

EDITH SITWELL: A STUDY
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INTRODUCTION

There is an old rumor, largely circulated by artists, one may suspect, that artistic taste in any era lags behind artistic expression sometimes as much as twenty years. Whether this assumption is defensible or not is not the concern of this thesis, except insofar as it may be applied to the popular rejection of modern poets in favor of the writers of an earlier day.

Two purposes emerge as the objectives of this thesis: first, the attempt will be made to demonstrate that the modern poetry of at least one of this era's poets, Edith Sitwell, has great merit, and, secondly, the effort will be made to show that this poetry is not, as has been charged by the "cultural laggards," unintelligible and uncommunicative, but instead is both intelligible and communicative and, as such, offers appropriate material for oral reading.

The reference to a so-called "cultural lag" is important to consideration of these two purposes. This becomes apparent when one realizes that acceptance of Miss Sitwell's worth must rest largely upon a recognition of new forms and values in poetry, new expressions of experience and new methods of revealing that experience... or at least, new interpretations of the qualities which have been universal in poetry since Homer first sang of the wrath of Achilles. When, or if, such innovations are accepted, thus bridging the "cultural gap," it is the belief of the author that the major premises of this study will also be acknowledged, as tenable.

For purposes of unconfused consideration, this thesis has been arbitrarily divided into four parts:

Chapter 1 deals with the social, intellectual and historical backgrounds which produced Edith Sitwell, as well as a collection of biographical incidents chosen to reveal her essential character and the influences which have molded her.

Chapter II is devoted to a consideration of Miss Sitwell's poetic techniques.

Chapter III follows her development as a poet, stressing her themes and materials as found in fairly distinct periods of writing.

Chapter IV, in summarizing the values discovered in the chapters, is designed to show the appropriateness and values of Edith Sitwell's poetry for Interpretative Reading.

To remedy any large disparities which might result from this separatist consideration of the elements in Miss Sitwell's work, each section devotes a portion of the commentary to relating the material of that section with the rest of the thesis. Unfortunately for the hurried reader, this method of treatment demands that all portions of the paper must be read in the order in which they appear if an appreciation and understanding of Edith Sitwell's poetry if desired from this thesis.

Limitations of this study are not only those inflicted by the generality and brevity of its nature. Limitations are also encountered in the matter of reference material available and the skill of the commentators quoted and that of the author himself. The paucity of biographical material or personal remembrances of Miss Sitwell, for example, seriously hampers an attempt at complete biography. However, the careful selection of a rather scattered collection of incidents is a sincere effort to give as full, accurate and rich a picture

of Edith Sitwell as possible. This is not an integrated chronological account, nor was it so intended. Its aim is merely to introduce the reader to the poet, prefatory to the consideration of her poetry.

Techniques, materials and philosophical developments are, again, apt subjects for volumes of analysis and criticism. Inevitably, in a thesis of this type, only the surface of such materials can be touched.

Lastly, the limitations which are always imposed upon an evaluatory section, owing to the education, personality and tastes of the evaluator, must be taken into consideration. The author has been in sympathy with Miss Sitwell and has made a sincere attempt to present her and her poetry in the light of his appreciation and understanding. He has not ignored the faults of her work, nor has he made them the focal point of the study.

EDITH SITWELL: A STUDY

CHAPTER I

“NEW WINDS OVER OLD LANDSCAPES”

I. Edith Sitwell’s Historical Backgrounds.

It was 1807. Victoria was on the throne. To some Englishmen, it seemed as if Victoria had always been on the throne, so long had been her reign. The influence of this Queen had had such a powerful impact upon her subjects – and the world – that her name became attached for all time to political philosophies, architecture, poetry, morality, or whatever received the Queen’s favorable notice.

Victoria’s power, both as the symbol of English Empire and as a strong, dignified personality was so firm in its hold upon art and letters that one scholar was moved to name the death of Queen Victoria as one of the three main factors which made possible the new developments and experiments of artists over the past half-century – the other two factors being the advance of science and great archeological discoveries.¹ Into this cultural, economic and moral atmosphere known as “Victorian,” Edith Sitwell was born in 1887.

But before the story of the woman and the poet can be told, it is vital to set the scene by looking closely at a few of the trends in literature and art and the life of the mind during the last years of Victoria’s reign, as well as to consider some of the aspects of the life

¹ Tonks, Prof. Henry. “The Vicissitudes of Art,” Fifty Years. p. 57

of the average “Victorian.”

Victoria had ascended the English throne a young, inexperienced queen with a determination to serve her subjects and her country. She brought to the throne and to the whole of England a new sense of greatness and election as a leader among the powers of the world. Following a succession of monarchs whose personal and public actions had done nothing to enhance the stature of the throne nor to inspire the devotion of their people, Victoria became the pattern of the “good” wife and mother; pious, worthy, respectable, sympathetic and determined. Hinchman says of her, “Victoria was a truly great queen; for, in addition to her model private life, she showed consistently, through the longest reign in English history, devotion to her people, high courage and common sense...”²

During her reign the frontiers of England had been expanded by colonization, “protection” and trade to a point never before matched in English history. The old bromides “Brittania rules the waves” and “The sun never sets on the British Empire” became undeniable actualities. Prosperity, complacency and severe conservatism followed in the wake of Victorian virtues, however. These were the peculiar properties of those Victorians who surrounded Edith Sitwell as a child and who so markedly precipitated in her an emotional, intellectual and cultural rebellion.

Life for the English middle-classes in the last decade of the 19th Century was fairly settled and comfortable. People found great pleasure in reading books with strong moral uplift, looking at pictures by Edwin Landseer, or strolling for self-improvement and

² Hinchman, Walter S. England: A Short Account of Its Culture, p. 299.

exercise in city parks and country lanes. For the average “shopkeeper” Briton, it was a full, placid – if somewhat dull – satisfying life.³

The gentry and nobility were enjoying generally the profits of Victoria’s expansion into India and South Africa, so that they were able to lead a more colorful and eventful sort of life than the middle-class. Balls, house parties, excursions, trips abroad and concerts were all in great vogue, and the younger set participated as actively as horse-and-buggy transportation would permit. But this gay social life was no more wild and unrestrained than the merchant’s stroll in the park, since the chaperon system was in full blossom as a direct result of the strict Victorian morality. Victoria served as a standard model to all social classes. Her example as a wife and mother seems to have motivated a large part of the social whirl, for the desire for a home and family was uppermost in the minds of all the young ladies. Mary, Countess of Lovelace bewails the stumbling block to romance which British Imperialism had created: “The great difficulty... is the shortage of the unattached male... This shortage is the price that we pay for our splendid Empire, and the price is mainly paid by women.”⁴

In the field of art, the forms of expression at the end of the century were much the same as those in the earlier years. The great Victorian writers and artists and scientists responsible for establishing the patterns of thought and techniques of execution were of the earlier part of the century – men like Tennyson, Darwin, Millais – though they lived on into the later years. Those who followed them, with the exception of a few outstanding men of Browning’s genius,

³ Hinchman, Walter S. *Op. cit.* pp. 298-315.

created within the same moral, aesthetic and intellectual framework.⁵

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, the British essayist and scholar, felt the constriction of this static state in the arts of expression and philosophy while a student at Oxford in the 1880's, and he vividly attests the joy with which new writers were received, especially those who heralded the experimentation of the 20th Century.⁶ Of course, the young Oxonian was much more ready to accept the new and the startling than was his settled, complacent parent.

Such was the climate of culture and life in England as Victoria's reign drew to a close. Into this genteel, moral, assured and literarily "Romantic" world was born Edith Sitwell, a person destined to rebel against the settled, the assured and the "poem with a moral." She was the woman who was to create a sensation – and a shock – among the Victorians and Edwardians surrounding her, when she produced such lines as:

"The moon smelt sweet as nutmeg-root
On the ripe peach-trees' leaves and fruit..."⁷

II. Edith Sitwell's Family Influences.

That Edith Sitwell would be gifted, or at least unusual, in some way could almost have been predicted at birth, for her ancestors were as bizarre and imaginative a crew of human beings as one could devise. They included such people who left an unforgettable stamp on history as the Plantagenet Kings, Queen Elizabeth, the Earl of Leicester – Shakespeare's patron, Lady

⁴ Countess of Lovelace. "Society and the Season," Fifty Years. pp. 46-9.

⁵ Hinchman, Walter S. Op. cit. p. 298.

⁶ Quiller-Couch, Sir A. "Books and Other Friends," Fifty Years. pp. 46-9.

⁷ Sitwell, Edith. "Green Geese," The Canticle of the Rose. p. 12.

Conyngham – mistress of George IV, Arabella Churchill – mistress of James II, the Duke of Wellington, and Sir Sitwell Sitwell, who in 1806 won the favor of the Prince Regent by erecting a new ballroom at the family estate, Renishaw, for a single party in the Prince's honor. Another relative who liked to live in the grand style was Lord Londesborough, Edith's maternal grandfather. He caused quite a stir each summer at Scarborough by having a mile or scarlet carpet unrolled for him so that his feet would not have to be soiled in transit between his summer estate and the seaside.⁸

Edith's parents, Sir George Sitwell and Lady Ida, were no less unusual and erratic than their illustrious forbears. Sir George, the fourth Baronet in his line, was Lord of the Manor at Renishaw, held by the Sitwells since 1301. During his lifetime he devoted himself to many endeavors and fields of study, although the operation of the 5,000 acre Renishaw estate, Londesborough's Scarborough summer estate – where Edith was born, and a former Cardinal's palace in Italy and the strict upbringing of his offspring were of paramount importance.

The vivid series of autobiographies written by Sir Osbert Sitwell, Edith's brother, recount with zest some of the quixotic notions Sir George possessed. Once, fascinated with a learned treatise on design and composition in rural landscapes, Sir George had all his cows given a base coat of white paint, upon which blue Chinese characters were drawn.⁹ Other projects involved the construction of Palladian bridges and Baroque vistas in the extensive gardens of Renishaw, or plunging into some revival of the ancient barter system,

⁸ "The Sitwells," Life Magazine. (Dec. 8, 1948), p. 172.

using potatoes for exchange instead of currency. The Sitwell autobiographies show that this latter enterprise was more than a passing fancy for Sir George, while tacitly approving of Victoria and the traditions of her time, he was actually living in an ivory tower of Gothic construction, roughly placed in history at the 14th or 15th century. His letters, his advice to his children, his books, his hobbies and his various business undertakings all reflect this fixation. It is reported that he would monopolize dinner conversation by a discussion of the Black Death or the use of the fork in the 13th Century.¹⁰

Sir George's convictions on the merit and interest of the medieval are well suggested by his preface to Tales of My Native Village, one of his numerous works on life in the Middle Ages.

“That it (the book) dwells upon the beauty and wisdom, rather than upon the follies and superstitions and cruelties of the Gothic world... I do not deny; so many recent writers, misled by the rhetorical exaggerations of the old sermons and satires, have busied themselves in exposing the weaknesses of our ancestors, that a little weight needs to be thrown into the other scale if Truth is to hold her balance even.”¹¹

Sir George dedicated himself to the proposition that past experiences can offer things which may be practical for modern use, and his book was designed to point up these helpful hints. Sir Osbert points out that his father seemed to have an uncanny facility for selecting those hints manifestly the most impractical and inconvenient in modern life, and when the medieval devices clashed, Sir George would always assume – occasionally in a towering ill-humor – that it was because the modern world was at fault. At times, Sir George

⁹ Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁰ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Left Hand Right Hand!, The Scarlet Tree, Great Morning!, Laughter in the Next Room. (The remainder of the biographical material in this chapter unless otherwise identified, is summarized from these four volumes.)

would become so incensed at the inability of his contemporaries to adapt themselves to medieval custom that both family and servants found it wiser to avoid him until he had cooled off.

Lady Ida, on the other hand, seemed to be at fault for not living enough in the past. She was charming, attractive, generous to the proverbial fault and happiest when surrounded by a coterie of admiring friends. She was a great lover of parties and outings of all sorts, but, in keeping with Victorian tradition, never allowed herself any action unworthy of her station. Unfortunately, for both Lady Ida and her family, she was too trusting, too kind, too fond of luxury. She had been raised in an extremely wealthy family, developing a taste for fine clothes, extravagant gifts to friends and moderate social gambling – which was condoned in women of the nobility. Flattered and cajoled at every turn by a bevy of women friends who fed upon her generosity, and suffering sizable losses in her wagering on races Lady Ida was forced to go into debt privately to continue her pleasures. She knew Sir George would be furious to learn how much she had lost, so she took her money problems to an unscrupulous usurer who dragged her deeper into debt and threatened her with blackmail.

When Lady Ida's plight was finally revealed to Sir George, he insisted, rather than pay the debts and blackmail costs, that she stand trial to clear her name and render the debts invalid. The humiliating publicity, the arrogant attitude of Sir George, the nervous strain of testifying and waiting a decision took a tremendous toll of Lady Ida's health and personality. Since the trials were held when

¹¹ Sitwell, Sir George. Tales of My Native Village, p. i.

Edith was in her teens, the impact upon her was also terrific. The “appalling culmination” according to Sir Osbert was that the usurer won the decision, leaving Lady Ida guilty and shamed. For the rest of her life, she was unable to forget the ordeal and she never recovered her former energy and zest for living.¹²

These, then, are Miss Sitwell’s parents: Sir George, an eccentric, brilliant, strong-willed man who lived in the Middle Ages, and Lady Ida, a handsome, high-born woman whose love of luxury and extravagant nature nearly ruined her life.

From this introduction to Edith Sitwell’s parents, it may be easier to understand her unusual childhood. The Sitwell children, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell – in order of birth – were raised in keeping with the rules of the period – with Gothic overtones – and “given every advantage” due children of their class. But it soon became apparent that these three would not be bound by the convenience of the times. Had the three not been so similar in their keen interest in the new, the vivid, and the unusual, and so alike in their distastes for the conventional, it is possible that their collective childhoods would have been intolerable. As it was, mutual sympathy and Edith’s brilliant guidance, helped them to endure their upbringing and break away into the new world of the 20th Century.

There is so little biographical material available that the story of Edith’s upbringing can only be suggested by the few incidents recorded in Sir Osbert’s works. Early accounts of Edith stress her precocity, her childishly appealing face and her already warm personality. Her Aunt Florence writes of her at three and a half:

¹² Sitwel, Sir Osbert. Great Morning! pp. 181-4.

“Baby is Just like a child in a story book in appearance, with fat cheeks, sometimes like pink campions, blue eyes and fair curls, a dear little person, touchingly devoted to her dog, Dido. She seems very young... to have visited Venice, but has quite a memory for her tour abroad.”¹³

Several weeks later Edith declared:

“No little “gell” has had so many night journeys as I’ve had – but, oh, how I’ve had to sing and repeat things to amuse the grown-up people!”¹⁴

At five, Edith’s Aunt Florence again devoted space in her diary to the future poet:

“Dear little E has grown round one’s heart, and it was sad parting with her... Yesterday morning I had vases in the library to arrange with evergreens – we had no flowers for that room. The child wanted to help – I handed her the leaves, and I think she did four vases with her dear little hands, taking great pains to make them pretty, and making quaint remarks, such as ‘We must make the best of things,’ ‘We mustn’t carol (quarrel) with what we’ve got.’ ... It is wonderful the way in which the child is getting on with her reading – really teaching herself –, asking the meaning of unknown words, and remembering them. Fairy tales have been her especial delight. She is very reflective and at the same time full of fun and mischief, delighting in a joke.”¹⁵

Two years later, says Sir Osbert, there was no sign of the small child of the diaries. She was “thin, tall for her age, with the budding profile of a gothic effigy or a portrait by a Sienese master; she was already the same person I know today.”¹⁶

After the birth of Osbert, the child’s idyll that Edith had been experiencing abruptly vanished. Now it was Osbert who was to be taken on long trips and made much over by relatives and parents. Sir George had definite and somewhat feudal notions about the usefulness of women, so Edith was summarily shoved into second position to make way for Osbert, the logical inheritor of title and estate. This changed state of affairs prompted Edith to run away

¹³ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. *Left Hand, Right Hand!* p. 104.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁵ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. *Left Hand, Right Hand!* p. 107-8.

from home, but being hampered in her escape by being unable to lace her boots, she was captured before she had gone far.

Sir George and Lady Ida, generally noted for their broad if quixotic senses of humor, had absolutely no patience with Edith when she did such things. They had wanted to produce some sort of paragon of all their own virtues in a fifty-fifty balance. Instead, they had gotten a child who resembled her ancestors, rather than her parents. She had none of the qualities her parents desired... not even a love of "sport," a thing Lady Ida prized most highly. She was "a small creature with an alien and immortal soul, difficult to bend or mold to the comfortable, late Victorian conventions of her class."¹⁷

The infinite pathos of Edith's childhood, though surrounded by every luxury and with the invaluable companionship of Osbert and the warm, motherly nurse, Davis, is best captured in this passage from Left Hand, Right Hand!:

"I doubt whether any child was ever more mismanaged by her parents; they failed entirely to comprehend the sort of being who was in process of flowering before their eyes, they mistook nervous sensibility for awkwardness, imagination for falsehood, and a capacity for throwing the cloak of drama over everyday events – often the sign of an artist – for being affected. As she grew older, instead of allowing her to find her own range, in the manner that she had taught herself to read, they tried to force her to comply with their own measurements. Her seriousness, and an attitude of criticism which gradually developed in her concerning current class beliefs... terrified my mother, albeit she enjoyed, and always more with the passing years, the immense sense of fun... which continually developed. My father, on the other hand, insisted on her admiring the things which he, with a taste he held to be infallible, himself admired. If she wanted to play the piano, no, it must be the cello instead, for he, profoundly unmusical though he was, had in his own mind decided that the cello was the finest of all instruments. Then where poetry was concerned, Swinburne must be bad for her to read, for he had not read him, and therefore could not like him: she ought to be content with

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁷ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Left Hand, Right Hand! p. 110.

Tennyson for beauty, Austin Dobson for charm, and Kipling for strength. Beside, Swinburne was not the sort of poet to read; my mother agreed. 'Morbid,' she pronounced, with some lack of conviction, for she never read a line of poetry of any sort..."¹⁸

All was not gloomy and sad at Renishaw, however, for there were always outings and strolls with Nurse Davis and little games to play with Osbert – for Sacheverell came into his childhood days when Edith was leaving them. The estate was of tremendous expanse, including within its bounds a great number of tenant farms, woods, streams, a town – in which Sir George established the Sitwell Press – , a number of large dwellings besides Renishaw Hall proper, and many tracts of landscape gardening. Sir George listed among his many talents mastery of gardening both practical and aesthetic. As a result the fairyland variety of plantings and architectural vistas built to set off different botanical specimens was almost beyond belief. The huge Hall itself combined many periods and styles. First built in the 17th Century, additions and subtractions had left little of its original appearance, but had added tremendously to the total area taken up by the Hall. There were vast rooms full of china and rare objects d'art which were only opened during the rare parties or the annual visiting season. There were tiny, abandoned attic rooms haunted by Sitwell family ghosts. Hosts of servants and guests were always to be found swarming through the house so that Edith had a remarkable world of reality upon which she could build her dream universes of escape.

A better picture of Edith and her immediate family than words can offer is to be found in "The Sitwell Group," painted by John Singer Sargeant in the Spring of 1900. In the true Victorian tradition, Sir George wanted to have the family live for all time in oil by some

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 110-11.

well-regarded painter of the period – Alma-Tadema being his first choice. Edith’s father was not too pleased with Sargeant or his work, but he was tolerant, since he felt he could help the painter by telling him how the group “ought” to be done. Being fond of small, refined features in a woman, Sir George pointed out that Edith’s nose “deviated slightly from the perpendicular” and he expressed a wish that Sargeant emphasize the defect to impress upon Edith the enormity of her failure to have an attractive face. Sir Osbert says of the encounter:

“This request much incensed Sargeant, obviously a very kind and considerate man; and he showed plainly that he regarded this as no way in which to speak of her personal aspect in front of a very shy and super-sensitive child of eleven. Perhaps, too, he may already have divined in her face and physique the germ of a remarkable and distinguished appearance which was later to appeal particularly to painters. At any rate he made her nose straight in his canvas and my father’s nose crooked, and absolutely refused to alter either of them, whatever my father might say.¹⁹

The picture²⁰ shows in some manner the spirit of genius and imagination which even then raised Edith above the petty hurts and disappointments of her childhood. It is indeed as if she were “listening for some sound she could scarcely catch as yet, some sound in the future, the particular rhythm that, as if she knew it, had been left to her, alone of those who speak our English tongue, to seize it, adding thereby a new and lovely melody to the innumerable

¹⁹ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. *Left Hand, Right Hand!* p. 266.

²⁰ “The Sitwell Group,” (Reproduction) *Life Magazine*. (Dec. 8, 1948), p. 172.

glories of English poetry.”²¹

At this time Edith was now 13 – she would cooperate with Osbert to lighten the atmosphere somewhat by administering special treats on unsuspecting relatives. Egged on by their governess, the two would bound into the bedroom of their grandmother Osborne and recite dramatically and in unison “The Revenge” or “The Absent-Minded Beggar.” Since the old lady suffered from a weak heart and did not in the least expect these forays, the effects were not happy. In desperation, grandmother Osborne discovered that the pianola could divert the well-meaning demons, for both children deeply loved music. Edith’s own ability as a musician, and her application was one day to make her a pianist admired and envied by concert artists, but Osbert lacked the inspiration of the muse for performance purposes, so his musical activities were duly curtailed.²²

Another form of entertainment furnished diversion for the young Sitwells during their childhood. Lady Ida and her friends were fond of presenting pageants for worthy causes – or for any reason at all – since the opportunity was provided for dressing up in all sorts of bizarre costumes. These pageants were gaudy affairs, watered-down versions of the Elizabethan court masque, consisting largely of unusual conceptions in costume and scenery of groups of ancient Greeks posed in stirring tableau. All the idle ladies and gentlemen at Renishaw – and there were a great many of them during the extended “season” when the Hall was full of ill-matched visitors getting on each other’s nerves – were eager to don the garb of Bourbon shepherds and shepherdesses to break the monotony of

²¹ Sitwell, Sir O. *Op. cit.* p. 274.

incessant tea-times. For Edith and her two brothers, the theatricals brought quite a different type of thrill; here was a glimpse of the world of music, magic and illusion.²³

Since theatricals seemed a sanctified outlet for any unfulfilled expression, the governesses of the visiting families contrived to stage a French play each year on Twelfth Night. The Sitwells and their unwilling cousins were presented in these dramas delivering exceedingly long speeches with no movement, so that attention would be paid to the fine diction. Given for the Renishaw tenants, no one of whom spoke French, the stagings were engineered by a visiting governess named Mlle. Dicky, whose pathetic character was captured in Edith Sitwell's "Mlle. Richarde."²⁴ The most memorable of these plays occurred one year when Edith was impersonating Mme. de Lamballe. It was not her contribution which stopped the show, however. Rather, while Edith solemnly declaimed her lines, the audience was convulsed by the Tom Sawyer-like trick of fishing off Mlle. Dicky's old yellow wig with a hook and line, the brainstorm of two of Edith's cousins who had become thoroughly sick of French plays.²⁵

Despite Edith's willing participation in such affairs and her earnest desire to comfort and entertain all those around her, she could never seem to satisfy her mother. Sir Osbert recalls that Lady Ida's circle of false friends urged her into all sorts of follies mainly for their own enrichment or amusement. Torturing Edith was not one of the least enjoyable pastimes. They encouraged Lady Ida to find fault

²² Sitwell, Sir Osbert. *The Scarlet Tree*, pp. 131, 134.

²³ Sitwell, Sir Osbert, *Op. cit.* pp. 55-6.

²⁴ Sitwell, Edith. *Collected Poems of Edith Sitwell*.

with Edith in public and embarrass her, as Sir Osbert asserts, “because Edith’s interests, even as a child, were in poetry, painting and music, the enemies of the frivolous and dull-minded...”²⁶ Edith was penalized to the extent that Osbert was privileged, and more and more she was kept from seeing him by being confined to her schoolroom. Sir Osbert suggests that her strong personality, imaginative mind and extremely sympathetic heart made her an uncomfortable companion for the conventional... and Lady Ida saw, perhaps, “A living embodiment of some past unhappiness of her own” in Edith. This made her cruel to the one person who would have responded most to her.²⁷

The vulgar practical jokes and boorish love of the “good sport” so typical of the Edwardian Englishman, as well as the insane delight in fox-hunting and grouse shooting for “pleasure” revolted Edith. It was so strong, this hatred of “sport” and all that “sportsmanship” connoted to the conventional English mind, that Edith in her later rebellions against the traditional and outworn patterns of conduct and expression was moved to comment that she had “in early life (taken) an intense dislike to simplicity, morris-dancing, a sense of humor and every kind of sport except reviewer-baiting...”²⁸

Her attitudes in these matters were not appreciated by her elders and betters, nor by any of her own age, excepting Osbert and Sacheverell, whose sex saved them from the scorn and hard words Edith received. Sir Osbert recounts:

“The continual killings seemed to her to be cruel, even insane.

²⁵ Sitwell, Sir O. *The Scarlet Tree*, pp. 219-24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

‘She ought to have asked to go out with the guns, even if she herself did not shoot; she might at least have attended a meet! And, if anything, my father’s inclination to nag at her on the one hand, my mother’s to fall into ungovernable and indeed terrifying rages with her, on the other, because of her non-conformity, seemed stronger when there were people, as here, to feed the fires of their discontent, and other children to set a standard by which to measure her attainments. ‘Dearest, you ought to make her like killing rabbits,’ one could hear the fun brigade urging on my mother.’²⁹

Sport was not the only thing in which Edith disappointed her father. First, she did not have a Du Maurier profile, she did not like “lawn tennis,” and she neither played the zither nor sang after dinner to entertain the guests. And, worse, to Sir George’s mind, she showed no interest in his stories about the Black Death and had no “natural feeling” for John Stuart Mill’s Principles of Political Economy.³⁰

Perhaps the most unhappy event of Edith’s youth was one which was dictated entirely out of love and a desire to “do the right thing.” Edith was 19 and at the age when marriageable young women should be launched into society with all the verve and élan their family fortunes and their own personalities could muster, so Sir George decided that a coming-out party was in order. Ordinarily, the customs of conventional society would not have troubled him in his gothic meditation, but for some reason the idea of a coming-out party appealed to him, and he resolved to make it the biggest celebration

²⁸ Kunitz, Stanley J. and Howard Haycraft. Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1926.

²⁹ Sitwell, Sir O. Op. cit. p. 217.

³⁰ Sitwell, Sir. O. Op. cit. p. 218.

Renishaw had seen in over a century.

Fantastically expensive and extensive preparations were made. Railroad trains and motor cars were chartered to take the guests to the races and on tours – this was to be long party. Food supplies suitable for a small army – only much more lavish and exotic than army fare – were garnered in, along with volunteer and conscript additions to the already large household and garden staffs. Ballroom and bedrooms that had been closed for years were opened and completely redecorated. Masterpieces imported from all over the Continent were placed on display. An orchestra of Hungarian Hussars was engaged to grind out music. The preparations, in short, “beggared all description.”

A distinct anti-climax was offered by the actual coming-out.

It developed that Sir George, with his preoccupation with the Black Death, had lost touch with current society and had invited large numbers of people who had been dead and buried for years. The guests who did come were tottering on the brink of the grave, so that the universal atmosphere of senility and rheumatism cast a gloomy pall. It was very far removed from the treat Sir George had intended to give Edith on her coming into young womanhood.³¹

III. Edith Sitwell's Education.

The advantages of being born into a wealthy and titled family seem to outweigh those disadvantages which hung so heavily over Edith. No middle-class family could provide such opportunities for travel, private instruction, acquaintance with noted and interesting

³¹ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Laughter in the Next Room.

personalities and generally having more experience in observing nature and developing the mind.

Another factor is important. The seclusion of Renishaw and the naturally exclusive circles in which the Sitwells moved meant that Edith was for a long time shielded from the grim realities of the workaday world with its brutally mistreated coal miners, its starving farmers and its grubbing clerks. In time she learned, but only when she had gained an insight and perspective which enabled her to see clearly the tragedy of the English social and economic system. The poetic world of fancy of her childhood was thus not damaged nor corrupted by such influences. It is possible that this sustained isolation is the thing which has kept Miss Sitwell in such close contact with the magical world of the real-unreal one finds in her poetry, without dimming her awareness of actuality.

Edith's early education was gained largely through travel, visits to relatives and her own initiative, as evidenced by her self-teaching of reading. She also had been taught the arts of arithmetic and spelling and the other elementary subjects by her nurse, Davis, and her governess, Miss King-Church. These two not only gave her her primary education, but also shielded her from the temperamental outbursts of her parents.

In Edith's 13th year, soon after the Sargeant painting had been completed, she was launched firmly but kindly upon the very special kind of education reserved for young girls of the period. As in all her previous education, her work was to be administered at home. She had her own schoolroom and her devoted governess. Miss King-Church, who had so ably encouraged Edith's artistic talents in her

childhood, now had no power to determine the direction of Edith's education and was forced to give up many of the projects in which she and Edith used to delight.

Sir George toyed with the idea of preparing Edith for a business career when he discovered her powerful disinclination to study shorthand. It was his notion that a person should always do one distasteful thing – especially if it were difficult – an idea he borrowed from Nietzsche. Lady Ida was firmly set against a business education, since it was obviously not suitable to a lady's upbringing. She insisted that Edith should have all the "usual advantages." Hence it was decided that Edith should learn to play the cello – which meant that her cherished piano study would be cut down – and acquire other unique and artistic skills after the manner, as Sir Osbert phrases it, of a geisha. Scarf dancing, water colors, recitation and small talk were included in the curriculum.³²

In addition to the training of the mind in such intricate matters, the body was also to receive attention. Edith was drilled in a great number of dances and cotillion figures which had passed out a century before. She was put through a rigorous course of gymnasium exercises because, as Sir George explained: "Nothin' a young man likes so much as a girl who's good at the parallel bars."³³ An extension of these activities was a peculiar system of tortures inflicted upon Edith in the name of health and beauty. A Dr. Grabbe was engaged to remold Edith's offensive – to Sir George – nose and other parts of her anatomy via a unique conglomeration of orthopedic thumbscrews, nose slams, ankle twistlers and, in short, "a thousand

³² Sitwell, Sir Osbert. The Scarlet Tree, p. 22.

little clever dodges for giving pain and taking money,”³⁴ This venture proved extremely costly to both physique and nervous system, and long months of electric treatments were later required to undo the mischief.

During Edith’s adolescence, the Edwardian era came into being. A reaction against Victorianism, it had no proper language of its own in which to express its emotions and new found freedoms, so that it became, in Sir Osbert’s words “empty and superficial.” This change bothered Edith’s father, who did not like change in any form, except in the matter of resuming old customs. The resulting fortification which he built around his family was apparently so impregnable that Edith, at the age of 14, had read all the children’s classics, but knew only Shelley and Shakespeare from the world of poetry.³⁵

With the marriage of Miss King-Church and her subsequent departure, Edith lost a good friend and a sympathetic teacher at the time when she most needed both. The vacancy was filled, however, by a young woman who proved to be a better teacher, a stronger champion and a dearer friend. The woman was Helen Rootham, who, after her tenure as governess to Edith was over, continued to be one of her closest confidantes and kindred spirits in the world of art and letters. Helen Rootham was a remarkable pianist, a better-than-average singer, a person with “a passion for truth and justice, together with a love and understanding of the arts.” “Helen was undoubtedly super-sensitive, apt, even, to be censorious,” says Sir

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

³⁴ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. *The Scarlet Tree*, p. 23.

³⁵ Dilly Tante (pseud.) *Living Authors*, p. 376.

Osbert, “but she was the first person we had ever met who had an artist’s respect for the arts, that particular way of regarding them as all important... without which it is impossible for a painter, writer or composer to achieve anything.”³⁶

She distinguished herself, not only for the immeasurable services she rendered from a cultural and critical standpoint to the three young Sitwells and for her lifelong encouragement of artistic expression and experiment in others, but also for her own literary achievements, not the least of which were her translation of Rimbaud’s Les Illuminations – which were set to music by Benjamin Britten – and her translations of Serbian ballads.³⁷ The possibility of her influence on Edith Sitwell in the realms of poetry is suggested by the presence of that same “poetic sense” which can be found in so many of Miss Sitwell’s early works.

Through Helen Rootham, the very cultivation of the arts and skills of young womanhood, which had been the bane of Edith’s life, became the avenue of her first real escape into the world of individuals with minds and ideas of their own. It was now possible for Edith to acquaint herself with the great poets, writers and painters of all time under the guidance of a person who well understood the great talent she was to encourage.

It was the fashion of that opulent period preceding World War I to send young English ladies to Paris to perfect their French, to Berlin to perfect their German and to Florence to perfect their Italian. And so it was that Edith was able, after her long and tedious apprenticeship at Renishaw – with only parentally guided tours of

³⁶ Sitwell, Sir O. The Scarlet Tree, pp. 174-5.

England and the Continent – to go to Paris to round out her education, accompanied by a governess wise in the ways of the Gallic.

This was probably the definite turning point in her maturation and assertion of individuality, for when she returned from Paris she was a freed being. Sir Osbert describes her on her return:

“Though it was only six months since I had last seen her, I found my sister a changed person. Tall for her age, she already wore her hair up, the lank, green-gold locks puffed and frizzed now in the mode of the time, and she was encased, too, by my parents’ orders, in clothes that, though no doubt designed to suit the girl of the period were most inappropriate to her gothic appearance... Still more, though, did I notice an alteration in her way of looking at things, for her absence from home... had lifted the whole range of her spirits... All her interests had blossomed in the short interval that had elapsed, and music and poetry burned in her blood like fire. She had become the most exhilarating and inspiring as well as understanding companion.”³⁸

Thus ended her “formal” education, though it was by no means an end to Edith Sitwell’s thirst for knowledge. Now completely cultivated, as a candidate for Edwardian matrimony – a state she was never to enter – Edith lived at Renishaw, taking jaunts to London to see the galleries, hear the concerts and watch the ballets with Helen Rootham or with Osbert who was serving with the Grenadier Guards. Occasional trips to Paris, Germany or Italy served a broadening and diverting function until that time when she would be able to leave

³⁷ Rootham, Helen. Kossovo: Heroic Songs of the Serbs, 99 pp.

home and begin her career.

IV. Edith Sitwell's Career and Achievements.

Edith began her career as a poet at the age of 24. Her first, "Serenade," was written during a "bout of measles."³⁹ Sir Osbert observed that it was not only unusual that a poet of Edith's order should come from such a background, but also that such a paper as the London Dally Mirror should be the first to publish her work, as was done in 1913.⁴⁰

In 1914, with the outbreak of the Great War, Edith had managed to leave Renishaw and get herself established in a small top-floor flat in Bayswater. Though not capacious, it was for many years a gathering place for writers, musicians, painters, and especially, young poets. She made it her business to encourage, to criticize and to win recognition for these new poets, since she knew only too well the meaning of discouragement.⁴¹

It would not be fair to assert that Edith Sitwell burst upon London's literary scene as a blinding meteor, yet scarcely had she published The Mother and other Poems (1915), Twentieth Century Harlequinade, and Other Poems (1916: with Osbert's collaboration) and Clown's Houses (1918) when her theories and practice in the "new" poetry became topics of controversy. Younger critics were eager in their acclaim and support, though they realized that the Sitwell techniques were distinctly hers and not to be used by any poetic, craftsman. Older critics were interested, but more reserved.

³⁸ Sitwell, Sir O. Op. cit., p. 274.

³⁹ Dilly Tante, Living Authors, p. 376.

⁴⁰ Sitwell, Sir O. Great Morning! p. 260.

The reading public was generally infuriated with this “new hodge-podge” where nothing seemed to make sense; meaningless words and scrambled sensations being used with gay abandon.⁴²

Richard Aldington, one of Amy Lowell’s group of Imagist poets who had done some shocking of their own a few years earlier, reviewed the work of all three Sitwells – for Osbert and Sacheverell had also begun to write – and praised it for its “energy and vitality and healthy scorn and keen sense of youth.” Of Edith’s Clown’s Houses, he said, “(it) gives me a most pleasant feeling of bright colors, movement and guitar playing.” He added that Edith possessed a painter’s sense of words and colors... “not even Any Lowell takes such pleasure in colors or records with such precision.⁴³

In his discussion, Aldington captured the essence of Edith’s revolt against her entire education and background, as well as all that the “sportsmanlike” and “ladylike” traditions implied. The spirit of her verse – and this proved true of her prose and her criticism in later years – was what Aldington described as not being a “Kultur” wielder, but “living in touch with the intellectual activity of the time.” The Sitwells know Victoria is dead; they realize that there is a continent of Europe; they do not belong to the “village idiot” school of poetry, and they avoid the amiable barrel-organ noises, euphemistically called “Georgian” poetry, Aldington concluded.⁴⁴

In launching her experiments in poetry, Edith made it quite clear that she was not trying to be simply quixotic. She had the very definite purpose in mind of trying to bring new life and meaning into

⁴¹ Sitwell, Sir O. Laughter in the Next Room, p. 80.

⁴² Millet, F. B. Contemporary British Literature, pp. 1-100.

⁴³ Aldington, Richard. “The Three Sitwells,” Poetry, p. 166.

English poetry by using new patterns of words with old ideas and new ideas with old patterns of words. She was revolting against the intellectual, emotional and imaginative stagnation which had held the English-speaking world in its thrall since the days of Tennyson. The bucolic expeditions of Housman's Shropshire Lad, while abandoning the showy techniques of Victorian poetry still had a type of moralizing, message-giving tone to them. She announced her opposition to bucolic simplicity, humility and expansiveness, and set about to show what complexity, arrogance and astringency could offer.⁴⁵ She finally dismissed the lot of the Romantics and the Georgians by decreeing that a lovely poem with no philosophy was preferable to a bad poem with philosophy.

While critics disputed the merit of her work, Edith continued writing her new poems and vigorously defending her offering with essays and lectures. In fact, it was the controversy that was stirred up over the "properness" of her images and unusual techniques which enabled her poetry to receive almost immediate recognition, rather than the scorn and neglect her severest critics had foreseen.

The wartime period also found Edith editing an annual review of poetry, "Wheels," whose principal function was revolt against tradition. This little magazine was published from 1916-1921, and depended mainly upon contributor who did not have material or prestige enough to command an audience in a single published work of their own. The press of her own writing activities made the time that she devoted to "Wheels" a real sacrifice.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 166.

⁴⁵ Millet, F. B. Contemporary British Literature, pp. 85-100.

⁴⁶ Kunitz, S. J. and Howard Haycraft. Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1927.

The war over, Osbert had obtained a house in London, and here he and Sacheverell began to devote themselves completely to writing. With then lived William Walton, the gifted young English composer, who was to make as great a name for himself in the world of music as Edith's in poetry. Osbert was gaining a reputation for wit and satire with his essays and sketches, while Sacheverell attained definite literary stature with publication of his Southern Baroque Art, generally acknowledged a work of the first magnitude, written when he was only 22.

Edith, always close to her brothers, identified herself with them literarily, socially and culturally so that the three became, as Mark Schorer observes, "extraordinary people... in a curious way the British and aristocratic equivalent of our (the United States') jazz age. They defied public values not through a fevered acceptance, as life principles, of what Housman called 'liquor, love and fight,' but by writing poems and prose that pictured modern life and contemporary values..."⁴⁷

Edith had become a very striking figure, being over six feet tall, blonde, with straight green-gold hair and "strange grey eyes." The haunting, refined facial structure and expression which so often reminded Sir Osbert of the Plantagenets or Queen Elizabeth, and the graceful, "gothic body" were accentuated by a deliberate adoption of medieval style clothing made of rich brocaded silks – a touch which pleased Edith's father immensely.⁴⁸

The "twenties" was a rich period for Edith in more than the world of writing. She found herself on intimate terms with Gertrude

⁴⁷ Schorer, Mark. (news quote) The Daily Californian. (Jan 5, 1951), p. 6.

Stein, as well as Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, Arnold Bennett – who once said of her, “she positively dazzles me” – Aldous and Julian Huxley, and, in fact, the whole coterie of artists and writers who made up the new intellectual movement in post-war England. She was now sought for formal dinner parties by society hostesses with the determination – and often the same methods – of the African big game hunters. To one such opportunist, who had ignored Edith until Clown’s Houses, The Wooden Pegasus and other early books had been pronounced successes, the poet addressed the following letter:

“Dear Mrs. Aimer,

After five years, you have again been kind enough to ask me to luncheon. The reason for this is that I have just published a successful book; the reason that I have had a successful book is that I do not go out and waste my time and energy, but work hard, morning and afternoon. If I accept your kind invitation, I shall have to leave off earlier in the morning, and shall be too tired to work in the afternoon. Then my next book will not be such a success, and you will not ask me to luncheon; or at the best, less often. So that, under these circumstances, I am sure you will agree it is wiser for me not to accept your present kind invitation.

Yours sincerely,
Edith Sitwell.”⁴⁹

Now publishing an average of one book a year, Edith continued this output until 1930, when she released Collected Poems; her monumental work, Alexander Pope, and the critical volume, The Pleasures of Poetry, in the same year. In the ten year period

⁴⁸ Op. cit. p. 1926.

⁴⁹ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Laughter in the Next Room, pp. 144-5.

preceding 1930 Edith had brought forth only one book of criticism, Poetry and Criticism (1925), and no other prose. Her reputation rested largely upon the works through which she became most widely known: Façade (1922), The Sleeping Beauty (1924), Troy Park (1925), Rustic Elegies (1927) and Gold Coast Customs (1929).

No matter how much success Edith's work attained, her father still journeyed up to London to have the last word with her on the follies of poetry. He once exclaimed, "Edith's poems make me look ridiculous!" When D. H. Lawrence called on Sir George, praising the abilities of his three offspring, Sir George could not suppress the feeling that Edith had made a big mistake in taking up the literary life.⁵⁰ This criticism came at a time when Gold Coast Customs (1929), a bitter comparison of modern civilization with aboriginal cannibals, was being hailed as proof of Edith's new maturity in poetic expression. Critic Edmund Gosse now claimed that she had "broken through to a new kind of perfection and beauty."⁵¹

With Edith's new ideas in poetry and criticism came also new ideas in presentation. With the publication of Façade, she entered into a crusade to render poetry orally in as completely abstract a manner as possible. Her friend William Walton composed a special score for the poems, making a brilliant integration of musical and speech sounds. This combination was then purveyed to the public by quite unusual means. The music was provided by an orchestra concealed behind a painted curtain. The words were spoken into a megaphonic device called a sengerphone also concealed behind the curtain. The aim was a high degree of elimination of the personality

⁵⁰ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Laughter in the Next Room, p. 356.

of the reader, but the first performances induced not aesthetic rapture but disgust and downright anger in the audiences. Later performances, among them one at the International Festival of Modern Music at Siena, were much more tolerantly and even appreciatively received.⁵² Façade, with its special music, has since been recorded by Walton and Miss Sitwell.⁵³

After 1930 Edith Sitwell spent the next seven years almost entirely on prose and anthologies. This concentration was mainly due to Edith's need for money, and her constant concern and care for her old governess and friend, Helen Rootham, whose long and mortal illness began shortly after 1929. Prose seemed to be easier for Edith to turn out, and wide sales would guarantee quick monetary return, so she published Bath (1932), The English Eccentrics (1933), Aspects of Modern Poetry (1934), Victoria of England (1936) and I Live Under a Black Sun (1937). It was not until 1938, when Helen died, that Edith could finally relax and find heart and time to return to poetry. Her mother had died after a short illness in 1937, and Sir George was to die of old age in Italy within a year, so her disinclination to write can well be understood.

Edith Sitwell was well past the periods of experimentation. The trials and successes she had undergone had changed the child's precocity into a deep and abiding maturity, a breadth of outlook and depth of understanding. In her search for a new voice in poetry, she had found not only that, but also the key to the riddle of existence and the mystery of personality. Her poetry began to reflect more and

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 330-1.

⁵² Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Laughter in the Next Room, pp. 206-23.

⁵³ Sitwell, E. Façade. (Columbia Recording). Standard and LP.

more the qualities of the philosopher as she sought to come to terms with a world at war. Out of the war came Song of the Cold, Street Songs and The Shadow of Cain, followed by a selective anthology of all her poetry, The Canticle the Rose, in 1949.⁵⁴ Recognition of her new stature and her past achievements was finally granted by England. Among the most important awards given her were the Medal of the Royal Society of Literature and an honorary Litt. D., conferred at Leeds in 1948.

Today, at 64, Edith Sitwell is as full of mischief, imagination, sensitivity, kindness and genius as she ever was in her youth. In fact, the mischievous and imaginative qualities seem to be the first appeals for newcomers to her works. These qualities, sometimes confused with eccentricity, were greatly exploited when Dr. Edith and Sir Osbert came to the United States on their first lecture-tour in 1948. The more sophisticated entertainers brought the Sitwells to public attention by composing parodies on their verse which sent audiences scurrying to the libraries to see if Dr. Edith actually did write such strange poetry.

With this sort of publicity awaiting them, it is proof of the Sitwells' great insight into character that they were able to live up to all expectations of wit and mischief with an engaging cleverness. But once the audiences had been captured, the Sitwells set to work to gain acceptance for their verse, as well as for their interpretations of the work of great English poets. Their success may be measured by the booking of another tour for 1950-1 – recently completed, the reissuing of several of Dr. Edith's older works and the appearance of

⁵⁴ See Appendix I for list of most important prose and poetry.

all four of Sir Osbert's autobiographies on the best-seller lists.

In 1948 New Yorkers were apparently captivated with the sight of Dr. Edith sweeping around the city "looking like a medieval sorceress, in flowing capes and gowns topped off by a vermillion turban,"⁵⁵ for Life Magazine burst forth with an eight-page article on the Sitwells, featuring a two-page spread showing Dr. Edith and Sir Osbert staring pensively into a Town Hall audience. There followed a number of Cecil Beaton photos showing Edith variously as a coffin effigy, and a harpist. Of the latter, Miss Sitwell said, "Only in heaven will I play the harp, and I'm thinking over my repertoire now, as I haven't much longer. I think it will be Debussy..."⁵⁶

Life, in its characteristic manner, called Miss Sitwell "sibyllike" and intimated that she was a candidate to succeed John Masefield as England's Poet Laureate. Dr. Edith told reporters of the affection she felt for America and the American people, commenting on their kindness and extreme generosity. Sir Osbert had noted in The Scarlet Tree that she had always been fond of Americans and their country, though she became violently ill when she listened to John Phillip Sousa's patriotic "Stars and Stripes Forever."⁵⁷ When asked at a press conference about her unusual garb – unusual for New York – she protested that she had no intention of shocking people. "Who would purposely try to annoy the public?" she asked. "I would," said Sir Osbert. "Frequently have."⁵⁸

This casual and friendly manner, together with a quality of approachability not generally associated with English aristocracy or

⁵⁵ "The Sitwells." Life Magazine, p. 166.

⁵⁶ "The Sitwells," Life Magazine, pp. 162-3, 171.

⁵⁷ Sitwell, Sir Osbert, The Scarlet Tree, p. 31.

among poets, won for the Sitwells the personal and the literary friendship of a large audience of Americans. It is somehow fitting that the vitality, imagination and insight of Edith Sitwell's poetry should come into its own with a nation of vital and imaginative people.

This then is Edith Sitwell: the woman whose poetry began with lines like these:

“When spring; begins, the maids in flocks
Walk in soft fields, and their sheepskin locks

Fall shadowless, soft as music, round
Their jonquil eyelids and reach the ground...”⁵⁹

and has progressed to lines like these:

“But I saw the little Ant-men as they ran
Carrying the world's weight of the world's filth
And the filth in the heart of Man –
Compressed till those lusts and greeds had a greater
heat than that of the Sun.

And the ray from that heat came soundless, shook the sky
As if in search of food, and squeezed the stems
Of all that grows on earth till they were dry –
And drank the marrow of the bone:
The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed, are gone –
Or black as thunder lie and grin at the murdered Sun.

The living blind and seeing Dead together lie
As if in love There was no more hating then,
And no more love: Gone is the heart of Man.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Life, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁵⁹ Sitwell, Edith. “Spring,” The Canticle of the Rose, p. 4.

⁶⁰ Sitwell, Edith. Op. cit., p. 271.

CHAPTER II

“THE NEW VERSE CONTROVERSY”

I. Edith Sitwell’s Clash With Literary Tradition.

To the Editor of the Spectator:

Sir: May an old reader of the Spectator make an appeal to you in connection with the poetry which you publish now and again? And that is that you would be so good as to provide some clue to the meaning of such verses as those by Miss Sitwell in your issue of Nov. 18th. Doubtless, if one possessed the key, the mystery could be unlocked. Perhaps the mention of Professor Goose-cap is intended for the key.⁶¹ But then, who

⁶¹ Refers to Edith Sitwell’s poem, “Promenade Sentimental... Professor Goose-cap Speaks.”

in the world is he? As it is, the lines are wholly unintelligible to me.... To one not wholly unread in the lyrics of the Greek anthology, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats – not to mention the discredited Victorians – such writing reads as mere juggling with words.... We old fogies – for I cannot suppose I am alone in my bewilderment – would like to be told in plain language, suitable for our superannuated wits, what it is that is so much admired in works of this character, and above all what they are about.

I am, Sir, etc.,
2 Bedford Sq. W. H. Ward⁶²

As the foregoing letter intimates, Edith Sitwell's poetry was not at first received with plaudits from every quarter. She had her defenders in people like Mrs. A. Williams-Ellis, poetry editor of The Spectator, who answered Ward, saying that the seeming unintelligibility and obscurity of "Promenade Sentimental" should be no drawback to appreciating it as a poem. She asserted that on first reading a poem, one is hit by electric shocks or linguistic highlights, not by the logical meaning, and it is these moments which justify the rest of the poem, no matter how poorly constructed or obscure it may be. "It is difficult to explain my reaction to Miss Sitwell's eccentric poetry, since it is spontaneous and naive ever," she said. As far as understanding is concerned, Mrs. Williams-Ellis admitted that she still didn't completely understand the poem... but, she insisted, the same thing attains in music and painting: to understand would be to rob the poem of its mystic qualities. Browning, observed Mrs. Williams-Ellis, was once considered so obscure that societies had to come into existence to popularize him and explain his work. Since hardly anything is now obscure in Browning, she concluded that Miss Sitwell may expect a like reception in later years.⁶³

⁶² Ward, W.H. "Miss Edith Sitwell's Poem," The Spectator. Vol. 129 (Dec. 30, 1922), p. 1002.

⁶³ Williams-Ellis, A. "Poetry and Poets," The Spectator. Vol. 129 (Dec 30, 1922), pp.1011-2.

The following months brought Mrs. Williams-Ellis many angry letters denouncing Miss Sitwell's early poem in terms of existing standards. The redoubtable Mr. Ward went so far as to thank all those who had sided with him against Miss Sitwell, delivering himself of the firm opinion that her poetry's major failing was in her inaccuracy of the combinations of words and ideas from a scientific and geographic standpoint – a criticism based on the poet's rather fanciful scrambling of the Spanish Main with the Spanish peninsula.⁶⁴

Though Mrs. Williams-Ellis was able to end the quarrel for a time by announcing that "There are not enough general principles in the arts to make criticism more than the expression of personal opinion,"⁶⁵ the new verse of Edith Sitwell became more and more a topic for debate and acrid criticism. To explain what it was that Spectator-reader Ward and others have missed, this chapter will attempt to: 1) further clarify the traditions Miss Sitwell sought to overthrow – including her comments upon these conventions, and 2) discuss the essence of her technique and how she applies it. Inclusion of the reactions and judgments of competent critics will demonstrate practically some of the objections to her verse, as well as point out its merits.

Since this chapter is devoted mainly to the aspects of technique, one cannot hope to show the breadth and depth of Miss Sitwell's work. An analysis of style cannot capture the dimensional quality unless it is coupled with an understanding of attitudes, materials and the poet's own growth. These important factors will be treated in the following chapter, with relation to this section on style

⁶⁴ Ward, W. H. "Obscure Poetry," The Spectator, (Jan 27, 1923), pp. 143-4.

and to the previous one on Edith Sitwell's background and personal development.

In again reviewing the tendencies and traditions which lead up to the Sitwellian revolt against her older contemporaries, perhaps the most concise crystallization of attitudes between the rebels and the traditionalists can be found in David Daiches' observation that the Victorians were occupied with moral responsibility, while the moderns are interested in the individual. This, of course, is not completely accurate, but it can be interpreted as a fair approximation with Daiches' explanation that the Victorians sought to come to terms with their age – whether they were satisfied with it or not – whereas the moderns have rejected their age in disgust. As a result, the verse of the moderns sublimates a sense of decay and subdued hysteria under the guises of artificiality, satire or bizarreness.⁶⁶

The idea of moral responsibility was established and sustained by such Victorians as Tennyson and Browning. This pattern, once entrenched, became the standard outline for all English poetry of the Victorian era, and of most English poetry up to the time the modernists deliberately began to run their traditionalist competitors out of the field by sheer force of argument and weight of material published. Miss Sitwell makes it quite clear in a number of her books of criticism that she finds no fault with the poetry of Tennyson or Browning, or with their ideals and ideas. She admires much that they have done as poets and as observers. For example, the hypnotic verse of Tennyson – as well as that of Edgar Allan Poe – received delighted attention from her in The Pleasures of Poetry. What she

⁶⁵ Williams-Ellis, A. "Obscure Poetry," The Spectator (Feb 10, 1923), p. 247.

objects to is that a whole era of poets should copy Tennyson's style, his attitudes and his philosophy, never once making an attempt to create something new.

In Trio, Edith Sitwell reviews the poetic scene of the last seventy-five years and comes out with some rather acidulous criticisms of the Tennysonian imitators, and of those poets who broke with the Victorian patterns, only to pick up worse habits elsewhere. While she praises Browning, Father Hopkins and Whitman for being among the greatest influences upon today's poets, very few of the other late Victorians receive approbation. Poetry at the end of Victoria's reign is seen as possessing an "undergrowth of extreme debility." "The latter part of The Oxford Book of English Verse is a perfectly awful affair," says Miss Sitwell.⁶⁷ These poets, she asserts, did not take experience and transmute it into something finer or more artful as did Wordsworth, Whitman or Browning. They had a mania for dilettantism which took the shape of understatement: a sort of photographic reproduction of life... but the reproduction was not even a colored one.⁶⁸

She dubs another trend at the turn of the century as the "Oh, la! la! Moosoor" school of poetry. This style, exemplified in the work of Austin Dobson, receives this unusual title because the poets who wrote "Oh, la! la!", asserts Miss Sitwell, thought that the very mention of French words or an accent would cause instant excitement. Dobson, as the Georgians who followed him, was determined to create poetry. Of all these poets, Miss Sitwell says, "Their poetry

⁶⁶ Diaches, David. Poetry and the Modern World, pp. 3-4, 66.

⁶⁷ Sitwell, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. Trio, p. 100.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 101.

never grew, it was formed deliberately, if aimlessly, by their nerveless and numb fingers.”⁶⁹

There were, of course, distinguished poets either in or out of accepted schools of verse who were writing in terms of rebellion or re-evaluation of the Victorian world. Rossetti of the Pre-Raphaelites had made a move in this direction by treating the non-Victorian in a Victorian environment. Swineburne – who exerted a powerful influence during a period of Miss Sitwell’s youth, as did the French symbolists – had offered another symptom of the change, but his rejection of the Victorian petered out. Thomas Hardy – a powerful poet in Miss Sitwell’s estimation – provided part of the big break-up of the moralistic tradition.⁷⁰ But this break-up was followed by a new sort of moralizing: that of the Georgians of A. E. Housman’s persuasion. A pessimism and disillusion made these poets reject the old values, but their search for new ones went no further than a simple defeatist “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”⁷¹ Miss Sitwell singles Housman out for scorn, saying his verse is dead, non-vital, and without passion. His whole tradition – named, incidentally, for George V – had a bad predilection for sheep, cricket, country roads and the “God wot” expressions of T. E. Browne. When the Georgians were not wrapped up in this type of poetry, they were, by Miss Sitwell’s account, involved in producing “hysterically exuberant vulgarity and whipped-up (spurious) emotion.” Rupert Brooks is offered as an example.⁷²

⁶⁹ Sitwell, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. *Trio*, pp. 102-3.

⁷⁰ Daiches, David. *Poetry and the Modern World*.

⁷¹ See Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* as a typical example. “To An Athlete Dying Young” exemplified the attitudes perfectly.

⁷² Sitwell, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. *Trio*, pp. 104-35.

With the advent of World War I a definite revolt from the stale poetic memories of the past seemed to have been established. The work of Wilfred Owen – who, had he not been killed in the war, would have proved, according to Miss Sitwell, to be one of the greatest of modern poets – and T. S. Elliot now emerged as expression, of the distinct attitudes of the modern poet toward his world.

Unfortunately, this period of confusion and dissolution of values brought forth the French “Dadaists”, whose nonsense was often confused with work of a much higher order. Miss Sitwell’s poetry was often compared to “dada” in an uncomplimentary fashion. She replied that her early experiments, for all their abstraction, were not nonsense, but “exceedingly difficult technical exercises... like Liszt transcriptions.”⁷³

It is Miss Sitwell’s considered opinion that the uninformed habit of lumping all moderns of whatever persuasion into the same piece of clay has done a great deal of harm, especially insofar as getting a hearing for intelligent modern poetry is concerned. She speaks scornfully of what Geoffrey Gorer, the English psychologist, calls the YMCA poets – The Young Men’s Communist Association – and of many other newcomers to the fields poetic:

“It has been held of late, by the hoards of persons who cling round and impede the movements of the arts, that poetry need not be written by a man who knows his metier. It is necessary only that he should take an interest in left-wing politics, the housing problem, or the works of Marx for him to become, automatically, a poet, - even if he has none of the vision of a poet, nor any technique whatsoever. It would be as foolish to recommend that a person who has not the hands of a pianist, who has neither the touch, finger, nor the wrist technique, should become a public pianist, simply because he has a good heart and is an ardent Communist. The average reader, bewildered by the irresponsible statements, founded

⁷³ Sitwell, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. *Trio*, p. 163.

on little or no knowledge, and no sensibility, made by certain critics, will now accept any loosely-knit conglomeration of unilluminated and unassimilated statements, any pseudo-philosophy expounding, pseudo-scientific or political ideas as great poetry.”⁷⁴

Her advice to the would-be poets is “write poetry of simple, primitive emotion, or none at all.” Continuing in this vein in her introduction to Sacheverell Sitwell’s Collected Poems, she hails her brother as one of the greatest poets to come out of England in the last 150 years. Since Sacheverell’s poetry bears a great likeness to Miss Sitwell’s, one finds an almost unconscious self-compliment in these words:

“I would like to make clear my conviction that this great poetry will remain long after the silly little poems about vulgar little personal troubles or pleasures, about bungalows and motor cycles and sandwich papers and the doctrines of Marx, have sunk into an early grave.”⁷⁵

II. Edith Sitwell’s Techniques Discussed.

The notion of simplicity, as a poetic technique needs clarification if one compares the “silly little poems” with Sacheverell’s highly ornamented verse. When Miss Sitwell speaks of simplicity and when she writes a poem with simplicity in mind she is not thinking of simple, “homey” themes nor of elemental language. If she were, then the poems on motor cycles and sandwich papers might please her more. The simplicity she sees in a poem, though its language be Baroque, is simplicity – or “oneness” – of idea, emotion or motive in

⁷⁴ Sitwell, Sacheverell. (Introduction by E. Sitwell) Collected Poems, pp. 15-6.

⁷⁵ Sitwell, Sacheverell. (Introduction by E. Sitwell) Collected Poems, pp. 31-2.

writing the poem. An excerpt from “Waltz” will demonstrate this interpretation:

“Daisy and Lily,
Lazy and silly,
Walk by the shore of the wan grassy sea –
Talking once more 'neath a swan-bosomed tree.
Rose castles,
Tourelles
Those bustles
Where swells
Each foam-bell of ermine,
They roam and determine.....”⁷⁶

Certainly the language is not simple – and it grows more ornate as the poem progresses. The picture of the two lazy girls might be labeled simple, if it were not for the increasing fancy and complexity of their conversation. What then is simple in this poem? The simplicity arises from the motive. Miss Sitwell’s airs, besides creating this artful picture, was the pure creation in words of the musical feeling of a waltz. Reading the lines with this in mind points up the utter simplicity of intent and achievement, regardless of whether an understandable story can be extracted from the lines, or not.

Writing of the problems which faced the modernist poets, Miss Sitwell has said, “At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery and rhythms of poetry had become a necessity, owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns, of some of the poetry preceding us.”⁷⁷ She distrusted the “Dadaists” and the Marxists, but she also distrusted those poets whose release of emotion resembled epileptic fits and

⁷⁶ See Appendix II for the complete poem.

⁷⁷ Sitwell, Edith. The Canticle of the Rose, p. xi.

had much the same interest value for the reading public.⁷⁸ This sort of change was not what she was seeking. It failed as a new sort of poetic expression for the same reasons that the Victorian imitators and the Georgians failed. The quality which was lacking was to be that quality upon which Miss Sitwell's technique and new view of the world in poetic expression would rest. It was the quality of sensation, or, more properly, sensibility.

Expounding this idea of sensation in The Pleasures of Poetry she wrote:

"The pleasures of poetry are unconfined. They are of the spirit and of the wind and the heart, but not of these alone, for they are also the delights of texture, sight and hearing. In our time, such pleasures are rarely admitted as relating to poetry; and it is for this reason that much of the verse of our age fails to be poetry, and is introspection only."

"The pleasures of poetry are like the joys of nature – and for this reason in poetry we may be allowed every form which is beautiful – poetry is not only of the soul but also of the blood and surface of the skin."⁷⁹

Miss Sitwell repeated this idea a bit more poetically in

Alexander Pope: "I believe that a poem begins in the poet's head, and then grows in his blood, as a rose grows among its dark leaves."⁸⁰

Returning to the traditionalists, she points out their faults again and again in this matter. What Tennyson had, what Browning felt, what Hopkins sensed: all this had been missed by the dully decorous.

"The reason why Matthew Arnold, to my feeling, fails entirely as a poet, (though no doubt his ideas are good – at least I am told they were) is that he had no sense of touch whatsoever. Nothing made any impression upon his skin. He could feel neither the shape nor the texture of a poem with his hands."⁸¹

⁷⁸ Sitwell, Edith. Alexander Pope.

⁷⁹ Sitwell, Edith. The Pleasures of Poetry, pp. 223-4.

⁸⁰ Sitwell, Edith, op. cit., p. 304.

⁸¹ Sitwell, Edith. The Pleasures of Poetry, p. 39.

Even worse, Matthew Arnold had no “muscle” in his verse. Miss Sitwell stresses the importance of this evidence of sensibility or “physical awareness” in good poetry. The theory of “muscle” in poetry involves the premise that in capturing an emotion or recording an idea the entire body of the poet creates with the mind and emotion so that the poem takes on characteristics of the poet himself. This is strongly reminiscent of the traditional definition that style is “the man himself.” Miss Sitwell feels that a shrewd student of poetry can often judge the physical stature and condition of a poet by simply reading his poetry to detect the “muscle.” This is only true, she says, if the poet knows his physical and emotional limitations and does not try to work outside of them. She cites Pope’s use of the couplet as further proof of this thesis, since Pope was a somewhat mis-shapen, weak little man who lacked the necessary strength and staying-power to tackle more expansive forms.⁸²

To her acute awareness of the importance of the senses, Miss Sitwell added her belief that the recording and expressing of the perceptions of the senses needed rescuing from the world of the commonplace and the realm of the cliché. To accomplish this, Edith Sitwell introduced what may be called her third technique, synaesthesia. This new device brought down upon her head the imprecations of innumerable traditionalists – W.H. Ward among them – and won for her the praises of alert and appreciative readers who agreed with her that the language of expression needs a jolt and new vision every several generations. Synaesthesia, or the scrambling of sensations, (to make odors visible and sounds tactile, for example)

⁸² Ibid.

was, as a matter of fact, not really new. It had also been used with great success by Blake, Donne, Calderon and Shakespeare.⁸³

Many readers felt that, rather than a useful and sensitive tool of technique, synaesthesia was just a toy or a device without worth or purpose. Such lines as: “The trees were hissing like green geese,” “Black as Hecate howls a star,” “A lolloping galloping candle...” “...darkness rustling like witches’ dresses” were taken to be simply mechanical piecings, verbal ingenuity, instead of a completely fresh way of revealing experience. Miss Sitwell had aimed at transmuting experience and perception as did Tennyson and Browning... and she had hit her target on the bullseye. But the public must have felt that she cheated by using bullets instead of arrows, for the reaction to these sudden, swift new images was that of shock and actual disapproval. An expert from “Minstrels,” however, will illustrate the charm and freshness of the technique:

“Beside the sea, metallic bright
And sequined with the noisy light,
Duennas slowly promenade,
Each like a patch of sudden shade...”⁸⁴

Her burning consciousness of the function of poetry has led Miss Sitwell to study extensively those elements which make poetry different from prose or conversation. She has learned that the projection of mood, experience, attitude or the simple creation of verbal patterns of music and sound always depend for their greatest effect upon the skillful and partly intuitive handling of the poetic

⁸³ Gosse, Sir Edmund. Leaves and Fruit, p. 261.

⁸⁴ See Appendix II.

components: words, metre, rhyme, texture, rhythm. The accuracy with which Edith Sitwell blends these is tribute to her complete mastery of technique. The effects produced by the poems themselves, when properly approached, are proofs that Miss Sitwell is right in her evaluation of what poetry is. The development of her conception can be traced through all her poetry, the outstanding feature being a growing sureness and subtlety in handling the poetic elements so that techniques become less and less noticeable.

In her early poetry, in an attempt to demonstrate that “half the beauty of English, poetry is due to minute variations and fluctuations of rhythm,”⁸⁵ she used a system of “equivalent” syllables which are not really equivalent at all, owing to drawn-out or shortened vowels, hard consonants, nasals, sibilants and labials. This is the technique of texture. The basic rhythm of the poem is altered – made longer or shorter, harder or softer – by use of these contrasts and changes of tempo which give warmth and a tactile equality. A few examples of the use of texture through variation of tempo and shrewd choice of words are:

“The harsh bray and hollow
Of the pot and the pan
Seems Midas defying
The great god Apollo!”⁸⁶

“Then one on one leg,
One on two,
One on three legs,
Home they flew
To their cottage; there one sees
And hears no sound but wind in trees;
One candle spills out thick gold coins
Where quilted dark with tree shade joins.”⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Sitwell, Edith. Alexander Pope.

⁸⁶ Sitwell, Edith. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 9.

That such verses are not the mere toying of an intellectual dilettante may be seen in the prose writings of Edith Sitwell wherein she defends her theories with an earnestness and a lucidity approaching only Amy Lowell. In “Some Notes on My Own Poetry,” which precedes the poetry in The Canticle of the Rose, Miss Sitwell goes into great detail to show how the poetic techniques are exploited to achieve the effects she wants. A few representative examples will help the reader to appreciate the special nature of the Sitwell techniques:

“In his tall senatorial,
Black and manorial
House where decoy-duck
Dust doth clack –
Clatter and quack
To a shadow black – ...”⁸⁸

Of this, Miss Sitwell says:

“In the first few lines I attempted to convey the sense of menace, of deepening darkness, by the use of dissonances, so subtle they might almost be assonances, of ‘tall,’ ‘senatorial,’ ‘manorial’ – the ‘o’ of ‘senatorial’ being deeper than the dissonantal ‘a’ in ‘tall.’ ‘Black,’ ‘duck,’ ‘clack,’ ‘clatter,’ and ‘quack,’ with their hard consonants are dry as dust, and the deadness of the duet is conveyed thus, and, as well, by the dulled dissonance of the ‘a’s, of the ‘u’ in ‘duck’ followed by its still more crumbling assonance ‘dust.’...”

“The sharp and menacing rhythm of the first four lines is given by the fact that ‘black’ in the second line is at the opposite side from ‘duck’ and ‘clack’ in the fourth and fifth, and this throws reversed shadows. In the lines:

‘Clatter and quack
To a shadow black’ –

‘clatter,’ coming, as it does, immediately after ‘clack’ has an odd sound,

⁸⁷ Ibid., “Three Poor Witches,” p. 8.

⁸⁸ Sitwell, Edith. “The Drum,” p. 27.

like that of a challenge thrown down in an empty place by one, who having offered it, then shrinks away in fear. It is a fact that the second syllable of 'clatter,' instead of casting a shadow, shrinks away into itself and dies....

"We find, occasionally, subtle variations of thickness and thinness (and consequently, variations of darkness) brought about in assonances and rhymes by changing of a consonant or labial, from word to word, as in the first two lines of the poem, where the grave darkness of 'senatorial' changes to the thicker, more impenetrable 'manorial'..."⁸⁹

Another poem which uses techniques of synaesthesia and texture to reveal meaning is "Dark Song":

"The fire was furry as a bear
And the flames purr...
The brown bear rambles in the chain
Captive to cruel men
Through the dark and hairy wood...
The maid sighed, 'All my blood
Is animal. They thought I sat
Like a household cat;
But through the dark woods rambled I...
Oh, if my blood would die!
The fire had a bear's fur;
It heard and knew...
The dark earth, furry as a bear,
Grumbled too!"⁹⁰

Of this, Miss Sitwell says:

"'Dark Song' is a poem about the beginning of things, and their relationship – the fire that purrs like an animal and has a beast's thick coat (the crumbling, furry black coal), and has a girl whose blood has the dark pulse and instinct of the earth.

"The long, harsh, animal-purring 'r's and the occasional double vowels, as in 'bear' and 'fire', though these last are divided by a muted 'r', are intended to convey the combatable animal instinct. The poem is built on a scheme of harsh 'r's, alternating with dulled 'r's, and the latter with the thickness of the 'br' and the 'mbs' in:

'The brown bear rambles in his chain'

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

⁹⁰ Sitwell, Edith. *The Canticle of the Rose*, p. 59.

are meant to be the thickness of the bear's dull fur..."⁹¹

These excerpts may serve to indicate that Edith Sitwell is sincerely trying to voice new meaning through an involved and genius-like expression of moods and perceptions. For more than the simple suggestion these quotations give, it would be profitable for the person seeking fuller appreciation of Miss Sitwell's techniques to consult almost any of her prose works on criticism. Even those works which do not deal directly with her own poetry, often suggest similar trends, successful or otherwise, in other contemporary poets. The discussions raised in A Poet's Notebook, Alexander Pope, The Pleasures of Poetry, and A Notebook on William Shakespeare deal mainly with the poets who established the various poetic conventions, but Edith Sitwell's analysis of their work is done largely as she dissects her own: careful attention is paid to the variations in syllable length, the assonances and dissonances, the un-usualness of imagery, the texture, the metre, the basic rhythms and their variants. In all these works, and especially in A Poet's Notebook, one can detect the strong "debt" Miss Sitwell owes to all the great poets, and also, the essential kinship of Miss Sitwell with the illustrious vanguard of immortal names in poetry. A twofold purpose is served by these critical studies: they show what the real essence of poetry is through a careful examination of structure and technique, thus revealing what Edith Sitwell has borrowed from the masters, and they also endow old favorite poems with next life and meaning.

Of this devoted and careful study of other poets as a

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. xxiv-xxv.

prerequisite for developing her mastery of the poetic idiom, critic C.M. Bowra writes:

“...An early acquaintance with the great English masters formed her taste and her standards and taught her the magical power of words. A devoted student of Chaucer and Shakespeare, she came into her first maturity under the influence of Yeats, Hopkins, Wilfred Owen and T.S. Eliot. From each she extracted some essential quality and saw how this was related to the special experiences which she herself wished to record, but instead of imitating one or other of them, she was strengthened by them in her own view of poetry, and in her own way of writing it. They were perhaps her masters, but she was always an original and independent pupil who learned from her teachers the means to make her art truer to herself and to her own inner vision.... she has always been guided by her own light, her unfailing recognition of true poetry wherever it is to be found. The driving passion in her has been the desire which poetry creates in its lovers for a more vivid and lively appreciation of life. Such a desire is in her too powerful to demand explanation or justification. It proves its worth by its results, and to try to explain it is to add nothing to it...”⁹²

No more thorough examination – outside of Miss Sitwell’s own – of the Sitwellian style can be found than in the Ph. D. thesis of Ann Hofmann of the University of Zurich.⁹³ The discussion is sound and careful, but it is at once so non-academic in its insight and almost lyrical comment that it becomes more than either a simple thesis or a guidebook to a fuller appreciation of Edith Sitwell’s work.

To fill in some of the bare outlines already sketched in the Sitwell technique, the Hofmann thesis offers some good summarizations. The paper is divided into four sections, of which two – “Technique and Art” and “The Choice of Imagery” – may be applied here.

Of technique, Hofmann says that it asserts itself loudly and again submerges itself unperceived in Edith Sitwell’s poems. She

⁹² Bowra, C.M. Edith Sitwell, pp. 8-9.

may play with patterns of sound, lacking in meaning-apparent meaning – so that form become content... Her technique attempts to break or reshape the limitations of significance. “Her interest in sound, her love of words, their substance and secret perfection, her desire for melody, combined with an extraordinary consciousness of or sensibility to rhythm, invent design upon absorbing design: revealing in their sequence quick intimations of discord, and hardness; teasing little half-jokes: beauty coming unexpectedly; a precise and direct truthfulness.”⁹⁴

The techniques of form become content, metre and rhythm are all pointed up in:

“Underneath the trees
Where the boiling
 Water
 Hissed,
Like the goose-king’s feathered daughter-kissed,
Pot and pan and copper kettle
Put upon their proper mettle,
Lest the Flood – the Flood – the Flood begin again
 through these!”⁹⁵

Hofmann regards this particular fragment as a work of rare perfection and a pure delight in its dancing best. It is an excellent example of Miss Sitwell’s metric and rhythmic virtuosity... and dependence upon these poetic elements is responsible for making the form become the content, though an abstract sense can be derived from the lines.

In fact, one of the most distinct qualities Hofmann sees in Miss Sitwell’s poems, whether they are patterns of sound, stories, lyrics or verbal pictures, is the unfailing presence of rhythm. It is a rhythm that

⁹³ Hofmann, Ann. Edith Sitwell: etc. 96 pp.

⁹⁴ Hofmann, Ann. Edith Sitwell: etc., p. 15.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

remains steady where needed, varies, completely changes, or even breaks, if the poem requires it. The best examples of rhythm – and, naturally, of the use of metre as well – are to be found in the suite of abstract poems, Façade, where one finds poetic impressions of musical rhythms in such titles as the already-quoted “Waltz,” “Lullaby for Jumbo” –

"Jumbo asleep!
 Gray leaves thick-furred
 As his ears, keep
 Conversations blurred.
 Thicker than hide
 Is the trumpeting water;...
 Don Pasquito's bride
 And his youngest daughter..."⁹⁶

“Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone,” “Hornpipe,” “Popular Song,” and “Polka” –

“Tra la la la –
 See me dance the polka,
 Said Mr. Wagg like a bear,
 ‘With my top hat
 And my whiskers that –
 (Tra la la la) trap the Fair.”⁹⁷

If, through any mischance, the reader should fail to capture the dominant rhythms of these poems, hearing them read to the brilliant orchestral settings of the young English composer, William Walton, should dispel any doubts as to Edith Sitwell’s competence in handling both metre and rhythm.

Hofmann, in studying the texture of Miss Sitwell’s verse, discovers some subordinate techniques which contribute heavily to the total effect of texture and rhythm. They are the techniques of

⁹⁶ Sitwell, Edith. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 33.

balance and contrast – already discovered, though not by name – by Miss Sitwell in her dissection of “Dark Song” – and the “intricate fun” of Miss Sitwell’s “little extravagances of rhyme.” Balance and contrast are seen in a number of forms they may be present in word and sound arrangement, which is mainly related to the idea of texture; they may be present in the ideational content in the form of similes, analogies, or contrasting ideas; or they may be present in sensation images, illustrated by such couplings: lightness-darkness, furriness-softness, hardness-softness, coldness-warmness, forcefulness-strongness. These images, as shown, may be either opposites for contrast, or balanced equivalents.

The ingenious fancy of Miss Sitwell’s rhyme stands out in such lines as: The navy-blue ghost of Mr. Belaker, the allegro negro cocktail shaker...” or “Lily O’Grady, silly and shady, longing to be a lazy lady...”⁹⁸

Hofmann uses various approaches in treating Edith Sitwell’s imagery, but she insists that the reader recognize that the unusualness of the image results only from the fact that Miss Sitwell perceives externals differently from other people. All imagery is, to her mind, a mirror of the distinct personal reactions of the poetic mind to its environment. But Hofmann is impressed by more than the unusualness of Miss Sitwell’s images: she is astounded at the profusion and variety. Miss Sitwell is not content with a series of contrived pictures for the eye: she packs and supports her poems with sensations of movement, of sound, of light, of darkness, of changing inner states of being and of outer structure. Her vivid

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

handling of the entire range of color and color suggestions, her at-times astonishing, but never trite tactile images attest a person alive in every nerve and fibre.

“It is difficult to estimate her work,” says Sir Edmund Gosse, “for it is like, the invasion of a bulldog into the realms of the nightingale.” “My quarrel with her is not that she uses violent and grotesque imagery, as she has a perfect right to do, but that she does not perceive that to recommend such extraordinary innovations as she projects, her technique should be faultless.”⁹⁹ “Experimenters are forbidden nothing but failure – she needs a firmer instinct for sober and delicate technical precision... I would have her aim relentlessly at being less funny and more human.”¹⁰⁰

Gosse, in this early review, was finding another new Sitwell technique confusing. This was the repetition of couplets, phrases or even of stories and characters. Such images as “blue wooden seas,” “foam-bosomed swans,” “the rain creaks down,” and titles like “the navy-blue ghost of Mr. Belaker” appeared in a number of poems which had no apparent relation to each other. The poem, “Aubade” appeared in several versions, even being used as a “movement” in the symphony of “The Sleeping Beauty.”

C.M. Bowra explained this seeming defect, saying that Miss Sitwell reused these phrases or ideas because her ear told her that no other phrase would be as good. She would apply these standard images either in the manner of an Homeric epithet, or to evoke some

⁹⁸ Sitwell, Edith. The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 27-63.

⁹⁹ Gosse, Sir Edmund. Leaves and Fruit, pp. 260-1.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 262.

definite mood or attitude.¹⁰¹ Whether this defense is justified is a moot question: some early poems really do seem to suffer from repetition while others are improved by it. It is of interest to note that obvious repetition has gradually disappeared as Miss Sitwell has developed her craft.

III. Critical Reaction to Edith Sitwell's Verse.

When one considers the rarity of great poets and the relative paucity of women poets of any level of worth, the terrific capacity of Edith Sitwell to make her dynamic personality respond to so many types of stimulations and communicate them in an original and vivid manner cannot but impress. Surely such a talent proves that she is more than a juggler of words or a petulant adult longing again for her childhood.

The pragmatic test of the worth of Edith Sitwell's poetry is of course the reaction it induces in its readers. For an appraisal of that reaction, especially in the matter of techniques and their effectiveness, one finds the best cross-section of opinion in the writings of the contemporary critics. Critics provide a more nearly accurate view of the reaction of the "better-read" public to literature because they are involved in the business of judging current literary products in terms of the standards of the "better-read." They do not serve under the scholar's obligation to be objective and fair-minded at all times, and they are not afflicted with the lazy man's habit of damning without reading. Thus, their prejudices influence their judgment in much the same manner as Miss Sitwell's popular reading

¹⁰¹ Bowra, C.M. Edith Sitwell, p. 18-9.

audience was influenced.

While F. R. Leavis abruptly dismissed Edith Sitwell as “belonging to the history of publicity, rather than poetry”¹⁰² – a criticism not unlike some remarks Amy Lowell once directed at a good portion of Carl Sandburg’s works – it remained for Richard Aldington, a survivor of the Imagists, to make a really concrete criticism. He took marked exception to a great deal of the “obvious synaesthesia” in Miss Sitwell’s work on the grounds that it spoiled his enjoyment of a poem to feel that the images had been “worked on.”¹⁰³ Of course, having been so acutely conscious of the technique of expression via images, Aldington may have become a man with a specialized prejudice. He did not fall to praise her work, though, commenting at length upon the great range of color images. She has an alert and sensitive mind, which perceives the world in its own way, Aldington admitted, and she has “created a colored oasis in the drab wilderness of English literary squirearchy.”¹⁰⁴

Untermeyer, in reviewing her earlier verse, observed that she had a limited gamut, “but there is no poet like her within that range.” He cited her as a craftsman of the first order, both in the realms of nonsense and serious verse: “there has rarely been so brilliant an exhibition of legerdemain.” He felt that calling her poetry artificial is not a real criticism, since her world is artificial as well. He concluded, “After one’s initial bewilderment – due chiefly to the galloping pace of her verse – the wit of her comments, her strange associations, the novel romanticism of an essentially feminine mind – all these lie

¹⁰² Leavis, F.R. New Bearing in English Poetry.

¹⁰³ Aldington, Richard. “The Three Sitwells.” Poetry. (March ’20-21), p. 166.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 167.

ready to disclose themselves beneath the surface glitter.”¹⁰⁵

Other reviewers and critics who have looked on Edith Sitwell’s early works with interest and favor are Dilys Powell and F.B. Millet. Powell defended her against her early critics by asserting that, rather than confusing, her unusual images served to clarify her prose ideas and allowed an extraordinary sort of communication which he compared to a poetic cinematograph. He felt that her handling of her materials and forms so skillfully and surely was proof of her authority as a poet.¹⁰⁶ Millet attempted to draw certain relationships between Edith Sitwell’s work and that of the Imagists, but he overlooked the narrowness of the Imagist technique and the breadth and depth of Miss Sitwell’s. He paid so much attention to the images – “most individual and vital... constant utilizing of synaesthesia a hard brittle world that has something of the unreal theatrical quality of Rousseau le douanier... marked reliance upon next and startling images to carry the burden of the poem’s effect, and an indirection of statement of the poem’s idea that is a revolt against moralizing Victorians and Georgians”¹⁰⁷ – that he overlooked the development of texture – weight and “feel” of the verse –, rhythm, rhyme and metre.

Edwin Muir, in his critical work Transitions, gave some highly complimentary comments to Miss Sitwell: “little more than a redescription of objects is accomplished by Miss Sitwell’s method alone; when her imagination is added to it, it gives glimpses of whole new worlds, which in turn illuminate anew and correspond to reality... her mystic imagination not only animates things, but makes them

¹⁰⁵ Untermeyer, Louis. Modern British Poetry, pp. 354-5.

¹⁰⁶ Powel, Dilys. Descent from Parnassus, pp. 124-5.

¹⁰⁷ Millet, F.B. Contemporary British Literature.

move and tends to personify them... no other poet of our time has written so many lines which delight the imagination and give us a sense of magical freedom..."¹⁰⁸

Muir suggests a criticism which probably goes farther than others in explaining the great furor which greeted her "incomprehensible poetry." He says, "Her bright and childlike vision is her chief virtue, but it prevents her from co-relating the distinct entities she sees... her work says all that she wishes – implicit – but she makes readers often resort to reason to see what she wishes to say... in this, she lacks poetic articulation, which makes for disintegration of structure."¹⁰⁹

Whether Muir is justified is a matter of interpretation. Certain it is that the average reader, coming unprepared to Miss Sitwell's works, is due for a rude shock, not only from the techniques, but from what Muir suggests is a lack of them. The thing which confuses the average reader – and Mr. W. H. Ward of the Spectator – is his failure to realize that here is a poet with a different conception of poetry. The traditions which Edith Sitwell rebelled against are still so strongly entrenched that the Ruskin dictum "Poetry is the presentment, in musical form, to the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions"¹¹⁰ tends to prevent the average person from accepting her work. But once her poems are appreciated in their proper frame, it becomes apparent that there is just as much content and even "message" in Miss Sitwell's writing, as there is in Tennyson or Whitman.

¹⁰⁸ Muir, Edwin. Transition, pp. 150, 153, 157.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 154.

¹¹⁰ Smithberger, A. and Camille McCole. On Poetry, p. 174.

The odd thing is that a reading public so thoroughly grounded in the Victorian tradition, even at this late date, should reject the poems even on the “art for art’s sake” basis of another Victorian, Walter Pater. Miss Sitwell, herself, goes back to some of his notions when she decries the “Three parrot-cries from the press and the public” about modern poetry. To the charge that poetry should not be “all technique and no great moral message,” she seconds Pater by saying that “poetry is primarily an art and not a dumping ground for emotions.” To prove her point she cites “The Rape of the Lock” as a great poem not of lofty theme nor dealing with morality and “Aurora Leigh” as not a great poem, though the theme is both lofty and moral!¹¹¹

The other two parrot-cries which have disturbed Miss Sitwell’s sleep have been the edicts against free verse – though Dr. Johnson would have encouraged it, she feels – and the demand that “poetry must give pleasure.” For this last, she borrows Wordsworth’s query: “Pleasure to whom?” in showing that the varieties of subjects and treatments which can please and displease various people at the same moment are legion.¹¹²

But it is upon the philosophy of Ruskin that most critics take their stand against Miss Sitwell’s work. Nor are all these critics Victorian hold-overs. Some of them, like Max Eastman, are a new breed of prophet who speak for the great god Science. In his critical work, The Literary Mind, Eastman denounces all literature which seems to exist for itself alone and does not serve a function of

¹¹¹ Sitwell, Edith. Poetry and Criticism, p. 34.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 34-5.

communication which he can understand.¹¹³

In referring to all modern poets – and indeed all “modern” writers in the “avant garde” sense – as the “cult of unintelligibility,” Eastman creates an invalid and unnecessarily broad category into which he dumps every writer who does not write explicitly what Eastman can understand and all writers who explicitly make no attempt to fulfill what Eastman holds to be the function of all writing: communication. The unfortunate miscarriage here is that Eastman’s ideas of communication and how it can be achieved do not extend to the communicatory techniques of such poets as Edith Sitwell. He professes not to understand modern poetic expression and yet he produces a very good parody of another modern, E.E. Cummings. What he eventually says in essence is that Miss Sitwell is indeed the “most gifted of the modernists,” “the one who is most unaffectedly expressing a genuine and inevitable poetic character” – is not this expression a communication in itself? – but that she is working toward pure poetry – which is as Eastman quotes her, “a pure effort to heighten consciousness” – without being interested in communicating a sincere and natural experience with others. She hides it, says he, in techniques best adapted to private expression.¹¹⁴

Eastman is not happy with this state of affairs. Her poetry appears to him as “this untidy huddle of ideas, which might be the preparation for a rummage sale of the half-antique furniture of the literary mind...,”¹¹⁵ and “decadently ornamental.” Perhaps even the decadence might be acceptable to Eastman if Miss Sitwell would

¹¹³ Eastman, Max. The Literary Mind, pp. 13-294.

¹¹⁴ Eastman, Max. The Literary Mind, pp. 57-175.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

condescend to become scientific: for this is what Eastman really wants. Man lives in a scientific age, says Eastman, and everyone is making an effort to expand his horizons of knowledge and experience. The writers have as much a role in this development as anyone, since “science is nothing but a persistent and organized effort to talk sense.” Poets are eligible for membership in this scientific examination of the world man lives in because “all poetry is communication” and it is their business to talk sense in poetry. Edith Sitwell refuses to cooperate with Eastman in this... “she doesn’t tell anything, either because she won’t or because she doesn’t know.” Eastman rather nastily alleges that, though Miss Sitwell is one of his favorite poets and he is one of her greatest admirers – despite what he says in his criticism – she is distinctly unfriendly toward him by never giving her poems understandable titles which might explain what they are all about. He claims that all modernists would much rather put a title on a poem telling what the poem is not about or, better yet, a title in a foreign language telling what it is not about.

Carrying his devotion to science several steps further, Eastman assaults her use of synaesthesia as faulty psychology. She thinks, he says, that the senses are five, rather than the actual number nearer twenty – though he will not admit the suggestion of multiplication of senses that Sitwell’s use of synaesthesia offers – in a typically unscientific intuitivist fashion. Eastman dictates that Miss Sitwell has no right to consider herself an intellectual as long as she uses her unscientific jargon and medieval notions. He continues that it is an article of faith for Edith Sitwell not to know what she is talking about, and that that is perhaps the reason that she ignores the

experiments of Sir Francis Galton which proved scientifically several decades ago that synaesthesia is a highly eccentric affliction of the nerves, and while it may serve to elevate Miss Sitwell, experiments show it is more often a depressant. Eastman cannot forgive the fact that Miss Sitwell stolidly maintains an “ignorance of the scientific implications of Galton’s work.”¹¹⁶

Ann Hofmann provides an explanation which may explain to a degree why and where Eastman misses the content of Edith Sitwell’s work and sees only the form.

“The world of thinking, it must be borne in mind, is an aspect of the ordered and objective world which, since the significance of modernist poetry is the living conflict in its implications, mechanical and spiritual, can hardly be relied upon to explain it. To experiment upon such lines (Sitwell’s), analyzing their content, is to destroy them, less by misreading thought than by disregarding the essential irreducible feature of their imaginative integrity. Their meaning is an intimation, not the fact; their poetry, by a fatal intermittence, an irreversible contingency, is not ‘in them’ but in their mocking, spiteful, half-serious and half unwished elusiveness.”¹¹⁷

That the essential differences in attitude toward poetry are widely shared among men demands that poetry, to be widely appreciated must participate in a large portion of those virtues universally required of poetry. Certainly in technique alone Miss Sitwell’s poetry is rich in qualities which have distinguished the work of Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Tennyson and the other great poets of civilization.

IV. Summary of Techniques.

A brief review will recall these techniques to mind:

¹¹⁶ Eastman, Max. The Literary Mind, p. 18.

Simplicity: oneness of idea, emotion or motive in a poem.

Sensibility: being able to feel the thought and emotion of the poem in every nerve and fibre of the human body.

Synaesthesia: Blending the reactions of the senses so that odors may be seen and warmth heard.

Texture: a technique of composition which uses the sub-techniques of Balance, Contrast and Tempo to give a feeling of weight, depth and general dimension to a poetic line: variations of sounds, images, syllable lengths.

Form Become Content: conceits of word arrangement and sound patterns are sole concern of poem.

Rhythm and Metre: patterns of scansion and basic beats used to evoke mood or stimulate imagination.

Rhyme: often comic sound repetitions, strongly emphasized in Form Become Content poems, in particular.

Imagery: the word pictures conjured up through the media of sensibility and synaesthesia, though they are not necessarily unconventional images.

Repetition: a device used for the effect of the Homeric epithet, or to evoke a definite image.

In the next chapter the writer will try to show that the worth of Miss Sitwell's work does not rest solely upon her use of techniques,

¹¹⁷ Hofmann, Ann, Edith Sitwell: etc. p. 18.

dazzling as they are. Building upon the discussion of this chapter, the following one is designed to reveal the content of her poetry and to show how her poetry may be approached and appreciated.

CHAPTER III

“MORE MATTER WITH MORE ART”

In order to reveal the steady progress toward depth of thought, breadth of philosophy and worth of materials, this chapter will offer a consideration of the definite periods in Edith Sitwell’s poetry.

Since there is far more to Miss Sitwell’s work than a simple “cultivating of all possibilities of words: appearance, arrangement, sound, contrast...”¹¹⁸ the attempt will be made to indicate how technique has been integrated in these periods with Miss Sitwell’s ever-growing universality and humanity of consciousness.

The periods to be studied are, roughly, as follows:

Early Poems – 1914-1923,

The “Rustic” Period – 1924-1928,

¹¹⁸ Trueblood, C.K. “Whatsoever Force of Words,” Poetry, (June, 1937), p. 161.

The Turning Point – 1929-1938 and
War Poems and Later Works – 1939 to date.

I. Edith Sitwell's Early Poems – 1914-1923.

The most distinctive thing about Edith Sitwell's first offerings is their participation in an unreal or artificial world. It is unreal and artificial, having been compounded of as varied a crew of words, personalities, colors, images, histories, objects and ideas as can be conceived. But there is a method to this mixture – a method which depends heavily upon the techniques considered in Chapter II for its effect – in that the elaborate Baroque quality of the verse and the images it conjures up is an attempt to show that the whole world of “civilization” is also artificial and unreal.

Thus the kaleidoscopic projection of images and the charming conceits of rhythm and rhyme are almost the exclusive concern of these early poems. The radicality of Miss Sitwell's approach in these poems is probably the main factor responsible for the confusion and lack of understanding which met her first efforts. The deeply entrenched idea that a moral message or the retelling of a lyric moment of experience must be the core of a poem prevented many from being able to examine the new verses in an unprejudiced fashion. The early poems depend not upon messages oratories for their effects, though there may be both message and story in the poems, but upon the techniques of poetry.

Since it is almost impossible to write a poem that is about nothing, even when form is the sole concern, Miss Sitwell drew upon her wealth of imaginative experience to infuse a child-like quality into

her poetry. That her rich historical and personal background should become a part of her poetry seems only natural when one considers how completely Miss Sitwell puts herself into her poetry. Her experience is seen at times as merely a fleeting phrase; at other times it may take the form – as it does in “On the Vanity of Human Aspirations –”¹¹⁹ of a story taken from the poet’s rich store of historical lore.

Another tendency which is pronounced in the early poems is the poet’s insistence on a generally non-explicit treatment of subject and materials. This approach was dictated because Miss Sitwell had become tired of the trite and uninteresting expressions which had resulted from the explicitness of the Georgian poets preceding her. Her hope was that the empty artificialities of the Twentieth Century would be easier to recognize if they were isolated into the unreal dream world of her poetry, since people refuse to recognize them in daily life.

To those who feel that the early poems lack concentration, cerebration and purpose a word must be directed. Miss Sitwell, more than any other contemporary poet, is conscious of the “debt” she owes to the great poets of all time, as well as being aware of all her sources of material and experience. This is proven by her dogged practice of annotating her poems to identify phrases, ideas, techniques or characters borrowed from Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Donne, etc.,... and explain, often, why these materials were used. Casual reading by the average reader may allow this indication of concentration, purpose and cerebration to go unnoticed, and that is

¹¹⁹ See Appendix II.

why it is important that it be noted. Added awareness of this professional scholarship may be gained from reading Pope A Poet's Notebook or even Meddlesome Mattie and Other Poems – for which Miss Sitwell wrote the introduction – for these books demonstrate Miss Sitwell's consciousness of the poetic and her versatility in adapting widely varied ideas and materials to point up her own themes.

The lack of seriousness in the early poems – dictated by the techniques and attitudes which Miss Sitwell was employing at the time: i.e., avoidance of “message” – has been one of the strongest criticisms of her work. Harold Munro objected that “the claim to amusement is not in itself frivolous, but it is not backed by enough intellect: hence it has insufficient literary power.”¹²⁰ Munro added, “She need not expect to be intelligible to the general public, for her distortion and artificial view of the world are too confusing, even if there is a philosophical substratum to them.”¹²¹

Another critic, F. B. Millet, refused to take issue with the lightness of her work. He said, “Artifice and whatever forms of culture suggest artifice – the theatre, ballet, etc. – are enticements and assuagements from the dully decorous... her view of the world is... tangible,... it is the view of a precocious and perverse child, driven back from the pasteboard unrealities of the adult world to the unsmitten citadels of childhood.”¹²²

Honor may be accorded Miss Sitwell for her refusal to be intimidated by criticism of the lightness of her verse. Millet had put

¹²⁰ Monro, Harold. Some Contemporary Poets, p. 138.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 143.

¹²² Millet, F.B. Contemporary British Literature, p. 87.

his finger on her essential purpose in the early poems: a recapturing of the joys of childhood as an escape from the Twentieth Century reality. The pure joy in “Summer when the rose bushes have names like all the sweetest hushes in a bird’s song” and the jolly humor of “Whirring, walking on the tree-top, three poor witches mow and mop... Moll and Meg, and Myrrhaline,”¹²³ are thoroughly enjoyable and understandable on their own merits. It is significant that no one knows better than does Edith Sitwell which of her poems is bad or mediocre. As the years have passed, she has released anthologies of her better poems, and these collections include none of the poems which so upset her early critics. The missing poems were not omitted because they lacked seriousness nor any of the other points upon which they had been criticized. They were not included because they were not good technical exercises.

After the initial success of Clown’s Houses (1918) and The Wooden Pegasus (1920) which were largely famous for such lines as:

“Jane, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again;

Comb your cockscomb-ragged hair,
Jane, Jane, come down the stair...”¹²⁴

Miss Sitwell published Façade, the suite of poems for which, she is still best and most widely known in the United States. (It is interesting to note that, though this work was released in 1922, there are popular conceptions that it is representative and recent. Neither of these

¹²³ Sitwell, Edith. “Two Songs,” The Canticle of the Rose, p. 16.

¹²⁴ See Appendix II: “Three Poor Witches.”

conceptions is correct.) Façade became the storm center of controversy over her new ideas and techniques. Even her supporter, Sir Edmund Gosse, deplored Façade: “Being true to her own nature has made her extravagant ... Façade, therefore, does not do justice to her purpose.”¹²⁵

Sir Osbert Sitwell observed that if such lines as “Long steel grass, The white soldiers pass” had not irritated the critics so much, his sister’s poetry night have had to wait a threat deal longer before it received any kind of notice at all.

Façade was a group of poems which more vividly than any previously put Miss Sitwell’s adeptness at “pure poetry” before the public. All the poems in the suite were technical exercises of the highest order: they had been written integrally with music composed by William Walton to emphasize the patterns and contrasts of sound in speech. That they included understandable or evocative material seemed to escape almost everyone. It may have been that the novelty and difficulty of the technique stopped the reader’s and listener’s attention at that point, but many naive and unschooled people expressed great enjoyment of the poems since they were able to penetrate to the core of mood and tone without having to look for complex poetic statements of ideas. One, “Madame Mouse Trots,” can illustrate this unique quality of mood and tone in pattern, as well as giving a picture of the mouse roving the night while the cat sleeps:

“Madame Mouse trots
Gray in the black night!
Madame Mouse trots:
Furred is the light.
The elephant trunks

¹²⁵ Gosse, Sir Edmund. Leaves and Fruit, p. 256.

Trumpet from the sea,...
Gray in the black night
The mouse trots free.
Hoarse as a dog's bark
The heavy leaves are furled....
The Cat's in his cradle,
All's well with the world!"¹²⁶

All the poems in the Façade suite (and that title almost suggests what is to follow) were seen by Miss Sitwell as abstract patterns through which one could variously discern the materialistic world crumbling into dust, shadows moving in a mechanical universe, and figures dancing in a flickering light in the heart.¹²⁷

Attempting to give a general character of similarity to all her poems, in 1938 Miss Sitwell asserted that her poems are all "hymns to the glory of life," and that "the world I see is a country world, a universe of growing things where magic and growth are one."¹²⁸

These quotations may well apply to much of the early poetry which shows such a delight in the beauties of nature, but the quotes do not always seem appropriate when applied to the bitter, sordid side of life, painted in Miss Sitwell's elaborate fashion. This seeming inconsistency must be rationalized by realizing that the "magic and growth" ideas are underlying qualities, not necessarily surface ones. A poem which seems to have nothing of the praise of the "glory of life" in it actually does by the device of antithesis: the true glory of life is emphasized by showing its opposite in the worst possible light.

Bucolic Comedies, which followed Façade, in 1923, was deeply steeped in Miss Sitwell's country world; an 18th Century world. All

¹²⁶ See Appendix II: also included are "Nursery Rhyme," "Waltz," and "Black Mrs. Behemoth."

¹²⁷ Sitwell, Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell. Trio, p. 168.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

the flavor of Renishaw's many splendid, haunted rooms, its acres of formal garden, its pastoral vistas, its dark forbidding woods and its gentle, winding streams were distilled into the poetry. The overtones in many of the pastoral poems suggest nothing so much as the court of the Little Shepherdess of the Petite Trianon, or the magic fairy tale world of the Brothers Grimm. This country lightness is occasionally darkened by a sense of menace (the antithesis of the "glory of life") which is strongly reminiscent of the old German fairy tales. Miss Sitwell suggests that this shadow on the pleasant bucolic scene is the sound of death's satyr hoof, rattling in the woods: even in the midst of life, one is near death.

It was as much for Façade and the Bucolic Comedies as for her other supposed eccentricities that Miss Sitwell was branded as a "clowning poet." A writer in Pathfinder explained this tag: "What the highbrow critics mean by clowning is an attempt by the poet to create an imaginative world, or dream-life, having something of the esthetic quality of comic pantomime, and to superimpose it on the ugly realities of modern life. This idea was borrowed from some of the later French poets. It is usually combined with a studied eccentricity and a contempt for contemporary conventions."¹²⁹ Certain it is that the flavor of such French symbolists as Baudelaire and Rimbaud is quite pronounced in the Bucolic Comedies.

Triviality of subject matter and lightness of treatment saved the Bucolics from the strong criticism Façade received, and, with the exception of a strong dose of synaesthesia, they are generally more comprehensible as poems and less curiosities of pattern. If they

¹²⁹ "The Clowning Sitwells," The Pathfinder. (Dec 28, 1949).

lacked “message” and incisive comment upon the universe, a group of poems titled “Marine”, which was associated with the Bucolic collection, gives some definite ideas and attitudes far “beyond the range of mere style and technique:

“The brass band’s snorting stabs the sky
And tears the yielding vacancy –
The imbecile and smiling blue –
Until fresh meaning trickles through:

And slowly we perambulate
With spectacles that concentrate
In one short hour, Eternity,
In one small lens, Infinity.

With children, our primeval curse,
We overrun the universe –
Beneath the giddy lights of noon,
White as a tired August moon.

The air is like a jarring bell
That jangles words it cannot spell,
And, black as Fate, the iron trees
Stretch thirstily to catch the breeze.”¹³⁰

Here, Miss Sitwell demonstrates her ability to wed idea and technique to the mutual advantage of both... neither obtrudes itself, nor is either lost. Gosse saw this type of poem as proof that Edith Sitwell was not only “individual and intelligent,” but also “at her most diminutive fingertip an artist and nothing but an artist.” The artistry – as demonstrated in the above poem – consisted in extending the range of impression produced by words without losing their essential beauty.¹³¹

In Descent From Parnassus, Dilys Powell commented negatively on Miss Sitwell’s early offerings: “experiments in abstract

¹³⁰ Sitwell, Edith. “Pedagogues,” The Canticle of the Rose, p. 26.

patterns seem pointless to an age crying out for moral conflict.” He suggested that Miss Sitwell’s revolt against the Victorians and Georgians had served to cut her off from her audience, in that she was paying no more attention to aesthetics than to morality or spirit of the times.¹³² Then, graciously reversing himself, Powell went on to explain that Edith Sitwell does deal with moral conflicts find the spirit of the times in her own way. She treats not only with physical dissolution, but also with rot of the spirit. In fact, spiritual death, said Powell, provides the central conflict in her poetry. Overtones of this may be seen in what Powell chose to call Miss Sitwell’s “Vanity Fair” period (Clown’s Houses, Façade, etc.) which he singled out as a collection of “blind, houses and dusty booths,” “comedia dell’arte,” and “harlequins.” Powell felt that this sense of menace and death comes explicitly to the surface in the Bucolics where he saw “the animal state of consciousness shaping itself from within, beginning to evolve shape out of its thick blot of darkness.”

This criticism is cited to show the variance of reaction which was occasioned by Edith Sitwell’s early works, and consequently to indicate the wide range of form and material appeals to which critics and readers responded. One cannot say simply that the first poems are only technical exercises, only light pastoral pictures, only comments on the sordidness of existence, for all of these qualities exist.

II. Edith Sitwell’s “Rustic” Period – 1924-1928.

In 1924 Edith Sitwell brought forth a work which was similar to

¹³¹ Gosse, Sir Edmund. Leaves and Fruit, pp. 225,258,259.

the Bucolic Comedies, but really quite different in many respects. This new work was The Sleeping Beauty in which, as one critic phrased it, “the perspective of music becomes also the perspectives of time and sadness... an evocation of and a lament over le temps jadis.”¹³³ Here were the same materials used in the Bucolics, but they had now been rephrased and changed in such a way that the entire work became a symphony of words and moods. Each section possessed its own distinctive rhythm, mood, and narrative contribution to the whole. The lives of the lazy kitchen maids were sharply balanced by lyrical descriptions of the lovely princess: here was the essence of symphonic variation of theme, balance and contrast, selective orchestration. A quotation may illustrate in some sense the contrast between the cross and crochety housekeeper and the princess, but segments are not enough to convey the impression of the whole: its unity, its modulation and restatement of theme.

"When the dew seems like trembling silver leaves,
Cross Poll Troy looks out through the palace eves....

'Knot up your butter-yellow hair.
You lazy queans. . . Come quick! come down the stair!

Anne, Anne,
Come draw the milk!
The cream must be as thick as silk
And yellow as the ripest sheen
Of apricock or nectarine...¹³⁴

The Princess

"Upon the infinite shore by the sea
The lovely ladies are walking like birds,
Their gowns have the beauty, the feathery

¹³² Powel, Dilys. Descent From Parnassus, p. 104.

¹³³ Williams, Charles. Poetry at Present, p. 182.

¹³⁴ Sitwell, Edith. "The Sleeping Beauty," The Canticle of the Rose, p. 69.

Grace of a bird's soft raiment; remote
Is their grace and their distinction – they float
And peck at their deep honeyed words...¹³⁵

The similarity of these lines to earlier poems may lead the casual reader to wonder why The Sleeping Beauty is regarded as the beginning of a new period. The explanation is that Beauty shows not a complete abandonment of former materials and styles (hardly to be expected – very seldom are there sharp dividing lines between periods of a writer's development, unless they are induced by a terrific emotional shock or a desire to experiment), but a new attitude and direction to Miss Sitwell's writing. In Beauty Miss Sitwell was past the period of experimentation with technical exercises. She felt that she had her technique well enough under control to sustain a unified group of poems and to project her attitude clearly.

Untermeyer suggested what the nature of the change was in Beauty. He admitted that she was more than a verbal artificer even in her first poems, but he added that only in Beauty does one begin to get the full impact of her mysticism and the care and sensitivity with which she charts the borders between sanity and insanity.¹³⁶ Essentially, from Beauty onward Miss Sitwell began to direct her attention to the human drama and the growth of man's hunger for beauty.

Where one could catch a diffuse feeling for humanity and for the beautiful in occasional early poems, in Beauty these feelings are strongly set forth, not explicitly, but symbolistically and suggestively. The lavish and artful descriptions of the setting, so like Renishaw and

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 75.

the Baroque tradition, certainly revel in the hunger for beauty. And the symbol of the beautiful princess who lies sleeping surrounded by cross, aged retainers and spiteful, warped fairies in a decaying palace, must suggest something of the Twentieth Century, when decay and aged corruption seem to have gained the ascendancy over beauty and humanism. It is most significant that Miss Sitwell has written a complete poetic symphony, but not a complete story. The Sleeping Beauty is complete as a poem, but it ends with the princess still sleeping as the gloom and rot of age and decay creep in around her. Miss Sitwell had apparently refused to predict a symbolic rescue of the Twentieth Century by the handsome young prince.

The escape from the empty world of adult civilization which was only suggested in Bucolic Comedies, and which was so vividly drawn in the retreat of Beauty becomes complete in Troy Park, which appeared in 1925, a year after Beauty was published. This is the idyll of Renishaw, for in the book are to be found many of the real-life characters – including the three Sitwells – who lived at Renishaw during Miss Sitwell’s childhood.¹³⁷ And to replace Renishaw with the name Troy Park is a distinctive recognition of the fact that those delights and memories are indeed past and destroyed, just as Troy, that delightful city, was laid waste by its enemy. Mark Van Doren found the pathetically beautiful poetry of Troy Park “intelligible and transparently lovely,” in that Miss Sitwell’s “vision speaks directly in some poems, mystically in others.”¹³⁸

Other critics were not so pleased with Miss Sitwell’s new work

¹³⁶ Untermeyer, Louis. Modern British Poetry, p. 355.

¹³⁷ See Appendix II for typical selections (too long to quote here).

¹³⁸ Van Doren, Mark. “First Glance,” The Nation, p. 359.

and refused to grant that she had made any progress over her Façade poems. Leonard Bacon wrote that Miss Sitwell was wasting a great ability trying to uphold her theory, for the great poets who were her models were great, claimed he, only because they had a power of idea and expression which was not completely crippled by the conceits of their poetry. That she did have “flashes of brilliance,” Bacon admitted, and he even went so far as to say that “she is trying to do something very beautiful and very hard.”¹³⁹

Miss Sitwell’s admirer, Sir Edmund Gosse, was still not too pleased with Troy Park. He asked that she “cease being a mere grotesque” so that she might take a significant place in modern literature. Such poems, he felt, “lose freshness after several readings,” and the only way to keep them from being impermanent would be for the poet to “rise to more serious matters with greater skill... then we not merely appreciate her advance, but we learn to look back upon her experiments and find a new value in them.”¹⁴⁰

Succeeding works made an effort to continue Miss Sitwell’s new attitudes and direction, “rising to more serious matters,” but they kept the same vein of expression – the world of the Baroque, of the fairy tale, and of the Punch-and-Judy show – until 1929.

The rise to the more serious did not bring forth more conformable poetry, however. Rustic Elegies, which appeared in 1927, brought forth all the cheerful warmth of a mausoleum. Elegies contains three poems which deal variously with the sense of death and the problem of existence. The first, “Elegy on Dead Fashion,” assumes the form of a wistful and elaborate commentary upon the

¹³⁹ Bacon, Leonard. “A Poet on the Defensive,” The New Republic, pp. 159-60.

glories of the ancient past and the unrestrained delights of nature and the senses. Despite a suggestion of the Bacchanal to such a collection of images and ideas, the poem has such a shadow-like quality that even the most exciting passages enforce realization that everything in the poem is dead and gone. Gosse was delighted with this poem, calling it her best to date. By using the same images of earlier poems, he felt that she had now “given shape” to her work.¹⁴¹

The second of the poems, “The Hambone and the Heart,” presents a rather ghoulish recitation between a girl and the heart of a mother who has been murdered by her son for love of a wanton. Nonetheless Miss Sitwell makes good use of this ballad-like setting to evoke a sense of decay and futility in sensual love.

“Prelude to a Fairy Tale” concludes the volume. This is a collection of speeches for various characters, most of whom have appeared in earlier poems. In this poem there is no loss of technique, though many devices, such as repetition, obtrude themselves a great deal less. In an intelligible and serious manner, Edith Sitwell considers the problem of existence and the problem of death:

“The strong man dies in age; the youth that seemed
Tall as the gods, immortal, who had dreamed
The splendour of the noon unfading, dies
In manhood; in his strong youth cradled lies

The child that played like a small tumbling wave
Among the tombs of God; the forest cave
Echoed that childish calling... still he strives
To wake the spell-bound God that sleeping lies

In nature. Why then should we fear our dying, –

¹⁴⁰ Gosse, Sir Edmund. Leaves and Fruit, p. 257.

¹⁴¹ Gosse, Sir Edmund. Leaves and Fruit, p. 258.

Who died so many times, – who follow flying
Feet and clasp love's shade and cry his name, –
But the bright love we clasp is not the same,

Since what existed yesterday must die
Today, that soon as dead as this must lie.
The death of fire is but the birth of air,
Whose bright death is the water's birth, and here

Immortals have known change, are mortal grown
And mortals are immortal, by death sown...¹⁴²

III. The Turning Point in Edith Sitwell's Work – 1929-1938.

After her long apprenticeship as a poet Miss Sitwell finally brought forth in 1929 her first really strong, sustained piece of poetry. This was her controversial Gold Coast Customs, which balances the fantastic blood rites of primitive African cannibals with the equally fantastic demands and conventions of modern civilization, to the everlasting discredit of the latter. This may be called her first strong, sustained work because it is the first of any length – The Sleeping Beauty had been an integrated collection of various kinds of verse – to maintain its fiery, angry attitude without modification. Though portions of the poem bear a strong resemblance to Vachel Lindsay's "The Congo" for their rhythm and lack of pastoral ornamentation:

"The Negro rolls
His red eyeballs,
Prostrates himself.
The negro sprawls:
His God is but a flat black stone
Upright upon a squeaking bone.
The Negro's dull
Red eyeballs roll..."¹⁴³

The unflinching, bitter indictment of modern civilization is an

¹⁴² Sitwell, Edith. "Prelude to a Fairy Tale," Rustic Elegies. pp. 93-4. Note the similarity of theme, if not of mood, attitude or technique, to A. E. Housman. This could be called an instance of Miss Sitwell's ideational revolt.

expression that is all Miss Sitwell's own:

“Against the Sea-wall are painted signs
'Here for a shilling a sailor dines.'
Each Rag-and-Bone
Is propped up tall
(Lest in death it fail)
Against the Sea-wall.
Their empty mouths are sewed up whole
Lest from hunger they gape and cough up their soul.
The arms of one are stretched out wide. ...
How long since our Christ was crucified?”¹⁴⁴

Grierson and Smith commented: “As for modern civilization, it is a thin matchboard flooring over a shallow hell... she gazes into that hell and draws on cannibal Ashanti for images of its rotting horror. Not much here of what Arnold thought the complaining millions ask from poetry!”¹⁴⁵

That it is one of her most notable poems, if not one of the most pleasant, was also supported, by C. M. Bowra. He also believed that it is definitely the turning point in her work: it shows all the consummate craft of her technique in her use of rhythms and sounds to carry the precise tone of the different moods, but it is more... it is “her deepest criticism of the world which greeted her when she left the dreams of childhood.”¹⁴⁶ Bowra explained, the effect of the poem thus, “In his Sweeney Agonistes T. S. Eliot uses the rhythms and the flat language of jazz-songs to show life in its nakedness on a kind of cannibal island; Miss Sitwell with more passion and more direction shows that this cannibalism is in the midst of us and that our feverish activities are like its own.” Behind the musical structure which

¹⁴³ Sitwell, Edith. “Gold Coast Customs,” The Canticle of the Rose, p. 140.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 144-5.

¹⁴⁵ Grierson, H. and J.C. Smith. A Critical History of English Poetry, p. 557.

¹⁴⁶ Bowra, C. M. Edith Sitwell, p. 27.

opposes bestiality with beauty, frenzy with inertia, can be found a hard intellectual framework, he continues. It is more than an effect of sound. "Matthew Arnold could well have found it an intense criticism of life. Behind it lies both a burning sense of justice and a bitter grief that modern life is as hollow as it is... But in this world there are, hidden away, some relics of life, of the heart of God... These secret forces are hardly at work, but they exist, and one day they will emerge in a fearful cleansing."¹⁴⁷

Naturally, such a violent denunciation of modern society could not be expected to receive cheers and congratulations from all quarters. Conrad Aiken's reaction to Gold Coast Customs was typical of the critics who felt that Miss Sitwell was mistaken in her view of the world. He found the book morbid, cold, shallow, selfish and lacking in insight. This biting criticism came about largely through the publication of Miss Sitwell's prose study of Pope in 1930. Aiken did not like the book: he thought it was trivial, overly sentimental and distorting a criticism he also made of her poetry. The faults in Pope were attributable, said Aiken, to the fact that Sitwell and Pope were fish in the same bowl, and Miss Sitwell's book showed that she was trying to reinterpret Pope's morbidity, shallowness, etc., etc., in order to save her own reputation.¹⁴⁸ Aiken considered Customs a prime example of Miss Sitwell's personal and professional failure.

Later judgments of Pope have rated it as one of the best books in its class, both for its technical thoroughness and its intelligent and sympathetic presentation. The appearance of Pope heralded a

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

poetic silence which was to last until 1938. The illness of Edith Sitwell's old friend, Helen Rootham, and her own urgent need for money forced her to abandon poetry in favor of prose writing. The poetic qualities were by no means stifled, however, for a large part of her prose was concerned with criticism and technique in poetry. Other prose works dealt with such notables as Queen Victoria, and other personalities in the English family closet, who all received an added flavoring of time and mood through the strongly poetic tinge of her writing. Even with a mass of facts and figures and footnotes, Edith Sitwell managed to infuse a very rich feeling of reality and interest into her material, though she exhibited a tendency to succumb to sounds which pleased her, rather than proceed with the narrative. Victoria of England, for example, comes to a full two-page halt while Miss Sitwell, in a transport of verbal rapture, lists the exotic names of the perfumes upon Her Highness' dressing-table.

Her Bath, brought out in 1932, called forth the observation that she seemed like a ghost from the 18th Century, since she is so well-versed with it. "But," the reviewer noted, "she is nice to share it with us."¹⁴⁹ Charles Williams snapped that thin sort of comment was pure laziness. "She is no more 18th Century than she is 22nd Century." She is one of the few poets and writers who do not divide literature from life, he said, and one becomes aware when reading her work that she is not only human, but also that she has a womanly heart.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Aiken, Conrad. "Edith Sitwell's Pope," The New Republic, pp. 358-9.

¹⁴⁹ Drury, Betty. "Bath," New York Times Book Review, (Dec. 11, 1939), p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ William, Charles. Poetry at Present, p. 176.

IV. War Poems and Later Poems – 1939-to date.

With the advent of World War II, Miss Sitwell finally came into her own in the world of poetry. Whereas even her early experiments had reflected in a strange, symbolic manner the disillusionment of the younger generation after World War I, it took the direct experience of a mature woman actually in the war to help her rise to an eminence of poetic expression which could be appreciated both as great poetry and as the understandable communication of a sort of faith in the midst of desolation and despair.

Caught in the air raids during the London Blitz, Edith Sitwell saw a portion of modern civilization in its darkest hour. She responded to the need for a poetic reaffirmation of faith in the midst of the darkness and mechanized evil of war with:

“Still falls the Rain –
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss –
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.”¹⁵¹

which is easily one of the most moving and inspiring poems to come out of any war.

Her claim to be considered one of the great poets of World War II rests, not so much on actual poetry written about the war, but upon poetry which gave a new heart and a new hope to the embattled English. Her most notable war collections were Street Songs (1942) and Green Song (1944). They have the same quality of greatness and permanence of Yeats' war poetry because they are not a radical change of thought and style, but a reinforcement of Miss Sitwell's gift. They show the authority of the mature, unhysterical person; they

show her ability to revitalize what she analyzes.

Although some of these poems are full of the horror of war and the expression of the universal death-wish, a large number of them are still in the pastoral phrase, recalling the delights of childhood and peacetime: a sort of promise of the world of tomorrow. Through them all flow a subtle sense of compassion, beauty and repose. Miss Sitwell's astonishing insight into the sufferings of war-stricken people results in poems which are neither reposeful nor beautiful, however, as in "Lullaby":

"Red is the bed of Poland, Spain,
And thy mother's breast, who has grown wise
In that fouled nest. If she could rise,
Give birth again,
In wolfish pelt she'd hide thy bones
To shield thee from the world's long cold,
And down on all fours shouldst thou crawl
For thus from no height canst thou fall –
Do, do."¹⁵²

Horace Gregory noted that the most amazing thing about Miss Sitwell's war poems was her ability to preserve her style and her technique. He felt that the 1942 collection was more artistically in the Baroque tradition than the works of Richard Crashaw, a poet noted for the elaborate conceits of his verse.¹⁵³

The suggestion one receives from this comment is that so often observed in great artists when their capacities are brought under some great test or strain: that the great artist does not "crack," he does not desert his art for some new metier, but is inspired by the test

¹⁵¹ Sitwell, Edith. "Still Falls the Rain," *The Canticle of the Rose*, p. 167.

¹⁵² Sitwell, Edith. "Still Falls the Rain," *The Canticle of the Rose*, p. 169.

¹⁵³ Gregory, Horace. "The 'Vita Nuova' of Baroque Art in the Recent Poetry of Edith Sitwell," *Poetry*. (June 1945), pp. 148-56.

to push his creative powers to new and greater heights. Here is an extract from Green Song which combines the old ornate elements of Miss Sitwell's verse with new expression in a very bitter attitude born of the war (not her attitude, however):

"I live in my perpendicular gray house;
Then in my horizontal house – a foolish bed
For one whose blood like Alexander roamed
Conquering countries of the heart.
All is the same:
The heroes marched like waves upon the shore:
Their great horizons and the kiss
Of Lovers, and of atoms, end in this.

O bitter love, O Death that came
To steal all that I own!"¹⁵⁴

C. M. Bowra attempted to explain this intensification of gift and expression by defining the central element of the poems of the war period – and, consequently, those which have followed:

"She has not only won an almost unique place for herself among the poets of the war but abundantly fulfilled the highest hopes which her admirers have held for her... Even the old-fashioned must feel that she has now joined the great tradition of English poetry and created something of universal significance and wide human appeal. Through it there beats a suffering, tender heart, a wise understanding and a true compassion. It has all the freshness of her earlier work, all its brightness and harmony, but it has a new humanity, a deeper sense of suffering and a more philosophical outlook. It shows above all her heroic courage in the face of a shattered world and her deep religious trust in the ultimate goodness of life."¹⁵⁵

The more recent work of Edith Sitwell continue in this vein of awakened humanism. Song of the Gold, published in 1945 contains a number of poems from older works, integrating them with several new ones to form a concentrated picture of coldness. Many take a

¹⁵⁴ Sitwell, Edith. Green Song, p. 20-1.

¹⁵⁵ Bowra, C. M. Edith Sitwell, pp. 29-30.

delight in the icy, tinkling sensations of the cold, but a few are heavy with a sort of frigid menace, as in “Tattered Serenade: Beggar to Shadow”:

“These are the nations of the Dead, their
million-year-old
Rags about them – these, the eternally cold,
Misery’s worlds, with Hunger, their long sun
Shut in by polar worlds of ice, known to no other,
Without a name, without a brother,
Though their skin shows that they are yet men,

Airing their skeleton’s well-planned cities whence
(Left by the rose, the flesh, with truth alone),
The fevers of the world and of the heart,
The light of the sun, are gone.”¹⁵⁶

Edith Sitwell’s poetic output has tended to fall off since the publication of her war collections. Whether this is due to interests in other fields – she has released a number of anthologies, critical works and a biography on Queen Elizabeth since the war poetry first appeared – or a semi-retirement is difficult to judge. Her latest book, The Canticle of the Rose, is actually an anthology of the best and most representative of her poetry, chronologically arranged. The latter portion of the book is devoted to the 1945-49 Canticles, her most recent published poetry, which reflect a new hope for tomorrow in the wake of yesterday’s disaster and today’s chaos. The closing portions of the book, “Three Poems for the Atomic Age,” cry out to warn of the sure destruction which the atomic bomb will wreak on mankind if the human race does not come to its collective senses:

“We did not heed the Cloud in the Heavens shaped
like the hand
Of Man.... But there came a roar as if the Sun
and Earth had come together –

¹⁵⁶ Sitwell, Edith. The Song of the Gold, p. 31.

The Sun descending and the Earth ascending
To take its place above... the Primal Matter
Was broken, the womb from which all life began,
Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose
in memory of Man."¹⁵⁷

In this range of poetry, from 1914-1949, can be found the story of a consistent, and increasingly skilful application of theory and technique in writing poetry. But there is more than just that. In this span of poetry can be found the heritage of the world's great poets, the trivial and the important from history and fashion, the revelation of personality and strength of inner resources, and the inherent beauty of words and sounds, all combined to produce at last a contribution to literature as different and striking as its content is profound and significant.

¹⁵⁷ Sitwell, Edith. "The Shadow of Cain," The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 274-5.

CHAPTER IV

“POETRY, SITWELL AND ORAL READING”

The preceding chapters dealing with the poet, her techniques, the growth of her skill and insist and the widening scope of her subject matter have been planned as a foundation for this final chapter. In this, the attention shifts to a consideration of Miss Sitwell's poetry as material suitable for oral interpretation.

To reveal the writer's ideas on the possible uses of her poetry for program presentation, the discussion will be divided into three convenient points of consideration: the appeals inherent in her poetry; specific values Edith Sitwell's works offer various types of audiences; the problems and values in these poems for the interpretative reader.

I. Consideration of the Appeals of Edith Sitwell's Poetry.

One of the most important attitudes the interpreter must possess in order to do service to himself and his art is an open-mindedness and a breadth of understanding which enable him to see the universal qualities in a poem... or any work of art.

Appreciation of Edith Sitwell's work demands such an open-mindedness. As was stressed in the chapter on techniques, the arguments against her poetry which used such terms as

“unintelligible,” “nonsense,” and “gibberish” are generally fallacious, since the critics who used those derogatory terms were judging the poetry on one and only one standard of values: that a poem must have a message, tell a story, or embody some great moral truth. This narrowness of view caused these critics to miss the great universal appeals which are found in Miss Sitwell’s use of form, sound and imagery.

Before discussing the problems of recognizing and appreciating the variety of appeals in Miss Sitwell’s poetry, it will be advantageous to enumerate the outstanding qualities of her work. The general appeals of her writing may be divided into four groups: technique appeals, appeals to scholars, appeals of an interest in mankind, and appeals of a thoughtful examination of the world and its future. This very variety is in itself one of the distinctive appeals of Edith Sitwell’s poetry.

Appeals of technique are to be found in her use of rhythm, rhyme, texture and musical qualities, as well as in her brilliant use of vivid and unusual images and clever nonsense verse. Façade and The Sleeping Beauty are rich in these values.

Appeals to scholars – or to any well-read person – are provided by Miss Sitwell’s challenging use of allusions, metaphors and sources. The intrinsic appeals of classical mythology, Baroque tradition, enchanted lands, magic, great art and architecture contribute heavily to this category. Freshness of expression, attained by presenting old themes in new ways as in “Song of the Cold” and “Gold Coast Customs,” offers a distinct appeal to the widely-read individual.

Of interest to all people are Miss Sitwell's appeals growing out of her knowledge and observation of mankind. The truth to reality and the insight of her character portraits – "Col. Fantook," "Mlle. Richarde" – represent one aspect, while her strong poetic criticism of the shams of modern civilization – coupled with a deep compassion and understanding of the underdog and the unfortunate – gives a different approach to the same material.

The most important category of Miss Sitwell's appeals is that which deals with her understanding of the world at present and her predictions for the future. Here one finds the basic appeal of universal themes: the business of living, the business of loving, natural themes, attempts to explain man's relation to his universe, themes on the significance of the supernatural, and, most vital, the expression of the universal desire for peace and happiness. Miss Sitwell's awareness of the threat of atomic warfare and incipient chaos have an added appeal of timeliness which helps to balance earlier escapist works.

It is praiseworthy that a creative artist should produce an art work embodying one of these universal appeals, but it is infinitely more of an achievement when the artist manages – as Miss Sitwell does – to offer such a wide variety of appeals in her poems.

While art critics like Max Eastman have insisted upon a monistic theory for judging art – "art must be illusion," art must have a moral," etc. –, it is the author's opinion that such demands reflect personal prejudice and are only justifiable when the critic also announces his limitations. For this reason, the interpreter must understand the multiplicity of values in Edith Sitwell's poetry and not

be misled into searching for only one appeal. Alert observers and psychologically trained aestheticians have discovered that monistic theories of art valuation are not really valid. Herbert S. Langfeld, eminent psychologist, while eliminating the process of artistry as an avenue of art valuation, insists that appreciation of art works varies and has different centers of attention depending upon the philosophical and psychological relation of the individual to the art object.¹⁵⁸ George Boas, distinguished Johns-Hopkins philosopher, sets up a chart of eight possible art appreciation angles. Boas maintains that the onlooker may derive appreciation of an art work through any one, some, or all of these eight approaches.¹⁵⁹ Boas' categories include such items as contemplation of artistry process—watching the creation, seeing finished object as a complete work, appreciation of a story or moral suggested by the art, enjoyment of form, color and other technique elements.

Cleanth Brooks and Robert Perm Warren also see the need for the recognition of multiplicity of value in art, instead of the narrow monistic approach. In Understanding Poetry, the authors point out the fallacy of “message hunting,” searching for “pure realization,” or looking for a “beautiful statement of some high truth,” or for any other single value. This sort of criticism and appreciation, say the authors, completely ignores the fact that there is an organic basis to all good poetry which makes a poem not a bundle of mechanical or philosophical poetic elements, but an integrated work of art in which each of the elements works with the others to create the total affect

¹⁵⁸ Langfeld, Herbert S. The Aesthetic Attitude.

¹⁵⁹ Boas, George. A Primer for Critics.

the poet wished to leave with his readers.¹⁶⁰ Thus, if the poet had wanted to give a complete character portrait – his total effect –, he might use the finest of messages in literature and the highest of moral truths, but these elements would still be subordinate to the whole.

This, then, is the approach the interpreter must take to Miss Sitwell's poetry as he considers it for his audience and for himself.

The multiple and universal appeals in Edith Sitwell's poetry lie as much in the techniques as they do in the content. One agrees with Max Eastman that a poetic expression of an attitude toward life has great value – though one insists that he is unfair to say Miss Sitwell has not offered such an expression – but one also recognizes the values of form, which Franklin T. Baker stresses: “But it is poetry above all other forms which needs to be read aloud. It is addressed to the ear. Its very form emphasizes this fact, in rhythm, in theme, in caesural pause, in recurrent regularity of structure, in euphony, in onomatopoeia. We are not, really reading poetry when we get only the idea and the feeling; we must also get the music of it. If there is no music in the verse it is not poetry, however impressive the ideas it contains. This is the rock upon which the extremists of ‘free verse’ are wrecked.”¹⁶¹

Miss Sitwell may be found in firm agreement upon this point, for she has insisted a number of times that a lovely poem without philosophy is infinitely superior to a bad poem with philosophy. One may recall an earlier quote of hers regarding the impermanence of contemporary Marxist poets with their poems on “sandwich papers and motorcycles” as measured against the work of artists who really

¹⁶⁰ Brooks, Cleanth, and Robert Penn Warren. Understanding Poetry.

‘And the drinks,
You can see,
Are hot as any hottentot and not the goods for me!’¹⁶²

In the general stir of merriment and disbelief which greets such an excerpt, two reactions – typically liberal and conservative in nature, respectively – often take place. The open-minded moderns praise the nonsense quality and the suggestion of tradition-mocking, while the people who still stand with Ruskin are appalled at the triviality of the verse and the lack of message.

With this latter reaction, the conservative generally dismisses Miss Sitwell as impossible, thus cutting himself off from the brilliant “messages” and “moral truths” to be found in her more recent works. The modern, priding himself on his distaste for moral messages in poetry – a narrowness Miss Sitwell has never allowed herself – cuts himself off from the later works by being content with the early novelties. The modern, in his desire to participate in the fads of his circle, quite often fails to penetrate to the real technical values of even the early poems because of his infatuation with their novelty.

That the existing appeals should escape notice, or at least that only one or two of them should find an understanding and appreciative audience indicates some serious problems for the oral reader.

Because Edith Sitwell’s later, fuller poetic works have been built upon the foundation of the technical experiments of her early poems, the greatest possible appreciation of her deeply moving war poetry, for instance, still requires appreciation of her technique values. As is

¹⁶² Sitwell, Edith. “Hornpipe,” The Canticle of the Rose, p. 62.

the way with most contemporary poets, Edith Sitwell's work is highly subjective and impressionistic... it is rarely explicit, but for all of that it is no less intelligible when the tools of understanding have been mastered. But even if the reader lacks appreciation of backgrounds, theories and techniques, he will see in the later poems an expression of universal experience and humanity which is common to all good literature. Ivor Richards, the noted English scholar, stresses the need for this universal appeal as the core of literature, whereas Max Eastman's monistic theory was based on this and this alone. Richards allows for a variance in response levels and modes of expression in dealing with these universals. The variations are, after all, the essential distinguishing qualities – style –, a new and unaccustomed fashion which is no less valid for all its unusualness. Richards also points out, as did Brooks and Warren, that expression, poetic experience, rhyme, metre, imagery are all part of the whole, and the whole effect is always greater than the sum of these parts, owing to the integral action of all these universal.¹⁶³

To demonstrate Edith Sitwell's universality and flexibility as a writer of poems containing appeals of all sorts – humorous, tragic, gay, serious message, light story, lyric, musical rhythms – it will be best to dispel a few notions which persist about the nature of her style. Since she was and is one of the leading “modern” poets, a consistent attempt has been made to confuse her work with the often deliberately meaningless poetical trivia of the “Dadaist” school. The popular currency of her Façade record – which was composed in 1922 – has done nothing to erase this idea. Nothing could be farther

¹⁶³ Richards, Ivor A. Principles of Literary Criticism.

from the truth in intention, though the results of Miss Sitwell's work may have seemed similar to "dada."

A simple comparison of aims may serve to indicate the difference between Miss Sitwell's meaningful obtuseness and the haphazard vacancy of some "avant garde" groups. The "avant garde" has on numerous occasions announced its cardinal doctrines of art as: 1) NO SUBJECT. The subject is considered as a prejudice of which the artist must be free; 2) NO CATERING TO THE PUBLIC. The artist must avoid felicity, because to please is to flatter; 3) NO CONFORMITY. The artist must intentionally search for what is unusual: strange associations, scandalous allusions, disconcerting images... everything calculated to shock traditions and conventions.¹⁶⁴

The only one of those principles Edith Sitwell has ever subscribed to is the principle of non-conformity. She has employed this, not to shock, but to revitalize and freshen expressions regarding the universals in experience and philosophy. It is this which makes her earlier works seem especially like the more irresponsible offerings of the schools who refused to communicate anything of their experience with their public. Synaesthesia was not adopted by Miss Sitwell simply to keep her readers in a perpetual quandary about her ideas and intents: it was adopted to overthrow the traditions in feeble Georgian poetry and the strongly boring moral overtones of Victorian verse. The ideas and techniques employed in the perfection of Edith Sitwell's poetic expression were all soundly thought out and based upon a long tradition of great poets. These ideas and these

¹⁶⁴ Anon. Cinema '51 Showsheet.

techniques were used forcefully and in a craftsmanlike way to create a new form of communicative poetry. The essential factor which will enable the reader to realize the old universal values of human experience and thought recorded in Miss Sitwell's poetry is a recognition of the role – and intrinsic art value – of form, imagination and the other distinctly Sitwellian characteristics of style in expressing that thought and experience.

II. Specific Values Edith Sitwell's Works Offer Various Types of Audiences.

After the previous discussion, it might seem that comprehension of Edith Sitwell's verse could only be attained after intense study, a deterrent which could alienate almost any audience. Such is not the case, however, for a simple admission of the possibility of multiple appeals on the part of the audience – a willingness to give an unprejudiced hearing – and capable reading by the interpreter should be sufficient to allow the merit of the poetry to emerge without undue analysis or introductory praise.

The appeals of rhythm, sound patterns and images which are the main distinctions of the early poems have a sort of universal appeal which should please almost any audience. Adults, owing to monistic art prejudices, are apt to resist the charms of "Jane, Jane, tall as a crane," but children, unburdened by preconceived notions of what poetry ought to be, will respond freely and delightedly to many of Miss Sitwell's early poetic exercises purely for the musical values and unusual word pictures. The Façade suite is especially appealing for those values. Robert B. Farren, in How To Enjoy Poetry, stresses

the deep and basic appeals which reside in the form and techniques of poetry, with no attention even being paid to philosophy or story content. He says, "Few, even of those who have seldom sought poetry, lack an inborn relish of its elements, and so of some of its simpler forms."¹⁶⁵

In Chapters II and III the attempt was made to show that Miss Sitwell's techniques are basic to all her work, but the techniques are not in themselves hindrances to communication. Half of the hindrances in interpretation will lie with the audience who may be looking for something else in poetry. For this reason, there should not be too much difficulty in communicating the earlier poems, if they are offered for what they are, not for what they are not.

Miss Sitwell's poetry is primarily emotional, though her tremendous fund of knowledge and her active mind infuse high intellectual content into her work. The emotional qualities, coupled with the elemental attractions of the imagery, the rhythm, and the sounds, will often carry over the basic content of the poem, even though the receiving individual may not realize to what the many Baroque fragments refer. This is always true of really excellent poetry which has the fire of personal expression in it. Many obscure references in Shakespeare and Keats, for example, do not impair essentially the communication of the emotion which is the core of the particular poem.

The numerous classical references in a number of the poems, do seem to suffocate the emotion and the mood to an extent, unless the references are recognized and understood. This disadvantage,

¹⁶⁵ Farren, Robert B. How to Enjoy Poetry, p. 15.

peculiarly strong in the overly-Baroque Sleeping Beauty, demands an unusually well-educated audience.

It is necessary to point out that a goodly number of Miss Sitwell's poems do not suffer from an overdose of classicism and are readily intelligible to any audience. Two very fine examples are the amusing "On the Vanity of Human Aspirations" and "Three Poor Witches."¹⁶⁶ One cannot answer a general question in terms of "yes" or "no" – Can an average audience understand her poetry? – because Miss Sitwell's virtuosity and variety is such that she has produced poems to which the answer must be "yes," and poems to which the answer must be "no."

What can be said generally is that the bulk of Miss Sitwell's poetry will not appeal to an average audience without proper preparation and presentation – an average poem can get by with improper presentation owing to its use of stereotypes, whereas Miss Sitwell's poems require special attention. An audience of college-trained people would be much better equipped to appreciate her work, and an audience of the college professors would probably be the best prepared to deal with it, at least with the scholarly aspects. As has been said before, it is the untutored who respond best to the emotional and technical effects, for the educated people tend to look for something more, or something else in Edith Sitwell's "pure poetry" experiments.

These considerations must not be interpreted to mean that only children and college professors will find appeals in her poetry. "The preceding discussions have been devoted to stressing the

¹⁶⁶ See Appendix II for copies.

universality of Miss Sitwell's work, within her own distinctive frame of style. What the aforementioned considerations do imply is that Miss Sitwell's poetry, while it contains many excellent, communicable selections adaptable to all sorts of audiences as single selections, does not offer, for all of its variety, enough real variation in style to support a full program for an average audience. For a better educated group of people, the poetry would have sufficient variation, if one were to draw representative selections from each period of Edith Sitwell's development.¹⁶⁷

From an audience's point of view one of the most helpful and enjoyable programs an oral interpreter could offer from, the works of Edith Sitwell would be of the lecture-recital type. Here, since the program does not depend entirely upon an unbroken succession of poems, the more extreme conceits of Miss Sitwell's style would not be too incomprehensible to the average audience.

There are a number of lecture-recital approaches which could be used to advantage. One, which might appeal especially to a college group or to a women's group, would introduce the rich, warm and human personality of Edith Sitwell through her prose and her poetry. Some of the excellent biographical material from Sir Osbert's writings would well be included. Also valuable for a general audience – always assuming the audience to be interested in poetry – would be a study of her work in relation to the development of modern poetry, using such poets as T. S. Eliot, and Stephen Spender as contrasts. Another very interesting presentation would be a comparison of Edith Sitwell's modernism with the "traditions" of Victorianism and

¹⁶⁷ See Appendix II for suggested samples from each period which indicate variously impressionistic and

Georgianism which – with some measure of success – she tried to overthrow.

The foregoing, adaptable to both average and better-educated audiences, are obviously serious, yet enjoyable programs. They are not designed for laugh-getting at the Elks' Smoker. They should be given under conditions of a genuine interest on the part of the audience in a serious consideration of a poet either unknown or not well known to it.

An entertaining program not intended to be serious could be well devised by comparing Miss Sitwell's nonsense and rhythmical verse with other masters such as Lewis Carrol and Edward Lear. Children would especially enjoy a well-prepared program along those lines.

The most scholarly type of lecture-recital which could be offered – best suited to college students and alert literati – would be a study of Edith Sitwell's use of techniques, or an exploration of her growth as a poet. A study of her symbolism, the backgrounds of her themes and materials, her view of the universe... all of these offer fertile ground for such a recital.

Perhaps most valuable of all in winning a hearing and encouraging appreciation of Edith Sitwell's works would be a recital demonstrating the great scholarship and artistic genius of Miss Sitwell by showing her direct poetic relation through techniques, attitudes and ideas to her illustrious teachers: Milton, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, Pope, Donne.

III. Problems and Values the Interpretative Reader will Encounter in Presenting Edith Sitwell's Poems.

A reader faces an important challenge in the poetry of Edith Sitwell for it is largely his responsibility to win an appreciative hearing for her poetry. If an audience is to be made aware of the many values and appeals, it is the reader's obligation to know as much as he possible can about Edith Sitwell herself, her techniques, her ideas and her poetic materials.

This preparation for presentation offers the oral reader an opportunity for real emotional and intellectual growth. The amazing quality of Baroque fancy, the delights of "pure poetry," the absorbing ideas... all these are invitations to the thinking mind and to the imagination. Miss Sitwell's distinct mode of expression and interpretation of the universe cannot but broaden the outlook. Here also is a stimulus to increasing one's knowledge of history, of art, of classical and folk mythology, of music, of the variety of human experience.

The author would hazard his own experience in connection with the research for this thesis as proof of the values – and problems – the oral reader may derive from study and presentation of Miss Sitwell's works. First, one is intrigued by hearing excerpts from her poetry to such an extent that one wants to learn more about her unusual techniques and her highly unique approach to life. On the scholarly side, this interest leads to an investigation of Miss Sitwell's life and the culture which nourished her; a short course in political, social, moral, cultural, and literary history is the valuable result. The scholar, to be assured that he has been thorough, is led to expand

his studies into the realms of ancient history and myth, to be sure he has captured the fullest effect of Miss Sitwell's work... of course, it is not necessary that an audience know or understand all Miss Sitwell's allusions and metaphors, but it is absolutely necessary that the oral reader be sure of them so that his comprehension may be conveyed through his attitudes and tones: the basic emotion or idea is not always communicated only by intelligible words. On the imaginative side – dropping the scholarly approach, the reader will be able to find a world of emotional release – and escape – in Edith Sitwell's poetry unlike any other. And if a reader fails to capture this fragile quality of fancy and unreality as Miss Sitwell has first projected it, all the scholarship on allusions and techniques and developing philosophy will not preserve the essential Sitwellian charm of the poem.

This problem of communicating the many different qualities in any single poem is the main task the interpreter will have to face in Edith Sitwell's poetry. It is a challenge to his best efforts, physically, emotionally and intellectually, for the unusual combination of complexity with simplicity in these poems makes it possible for a reader either to communicate almost completely or to fail entirely in any sort of communication. The success of the poem rests mainly with the reader.

Aside from the ever-present problems of communicating ideas in poetry, an intriguing problem arises in connection with the unusual techniques of Edith Sitwell's writing, especially in reference to the early impressionistic collections such as Façade. The problem is: How should these poems be read, in the light of their special construction, unique texture, imagery and rhythm?

Such a question is really more vital than it might seem to one accustomed to hearing rhythmical poetry simply read with metric stress. One becomes aware that Miss Sitwell's verse requires a much more special type of treatment. This special need is pointed up by the fact that Miss Sitwell reads the works of other authors with "great personality and vitality" in quite a different fashion from the Façade poems.¹⁶⁸ She has very definite opinions on the reading of her own impressionistic poetry and it may be that her idea is an attempt to answer W. M. Parrish and Max Eastman and to explain that impressionistic poetry does not demand impressionistic reading.

In fact, impressionistic rendering would apparently be about the last thing she would want in Façade. Consider this passage from Sir Osbert's Laughter in the Next Room in reference to this problem:

"It is not easy to describe Façade, nor to explain the kind of entertainment it provides: but its history is not without fascination, and that I can give you, together with the history of the details of which it was built up. First, however, I must emphasize that its primary objects were to exalt the speaking voice to the level of the instruments supporting it, to obtain an absolute balance between the volume of the music and the volume of the sound of the words – neither music nor words were to be treated or taken as a separate entity – and thus to be able to reach for once that unattainable land which, in the finest songs, always lies looming mysteriously beyond, a land full of nuances, and of meanings, analogies, and images hitherto seen only fragmentarily, and wherein parallel sound and sense, which here never meet, can be seen, even from this distance, to merge and run into one broad line on the horizon. Another chief aim equally difficult to achieve was the elimination of the personality of the reciter, and also – though this of lesser consequence – of the musicians, and the abolition, as a result, of the constricting self-consciousness engendered by it and sufficient to prevent any traveler from reaching the lunar landscapes I have mentioned above. Towards our purpose, the instrumentalists were secreted behind a painted curtain. ...Because of its function, an enormous mask occupied the center (of the curtain) the open mouth was filled by the receding hollow cone of a trumpet (a microphone was later used)... The trumpet-shaped instrument to which I refer was a megaphone of a kind invented some years before by a former singer in

¹⁶⁸ "No Bolsters," The New Yorker Magazine. (Nov 18, 1950), pp. 39-40.

opera, and an authority on voice production, who had in the first place devised it to help his own performance in the role of Fafner... The sengerphone – the inventor, Mr. Senger, had named it after himself – triumphantly retained the purity of the tonal quality it magnified. Its success was due in part to the material of which it was made – a fiber derived, I believe, from compressed grasses which altogether removed the metallic timbre once associated with the word “megaphone,” and in part to the fact that the orifice of the amplifier covered, not only the mouth but also the lips and nostrils of the speaker, whereby the nasal resonance was neither lost nor altered, matters of importance to us in an entertainment in which, by its very nature and object, the speaker is obliged to be incisive in diction and to preserve with severity the rhythms. Thus, the audience saw no one speaking; the painted curtain was provided instead for it to look at, and it heard the human voice speaking, not singing – but speaking at last on an equality with the music. It was, in short, the discovery of an abstract method of presenting poetry to an audience.”¹⁶⁹

The problem which the interpreter will find suggested to him by this passage is that of truth to the author’s intent, when reading the Façade poems and similar works. Of course, the normal situation will not find William Walton’s music close by for the needed accompaniment, so Miss Sitwell’s aim will in part be destroyed, but the strong suggestion of the above passage is that in reading these verses, Edith Sitwell was striving for as complete an impersonality as possible, in addition to reaching an equality with the music. This is understandable and quite justifiable when one considers that it is the artistic values of music and song – metre, rhythms, assonances, dissonance – which are the central features of all Façade poems, rather than individual, emotional expressions regarding man in his environment.

The interpreter, in the light of this knowledge, will do well to dwell upon the technique values of such poems in order to project the

¹⁶⁹ Sitwell, Sir Osbert. Laughter in the Next Room, pp. 207-8.

values of the poetry as a form, and the delights of words purely for their values in weight and length of sound. There is an underlying whimsy to all these poems which ought to be captured by the reader in order to vivify the rhythms. This is not a violation of impersonality to a great extent – though it will demand a certain amount of introspective reaction to the humor of the poems, and the reader's interpretation of that whimsy may be somewhat different from Miss Sitwell's – for the poetic values still remain supreme.

This sort of dilemma – to be impersonal or not – will not be such a burden which extracts from “Gold Coast Customs” or “The Canticle of the Rose” are read orally, for the poetic elements in form become merely valuable adjuncts to projecting the thought and attitude of the poet. Thus, in “Still Falls the Rain,” the values of metre and texture might be projected by the impersonal reading, devoid of personality and expression, but the emotional and intellectual values of the poem would be either lost or seriously crippled.

Simply, the technique of reading Edith Sitwell's works divides itself into two categories: that of impersonal where the conceits of form are the sole concern in a sort of pleasant toying with words, and that of true interpretative reading, where the ideas and attitudes are by far the most important and distinguishing qualities of the poetry. In the first, one needs knowledge of Miss Sitwell's theories and techniques of poetry writing in order to do justice to her work. In the second category, one needs not only this knowledge, but also a thorough understanding of the moods, attitudes, purposes, and meaning of her poems, plus a sympathy for her as a writer and human being – considering her life, background and philosophy – in

order to give the full values of sense and mind to her poetry and make it come alive for listeners.

It has been the sincere effort of the writer to discover and reveal the strengths of Edith Sitwell's poetry which make it appropriate and vital material for the oral interpreter. This study has attempted to prove that her poetry is worthy of being heard, but that it requires the talents of an especially well-prepared and skillful reader to reveal its full values. In addition, the paper sought to stress that, though Edith Sitwell's poetry will not appeal to a very broad public, there are enough audiences capable of enjoying and appreciating it to warrant its use in public reading.

APPENDIX I
 CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF POETRY, PROSE AND CRITICAL
 WORKS OF EDITH SITHELL¹⁷⁰

<u>The Mother and Other Poems</u>	1915
<u>Twentieth Century Harlequinade and Other Poems</u> (with Osbert Sitwell)	1916
<u>Clown's Houses</u>	1918
<u>The Wooden Pegasus</u>	1920
<u>Façade</u>	1922
<u>Bucolic Comedies</u>	1923
<u>The Sleeping Beauty</u>	1924
<u>Troy Park</u>	1925
<u>Poetry and Criticism</u> (criticism)	1925
<u>Elegy on Dead Fashion</u>	1926
<u>Poem for a Christmas Card</u>	1926
<u>Rustic Elegies</u>	1927
<u>Five Poems</u>	1928
<u>Popular Song</u>	1928
<u>Gold Coast Customs</u>	1929
<u>Collected Poems</u>	1930
<u>Alexander Pope</u> (prose criticism)	1930
<u>The Pleasure of Poetry</u> (critical anthology)	1930

¹⁷⁰ This list, as inclusive as possible with references available, was constructed from the partial listings of Contemporary British Literature, F. B. Millet; Twentieth Century Authors, S. J. Kunitz and H. Haycraft, and Whitaker's Cumulative Book Lists, (1939-51).

<u>Epithalamium</u>	1931
<u>Jane Barston, 1719-1746</u>	1931
<u>Bath</u>	
..1932(prose)	
<u>Five Variations on A Theme</u>	1933
<u>The English Eccentrics</u>	1933
(prose)	
<u>Aspects of Modern Poetry</u>	1934
(criticism)	
<u>Selected Poems</u>	1936
<u>Victoria of England</u>	1936
(prose)	
<u>I Live Under a Black Sun</u>	1937
(prose)	
<u>Trio</u>	1938
(criticism: with Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell)	
<u>Edith Sitwell's Anthology</u>	1940
<u>Poems New and Old</u>	1941
<u>Look! The Sun: An Anthology</u>	1941
<u>Street Songs</u>	1942
<u>English Women</u>	1942
(prose)	
<u>A Poet's Notebook</u>	1943
(critical handbook)	
<u>Green Song and Other Poems</u>	1944
<u>Planet and Glow Worm</u>	1944
(anthology)	
<u>Song of the Cold: Poems</u>	1945
<u>Fanfare for Elizabeth</u>	1946
(prose)	
<u>Shadow of Cain</u>	1947

Notebook on William Shakespeare.....1948
(criticism)

The Canticle of the Rose: Selected Poems,(1917-49).....1949

APPENDIX II
EARLY POEMS

BUCOLICS

-AUBADE-¹⁷¹

Jane, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again;

Comb your cockscomb-ragged hair,
Jane, Jane, come down the stair.

Each dull blunt wooden stalactite
Of rain creaks, hardened by the light,

Sounding like an overtone
From some lonely world unknown.

But the creaking empty light
Will never harden into sight,

Will never penetrate your brain
With overtones like the blunt rain.

The light would show (if it could harden)
Eternities of kitchen garden,

Cooksoomb flowers that none will pluck,
And wooden flowers that 'gin to cluck.

In the kitchen you must light
Flames as staring, red and white,

As carrots or as turnips, shining
Where the cold dawn light lies whining.

¹⁷¹ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 6.

Cockscomb hair on the cold wind
Hangs limp, turns the milk's weak mind....

Jane, Jane,
Tall as a crane,
The morning light creaks down again!

-THREE POOR WITCHES-¹⁷²

Whirring, walking
On the tree-top
Three poor witches
Mow and mop.
Three poor witches
Fly on switches
Of a broom
From their cottage room.
Like goat's beard rivers,
Black and lean.
Are Moll and Meg,
And Myrrhaline.
'Of these whirring witches Meg'
(Bird-voiced fire screams)
'Has one leg;
Moll has two, on tree-tops, see
Goat-foot Myrrhaline has three!
When she walks,
Turned to a wreath
Is every hedge;
She walks beneath
Flowered trees like water
Splashing down;
Her rich and dark silk
Plumcake gown
Has folds so stiff
It stands alone
Within the fields
When she is gone.
And when she walks
Upon the ground
You'd never know
How she can bound
Upon the tree-tops, for she creeps
With a snail's slow silver pace;
Her Milky silky wrinkled face
Shows no sign of her disgrace.

¹⁷² Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 7-8.

-ON THE VANITY OF HUMAN ASPIRATIONS-¹⁷³

'In the time of King James I, the aged Countess, of Desmond met her death at the age of a hundred and forty years, through failing from an apple-tree.' – Chronicles of the times.

In the cold wind, towers grind round,
Turning, turning, on the ground;

In among the plains of corn
Each tower seems a unicorn.

Beneath a sad umbrageous tree
Anne, the goose-girl, could I see –

But the umbrageous tree behind
Ne'er cast a shadow on her mind –

A goose-round breast she had, goose-brains,
And a nose longer than a crane's;

A clarinet sound, cold, forlorn,
Her harsh hair, straight as yellow corn,

And her eyes were round, inane
As the blue pebbles of the rain.

Young Anne, the goose-girl, said to me,
'There's been a sad catastrophe!

The aged Countess still could walk
At a hundred and forty years, could talk,

And every eve in the crystal cool
Would walk by the side of the clear fish-pool.

But today when the Countess took her walk
Beneath the apple-trees, from their stalk

¹⁷³ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 20-2.

The apples fell like the red-gold crown
of those kings that the Countess had lived down,

And they fell into the crystal pool;
The grandmother fish, enjoying the cool –

(Like the bright queens dyed on a playing-card,
They seemed, as they fanned themselves, flat and hard)–

Floated in long and chequered gowns
And, darting, searched for the red-gold crowns

In the Castles drowned long ago
Where the empty years pass weedy-slow.

And the water is flat as equality
That reigns over all In the heavenly

State we aspire to, where none can choose
Which is the goose-girl, which is the goose. . . .

But the Countess climbed up the apple-tree,
Only to see what she could see –

Because to persons of her rank
The usual standpoint is that of the bank! ...'

The goose-girl smoothed down her feather-soft
Breast. . . 'When the Countess came aloft.

King James and his courtiers, dressed in smocks,
Rode by a-hunting the red-gold fox,

And King James, who was giving the view-halloo
Across the corn, too loudly blew,

And the next that happened was – what did I see
But the Countess fall'n from the family tree!

Yet King James could only see it was naughty

To aspire to the high at a hundred and forty,

“Though if” (as he said) “she aspired to climb
To Heaven – she certainly has, this time!”

... And Anne, the goose-girl, laughed, ‘Tee-hee,
It was a sad catastrophe!’

EARLY POEMS

MARINE-MINSTRELS-¹⁷⁴

Beside the sea, metallic bright
 And sequined with, the noisy light,
 Duennas slowly promenade,
 Each like a patch of sudden shade;

.....

Those crested paladins the waves
 Are sighing to their tawny slaves.
 The sands, where orange-turban'd, stand –
 Opaque black gems – the Negro band!

While in the purring greenery
 The crowd moves like a tropic sea –
 The people, sparkles from the heat
 That dies from ennui at our feet.

.....

Eternity and Time commence
 To merge amid the somnolence
 Of winding circles, bend on bend,
 With no beginning and no end.

Down which they chase queer tunes that gape
 Till they come close – then just escape!
 But though Time's barriers are defied,
 They never seem quite satisfied.

The crowds, bright sparks struck out by Time,
 Pass, touch each other, never chime:
 Each soul a separate entity –
 Some past, some present, some to be:

¹⁷⁴ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 24-5. The marks: (.....) serve to indicate the omission of verses. This device will be employed with all poems too long for the limits of this appendix.

But now, an empty blot of white,
Beneath the senseless shocks of light
Flashed by the tunes that cannot thrill
The nerves. Oh. 'Time is hard to kill!

EARLY POEMS

FACADE:

-NURSERY RHYME-¹⁷⁵

Said King Pompey, the emperor's ape,
Shuddering black in his temporal cape
Of dust, 'The dust is everything –
The heart to love and the voice to sing,
Indianapolis
And the Acropolis,
Also the hairy sky that we
Take for a coverlet comfortably.'
Said the Bishop, 'The world is flat....'
But the see-saw Crowd sent the emperor down
To the howling dust – and up went the Clown
With his face that is filched from the new young
dead....

And the Tyrant's ghost and the low-Man-Flea
Are emperor-brothers, throw shades that are red
From the tide of blood (Red Sea, Dead Sea),
And Attila's voice or the hum of a gnat
Can usher in Eternity.

¹⁷⁵ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 32.

-MADAME MOUSE TROTS-¹⁷⁶

Madam Mouse trots
Gray in the black night!
Madam Mouse trots:
Furred is the light.
The elephant-trunks
Trumpet from the sea....
Gray in the black night
The mouse trots free.
Hoarse as a dog's bark
The heavy leaves are furled....
The cat's in his cradle
All's well with the world!

-BLACK MRS. BEHEMOTH-¹⁷⁷

In a room of the palace
Black Mrs. Behemoth
Gave way to wrath
And the wildest malice.
Cried Mrs. Behemoth,
'Come, court lady,
Doomed like a moth,
Through palace rooms shady!
The candle flame
Seemed a yellow pompion
Sharp as a scorpion;
Nobody came....
Only a bugbear
Air unkind,
That bud-furred papoose
The young spring wind,

¹⁷⁶ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 36.

¹⁷⁷ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 39.

Blew out the candle.
Where is it gone?
To flat Coromandel
Rolling on!

-WALTZ-¹⁷⁸

'Daisy and Lily,
Lazy and silly,
Walk by the shore of the wan grassy sea –
Talking once more 'neath a swan-bosomed tree.
Rose castles,
Tourelles
Those bustles
Where swells
Each foam-bell of ermine,
They roam and determine
What fashions have been and what fashions will be –
What tartan leaves born,
What crinolines worn.
By Queen Thetis,
Pelisses
Of tarlatine blue,
Like the thin plaided leaves that the castle crags grew;
Or velours d'Afradine:
On the water-gods' land
Her hair seemed gold trees on the honey-cell sand
When the thickest gold spangles, on deep water seen,
Were like twanging guitar and like cold mandoline....'

RUSTIC PERIOD

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY:

“And with a dark dream’s pomp and panoply
 She swept out with her train; the soft sounds die
 Of plumaged revelry bright as her train
 Of courtiers; and all was night again.

Then through the deepest shades went Laidronette,
 Princess of the Pagodas; in a pet
 She left the domes, like rich and turbanned fruits
 In the great gardens, and she left the lutes;

Back to her palace in her great sedan
 She floats; world turn to snow before fan –
 She sweeps through the dark woods to her vast palace
 Where now, at last, she can unleash her malice.

.....

And in Night’s deep domain she monstrous lies
 With every little wicked dream that flies
 And crawls; with old Bacchantes black with wine,
 Whose very hair has changed into a vine,

And ancient satyrs whose wry wig of roses
 Nothing but little rotting shames discloses,
 They lie where shadows, cold as the night breeze,
 Seem cast by rocks, and never by kind trees.”¹⁷⁹

— — —

“Do, do,
 Princess, do,
 Like singing blackbirds are the eyes
 Of the fairy old and wise.
 A honeyed tune, the crystal drops
 From flowers as white as seraphims’
 Breath no winter ever dims....
 Do, do,
 Princess, do,

¹⁷⁸ Sitwell, E. The Canticle of the Rose, p. 54.

¹⁷⁹ Sitwell E. The Sleeping Beauty, Section I, pp. 15-7.

Like birds that peck fruit sweet and shrill
With tainted bill,
Flies down the snow.

The angels came with footsteps light,
They brushed her hair to make it bright,
They taught her to be sweet and wise
With kisses faint as butterflies.”¹⁸⁰

TROY PARK:-COLONEL FANTOCK-¹⁸¹

Thus spoke the lady underneath the trees:
 I was a member of a family
 Whose legend was of hunting – (all the rare
 And unattainable brightness of the air) –
 A race whose fabled skill in falconry
 Was used on the small song-birds and a winged
 And blinded Destiny.... I think that only
 Winged ones know the highest eyrie is so lonely.

There in a land austere and elegant
 The castle seemed an arabesque in music;
 We moved in an hallucination born
 Of silence, which like music gave us lotus
 To eat, perfuming lips and our long eyelids
 As we trailed over the sad summer grass
 Or sat beneath a smooth and mournful tree.

But Dagebert, and Peregrine and I
 Were children then; we walked like shy gazelles
 Among the music of the thin flower-bells.
 And life still held some promise – never ask
 Of what, – but life seemed less a stranger then
 Than ever after in this cold existence.

I always was a little outside life,
 And so the things we touch could comfort me;
 I loved the shy dreams we could hear, and see –
 For I was like one dead, like a small ghost
 A little cold air wandering and lost.

.....

¹⁸⁰ Sitwell E. The Sleeping Beauty. Section I, pp. 23-4.

MADemoiselle RICHARDE.¹⁸²

.....
Yet there are those who do not feel the cold;
And Mademoiselle Richarde thus, – both old
And sharp, content to be the cold wind's butt;
A tiny spider in a gilden nut
She lived and rattled in the emptiness
Of other people's splendours; her rich dress
Had muffled her old loneliness of heart.
This was her life; to live another's part.
To come and go unheard, a ghost unseen
Among the courtly mirrors glacial green,
Placed just beyond her reach for fear that she
Forget her loneliness, her image see
Grown concrete, not a ghost by cold airs blown.
So each reflection blooms there but her own.
She sits at other people's tables, raises
Her hands at other people's joys and praises
Their cold amusements, drawing down the blinds
Over her face for other's griefs, – the winds
Her sole friends now, grown grey and grim as she
They have forgotten how to hear or see.
And her opinions are not her own,
But meaningless half words by cold airs blown
Through keyholes... words that were not meant for her.
"Madame la Duchesse said, 'The spring winds stir!'"
(Madame la Duchesse, old and gold japanned,
Whirled like a typhoon over the grey land
In her wide carriage, while a dead wind grieves
Among those seeking ghosts, the small grey leaves.)
So now, like Echo, she is soundless fleet
Save for the small talk she can repeat, –
Small whispers listened for at courtly doors.
She swims across the river-dark vast floors
To fires that seem like rococo gilt carving

¹⁸¹ Sitwell, Edith. Troy Park, pp. 25-26. This is an autobiographical preface to the actual poem, which deals with the sad lingering-on in life of one of the many old Renishaw house guests.

¹⁸² Sitwell, Edith. Troy Park, pp. 99-100.

Nor ever knows her shrunken heart is starving
Till crumbling into dust, grown blind and dumb
With age, at last she hears her sole friend come,
Consoling Darkness smooths her eyelids fast
And she has her own resting-place at last.

THE HAMBONE AND THE HEART¹⁸³

The Heart Speaks:

.....
They say the Dead may never dream
But yet I heard my pierced heart scream
His name within the dark. They lie
Who say the Dead can ever die.

For in the grave I may not sleep
For dreaming that I hear him weep.
And in the dark my dead hands grope
In search of him. O barren hope!

I cannot draw his head to rest
Deep down upon my wounded breast;
He gave the breast that fed him well
To suckle the small worms of Hell.

.....
His body is a blackened rag
Upon the tree, – a monstrous flag.
Thus one worm to the other saith.
Those slow mean servitors of Death

¹⁸³ Sitwell, Edith. *Rustic Elegies*, p. 40-2. Here a mother tells of her anguish for her dearly beloved son who killed her to get gold to spend on a wanton... the macabre, funeral quality should be treated in much the same supernatural mood of the old ballads, rather in terms of a modern American's fear of death.

They chuckling said: Your soul grown blind
With anguish, is the shrieking wind
That blows the flame that never dies
About his empty lidless eyes.

I tore them from my heart. I said:
The life-blood that my son's hand shed –
That from my broken heart outburst,
I'd give again to quench his thirst.

He did no sin. But cold blind earth
The body was that gave him birth.
All mine, all mine the sin. The love
I bore him was not deep enough.

.....

THE TURNING POINT

GOLD COAST CUSTOMS:

.....
"The negro rolls
His red eyeballs,
Prostrates himself.
The negro sprawls:
His God Is but a flat black stone
Upright upon a squeaking bone.

The negro's dull
Red eyeballs roll...
The immortality of the soul
Is but black ghosts that squeak through the hole
That once seeded eyes in Munza's skull.

This is his god:
The cannibal sun
On bones that played
For evermore,
And the dusty roar
Of the ancient Dead,
And the squealing rat,
The soul's ghost fat.

But Lady Banburgher's Shrunken Head,
Slum hovel, is full of the rat-eaten bones
Of a fashionable god that lived not
Ever, but still has bones to rot:
A bloodless and an unborn thing
That cannot wake, yet cannot sleep,

That makes me sound, that cannot weep,
That hears all, bears all, cannot move –
It is buried so deep
Like a shameful thing

In that plague-spot heart, Death's last dust-heap."¹⁸⁴

.....
"Yet the time will come
To the heart's dark slum
When the rich man's gold and the rich man's wheat
Will grow in the street, that the starved may eat, –
And the sea of the rich will give up its dead –
And the last blood and fire from my side will be shed.
For the fires of God go marching on."¹⁸⁵

WAR POEMS

GREEN SONG:

A YOUNG GIRL¹⁸⁶

Is it the light of the snow that soon will be overcoming
The spring of the world? Ah, no, the light is the whiteness
of all the wings of the angels.
As pure as the lily born with the white sun.
And I would that each hair on my head, was an angel, O my
red Adam,
And my neck could stretch to you like a sunbeam or the
young sheet of a lily
In the first spring of the world, till you, my grandeur of clay,
My Adam, red loam off the orchard, forgetting
The thunders of wrongs and of rights and of ruins
Would find the green shadow of spring beneath the hairs of
my head, these bright angels,
And my face, the white sun that is born of the stalk of a lily

¹⁸⁴ Sitwell, E. The Song of the Cold, pp. 48-9.

¹⁸⁵ Sitwell, E. The Song of the Cold, pp. 48-9.

¹⁸⁶ Sitwell, Edith. Green Song, p. 8.

LATER POEMS

THE SONG OF THE COLD:

THE SONG OF THE COLD¹⁸⁸

.....

Dust are the temples that were bright as heat...
And, perfumed nosegay brought for noseless Death,
Your brightest myrrh cannot perfume his breath!

That old rag-picker blown along the street
Was once great Venus. But now Age unkind
Has shrunken her so feeble and so small –
Weak as a babe. And she who gave the Lion's kiss
Has now all Time's gap for her piteous mouth.
What lullaby will Death sing, seeing this
Small babe? And she of the golden feet,
To what love does she haste? After these centuries
The sun will be her only kiss – now she is blackened,
shrunken, old
As the small worm – her kiss, like his, grown cold.

In the nights of spring, the inner leaf of the heart
Feels warm, and we will pray for the eternal cold
Of those who are only warmed by the sins of the world –
And those whose nights were violent like the buds
And roots of spring, but like the spring, grew old.
Their hearts are tombs on the heroic shore,
That were of iris, diamond, hyacinth,
And now are patterned only by Time's wave...
the glittering plinth
Is crumbling... But the great sins and fires
break out of me
Like the terrible leaves from the bough in the
violent spring...
I am a walking fire, I am all leaves –
I will cry to the Spring to give me the birds' and

¹⁸⁸ Sitwell, Edith. The Song of the Cold, pp. 38-9.

the serpents' speech
That I may weep for those who die of the cold –
The ultimate cold within the heart of Man.

RECENT POEMS

THE CANTICLE OF THE ROSE:

.....
 “And the fires of your Hell shall not be quenched by the
 rain
 From these torn and parti-colored garments of Christ,
 those rags
 That once were Men. Each wound, each stripe,
 Cries out more loudly than the voice of Cain –
 Saying, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Think! When the
 last clamor of the Bought and Sold,
 The agony of Gold,
 Is hushed.... When the last Judas-kiss
 Has died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ, those
 ashes that were men
 Will rise again
 To be our Fires upon the Judgement Day!
 And yet – who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?
 He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in the
 terrible Rain.”¹⁸⁹

.....
 “In the forest there are great emerald mists from which
 the birdsongs
 Fall, the Cassandra voices. Through green lightnings
 and the emeralds
 Fallen from the trees
 The young green sun of spring,
 A laughing ghost, danced; with a ghostly voice
 Calls to the children, ‘See! New worlds and emeralds
 and Fates begin.
 Soon will my greenness fade and I shall wear my own

¹⁸⁹ Sitwell, Edith. “The Shadow of Cain,” The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 277-8.

gold armor,
Fighting the mists.'

And the children run from school
To the sound of the planetary system in the veins,
The beat of the young rains
And the thunder of the wild wood lilies' growth
beneath the ground.

They flee the old man who all morning long
Sifted a little dust through his dry hands
And boomed at the children, 'Once this dust was
Socrates...'”¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ Sitwell, Edith. "Out of School," The Canticle of the Rose, pp. 255-6.

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