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ALAN SILLITOE'S BATTLEGROUND

FOR ALAN SILLITOE'S HEROES, to live at all is to fight, and this belligerence defines their existence in the English working-class world that they inhabit. Their struggles, while reflecting the difficulties of individual protagonists, are primarily class conflicts echoing the author's disillusion with contemporary English society. The early Seaton-family novels, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *Key to the Door*, along with the shorter works *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* and *The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller*, offer a series of loud and angry protests which define Sillitoe's working-class perspective, while the later novels, *The Death of William Posters* and *A Tree on Fire*, move beyond this to a more positive approach to the problems of existence raised in the earlier work. The battles of his heroes, whether they are visceral or cerebral, internal or external, idealistic or pragmatic, are all fought to achieve Sillitoe's utopian dream of a better world.

The central campaigns in Sillitoe's war are aimed at toppling a social structure built on inequality and characterized by haves and have-nots. The early fiction makes it clear: the two groups are enemies. Smith, the Borstal boy in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, talks of "them" and "us" and reveals that "they don't see eye to eye with us and we don't see eye to eye with them."¹ His thoughts on the lonely practice-runs over the early-morning countryside lead him to conclude that "by sending me to Borstal they've shown me the knife, and from now on I know something I didn't know before: that it's war between me and them. . . . I know who my enemies are and what war is" (p. 15). The enemies, according to Smith, are generically called "bastard-faced In-Laws" as opposed to Out-Laws) and the species includes "pig-faced snotty-nosed dukes and ladies", "cops, governors, posh whores, pen-pushers, army officers, Members of Parliament" (pp. 8, 14). Arthur Seaton, the protagonist of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, includes "landlords and gaffers [bosses], coppers, army, government" in the list of enemies he plans to be "fighting every day until I die."²

All these groups are targets for Sillitoe, for they are the bastions of an established order which he rejects. The army is particularly singled out for attack because it is a clearly visible instrument of reactionary government.

Arthur Seaton makes this clear in his commentary on rifle practice during his annual fifteen-day training period: "When . . . I lay on my guts behind a sandbag shooting at a target board I know whose faces I've got in my sights every time the new rifle cracks off. Yes. The bastards that put the gun into my hands . . . [and who plan] how to get blokes into khaki and fight battles in a war that they'll never be in" (*SNSM*, p. 189).

Hatred of the army is often focussed on the uniform. In *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, for instance, Arthur Seaton gets caught up in a street incident in which order is represented by a young woman "wearing an army uniform—the colour of which immediately prejudiced him" (p. 94). His brother Brian, the hero of *Key to the Door*, is conscripted for the post-war occupation of Malaya yet remains a rebel by wearing his uniform only to collect his pay, and by showing a class-formed contempt of such "good" soldiers as Baker, who "had been to a public school, was hidebound and . . . mutinous only within the limits of King's Regulations."³ The pervasiveness of this attitude is seen in the Seaton family in which "out of a dozen able-bodied men in all remotely connected branches of the family, only two went into the army and stayed" during the Second World War (*Key*, p. 258).

This collective rebellion may be partly explained by the working-class feeling that the government (seen in its visible manifestations of army, police, and parliamentarians) simply does not care about the individual. And the English working classes, possibly because they have had little wealth to lose, have traditionally fostered a fierce sense of personal independence. Sillitoe shows his awareness of this phenomenon by showing us a class solidarity which finds its expression in individual (rather than collective) rejections of authority. Brian Seaton, for example, has regarded the police as enemies since his childhood reading of *Les Misérables* which he found "an epic of reality . . . a battle between a common man and the police who would not let him free because he had once stolen a loaf of bread" (*Key*, p. 193); Arthur Seaton rails against the authority of "looney laws . . . to be broken by blokes like me" (*SNSM*, p. 31); and Smith shows his disgust with the "pot-eyed potbellied governor" of the Borstal reform school and the policeman "like Hitler in the face" who had originally captured him (*LLDR*, pp. 27, 33).

Distrust of government is also characterized by a rejection of both major parties, and although there is some wavering sympathy for Labour as the socialist or egalitarian party, political affiliations are not encouraged in Sillitoe's working-class world. The Tories as representatives of tradition, position, and privilege are thoroughly damned. Brian Seaton, reminiscing about his child-

hood, thinks: "Conservative—it was an official word to be distrusted, hated in fact" (*Key*, p. 157). Smith remembers turning the sound down on television political announcements: "It was the best of all though when we did it to some Tory telling us about how good his government was going to be if we kept voting for him . . . you could see they didn't mean a thing they said" (*LLDR*, p. 20). And Arthur Seaton condemns both Tory and Labour for their lack of sympathy with the working class: "I ain't a communist, I tell you. I like 'em though, because they're different from these big fat Tory bastards in parliament. And them Labour bleeders too. They rob our wage packets every week with insurance and income tax and try to tell us it's all for our own good" (*SNSM*, p. 30).⁴

The angry protest remains only an impotent expression of disillusion because, as Irving Howe has pointed out, the worker-heroes are "bound by ritualistic practice and unexamined assumption".⁵ Their rebellion is visceral. So when Arthur Seaton hears a shop window being smashed and finds that the sound of breaking glass "synthesized all the anarchism within him," the anarchism remains only an urge (*SNSM*, p. 94). A substitute for action is the anarchistic dream. Like romantic guerillas in some hillside hide-away, the Seaton men dream of destroying the power structure of the established order, of blowing up factories and the Houses of Parliament because, as Arthur puts it, "that'd be something worth doing" (*SNSM*, p. 34). He is never quite lucid, however, about why it is worth doing, and it never gets done. Lacking a rational stimulus, the working-class protest in the Seaton novels is never translated into effective action.

What these novels offer, instead, is a many-faceted description of working-class anger in which the exuberant characters of Sillitoe's world come alive through the processes of revolt. Their belligerence is the dominant quality of their being from childhood through courtship and in the day-to-day struggles of married life. In *The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller*, an autobiographical short story, Sillitoe writes of his early allegiance to the leader of a slum gang, "a full-bown centurion with his six foot spear-headed railing at the slope, and his rusty dust bin lid for a shield . . . marching to war, and I was part of his army."⁶ To young Brian Seaton in *Key to the Door*, a good-night kiss between his sister Lydia and her boyfriend Tom "looked like a more desperate combat than that which was supposed to have taken place between St. George and the dragon" (p. 102). And in the family of "shuttlecocked Seaton and battledored Vera" the growth to manhood of the boys created "a balance of power that kept the house more or less peaceful"; yet even this was shattered

by Vera's jealousy of Harold's flirtation with the "black-haired inscrutable Millie from Travers Row . . . [when] the house witnessed pitched battles that even made the money quarrels of the dole days look like the pleasant tit-for-tat of a lively courtship" (*Key*, p. 354).

Belligerence is also evident in the religious attitudes of Sillitoe's characters. An atheist himself, Sillitoe attempts in the Seaton novels to establish an atheistic tradition for his working-class heroes.⁷ Harold Seaton's father-in-law, the blacksmith Merton, shocks his wife Mary with his heretical outbursts, and Harold himself replies to his wife Vera's remonstrance "God will pay you out" with "What bastard God? . . . There ain't no bastard God" (*Key*, p. 51). His sons carry on the tradition. Arthur refuses to believe in God. Brian as a child associates God with garbage, thinking the Sanitation Department incinerator is "like the inside of a church" (p. 84); he later concludes that "there ain't no God" (p. 327). Such irreverent outbursts serve to reinforce the working-class attitude of angry protest against a world that for them turns on social inequality and injustice.

Sillitoe, in speaking of the phenomenon of protest in recent English fiction, described the writers as "taking society to pieces and trying to show what it was made of. Perhaps after they had taken off the outer casing, found out more or less what made society tick and shown this in all its detail, these writers or new writers after them would not only express anger and protest, but would be able to show the positive way out."⁸ Sillitoe's own fiction follows this pattern. While the significance of his Seaton novels lies primarily in their exposure of the nature of working-class dissatisfaction and rebellion, his next work, *The Death of William Posters*, goes beyond "anger and protest" and attempts through a sharply-defined focus on the personal battles of the hero, Frank Dawley, "to show the positive way out".

Frank Dawley comes from the same Nottingham milieu that produced the Seatons. Unlike them, however, he feels the need to escape to a wider world and to do battle with the William Posters syndrome, based on his carefully-contrived legend of a working-class man who felt forever persecuted, who lived "his life on the assumption that whatever he wanted was unattainable".⁹ Such a struggle would be inconceivable to the Seatons, for in their acceptance of the idea of oppression they find a basis for the belligerence that defines their existence. The working-class background is deliberately muted in this novel, and its essentially negative visceral rebellion against an uncaring establishment is replaced by a thoughtful search for values that transcend class barriers.

Frank Dawley's attempts to escape the Posters ethos take him far beyond

Nottingham factory and slum, and specifically to the beds of two married middle-class women. His relationships with these women and their husbands show a Sillitoe hero for the first time in a middle-class world of the newly affluent. He soon learns that this world of advertising and suburbia, of conspicuous consumption and intellectual vacuity, offers him no answers. The shallowness of the concern with appearance, with having the proper image or wearing the right mask, is revealed by an emphasis on the shibboleths of class. Keith Shipley, the advertising copy-writer and husband of Dawley's first mistress, had at one time "travelled around in a Jag, but they were getting too common, so he preferred the distinction of anonymity in a souped-up sports. In any case, he'd soon be a shade too old for a Jag. Maybe after forty he'd change to a Mini, just to be on the safe side" (p. 124). And Myra, Dawley's second mistress, lives in the right Georgian home in suburbia where she "bottled, smoked, salted, pickled, baked and pre-packed; collected cook books and recipes from the *Observer* and *Sunday Times*, wrote cheques for magazines pandering to house and home, namely Which? Where? How? When? and What?—a super house-holder driven into the ground by it" (p. 169).

Frank Dawley's attempt to do battle with the values of such a world is symbolically centred in his fight with Keith Shipley. A verbal confrontation is followed by a fist fight in which Keith is bested, but Frank is frightened by a sense of the inadequacy of physical conflict. Bred to belligerence, he feels lost in the world of middle-class mores "because it let him down at such a time, didn't tell him how to avoid a punch-up or how to survive it" (p. 147).

Disillusioned by society, Frank now turns inward to find answers, and Sillitoe is able to preserve a metaphorical unity in the novel by describing the interior struggle in terms of war. "A man's body is a battlefield of rat and anti-rat—the rat to kill, and the other to keep him human. Every man has his rat, and his own brown rat sitting like an alter ego on his shoulder, dodging inside when storms flash and adversity baffles the air to stoke the inner chaos that such sights cause" (p. 221). To find conditions favourable to the satisfactory resolution of this conflict, Sillitoe feels it necessary to remove the beleaguered hero from a world in which he is socially frustrated. His exiling of Frank to the North African desert accomplishes this, and at the same time indicates an increasing disenchantment with class allegiance of any kind. Hope for the ultimate creation of a social utopia is now seen to rest not in class struggle, but in individual recognition of the need for social reorganization.

This is made clear in the desert. Even here the battle imagery dominates, and in the last chapters of the novel Frank's internal conflict is paralleled

by his physical involvement in gun-running and guerilla warfare. The perils of this activity stimulate him to reflect carefully on his past life, and finally lead him to a rejection of his identification with William Posters. He comes to laugh bitterly at his early confinement in a class precept that told him "since something in life was unattainable you had to stop reaching for it, that it was better to rot among the ruins and slums of a played-out way of life, persecuted and prosecuted, flitting from wall to shadow . . . in an ever narrowing maze with misery and failure at the middle" (p. 311). The Seaton-Posters negativism now gives way to an optimism that looks forward to the creation of a better world. The Seaton had simply rejected: "there ain't no God". Frank Dawley goes beyond rejection, offering an awareness of the possibilities for improvement and a militant willingness to work for their achievement. "The bum-bailiffs march up to the soul and sling God out kicking and screaming. Then the real things of life move in, and that space that God inhabited (all his bloody mansions) is enormous. We can get so much in there" (p. 260).

The creation of Frank Dawley suggests that a second stage has been reached in Sillitoe's campaign for the achievement of a utopian society. The Seaton novels of class view and reject the things which are; *The Death of William Posters* begins to show us "the positive way out" to what might be. This mood of affirmation continues to dominate *A Tree on Fire*, the latest novel Sillitoe has produced, in which an attempt is made to define the revolutionary cast of mind needed for effective social reorganization.

Frank Dawley is now actively involved in fighting the French in Algeria, and his life is linked through mutual friendship and beliefs with that of Albert Handley, the Lincolnshire artist-anarchist who also appears in *The Death of William Posters*. Like earlier Sillitoe heroes, the two men share in the working-class legacy of opposition to "the peculiar self-satisfied pipe-smoking resignation" of the comfortably-off "mellow people".¹⁰ Dawley pays lip service to his background by damning an English society "without intelligence or equality" as "an octopus sinking back in clouds of inkiness and sloth"; and Handley, in the act of seducing a bank manager's wife, contemptuously catalogues the tasteless opulence of middle-class bedroom furniture: the orange eiderdown, round piano-stools in powderpuff tops, and "His and Hers wardrobes and dressing-tables (how can he suspect anything with those staring at him on coming to bed every night?)" (pp. 415, 85). Yet compared with the pugnacious outbursts of the Seaton novels the tone is mild, a subdued reminder of working-class allegiances rather than a defiant enunciation of them.

The tremendous vitality of Sillitoe's characters is no longer dissipated

in bellicose railing against middle- and upper-class folly and privilege. Instead it is more positively directed towards the achievement of revolutionary goals in England and abroad. *A Tree on Fire* should be read as Sillitoe's manifesto of revolution, a preparation for the possible expressed through a detailed scrutiny of the conflicts of Frank Dawley and the convictions of Albert Handley.

Dawley, "godless and beleaguered" in the desert wilderness, is described by Handley as "a workman who saw the futility of his life . . . using the revolution as a spiritual quest" (pp. 173, 308). Guided and encouraged by Shelley, a romantic American to whom Mao Tse-tung's treatise on guerilla warfare is the "holiest of bibles", he comes to see the civil war as a ritual of purification, with rifles and machine-guns joining together in an apocalyptic chorus, "the new gunchurch of the revolution spitting out their cleansing hymns" (pp. 193, 209). Knowledgeable in the ways of war, he is also in a position to see man's need "to set the forces of liberation against his own heart and soul, the consciousness that controlled him, ambush the laws he lived by, mine and blow up all preconceptions . . . [and learn to] make one's life a protracted war against the flesh-built habits and indulgences" (p. 412). Dawley's involvement in the battle for Algerian independence therefore prepares him for the dual role of practical revolutionary and insurgent priest. At the end of the novel, reunited in England with Handley and those whom he loves, he stands ready for the "years of invigorating chaos ahead, of great ideas, and great work" (p. 447).

This dedication to social upheaval is fully shared by Albert Handley, the artist to whom belligerence is a way of life. Stimulated by the "acceptable torment of domestic war" he moulds his dependents—a wife, seven children and a mentally-disturbed brother—into a fighting band of dissidents, "*franc-tireurs* of the atomic and conformist age" (pp. 99, 433). Their Jerusalem-on-the-Wolds is built into a considerable storehouse of ammunition and food, a preparation for the turbulent times they hasten by a steady flow of seditious propaganda. Handley's theory of social reorganization, worked out in a carefully kept note-book, is based on the premise that violent change is necessary to unsettle the comfortable prejudices of "an island where no armies have moved or revolutions swayed for hundreds of years and where liberty has no meaning any more" (p. 279). To promote his convictions he invests money in industrial shares and then, with calculated irony, uses the dividends to support revolutionary organizations whose aim is the total disruption of the English way of life.

Even Handley's attitude to his art is coloured by his revolutionary phil-

osophy. Feeding on the spiritual energy he gets from the idea of revolution, he transforms a desert waste of canvas into a humanized landscape of violent change and offers his viewers a perspective on it through the prophetic lens of "the magic eye . . . of generations and regeneration" (p. 102). As artist he glories in his freedom from the restraints of conventional society, and comes to see himself as the eternal visionary "neither young nor old, clock-smashed, calendar-burned and picking my teeth with the compass needle" (p. 106).

Sillitoe's persistent emphasis on the revolutionary activities of his heroes points up his concern with what Denis Donoghue calls "the ordinary universe". He continues to feel it worthwhile to criticize society; and because he is one of the few serious writers today who has not disowned society for the autonomy of the imagination, he makes a legitimate and significant claim on our attention. His fiction reminds us that the tradition of social commitment in literature is not dead, for like William Blake he exults in the reformer's battle-cry:

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

NOTES

1. Alan Sillitoe, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (New York: Signet Books, 1959), p. 7. (All page references are to editions cited.)
2. ———, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (New York: Signet Books, 1958), p. 189.
3. ———, *Key to the Door* (London: W. H. Allen, 1961), p. 223.
4. The fact that Sillitoe's own initials match those of his first hero may indicate his sympathy with the sentiments expressed.
5. Irving Howe, "The Worker as a Young Tough", *New Republic* CXLI (Aug. 24, 1959), 28.
6. Alan Sillitoe, "The Decline and Fall of Frankie Buller" in *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, p. 128.
7. ———, *Road to Volgograd* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), p. 23.
8. Nina Matveyeva, "Alan Sillitoe Visits Our Office", *Soviet Literature* no. 9 (1963), 181.
9. Alan Sillitoe, *The Death of William Posters* (London: W. H. Allen, 1965), p. 310.
10. ———, *A Tree on Fire* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 415.