

Babel Self-inflicted

By James Blair

Osbert Sitwell's "Therefore is the name of it called Babel" blends allusion and imagery in a true poet's attempt to put his sight into writing. The Great War – the world in flames, tearing itself apart in a foolish pride, horrible and impossible to comprehend in its reality – must have stuck with Sitwell and haunted his mind. To simply write about the conflagration he witnessed would be impossible – how does one put into lyrics the mass death of innocence? Sitwell chose, at least partly, to obscure the reality of a suddenly meaningless world through the invocation of the book of God, and his attempt to do so is beautiful and haunting in its prophetic inevitability.

One must read closely to understand Sitwell's sorrow. To begin, the first line's inclusion of "And still" signifies the hellish conflagration from which the speaker has fled. Despite the fact that the viewers who "stare(d) far down" (1) should very well be in flight from their ruined city, they cannot break their eyes from the "ember-glowing town" (2); they are *still* there, gaping. The town itself, which "every shaft and shock of fate" (3) has obliterated, seems destroyed by nothing more than destiny. We can assume that those who bombed the city had their reason for doing so, yet those who gaze down upon it now can only imagine that it has occurred by fate, or by God's will. Fate was

[SCAFFOLD: A SHOWCASE OF VANDERBILT FIRST-YEAR WRITING](#) | Vol. 1 | Spring 2019

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the only actor in the error-full day, so, although its instruments were mighty, there is nobody to blame but fate. That means there is nobody to punish for this atrocity; the victims must move on without justice. "Serenity" (5) has now fallen upon the town, but only after there is nothing left to soothe but the scattered fires of a bombardment; she comes "too late" (4).

The "torn and broken houses" (6) that "gaze / On to the rat-infested maze" (6-7) are packed with meaning. First, these are homes, once occupied by human families, so the deliberate choice of "houses" rather than "homes" serves to distance oneself from the carnage. Moreover, "the rat-infested maze" is a collection of streets that humans have traversed, and so "rat" is not only literal but probably also a dysphemistic stand-in for the humankind that both before and during the bombardment scuttled through the winding streets of the city. Continuing, those who found themselves on the street almost surely are those who count as part of the "rose-silver haze" (8) that was sent up. The bombing obliterated lives and their souls; this haze now rises to heaven's eternal embrace.

The city walls, no longer standing tall, no longer standing at all, impress upon the purveyor of the scene the ephemerality of the city and civilization with it. Great images are called to mind: Roman amphitheaters and grand cathedrals, and yet those are just "thoughts" (11), no more a reality than the now-demolished city walls. "The outlines" (10) remind one of the guidelines of etiquette, society, all those ventures of civil life, now utterly meaningless in the void that bombardment has left. They were once "so strongly wrought" (10), but now they crumble, giving way to a time before civilization, at least for the moment of the immediate aftermath. The men who believed in these principles so greatly that they fought for them are now dead. The outlines of both the city walls and all the civilization

and society they enclosed are now a “jest unto the dead” (12), or a furiously sardonic joke on their values. The last line of the stanza provides a slightly brighter, or possibly darker, light. “Foundation for futurity” (13) causes one to cast an eye at the future; though the destruction of the town was hateful, it now lays a levelled field on which something else can be built. This thing to be built could be a greater civilization, in the tradition of progress and human perseverance, but it could be something worse. If something worse, then it might signal the decline of humanity – a new civilization, so shell-shocked and broken by the events of the War that it cannot continue with the grand tradition of progress. Either assumption is plausible; in the immediate aftermath, it is impossible to tell which is inevitable.

The fourth stanza is emotional, and expected; the children who before the attack had been playing on “shimmering” (14), bright and lively sands are now gone. The unspoken truth is that many of them died in the bombing, literally no longer lively. This horrible truth is bad, but worse is the “Night” (17). “The shimmering sands... / are drearily desolate, – afraid / To meet Night’s dark humanity” (14-17). The invocation of children is continued in “afraid to meet” (16-17), as it reminds one of a child who is afraid to meet the gaze of an admonishing adult. “Night’s dark humanity” (17) hints at the nature of the horror that has encroached upon the town; it is born of humans, and has human faces. Men in the night fired the shells that bombarded the city, killing children. So, the shimmering sands avoid the gaze of Night and the murdering faces that hide in it, obscured to those they kill.

The remaking of the dead by the “silver cool” (18) of night can be read as the literal mutilation of already dead bodies by excessive, “overkill” bombing, or it can be seen as a resignation of the whole of humanity as dead creatures, cast out of God’s

grace because of the actions they commit against each other. The inclusion of the word “cool” hints at the detached nature of the whole affair. There is nothing cool about the bombs nor the emotions they evoke, yet those who fire them may very well be called “cold.” Thus, the bombs themselves are given the distinction of “silver cool” since they are agents of a heartless bombardier.

The final two stanzas are relatively literal and the hardest hitting of the poem. All that the decimated townspeople knew, what they viewed as good, is obliterated in the wake of “Evil’s fiery flood” (23). Of course, the flood invokes God’s original wrath against the sinners of Noah’s time, a wrath that led to a new earth being built from Noah’s pure lineage. It may be inferred that this calamity is simply God exacting a plan to cleanse the earth once again for a pure rebirth. This would certainly fit with the positive “foundation for futurity” (13), creating a theme of “a time to come” after the time of these bombings in the work. The “monstrous myths of iron and blood” (24) allude to the reality that soldiers and those near the fighting on the continent knew all too well, but that, in England especially, many civilians could not grasp. To an English civilian, the thought of looking down upon a devastated city is just a myth. There is no real idea of the emotion and terror that accompanies it, and so the monstrous myths that are relayed back to England resonate only as stories and not as real-life atrocities. These myths feed public support for the war and give a heroic aura to the proceedings on the continent. The reality is there is nothing classically mythological about the Great War, and the “iron and blood” (24) are all too real.

The last stanza builds upon the penultimate one and is ultimately a summation of emotion. “The tragic star” (26) is the human race – blatantly sinful, belligerent and self-contradictory,

hating itself and its parts. Just as in Babel's time, we have reached our peak; we have "strewn all the seas" (28) and we sit at the precipice of deification. At the moment of truth, "[humanity] wages war / against itself" (27-28), tearing itself apart with deafening roars and furious explosions. All the world is affected by the "world disease" (29) of jingoistic fervor, and so God has not even found it necessary to strike down Babel for its grandiose ego. We've done it to ourselves; we have cast ourselves from the tower we painstakingly built in a blind fit of rage. This is "Babel's direful prophecy" (31), and like any prophecy, it is true: we knew the future before it came to past. As Sitwell's grand allusion to Genesis 11:9 evinces, the city is destroyed, this place of civilization, with confounded languages and misunderstood peoples; therefore, its name must be called Babel.

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