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# BOOKS

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## *Edith, Ian and all that—* by Martin Turnell

IN 1964 TWO VERY DIFFERENT personalities disappeared from the English literary scene: Edith Sitwell and Ian Fleming. The obituary notices of Edith Sitwell were laudatory. Although some of the writers had reservations, they felt on the whole that English literature had lost a major poet. I myself have the unworthy suspicion that the story belongs to case history rather than to literary history. Her background was aristocratic and her family what is known as “country.” The aristocracy has always been a fertile breeding ground for eccentricity. Sir George Sitwell, the father of “the three Sitwells,” was a notable English eccentric. Now eccentricity does not necessarily exclude conventional thinking in matters of birth and status. The Sitwells were hoping for a beautiful daughter who would be surrounded by eligible young men, who would make a “brilliant match” and become one of the ornaments of polite society. They were dismayed by the arrival of the ugly duckling. English parents do not easily forgive their children for a disappointment of this kind. Edith Sitwell’s unhappy childhood played a decisive part in shaping the woman and the writer. The poetry readings of which she was inordinately fond looked like some new style intellectual variety act: in reality they were acts of protest. What *The Times* called “the formidable bejewelled and turbaned figure” declaiming her verses in that harsh, grating voice had certainly taken a leaf out of her eccentric father’s book, but she was using what she had taken to protest against her lot, to try to impose herself on a society which does not

care for overpowering women, but likes its women to be womanly.

The protest is equally apparent in the mannerisms of her early verse. Someone has called it “jazz” poetry. The formula is not a bad one, but it is more damaging than the writer realized. It was a protest both against the Victorian ethos of her childhood and against the Victorian conception of the “poetical.” Her approach and tactics were very different from T. S. Eliot’s; they were much more personal and much less effective. They produced the irritating tricks: the cacophony, the repetitive internal rhymes, the transposed images, the synaesthesia. The trees “hissing like green geese,” “the noisy light,” “the squealing light” were intended to startle and impress. They were no doubt startling in their time: if they no longer impress it is because we are not convinced that there is anything beneath the surface effects.

*Gold Coast Customs* has been described as her most important work and her *Waste Land*. It is scarcely a compliment to Eliot. *The Waste Land* is a vision — a highly organized vision — of the contemporary predicament: a world without faith drifting into meaninglessness. *Gold Coast Customs* belongs to the nightmare world of the “horror comics.” There is no organization and no vision. There is simply a piling up of words suggesting horror and squalor which in the end becomes suffocating.

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Those who did not care for the verse of the early and middle periods were ready to hail the author of the last collections as a great poet. One of the obituarists mentioned Swinburne; St. John Perse might have been nearer the truth. The mannerisms are less in evidence, but the method and its vices are the same: words with highly emotional charges are piled up and left to do the work, or rather to work on the reader:

*Under the great yellow flags and banners of the  
ancient Cold*

*Began the huge migrations*

*From some primeval disaster in the heart of Man . . .*

Superficially, it sounds impressive, but the effect comes (as in St. John Perse) from the lavish use of adjectives of size and the coupling of “disaster” (heightened by “primeval”) and “heart.” The heavily inflated language creates the illusion of profundity.

It is too early to “legislate,” wrote one of the more cautious of the obituarists. Critics are paid to stick their necks out and I have no intention of trying to protect my own. I think the dons are wrong (as they usually are in matters of literary judgment) and that the avant-garde critics are right. I think that Edith Sitwell is a test case: the touchstone for distinguishing what is poetry from what is not.

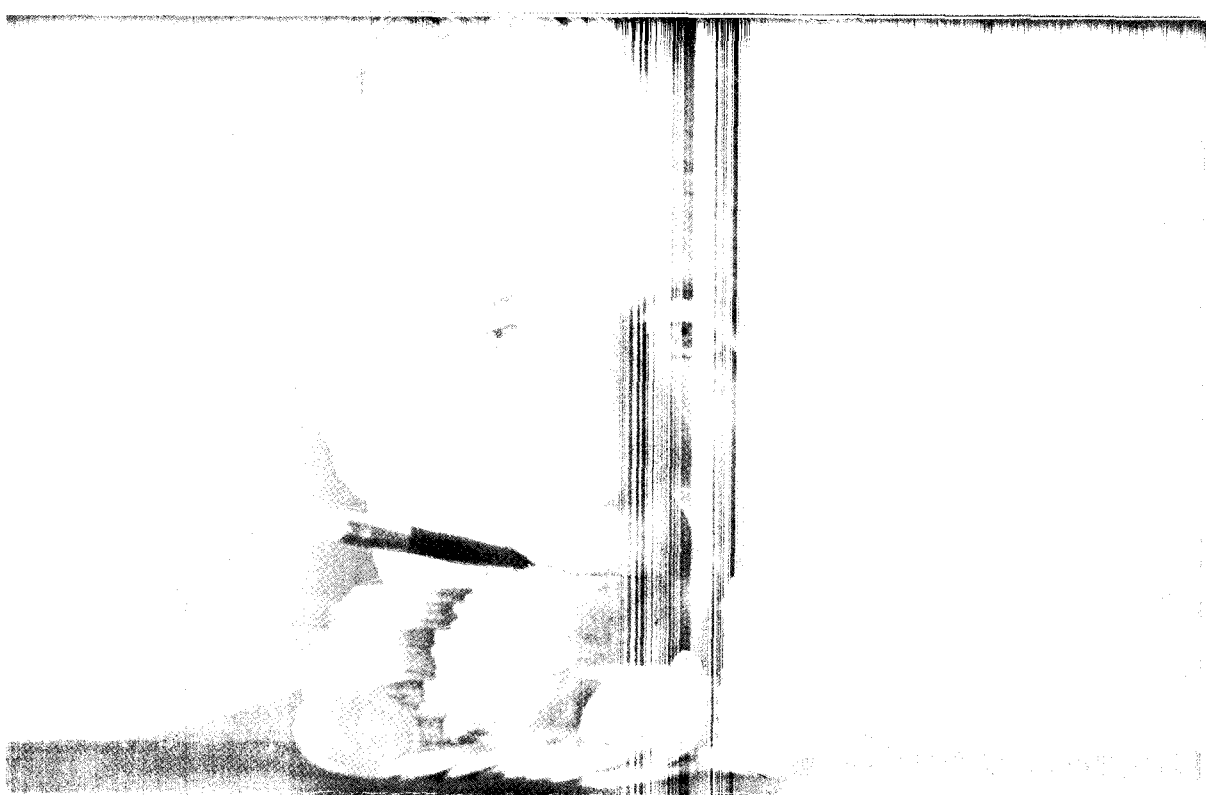
I CONFESS THAT IAN FLEMING was barely even a name to me when, a few years ago, one of the few remaining English intellectual reviews published an onslaught on his work. The author belonged to a much younger generation than my own. I do not know whether he had actually sat under Leavis; he had certainly not been a contributor to *Scrutiny* as I had. Nevertheless, Fleming received what might be called “the full *Scrutiny* treatment.” The methods of “close criticism” were used to expose his violence, his sexiness and his snobbery, which were sternly denounced; and though John Buchan was not exactly a favourite of *Scrutiny*’s the chivalrous attitude of his characters towards women was contrasted favorably with Bond’s lecherousness. The article was intended to be a knockout blow. Its effect on me was the reverse. I detest puritanism in any shape or form and I never had the slightest sympathy with the English Nonconformist outlook that coloured much of the writing in *Scrutiny*. “Fleming,” I said to myself, “sounds like perfect light reading for the tired intellectual.” And so, in my case, it proved to be.

I do not subscribe to the lofty view expressed by another contributor to *RAMPARTS*: Bond as the “tough,” trusty, patriotic British public servant outwitting his country’s enemies; the novels as useful repositories of information about foreign countries for the use of high-powered businessmen and the rest. One has the suspicion that Fleming wrote with his tongue in his cheek. He must have done so for part of the time, but there

were occasions when he “boobed.” Bond’s guns were one example until an expert stepped in and put the novelist right. On other occasions he may have been pulling the innocent admirer’s leg. There is nothing exotic or exclusive about Scotts restaurant; nothing “smart” about having one’s prescriptions made up by Bell and Croyden, or even going there for a pick-me-up after a thick night as I have done: they are the one London chemists who run a twenty-four-hour service and their pick-me-ups are most effective. Lenthéric aftershave lotion, favored at one moment by Bond, is simply one of the more moderately priced of the better known brands. If he had said “Zygmunt” it would have been different, but few of his readers would have taken the point.

Asked about the recipe for a good film, the great D. W. Griffiths replied: “A girl and a gun.” Fleming’s books are firmly based on this old and immensely successful formula. They contain all the ingredients of the traditional adventure story, but they have been brought up to date and enlivened with some highly sophisticated variations. The gentlemanly amateur who is unwittingly involved in the activities of a gang, who fights “clean” and “comes out on top,” belongs to the past. Bond is the ruthless, highly trained professional operating in the nuclear age. He is not merely a crack shot with any kind of weapon, he is expert in the latest methods of sabotage, a master of unarmed combat and a wizard at the gambling tables. The primary ingredient of the adventure story, however clean you fight, is violence. We all love a good smash. There are plenty of smashes in Fleming: buildings blown up, helicopters shot down, ships sunk, trains and cars wrecked, lakes set on fire by exploding petrol drums between Bond’s boat and those of his pursuers. The variations are fascinating: not merely gun battles between man and man, but battles between man and shark; cars armed with multi-machine guns and ejectors for the removal of unwelcome passengers; shoes with razor-sharp knives dipped in deadly poison which puts “paid” to an incompetent agent’s account in seconds, treacherous agents vaporized. We know all about concealed bombs, concealed telephones, concealed wireless apparatus, but a concealed cinematograph camera recording Bond’s triumphs in the lovely spy’s bed really is a bit of a novelty.

The results are exciting and often very funny – funnier on the screen than on the printed page—but neither excitement nor fun is the secret of Fleming’s success. The books are adult fairy stories designed to provide the tired intellectual with a vicarious satisfaction, a release for his less worthy sentiments: violence, sadism and sex. Fleming’s originality lies in the particular relation between the girl and the gun. In John Buchan the story ends with the bronzed, inarticulate hero – “the



*'... A girl and a gun  
and a zipper ...'*



*'... the formidable bejeweled  
and turbaned figure ...'*

strong silent man” -- leading the demure and still less articulate heroine of a dozen last-minute rescues to the altar. Neither altar nor register office has any place in Bond's world. He is not cynical about women; he is an inveterate womanizer whose attitude is neatly described by Henri de Montherlant's "affectionate copulation." Fleming's novels end (except when time is needed for the lacerated flesh to heal) with a leap from battle into bed, with a tremendous coupling with the lushest of accomplices. It is this sexiness which permeates the books. One example will suffice. It comes from *Diamonds Are Forever*.

And then he just said, softly, "My darling," and put one hand in her hair so that he could hold her mouth where he wanted it.

And after a while his other went to the zip fastener at the back of her dress and without moving away from him she stepped out of her dress and panted between kisses. "I want it all, James. Everything you've ever done to a girl. Now. Quickly."

The first two sentences might have come from any sex novelette. It is the last fourteen words that reveal the touch of this particular master.

"BUSY TODAY," SAID THE WAITER at the hotel where we were staying for the Chichester Festival. "Olivier's doing his stuff." He was "doing his stuff" in *Othello* and the public swarmed into Chichester for the matinée. The teenagers were allowed to camp in the theatre precincts -- crowds of them with sleeping bags and rugs -- to make sure of the unreserved seats without having to pay high prices for hotel rooms. Twenty years ago I admired Olivier in that controversial tour de force: *Oedipus Rex* and *The Critic* in a double bill. In general I do not greatly admire "his stuff." His performance in *Othello* struck me as one of the most overrated performances in recent years. His voice lacks the richness and the resonance necessary for high tragedy, particularly when one remembers Paul Robeson's tremendous performance as Othello. In this production there had been so many fits and faints, so much gambolling on the stage, that he was finished before the climax was reached. The last act, which contains some of the greatest poetry in the play, was a dead loss.

A good deal of the blame for the artistic failure rests with the producer. The National Theatre has plenty of stars and no producers. The Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company, now operating in London as well as at Stratford-upon-Avon under the direction of Peter Hall, who graduated as a producer, has fewer stars but has been much more fortunate in its producers. What a first class producer can do with a mediocre play is demonstrated by Peter Brook's production of the play known for short as the *Marat/Sade*. It is a modern German work about the Marquis de Sade mounting

plays at the lunatic asylum where he is incarcerated and using the inmates to perform them. The play is full of vacuous, high-flown "talk," but the presentation of the gibbering, squawking, giggling, shrieking, fighting lunatics provided London audiences with a spectacle which they will long remember.

THE REAL PROBLEM of the contemporary theatre is not lack of producers, but lack of playwrights who have anything to say. The three worst plays that I saw last year all had famous names attached to them: John Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence*, Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun* and Graham Greene's *Carving a Statue*. Osborne's play was given a trial run of four weeks at the Royal Court Theatre in Chelsea where he made his name ten years ago with *Look Back in Anger*, but it did not reach the West End. *The Royal Hunt of the Sun*, specially written for the National Theatre and first seen at Chichester, is a play about the Spanish conquest of Peru: one of those wordy, pretentious plays which so easily slip into the repertoires of national theatres and give them a poor reputation among the discerning.

Greene's ran for six weeks with shrinking audiences at a West End theatre. A Catholic critic, writing in one of the Sunday papers, remarked that it was difficult to believe that without Greene's name it would ever have got to the West End. It is, indeed, staggering in its feebleness. It is a study of a middle-aged and none too gifted religious sculptor -- denomination unstated, presumed Roman Catholic -- who for fifteen years has been working on a gigantic statue of God the Father. The play drips with "symbolism," but the only things that interested me were the seductions, or attempted seductions. When the hopelessly neurotic solicitor in Osborne's play asks his women staff, on the inter-com, how their sex life is doing, or makes the pair of them on the office floor after closing time, the effect is merely fatuous. It is far otherwise with Catholic writers. From Barbey d'Aurevilly and Huysmans to Mauriac and Graham Greene, the one thing they do superbly is a seduction, perhaps because they are less inhibited, or simply more immodest, than their unbelieving *confrères*. In *Carving a Statue* a brassy little tart in skin-tight jeans sets to work on the sculptor's teenage son, trying to steer a reluctant hand to the part of her anatomy where it should repose during a really good kiss. She fails. The sculptor enters and the son departs. In a religious art studio there is, inevitably, much talk of "virgins," a word that sorely puzzles the innocent son. "I think you're still partly a virgin," remarks the father to the little piece. "I'd better finish the job." He carries her off to a small office in a corner of the studio. A few minutes later the lady emerges minus jeans asking the way to the bathroom. The sculptor thinks that



he can now get God's left eye — the one with the malicious squint — right. The boy reappears with a new girl who is deaf and dumb and chaste. It is now the turn of the family doctor — a rare old goat — who tries his wiles on her in his consulting room. She bolts for the street and is killed by a passing car. There is a reconciliation between father and son on the scaffolding surrounding the immense white elephant. No doubt there is some deep religious meaning behind it all, but it escaped me completely.

ANOTHER CELEBRATED ARTIST has been "doing her stuff" for the entertainment of the British public. In December Marlene Dietrich came to London to do a solo performance of songs for a two-week season. The season had to be extended for a week and she sang to packed houses. She was one of the screen idols of my youth and I was determined to see her in the flesh. It was a fascinating experience. She was not a great actress and is only doubtfully a singer, but at sixty-two she looked marvelous with the delicate high cheek bones, the mass of blonde hair and the lock which still falls obstinately into her eyes as it did at the big moments in her films thirty years ago. She was never a Garbo in looks or as an artist, but she belongs to the same era: the golden age of Hollywood, the age when the *monstres sacrés* really deserved their label. It is arguable that the international stars of our own time — the Jeanne Moreaus and the Monica Vittis — are finer artists and they are incomparably more fortunate in their directors than their predecessors; it is unlikely that they will ever have the same glamour as that charmed circle in the thirties. It is a glory that has departed.

THE SUNDAY NEWSPAPERS have been playing their usual end of the year game: prominent writers, men of letters, reviewers and other scribes name what they consider the "best books" of the year. Someone opted for Phyllis Grosskurth's *John Addington Symonds*: "a wonderfully intelligent and sympathetic study of a major Victorian aesthete and man of letters." The reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement*, one feels, was nearer the mark when he said that the only interesting thing about Symonds was his homosexuality. Mrs. Grosskurth's biography is interesting not as a study of a rather lightweight man of letters, but for its picture of Victorian *moeurs*. Symonds was born at Bristol in 1840 and was the son of a doctor. He discovered his sexual propensities at an early age, but in his student years did no more than indulge in sentimental friendships for choirboys. During his last year at Harrow a fellow sixth-former boasted to Symonds that he was having an affair with the headmaster, the Reverend Dr. Vaughan. The news preyed on his mind. The following year at Oxford he

confided in the Professor of Latin. The professor was deeply shocked. He insisted on Symonds taking the train to his native Bristol and informing his father. Dr. Symonds was a formidable character: the relentless Victorian moralist who was shaky about the existence of God, but implacable on what now seem little more than moral peccadilloes. He promptly wrote to his son's old headmaster giving him the choice of resignation or exposure. Negotiations went on for several months. Mrs. Vaughan visited Bristol, flung herself at Dr. Symond's feet and begged for mercy. He was adamant. The headmaster resigned prematurely and became vicar of a large Anglican parish in the north of England. A few years later he was offered and accepted a bishopric. Dr. Symonds at once intervened to remind him that one of the terms of the agreement was that the unhappy man should not accept any high ecclesiastical preferment. Dr. Vaughan was placed in the embarrassing position of having to tell the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, that he was unable after all to accept. It was not, indeed, until many years later when Dr. Symonds was dead that he was appointed to the deanery of Llandaff.

The fact that he had been the instrument of Dr. Vaughan's ruin did not produce any striking change in John Addington Symonds's own inclinations. He became freer in the expression of them though he was not without guilty feelings. He thought, as other homosexuals have thought, that marriage might prove a cure. In 1864 he wooed and won Miss Janet North, daughter of the Conservative Member of Parliament for Hastings. The writer whom I have already quoted commends Mrs. Grosskurth for writing "without any trace of prurience." Nor is her book without humor whether intentional or not. This is her comment on the honeymoon:

*The first few days of the honeymoon were passed in Brighton, where the young couple fumbled and blushed and irritated each other. Since Symonds lacked the faintest knowledge of female anatomy, it was several nights before the marriage was consummated.*

As a cure the marriage was not exactly a success. Some years later Symonds made a pact with his wife which was as ruthless in its way as his hateful father's with the Vaughan family. He would be a good husband and father, he promised, provided that it was understood that he could look elsewhere than in marriage for sexual satisfaction. The unhappy wife accepted, as the Vaughans had accepted, a somewhat different proposition. An ugly world, but is our own, for all its tolerance, any better? There were indiscretions in Symonds' writings, but at least he did not publish accounts of his adventures during his wife's lifetime as Gide was to do in the second decade of the twentieth century.

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# REVIEWS

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## My Father, the Child

**Jean-Paul Sartre, THE WORDS.** An autobiography. Translated from the French (LES MOTS, Librarie Gallimard, Paris, 1964) by Bernard Fechtman. George Brazillier, New York, 1964. 225 p. \$5.

*Reviewed by JONATHAN KETCHUM who studied musicology at Harvard University and has written book reviews on psychology and philosophy which have appeared in ERASMUS, published in Stuttgart, Germany.*

ENOUGH HAS ALREADY been written on the grace, wit, humor, and stylistic acumen displayed in this work; it is a distinguished piece of writing, whatever its technical difficulties may be. And it would be perverse, after Sartre has taken the trouble to disentangle his own experience from the conscious cultural setting of a man of letters, to bury the clear individuality he is at pains to reveal in a mountain of remarks on the history of autobiography in France (*and* elsewhere), on the relation of this work to the educational novel, or on autobiography and psychoanalysis, without taking pains first to clarify some of the main themes. Only one will be mentioned here: if the character of alienation, estrangement, and paranoia (to give three names to the

same nexus) can be grasped as it emerges from the concrete experiences of Sartre's childhood, then a new understanding can be won of all those elements in his other works which have gained him the reputation of being atheistic, nihilistic, and sick.

One of the merits of a good autobiography is the ability to call the reader to his own autobiography. In the present case, that requires the reader to come to understand the character of his own alienation; inability to do so is a real obstacle in the way of penetrating the depths of Sartre's ironic wit. Another merit is the ability to show the universal meaning of a concrete experience, or to put it differently, to struggle with the images of contingency and destiny without loading the dice.

This autobiography possesses both these merits; though it does not assert as an article of metaphysical dogma that alienation is a fundamental aspect of the human condition, it certainly leads to the conclusion that there is no choice open to us apart from a radical examination of our social condition, or a bland and deceived acceptance of it.

It would be a mistake to suppose that Sartre's growing disaffection with himself is to be explained away as a problem peculiar to contemporary France, or to a child with a particular family structure. That is the way it first appeared to him. He grasped his individuality. But he also sees and reports the structure of his idealism as if now realizing that he was living for himself those attitudes which we come to know also through the study of philosophy and history; and, clearly and consciously present to the reader not only as the little child described, but also as the aging man coming to understand the structure of his life, he shows that child caught in one of the most timeless mantraps: talented mediocrity.

Kierkegaard wrote, "Life is lived forwards, but understood backwards." It is a peculiar illusion of positivism to suppose that any his-