

## SIEGFRIED SASSOON — AESTHETE MANQUÉ

The role of the aesthete in the Armageddon of World War One was an ambiguous one, determined by recent cultural history and immediate threat. Poetic aestheticism, as defined by Oscar Wilde and the “greenery-yallery” tendency, had perished under the homophobic assault of Wilde’s ignominious trial. Now the conservative reigned supreme, and poetry in the form of the Georgian poets, under J.C. Squire’s stern editorship, had a new conventionality about it. It was no accident that this conventionality coincided with the very masculine views which were the ones that contributed to the War, the jingoistic motivation that led thousands of young men to volunteer for the trenches.

But there was a sizeable opposition, not only from the nascent artistic community of Bloomsbury — the conscientious objection of Lytton Strachey and his friends — but also from extravagant figures like Ronald Firbank, just beginning to construct his baroque novellas, who, as a direct heir of Wilde and Co., stood aesthetically opposed to the War (Firbank referred to it as “that awful persecution”). There was the rising star of the Sitwell trio too; Edith, in conjunction with aristo-rebel Nancy Cunard, was compiling Wheels, which sought an entirely English avant-garde, following on from where Swinburne had left off. The Russian Ballet was their war-cry, not the sound of shells exploding in mud, nor the excesses of Wyndham Lewis and Blast. The latter was just as much anathema to them as the former. Edward Wyndham Tennant, a friend of Osbert who was published first in Wheels and killed in the battle of the Somme, wrote to his mother in that year: “I hope my proofs will come soon. I daresay if I wore black shirts, and painted execrable futurist pictures, and wrote verse that was quite incomprehensible, the reviewers would take it for genuine *poésie*.”

“Bimbo” or “Bim” Tennant was very much of the aristocratic line. His mother, the beautiful Pamela Tennant, née Wyndham, had been a notable “Soul,” a high-flying group of clever liberals whose unconventionality had stopped short of the Wilde tendency with which they were concurrent. Their succeeding generation, of which Bim was a part, named themselves the “Corrupt Coterie,” in face of their legacy and a perceived unstable future. Such beauties as Diana Manners and Nancy Cunard were key players here, and provided an intense social life as a background to the carnage of France and a breeding ground for the revival of aestheticism. A new generation would inherit their devil-may-care attitudes and determine the moral and cultural tone of the 1920s.

But war still raged, and men who were more used to genteel drawing-room life found themselves amongst daily destruction. The literate reaction of soldier poets like Graves, Owen and Sassoon was a gut reaction, a rage engendered by its futility. But for Sassoon, whose homosexuality was already determining his social habits, and was, even during the war, leading him more and more into the aesthete’s camp, the male “binding” process of an officer’s devotion to his men seemed at least to bring

good out of the evil. Sir Stephen Spender told the author that in his opinion, the homosexual overtones to that camaraderie still require exploration — and explanation — as it was crucial to the immediate post-war cultural world. When the war dragged to a close, the returning soldiers seemed to have lost their place in the world. Men like Sassoon, who might, without the war, have eased into a less virile poetic expression, continued to rail against the exploiters and profiteers.

After the war, Sassoon was at something of a loss as to what to do next. His reputation was at its highest, and he was highly regarded by his peers and public. But he was rapidly replacing his revolutionary zeal with a liking for less politicised attractions. Sassoon was taken up with alacrity by the aesthetically-minded friends whose acquaintance he had made, who saw in him a champion of their own cause, *vita brevis, ars longa*, by virtue of his cultural protest at their parents' generation and all it seemed to stand for. The social territory of the drawing-rooms of Mayfair and Belgravia replaced the mud of the trenches. His erstwhile biographer, Dame Felicitas Corrigan, notes that in the early twenties "Sassoon the Socialist, in sandy-coloured tweeds, yellow waistcoat, and a pink shirt was...coming on quite terrifically, as he more and more frequented the company of the 'titled blokes and blokesses' rather than that of the workers on the march waving the red flag." Indeed, one was more likely to find Siegfried at the salons of Lady Ottoline Morrell or Christabel MacLaren than marching with the General Strikers — which is not to say that his sympathies didn't lie with the underdog. His poem "A Breach of Decorum" was written in 1925 after a vexing evening at Emerald Cunard's table (mother of the rebellious Nancy), and records the reaction to Sassoon's proffered view of Christianity:

'Such dreadful taste!' `A positive blasphemer!'

'He actually referred to our redeemer

As the world's greatest Socialist teacher!'

In many ways, the twenties caught Sassoon between two shores. He told Dame Hildeth Cumming in 1961 that "...by 1920 I was too old to indulge in technical experiments," but that "the strange thing about it is that my poems should have been liked by other good poets — Hardy, De la Mare, Belloc, Masfield, Blunden, for leading instance — (Edith Sitwell too, though she has cooled off, owing to my being regarded as old-fashioned!)." Sassoon's relationship with the Sitwells is crucial to the idea of him as *aesthete manqué*. He flirted with their publicity circus, which stood upon the shoulders of the Russian Ballet and looked to new horizons, but felt he could not give himself up to their relentless electioneering on behalf of the new. The Sitwells made him "thankful that I have chosen to isolate myself from seeking to be conspicuous," he wrote in his diary for 1954. His difficult personal relationship with Osbert, tinged with a certain sexual element (as Sassoon confessed to himself in a diary entry in 1922, realising that he harboured "acute sexual feelings" toward Sitwell) only helped to make the poet's assimilation into their circle never quite complete. Modernism left him cold — Siegfried grew impatient with everyone

telling him how Eliot was the future of poetry — for it threatened his own only too recently established reputation. The result was a man without a movement.

Sassoon's tentative relations with the aesthetes of the post-war world highlight the tensions and contradictions in his personality (changes mirrored in the greater world around him, too). His love/hate relationship with the Sitwells, his affairs with the artist Gabriel Atkins, the German Prince Philip of Hesse, and the aristocratic butterfly Stephen Tennant, seem at odds with his public profile. He was by turns acquiescent and disapproving. When Stephen Tennant and his Bright Young Friends insisted on spending whole weekends in fancy dress in the mid-twenties, Sassoon pursed his lips and wrote, "I didn't quite like it." A later photograph of Sassoon in 1933 at the Wilton Pageant (where he met his future wife, Hester) in velvet doublet and ruff shows how painfully uncomfortable he looked when he did assume costume. But at the same time, he was not averse to posing for the camera, as his aesthetic friends seemed to do without cessation (even though Cecil Beaton records great courses of tears from Siegfried's craggy cheeks during one photosession): "I am always delighted to be delineated, painted, sketched, or caricatured," wrote Sassoon the visible poet in his diary entry for 14 March 1922; "even being photographed or 'snapshotted' gives me delicious satisfaction — far better than being reviewed in the Literary Supplement (I suspect that this is not an unusual trait in twentieth-century males)." And it was definitely Sassoon the aesthete who presented Stephen Tennant, by now a romantic victim of TB, (and acute admirer of the beauty of sea-shells, which Siegfried would gather for him on the shores of Sicily during their 'honeymoon' there that winter) with Swainson's Exotic Conchology, writing on the fly-leaf:

"Stephen  
War has its idiot Shells;  
How different are these,  
designed by diligent Nature  
for her Devotees...  
From SS Oct. 3 1929."

In one way, Sassoon had found the perceived effeminacy of this new generation a good thing, a positive reaction against the masculine values of the men who had allowed the war to happen. But was it really constructive, all this dalliance? The fact that within twenty years another world war had begun indicated that it was not. It must have been painfully obvious to Sassoon that his poetic stance in the trenches had been in vain. Though the "Pylon Boy" poets of the thirties fought against fascism and the coming war, to Sassoon (who liked not their techniques anyway, and whose own work grew less adventurous with the years) it was a losing battle. No wonder that after his unhappy marriage to Hester Gatty petered out into a pretence of politeness, Sassoon resumed his solitude in Wiltshire. War approached once more, and as the poet watched the warplanes rehearse their deadly ballet in Southern English skies, he felt that the only route now was an interior escape.

## THOUGHTS IN 1932

Alive — and forty-five — I jogged my way  
Across a dull green day,  
Listening to larks and plovers, well content  
With the pre-Roman pack-road where I went.

Pastoral and pleasant was the end of May.  
But readers of the times had cause to say  
That skies were brighter for the late Victorians;  
And 'The Black Thirties' seemed a sobriquet  
Likely to head the chapters of historians.

Above Stonehenge a drone of engines drew  
My gaze; there seven and twenty war-planes flew  
Manoeuvring in formation; and the drone  
Of that neat-patterned hornet-gang was thrown  
Across the golden downland like a blight.

Cities, I thought, will wait them in the night  
When airmen, with high-minded motives, fight  
To save Futurity. In years to come  
Poor panic-stricken hordes will hear that hum,  
And Fear will be synonymous with Flight.

By the late forties, Joe Ackerley found him "dreadfully lonely" and "a kind of eccentric hermit" at Heytesbury, who constantly sought from friends like Ackerley the reassurance that he was "a man in whom posterity will be interested."

Perhaps what really happened was that Sassoon was a victim of survival, one of those who had tried to pick up the threads of life interrupted by war, and found it near-impossible. Being a living war hero yet a pacifist poet was a dichotomy only underlined by the unease he had felt in the new aestheticism. He could not throw himself into the roaring twenties and the avant-garde, nor find a comfortable place in the old guard. He had been part of what succeeding generations now sought to forget, and that must have been the hardest part to bear as the twentieth century attempted to recover from its second world war.

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