final lines is St. Hilary as quoted by Thomas Aquinas in *Catena Aurea* ('The Lord, having taken upon Him all the infirmities of our body, is then covered with the scarlet-coloured blood of all the martyrs.')

Looking backwards in 'Some Notes', Dame Edith saw all her early poetry as experiments leading up to 'Gold Coast Customs' as marking a turning point in her development.

As in much of her early poetry the images of 'Gold Coast Customs' are often of hell and negation:

Rich man Judas
Brother Cain

.....
Judas, mouldering in your old
Coffin body, still undying
As the Worm, where you are lying
With no flesh for warmth, but gold
For flesh, for warmth, for sheet
Now you are fleshness, too, as these
That starve and freeze,
Is your gold hard as Hell's huge polar street,
Is the universal blackness of Hell's day so cold?

But the poem rises to affirmation:

(Christ that takest away the sin
Of the world, and the Rich man's bone-dead grin)
.....
I have seen the murdered God look through the eyes
Of the drunkard's smirched
Mask...

And the poem closes on a note of confidence in a Divine Providence working itself out in the universe:

Yet the time will come
To the heart's dark slum

.....
And the last blood and fire from my side will be shed.
For the fires of God go marching on.

Edith Sitwell tells us that after 'Gold Coast Customs' 'I wrote no poetry for several years... Then, after a year of War, I began to write again.' The poetry she wrote showed a still further advance. In 'Invocation', the invitation to the Holy Ghost:

... O Spirit moving upon the waters
Your peace instil
In the animal heat and splendour of the blood

is answered

... in the night
The Holy Ghost speaks in the whispering leaves,

There is also in 'Harvest':

The universal language of the Bread –
(O Thou who art not broken, or divided –
Thou who art eaten, but like the Burning Bush
Art not consumed – Thou Bread of Men and Angels) –
The Seraphim rank on rank of the ripe wheat –
Boldbearded thunders and hierarchies of heaven
Roar from the earth: 'Our Christ is arisen, He
comes to give a sign from the Dead.'

For this the source is a sermon of Thomas Aquinas ('He gives us for our refreshment the bread of angels... On the breaking of the Bread Thou art not broken, nor art Thou divided, Thou art eaten, but like the Burning Bush, Thou are not consumed.')

Similar is the imagery in 'An Old Song Re-Sung'!

Once my love seemed the Burning Bush,
The Pentecost Rushing of Flames.

There are poems expressing God's immanence such as the one entitled 'How Many Heavens':

God is everything!
The grass within the grass, the angel in the angel, flame
Within the flame, and He is the green shade that came
To be the heart of shade.

.....
... God is the stone in the still stone, the silence laid
In the heart of silence...
... God is the straw within the straw

and the poem rises to its climax:

He is the sea of ripeness and the sweet apple's emerald core.
.....
He is the core of the heart of love, and He,
beyond labouring seas, our ultimate shore.

Again the source is a sermon, this time by John Donne: '... The Stanca-rest will needs have God not only to be in everything, but to be everything that God is an angel in an angel, and a stone in a stone, and a straw in a straw.'

Following immediately upon this poem comes 'Holiday' making clear that this immanentism is not to be understood pantheistically:

... the Intelligible Light
Turns all to gold, the apple, the dust, the
unripe wheat-ear.

In a note to the poem, Edith Sitwell credits Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* as the source for 'God is Intelligible Light'. The poem closes with the emphasis on the whole of creation participating in the Redeeming Christ:

... the claws of the lion
Bear now on their palms the wounds of the Crucified.
.....
Old people at evening sitting in the doorways
See in a broken window of the slum
The Burning Bush reflected, and the crumb
For the starving bird is part of the broken Body
Of Christ Who forgives us – He with the bright Hair
– The Sun Whose Body was spilt on our
fields to bring us harvest.

In 'The Two Loves' Christ becomes the Redeemer of the suffering world:

I see Christ's Wounds weep in the Rose on the wall
Then I who nursed in my earth the dark red seeds of Fire –
The pomegranate grandeur, the dark seeds of Death,
Felt them change to the light and fire in the heart
of the rose ...
And I thought of ... Smart the madman who was born
To bless Christ with the Rose and his people
.....
And of One who contracted His Immensity
And shut Himself in the scope of a small flower
Whose root is clasped in darkness ... God in the span
Of the root and the light-seeking corolla ...

until the poem ends in confident hope:

... with the voice of Fire I cry –
Will He disdain the flower of the world, the
heart of Man?

A kind of laudate Dominum is hymned in the refrain – repeated with variations – of 'The Bee-Keeper' with its

... O bright immortal lover
That is incarnate in the body's earth –
O bright immortal Lover who is All!

The expression of sympathy for the poor and the outcast already seen in 'Gold Coast Customs' continued in such poems as 'The Stone-Breakers: A Prison Song':

... And we from death on death shall rise again
To testify against the heart of Man
That dreamed our darkness could present a dam
To the Sea that comes – the infinite Blood of Christ.

Of the specifically war poems two have found their way frequently into anthologies, 'Lullaby', with its image 'Under the Judas-Coloured sun', and 'Still Falls the Rain', a poem which has claims of being the most profound and most moving poem written in English about the war. The latter opens powerfully:

Still falls the Rain –
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.

The rain of bombs becomes the blood which flows from the wounded side of Christ, bringing redemption even to those who have inflicted the wounds:

Still falls the Rain
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have
mercy on us –
On Dives and Lazarus:
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.
Still falls the Rain –
Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side!
He bears in his Heart all wounds ...
Still falls the Rain –
Then – O I'll leape up to my God: who pulls me doune –
See, where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:
It flows from the Brow we nailed
Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
That holds the fires of the world, –
dark-smirched with pain
As Caesar's laurel crown

— lines echoing Marlowe's Dr. Faustus — and the poem concludes

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of a man
Was once a child who among beasts has lain —
'Still do I love, still shed my innocent light,
my blood, for thee'.

A still later group of war poems followed upon the news of the atom bomb, news which had a deeply disillusioning effect on Edith Sitwell. In her 'Dirge for the New Sunrise' she watches

— The ghost of the heart of Man . . . red Cain
And the more murderous brain
Of man . . .

In 'Some Notes on My Own Poetry', explaining 'The Shadow of Cain', she contemplates 'That Second Fall' of Man that took the form of separation of brother from brother, of Cain from Abel, of nation and nation, of the rich and the poor — the spiritual migration of these into the desert of the cold, towards the final disaster, the first symbol of which fell on Hiroshima'. She tells us that she uses Lazarus as a symbol 'of Poetry, now moved into a new tomb of useless gold, in which until the fire of love and spiritual rebirth reach him, he will lie dead in his tomb of mud'. For all its pessimism 'The Shadow of Cain' ends on a note of faith:

. . . When the last Judas-kiss
Has died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ,
Those ashes that were men
Will rise again
To be our Fires upon the Judgment Day!
And yet — who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?
He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in
the terrible rain.

In 'The Blinded Song-Bird near the Battlefield' the bird sees one

. . . torn by all the nails upon Christ's Cross:
He bore the Stigmata of the sins of the whole world.

Yet during the same dark period and included in the series entitled 'Three Poems of the Atomic Age' is 'The Canticle of the Rose' where 'The Rose upon the wall/Cries 'Christ's Wounds in me shine'.

But high upon the wall
The Rose where the wounds of Christ are red

Cries to the Light
'See how I rise upon my stem, ineffable bright
Effluence of bright essence . . . From my little span
I cry of Christ, Who is the ultimate Fire
Who will burn away the cold in the heart of man . . .
Springs come, springs go . . .
'I was reddere on Rode than the Rose in the rayne.'
'This smell is Christ, clepid the plantynge of the
Rose in Jerico.'

She has, indeed, the vision of all things, even the humblest, sanctified by Light — even the fly

Whose wings, though sprung from the uttermost
filth of the world,
Have all the grandeurs and jewels of the Dust
about them,
And are made holy by Light.

In *Collected Poems* the final selection is 'Elegy for Dylan Thomas' in which Edith Sitwell affirms 'our Death is Birth, our Birth in Death' and where she says

So, for his sake,
More proudly will that Sisyphus, the heart of Man,
Roll the Sun up the steep of Heaven . . .

Her most recent poem, appearing in the May 1958 issue of *The month*, was dedicated to Rev. Martin C. D'Arcy, S.J. The very title 'His Blood Colours My Cheek' is drawn from a saying of St. Agnes and it closes Edith Sitwell's work to date with

His Blood colours my cheek —
No more eroded by the seas of the world's
passions, greeds, I rise
As if I never had been Ape, to look in
the compassionate, the all-seeing Eyes.

The religious imagery of Edith Sitwell shifts and changes from hell and negation to heaven and affirmation, from Satan and Cain to the Holy Ghost and Christ, from the fire that burns to the fire that redeems — from darkness to Light. She becomes 'an inspired voice that speaks for all the spiritual distress of an agonized generation' and hers is a voice uttering in images the goal for which the heart of man is searching and straining.