

SPLENDOURS AND MISERIES. By Sacheverell Sitwell. (Faber and Faber; 18s.)

The landscape of horror has grown familiar with the years of war. Indeed it might seem that there is a law of diminishing returns in human sensibility so that yesterday's outrage becomes today's military necessity. So many cities lie in ruins; so many starving children have died in Greece, in Belgium, in France; so many wounded, homeless, hopeless millions—the catalogue is beyond compassion now. Or would be, were it not that occasionally some sudden lightning reveals the scene for what it truly is.

Lightning is not, perhaps, the best metaphor to use of Mr. Sitwell's purpose, still less of his style. But in *Splendours and Miseries* he has deliberately turned to the spectacle of man's inhumanity, of which the last four years have provided such new and terrible manifestations, and it will be a very brave—or a very callous—man who can look on that picture without fear and trembling. Yet evil is nothing new, and, though Mr. Sitwell might disavow it, his book is nothing but a sustained commentary on what Christians mean by Original Sin. His method is entirely his own, which is to say that it is that of a fastidious artist interpreting images rather than facts. But its type is a medieval wall painting, didactic and terrible, for 'a thing has been lost which cannot be recovered. It is necessary to descend into hell in order to bring it back.' Again, speaking of his imaginary biography of three mad women, 'the purpose of this narrative is to frighten and alarm, to break or stultify the normal vision. Before it is too late. And to prepare an open mind for what may or may not come to happen.'

Madness, false Messiahs, poisoners, the drawings of Fuseli, the scorched plains of the Ukraine, the blitz in England—here are the miseries: what of the splendours? They make a strange list: porcelain, tapestries, music, the quiet mind that returns to its private joys. But the division is not easy. The image of beauty involves the dark shadow of destruction. Mr. Sitwell is concerned to revivify the atrophied awareness of men; at least 'the individual can lift his blind and look out on the morning,' at least there remain some things for a man to love and work for. 'The world must not be regimented. There are other purposes or human beings than that they should be mere fodder for the machines.'

But even the splendours are a final sadness. It is the organ music of Bach (of which Mr. Sitwell gives a brilliant analysis) which gives us true beatitude. 'Many faiths; but only one true Ancient, of whom we hear the huge fist when the formal language of the Fugue begins.' Yet, while we wonder how it is that so deep a penetration into misery has not led Mr. Sitwell to consider the ultimate Splendour which alone can give mercy and meaning to his picture, we can see in his tormented and terrible book yet another reproach to Christians for whom compassion is not the least of the virtues.

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