EDITH SITWELL: CHRISTIAN POET

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#### INTRODUCTION

This work is intended to be a study of the Christian influence and meaning as evidenced in Dame Edith Sitwell's poetry. Many other influences have contributed to the formation of her thought and style--as, for example, the French Symbolists, the Metaphysical poets, jazz rhythms, Stravinsky's music--but these are outside the scope of this work, except insofar as they reflect or indicate an attitude allied to Christianity.

While the study is deliberately limited to this isolated theme, it is a theme which is dominant. Dame Edith Sitwell offers sound reasons for such an approach to her poetry:

The great artist in each of the arts retains spiritually (even if he is physically blind as Milton, physically deaf as Beethoven) the child's wondering vision of the glories of the world. His vision, his hearing, are closer to the quintessence of reality than any other vision or hearing. Like Moses, he sees God in the burning bush when the half-opened or myopic physical eye sees only the gardener's diurnal task--the burning leaves on a garden path.

It is a part of the poet's work to give each man his own view of the world--show him what he sees but does not know that he sees. The poet like the painter, harmonizes what seems to the "Vegetive Eye" irreconcilable aspects of the world, into a great design, a great balance. He shows the quintessence of the thing seen.<sup>1</sup>

Translating such a dictum into a critical approach involves grave risks because no topic moves critics to such heated discussion as the relationship of poetry to

<sup>1</sup>Edith Sitwell, "The Poet's Vision," "Adventures Series," Saturday Evening Post, November 15, 1958, p. 126 religion. However, Miss Sitwell's poetry is being studied rather than Christianity, and a sincere effort has been made to treat the Christian theme in as noncontroversial a manner as possible.

Within the confines of this study, Christianity is used in the widest sense of the term. All comments on life or behaviour used by the poet as springboards for her beliefs are considered as belonging rightfully to the realms of religion. Hence, implicit as well as explicit attitudes, whether positively or negatively expressed, will be included. Man, both redeemed and unredeemed, plays an essential role in the drama of Christianity.

No attempt has been made to treat Miss Sitwell's prose\_because the body of her poetry is so considerable. Her critical works, however, offer a valuable insight into her attitude towards poetry, and therefore are pertinent to the work.

This study has been divided into three parts: the first examines Miss Sitwell's life; the second, consisting of three chapters, explores the Christian content of her early, transitional, and late poetry; the third analyzes one of her pivotal poems, "Still Falls the Rain."

All quotations from Miss Sitwell's poetry are taken from the Vanguard edition of <u>The Collected Poems of Edith</u> <u>Sitwell</u>, published in 1954. Poems published since this time may be found in the fourth appendix.

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A sincere expression of gratitude is tended Professor Chester Duncan of the English Department of the University of Manitoba for encouragement and helpful criticism throughout the entire period of this study. Finally, there is the invaluable gift of sisterly assistance of which I have been the recipient in the Community of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. This cannot be repaid.

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#### CHAPTER I

## THE POET

Edith Sitwell, English poet and critic, was born at Scarborough on September 7, 1887, the only daughter and the eldest child of Sir George Reresby Sitwell, fourth baronet, and Lady Ida Denison Sitwell, daughter of the Earl of Landesborough. Both parents were remarkably unprepared for the arduous task of rearing three such literate prodigies as Edith and her two brothers: Osbert, born in 1892, and Sacheverell, born in 1897. Together they form a literary triumvirate with an established reputation for blandly disregarding accepted standards.

Some of these characteristics can be attributed to their unhappy childhoods, for their father was a man of monumental eccentricities while their mother was a woman of emotional instability. Sir George understood neither wife nor children. Of an impulsive nature, he made sudden and rash decisions which brooked no opposition. This alienated him from family and friends alike until his life became an island of loneliness. Nor was religion a mainstay for him. According to his son, Osbert, his father adopted an attitude of unbending atheism which could not even be said to "cleave to . . . the sunnier side of doubt."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Osbert Sitwell, <u>Left Hand</u>, <u>Right Hand</u>(Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1945), p. 34.

As for Lady Ida, she was the typical product of Victorian aristocratic culture. Her unconcealed preference for Osbert estranged her from her daughter. Both Sir George and Lady Ida had hoped for a son when Edith was born, and made little attempt to conceal their disappointment. At first they hoped she would possess those social graces so dear to her Victorian parents, but as Edith developed from babyhood into girlhood, their hopes withered. Her aquiline nose offended them, while her blunt truthfulness made them uneasy in her presence. Her piercing assessments of people and situations cast an uneasy atmosphere on social gatherings where relaxation and inconsequential conversation were de rigueur. Sir George and Lady Ida soon learned that the unexpected was inevitable when Edith was present. With the birth of Osbert in 1892, Edith was relegated to second place in the nursery, a position she resented even at the age of five. As a protest she ran away from home, but was forced to return after a few sweet hours of liberty because she was unable to tie her shoes.

Steeped in tradition, the Sitwell family trace their line of descent to John of Gaunt and the Plantagenet kings. Renishaw, the Sitwell country seat in Derbyshire since 1625, is one of the noted Gothic estates of

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England. Here royalty visited, political figures relaxed, and poets and artists exchanged ideas and theories. From this rococo and gothic setting, Miss Sitwell gained inspiration for her poetry. In the gardens of Renishaw she acquired a love of flowers; here she and her brothers sought comfort and refuge, walking

> . . . 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.

Here she romped with her favourite companions, her dog Dido and her pet peacock. From this background springs the rich source of heraldic imagery which pervades her poetry, for she is

> • • • 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. ("Colonel Fantock," p. 169.)

And life was lonely for the three children. From the age of seven or eight, Edith ceased to be a little girl, maturing with amazing rapidity, exhibiting those characteristics for which she is recognized today. If her parents failed to appreciate her, her brothers were

<sup>3</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Colonel Fantock," <u>The Collected</u> <u>Poems of Edith Sitwell</u> (New York: Vanguard Press, 1954), p. 169. All future quotations of Miss Sitwell's poetry that are of sufficient length to be set down from the text will not carry footnotes. The necessary information will be given directly after the quotation. However, all brief quotations incorporated in the text will have a footnote. quick to recognize her worth. In Osbert's opinion, his sister is the most important member of the family, both because of the force of her personality, and because of his deep affection for her.

As with everything concerning her, Miss Sitwell's education was a subject long discussed by her parents, and, as usual, they disagreed. Sir George favored a business career, but Lady Ida considered such a utilitarian education beneath her daughter's social position. Lady Ida insisted that her daughter's education must be private, and on this point she remained obdurate.

The choice of educational subject matter posed a problem even more formidable. In this area Sir George was allowed to have his way. The criteria whereby the choice appears to have been made was that all those arts and skills in which Miss Sitwell exhibited neither proficiency nor interest were included in the course, while those arts and skills in which both God and nature had richly endowed her with keen interest and phenomenal ability were to be omitted. Since she had a horror of sports, her father decided that she should spend long hours in gymnastic rites, obsolete dances and vigorous fencing. As she was already a gifted pianist, Sir George thought that she should study the 'cello. Her

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father's philosophy of education was founded on the principle that one should concentrate on what one does badly, and eschew those things which one does proficiently, for an accomplished person does nothing poorly and nothing well. Based upon out-moded Victorian ideas, Miss Sitwell's education caused her intense suffering. The wonder is that, in spite of her bizarre educational background, Dame Edith ever developed into a major poet.

Throughout this period, whether at Renishaw, Scarborough, or abroad at the family estate near Florence, Miss Sitwell was the object of strenuous efforts on the part of her parents to force her to accept their views and to act in accordance with their wishes. Blind to their daughter's talents, Sir George and Lady Ida determinedly tried to mould the non-conformist into a conformist. It was not without result, although scarcely the result they desired. Miss Sitwell and her two brothers banded together for support and security, forging links of mutual confidence, fostering common interests. As a result, even in the literary world, they are seldom thought of individually, but as a triple unity.

However painful this education was for Miss Sitwell, it was also indirectly instrumental in bringing her

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great happiness. Miss Sitwell's governess, a Miss King-Church, married and went to live in Rhodesia. To fill this vacancy a Miss Helen Rootham was chosen, and in her Miss Sitwell was to taste the stimulation of understanding and the strength of friendship. A dark, Spanish type, with a fierce passion for justice and truth that accorded well with Miss Sitwell's views, Miss Rootham was more than governess at Renishaw. Annaccomplished pianist, she filled the spacious grounds and the stately rooms with the music of the great composers. Between Miss Rootham and the three young Sitwells a bond of union kindled that deepened with the years and continued until her death in 1938. During the long period of Miss Rootham's final illness she lived with Miss Sitwell. While Miss Sitwell wrote the life of Swift, Miss Rootham translated Rimbaud's Les Illuminations. Miss Rootham's work was later set to music by Benjamin Britten, a distinction which would have afforded her the keenest pleasure had it arrived before her death. To Miss Rootham is given the credit for piercing Miss Sitwell's brooding melancholy, and for perceiving the dormant talent behind those hooded poet's eyes. Such a friendship deepened Miss Sitwell spiritually and emotionally, bringing new tenderness and humanity into her poetry.

At the age of nineteen, Miss Sitwell made her formal

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debut. The event was planned to coincide with the Doncaster Races held in the second week of September. Preparations assumed huge proportions. They entailed the installation of French windows opening onto the gardens, the rearrangement of fountains to afford a better view from the ball-rooms, a general re-papering and painting of all the rooms, the purchase of a new stair carpet, the ordering of extra trains to accommodate the guests. Nothing was left to chance in the matter of material preparations, but the primary purpose of the party was ignored. The only young person invited was Edith's cousin, the remainder being " well stricken in years and seasoned in the world."4 The young Sitwells' suspicion that there existed in their parents' outlook an ever widening gap between life and reality became conviction. To Sir George and Lady Ida the party was the high point of a particularly gay season; to the young Sitwells it was a travesty of Victorianism which caused them acute embarrassment. While most parents give such parties to draw attention to the presence of a marriageable daughter, Sir George and Lady Ida seem to have been innocent of such designs. Sir George confided in the guests how difficult Edith was, while Lady Ida admitted freely that Edith was too bookish to

<sup>4</sup>Osbert Sitwell, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 334.

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to be popular. Finally the celebrations came to an end, and Renishaw resumed some degree of normality.

Such events would, understandably, foster rebellion in a gentler soul than Miss Sitwell's. Life at Renishaw was becoming increasingly difficult, and she frequently sought relief by visiting her grandmother who lived at Bournemouth. Miss Sitwell had developed a fascination for Swinburne's poetry, thought to be unsuitable for a young girl. A clergyman chided her grandmother for allowing Edith to read what he considered scurrilous.

To a nature as ardent, independent, and loyal as Miss Sitwell's, an open manifestation of contempt seemed the only way of silencing such unwarranted attacks upon her favourite poet and her own personal privacy. Concerning this event, she writes:

On a lovely September day, more years ago than I care to remember, a very young lady disembarked fromma ship which had travelled from Bournemouth to the Isle of Wight.

The very young lady carried an enormous sheaf of red roses. Behind her trailed a captive handmaiden, dark green in colour from a malady caused by the sea and by disapproval, some ten years older than the very young lady, and looking very cross. She was cross because she had not enjoyed the sea-trip, because she did not approve of the sea, and because she did not feel well. She carried a jug of milk, a honeycomb, a wreath of bay-leaves, and the very young lady's coat.

The very young lady had run away from Bournemouth, and from her grandmother, to whom she was very much attached, and from a visiting clergyman to whom she was decidedly not attached, in order to visit the grave of Algernon Charles Swinburne (with whose poems

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she had fallen in love) in the little cemetry at Bonchurch, and to place offerings in the Greek manner upon the grave.

The ladies drove in an open cab, drawn by a horse tattered with age, to Bonchurch, and, when there, the younger lady entered into a furious and protracted battle with the verger (or whatever official was in charge of the cemetery), routed him, and, bending under a fuchsia bush which is almost a tree in size, poured the milk, and placed the baywreath, roses, and honeycomb, upon the grave of the poet.

That is very many years ago, but the no-longer young lady remembers still the excitement of the adventure, the enchanted September day, and the appalling storm which broke over her head on her return to Bournemouth--with her grandmother acting as lightning and the visiting clergyman acting as thunder--for both Swinburne and running away were much disapproved of.<sup>5</sup>

To conventionally-minded people, such behaviour would seem to indicate that Miss Sitwell could qualify without difficulty in that exclusive club of English Eccentrics whose passion for distinctiveness scorns uniformity. In any case, Miss Sitwell felt that she must maintain this defiant attitude to retain her individuality, and prevent herself from becoming submerged by the whims and erratic plans of her parents.

But tragedy was soon to overwhelm the Sitwell family: Lady Ida fell under the influence of a dishonest money-lender. Sir George, thinking that the proper action was to expose the man's fraudulent

<sup>5</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>The Pleasures of Poetry: A</u> <u>Critical Anthology</u>, Third Series, "The Victorian Age" (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1934), pp. 3-4.

methods, proceeded to sue him. Certainly no member of the family dreamed of the difficulties that lay ahead, otherwise Sir George would have been less brave and less forthright in his retaliation. A sordid series of litigations, extending from 1913 until March of 1915, disrupted what little family unity had formerly prevailed and depleted the family economy. As a result, the Sitwells gained notoriety, becoming popularly known as "the suing Sitwells." All were deeply affected, particularly Lady Ida, who was more vulnerable to adverse criticism. Miss Sitwell, who remained at home at this time, bore a major share of the suffering. Added to this, the family experienced the additional humiliation of being shunned by many whom they had considered as their friends.

If superficial relationships were broken, others were strengthened. The three young Sitwells were drawn still closer together. On Osbert's leave from the army, and Sacheverell's vacations from Oxford, they would browse through art exhibitions. The two boys, whose appreciation of art was less mature and less academic than their sister's, enjoyed these occasions, and of them Osbert writes:

No conquest of fresh esthetic territory was ever hidden from her by fog: and her perceptions had an enthusiasm about them that I have seldom

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known equaled. But, alas, under what she thought, as tall, fair, and rather thin, with the lines of her face developing every day into the classic mould of the poet's, she walked round examining the pictures with me, must have been always the feeling, 'What sort of row shall I find when I get home?'<sup>0</sup>

During the year 1914, Miss Sitwell was to leave home permanently, finally freeing herself from what was little better than servitude. Hysterical violence is no fit setting for a creative mind, and it is doubtful that her literary achievement would ever have attained its present proportions had she remained in the milieu of her youth. How painful this period had been may be gleaned from Miss Sitwell's remark concerning her departure from the parental roof: "I became a human being when I was twenty-seven."<sup>7</sup>

Establishing herself in a small top-flat in Baywater, Miss Sitwell became the centre of an intellectual group. In spite of the limited size of the flat, artists, musicians, and writers found a sincere welcome. Here youth of promise basked in the wisdom of such well-known figures as T. S. Eliot, Jacob Epstein, E. M. Forster, Ezra Pound, and Virginia Woolf who gathered regularly for Saturday afternoon teas. In this artistic world, each mind seemed raised to a new and intensified consciousness through the stimulus of politely clashing

<sup>6</sup>Osbert Sitwell, <u>Great Morning</u>(Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1947), p. 260.

<sup>7</sup>"Genius in a Wimple," <u>Time</u>, Jan. 17, 1955, p. 76.

minds.

Friends particularly close to the Sitwell trio were William Walton and Constant Lambert. Walton, a fellow-student of Sacheverell's at Oxford, was destined to collaborate with Miss Sitwell in the memorable presentation of <u>Facade</u>. When he was yet unknown, the Sitwells lent him what prestige and support they possessed in the artistic world. He was more a brother by selection than a friend, sharing quarters and vacationing with Osbert and Sacheverell.

But the significant bond between Miss Sitwell and William Walton, which is of interest here, is the story of their joint production of <u>Facade</u>, an event which ran the full gamut of scorn, scandal, and abuse, as many another <u>first</u>, later to know fame, had experienced before it.<sup>8</sup>

Briefly, Miss Sitwell's poems, published under the title <u>Facade</u>, are concerned with the false values in modern civilization. Certain of these poems, Walton set to music in a thoroughly delightful and fresh manner. This venture was in the nature of a sound-sense experiment, showing the inter-relationship of poetry and music. This problem fascinated Miss Sitwell, and was the reason for many of her early experiments in poetry.

<sup>8</sup>For a more complete account of the Sitwell-Walton presentation of <u>Facade</u>, see Appendix I, p. 149.

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The first public performance took place at Aeolian Hall at three o'clock on the afternoon of June 12, 1923. It was indeed a memorable occasion, but scarcely for the reason that the Sitwells had anticipated. The audience, unprepared for this type of performance, reacted violently to what they could not understand. The work was stamped with Sitwellian originality. Many, including Noel Coward, walked out, and those who remained booed and hissed the production.

Without humour, these difficulties would have been impossible to endure. But <u>Facade</u>, now a respectable work, enjoys a remarkable popularity in the cultured world. It represented England at the International Music Festival at Siena in 1929 when Walton directed and Lambert recited. Indeed, it has become one of England's international show-pieces.

The humour of personality and situation was never lost on Miss Sitwell. It flashes throughout her poetry and correspondence. In one such letter, she writes:

Dear Mrs. Almer,

After five years you have again asked me to luncheon. The reason for this is that I have just published a successful book; the reason I have had a successful book is that I do not go out and waste my time and energy, but work hard in the 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 a success, and you will not ask me to luncheon, or, at least, not so often. So that, under the circumstance, I am sure you will agree, it is wiser for me not to accept your present kind invitation. Yours sincerely.9

Perhaps it is only to be expected that one with such a highly developed sense of humour would eventually develop a correspondingly acute sense of pity. The charity which she showed her aging mother was typical of Miss Sitwell's fineness of character. Lady Ida, now elderly and alone, came to love her daughter's society, to enjoy her wit and perception.

If it seems odd that such a life amid such surroundings should have produced a poet of Miss Sitwell's magnitude, it is no less surprising to observe that the <u>Daily Mirror</u> should be the first to publish her poetry. Other writers, however, were quick to recognize Miss Sitwell's talents and to extend the sprig of laurel. Sir Edmund Gosse, in a letter to Siegfried Sassoon, predicted that she would one day break into top-flight poetry:

I think our noble Edith enjoyed her visit. . . . We both like her very much, and I admire her sincerely. I feel that she is a sort of chrysalis, in a silken web of imperfection expression, with great talents to display if only she can break out into a clear music of

<sup>9</sup>Osbert Sitwell, <u>Left Hand, Right Hand</u>, <u>op</u>. cit., p. 19. her own. There is no one I watch with more interest, and her personal beauty and dignity, which are even pathetic, attract me very much.<sup>10</sup>

With the publication of "Gold Coast Customs" in 1929, a work that firmly established her name as a poet of worth, Miss Sitwell turned from the writing of poetry to that of prose. No sooner had she gained full command of her poetic idiom, graduating from experimentation and apprenticeship, than she ceased to write poetry. The new demands made upon her time by her mother, the illness of her friend, Miss Rootham, and the necessity of earning a livelihood left too little leisure for the exigencies of poetry. Thus, for ten years Miss Sitwell was forced to neglect that form of expression for which she was so gifted.

Not only did Miss Sitwell suffer the loss of her mother and her dearest friend, but her father was the cause of considerable anxiety for her. Sir George retained his interest in remodelling buildings and landscapes, spending most of his time at his Italian villa. But when life became monotonous, he enlivened it by staging fake death-bed scenes and indulging in what his son Osbert called, "will-rattling." This consisted in not merely changing his will, but actually filing various wills with different firms.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup>Hon. Evan Charteris, K. C., <u>The Life and</u> <u>Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse</u> (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1931), p. 496.

However embarrassing this behaviour may have been to his children, the pitiful end of this old man's life in Switzerland in 1943, in "utter isolation, in a house in which he could see no one, and send and receive no letters",<sup>11</sup> filled them with sorrow. There was a Lear-like quality about his death, in that the tragedy of his passing together with the complete ruin of all that he had lived for had been brought about by the cupidity and deceit of those who pretended to serve him. How true in his case that

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices Make instruments to plague us.<sup>12</sup> With the passing of Lady Ida in 1937, and Sir George in 1943, there disappeared not merely another generation of Sitwells, but there ended a way of life.

But these exterior facts reveal all too little of the formidable task confronting one who set her heart on becoming a first-rate poet. To Miss Sitwell, poetry remains one of the few worthwhile occupations in an era of inverted values. To attain her present position in the poetic world, she practised her art as a pianist practises the piano. However numerous have been the

<sup>11</sup>Osbert Sitwell, <u>Laughter in the Next Room</u> (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1948), p. 362. <sup>12</sup>Shakespeare, <u>King Lear</u>, V, iii, line 172.

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influences that have formed her as a poet, she refocused them, making them wholly her own. Her poetry is no servile imitation. Keenly interested in the poetry of others, Miss Sitwell memorized vast stretches of poetry, until she was able to recite all the way from the family home in Renishaw to their villa in Florence, without repeating herself. Today, she tells us, "There was a day when I knew all of Shakespeare, but memory has suffered, possibly from air raids."<sup>13</sup>

Despite slow recognition, Miss Sitwell's works receive considerable acclaim today. In her forty-sixth year Miss Sitwell was awarded a medal by the Royal Society of London; three universities have accorded her honorary degrees: the University of Durham in 1948, the University of Oxford in 1951, the University of Sheffield in 1955. She was created a Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth in 1954; Hollywood engaged her to write the script for her life of Queen Elizabeth I, to whom she bears a striking resemblance; her readings and recordings are popular. Besides her poetry, she has written several books of criticism, a novel, a biography of Pope, a nostalgic tribute to Bath, a compendium of

<sup>13</sup>Frances Fytton, "Gothic Poet," <u>Catholic</u> <u>World</u>, (October, 1955), p. 5.

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English Eccentrics, and several anthologies. But it is her <u>Collected Poems</u> which, ranging from the consciously clever to the calmly sibylline, give her stature and authority. Into the writing of these poems went years of experimentation and effort which she considered essential for the development of a suitable technique. She uses them to shock man into a sense of spiritual awareness.

In her endeavour to awaken man, she has deepened her own spirituality. Dame Edith Sitwell became a member of the Roman Catholic Church in the summer of 1955. The best account of her spiritual odyssey is her poetry. When questioned by reporters concerning why she had taken this step, she replied: "I have taken this step . . . because I want the discipline, the fire, and the authority of the Church. I am hopelessly unworthy of it, but I hope to become more worthy."<sup>14</sup>

At the age of seventy-four, Miss Sitwell looks like a vision of a poet from some past age. Her customary form of dress is billowing brocade which sweeps and floats about her. Seldom seen without her four enormous rings, she looks like a resident of a sixteenth century castle. Her reactions remain as

14 Phyllis McGinley, "Golden Journey," <u>Catholic</u> Digest, (February, 1956), p. 50.

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unpredictable as in the days of her youth. Once she sent a stuffed owl to a critic she thought to be too stuffy.

Today, at Renishaw, Dame Edith Sitwell lives the life of tranquillity necessary for a lady of letters.

A chapter on the life of Dame Edith Sitwell cannot end; it just stops. Her achievement cannot be evaluated properly while the heat of controversy still swirls about her. Neither can her complex character, which combines logic and mysticism, decisiveness and compassion, be fully understood.

Miss Sitwell's life, however, is of less importance than her poetry which, despite her age, is still evolving. It remains to be seen how her conversion may affect her poetry. Conceivably, it might become more sacramental. But already she has become, in accordance with Plato's definition of a poet, "an unsubstantial thing, winged and holy."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Plato, "Ion," <u>Plato: With an English</u> <u>Translation</u> (London: William Heinemann, 1925), III, p. 423.

## CHAPTER II

# POETRY AND BELIEF

If literature is inseparable from life, and life is a prelude to eternity, it would seem reasonable to conclude that the greatest literature is linked with the eternal. The idea has been fundamental among poets for centuries: Shelley thought of them as the unacknowledged legislators of the world whose work impinges on the divine; Emerson envisaged them as "liberating gods"<sup>16</sup> whose melodies "ascend, and leap, and pierce into the depths of infinite time."<sup>17</sup> Plato spoke even more strongly:

For a poet is a light and winged and sacred thing. . . God takes away the mind of these men as his ministers . . . in order that we who hear them may know that it is not they who utter these words of great price, . . . but that it is God himself who speaks and addresses us through them. . . . we should not waver or doubt that these fine poems are not human or the work of men, but divine and the work of gods, . . .

However, the thorny question of the relationship of poetry and religion is not to be revived in this chapter. Religious poetry is difficult to write about,

<sup>16</sup>Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," <u>Essays</u>: <u>Second Series</u> (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, no date), p. 29.

> <sup>17</sup><u>Ibid</u>., p. 24. <sup>18</sup>Plato, <u>op. cit</u>., pp. 423 - 425.

raising, as it does, formidable questions concerning the poet's intent, the effect of poem on audience, the intrinsic value of the poem. On these and related topics, all critics have agreed to disagree. But in a study of the Christian aspect of a poet's work there seems no way to avoid the issue completely. The problem becomes one of how to attack it wisely, if not well.

This chapter will not attempt to do more than skirt the periphery of the relationship between poetry and belief,<sup>19</sup> but a detailed study will be made of Miss Sitwell's thought on the role of poetry and poet. No comment on her poetry could be as pertinent as her own.

Poetry may be divided into two classes: religious and secular. What fundamental differences separate these two? Religious poetry gives glory to God, seeing

. in a broken window of the slum The Burning Bush reflected, and the crumb For the starving bird is part of the broken Body
Of Christ Who forgives us--He with the bright Hair--The Sun Whose Body was spilt on our fields to bring us to Harvest. "Holiday," p. 302.
Secular poetry treats creation in a purely materialistic

manner, while religious poetry investigates the

<sup>19</sup>For quotations by various authors on the relationship between poetry and belief, see Appendix II, p. 154.

relationship which exists between creation and God. The centre of secular thought is man, the pivot of spiritual thought is God; secular writing restrains man to the purely human level to such an extent that, on occasion, he descends to the bestial; religious writing, seeking to transcend man and attain God, raises the poet, and with him all mankind, to a level beyond the merely human. Hence, the focal points of these two types of poetry are diametrically opposed one to the other.

To be classed as a religious poet is not necessarily to be so consciously or obviously. Rimbaud deliberately cultivated a cult of chaos in a nightmare world, plunging into a life of debauchery. Yet it was to this poet that Paul Claudel attributed his conversion, calling Rimbaud "a mystic in the wild state."<sup>20</sup>

Although Shakespeare may not be ascribed to any church, he is yet a religious dramatist. His works are not all of equal importance. His greatest are the tragedies which reveal the soul-struggle of the hero in time of crisis. These plays speak more

<sup>20</sup>Paul Claudel, "Introduction," <u>Oeuvres de</u> <u>Arthur Rimbaud</u> (Paris: Mercure de France, 1929), p. 3. ("Arthur Rimbaud fut un mystique à l'état sauvage, une source perdue qui ressort d'un sol saturé")

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significantly to man because of their religious themes.

Marlowe's atheism presupposes theism; Dr. Faustus, enamoured of beauty, knowledge, and power, but corroded by the love of pleasure and the willingness to misuse his power, was yet no unbeliever. At the end, forbidden to repent, he cries,

> 0 Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune? See where Christes blood streames in the firmament. One drop would save my soule, halfe a drop, ah my Christ. Ah rend not my heart for naming of my Christ.<sup>21</sup>

while the chorus answers,

Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight.<sup>22</sup>

These are scarcely the thoughts of a convinced atheist, since the theme of salvation and damnation presupposes a belief in eternity.

Man, of his nature incomplete, seeks fulfillment by communication with a higher power. Reinhold Niebuhr tells us that "an individual cannot bear to make himself the centre of meaning without qualification. Inevitably he must seek support from something greater and more inclusive than himself."<sup>23</sup> The religious poet

<sup>21</sup>Christopher Marlowe, <u>The Tragical History</u> of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 63.

<sup>22</sup><u>Ibid</u>., p. 66.

<sup>23</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, quoted by William Robbins in <u>Humanistic Values in English Literature</u> (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1960), p. 35. delves beneath appearances to attain Reality in an endeavour to communicate and reveal what he believes to be true. Any poetry which attempts this is religious, whether it be orthodox or not.

Some poets have sought Beauty, Nature, or Humanity as their poetic god, striving to establish a correspondence between these and experience which would explain the riddles of life. Conscious that a foundation is necessary to preserve sanity, other poets have turned to mythology, attempting thereby to buttress the flaccid framework of their beliefs. All too frequently, as might be expected, they found credence impossible in these myths of their own making. From this process arose the erotic mysticism of D. H. Lawrence, the totalitarianism of Ezra Pound, the American myth of Hart Crane, and the occultism of W. B. Yeats. Often for these artists the denouement was despair and tragedy.

Others, however, either returned to Christianity or Equired a new appreciation of it that informed not merely their lives , but also their work. This return to Christianity has been accelerated by the tide of historical events: the impossibility of belief in a form of socialism characterized by ruthlessness; the horrifying phenomena of war twice

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endured; the use and constant threat of atomic weapons; the devastation of world-wide revolution and revolt--all these brought a heavy burden of suffering which seemed futile when experienced without the support of Christian belief. Among men-of-letters in this group were T. S. Eliot, C. S. Lewis, W. H. Auden, to name but a few. As artists, they recognized that their natural position is on Jacob's ladder since the instinctive trend of the artist's mind should be towards God.

Miss Sitwell's rightful position is with the religious poets mentioned above because her poetry exposes the spiritual problems of modern life. The vision of ugliness, of despair, of ennui, of nerves in her early poetry reveals Miss Sitwell as a potentially religious poet, but it was not until 1940 that she was able to surmount her negative vision with a necessary note of affirmation. Her poetic development parallels that of T. S. Eliot. Both view the modern world as a vast wasteland; both believe that from this wasteland there is only one exit which leads to beatitude -- Christianity. While the message and method of each is idiosyncratic, yet they share the Christian vision. The poetry of both Eliot and Miss Sitwell stresses the necessity

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of a spiritual choice which renders life meaningful. The early poetry of both is essentially negative in vision, but as they matured, their work gained steadily in affirmation. In their later poetry, both see beyond the ugliness to beauty, beyond the horror to glory.

The choice which Miss Sitwell has made is Christian. Now it becomes a question of examining first what she considers the role of the poet and of poetry in the light of this Christian commitment, and secondly, how effectively this is carried out in her poetry, since, in a person of integrity, there should be little discrepancy between theory and practice.

If poetry is significant, then what is its function in life? Early in Miss Sitwell's critical writing, she stated what poetry should not be:

For at least in the centuries of which we speak, poetry was regarded as an art, and not as a vehicle for conveying misty moral ideas; it was not confounded with inferior metaphysics in the minds of the people, nor was it allowed that poetry should be flimsy, unshapen outpourings of an emotion which would shame men in real\_life, or if it were represented upon a canvas.

Moral meaning is not sufficient for poetry. Irrespective of how sublime the subject of the poem, poetry cannot result unless accompanied by the proper command of

<sup>24</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Poetry and Criticism</u> (London: Hogarth Press, published by L. and V. Woolf, 1925), p. 6. the medium. This does not mean that the theme has no bearing on the value of the poem. If inspiration is helpless without a correspondingly effective technique, technique is barren without inspiration. Both are indispensable to major poetry. But Miss Sitwell does not support the tenet that poetry is divorced from religion. Greater awareness of this aspect of poetry is evinced in her later critical writings in which she states that

The uses of poetry are many. The poet should stand beside the priest in his work of restoring to mankind faith in God and in the heart of Man, in this terrible age when the only faith seems to belong to the gray and murderous creeds.

Emerson said of Plato: "He, from the sunlike centrality and reach of his vision, had a faith without cloud." This is true of the great poet. It was true in the past, it is true now, in this age when so many, because of the outer circumstances of the world and their lives, suffer from a tragic weakening or total loss of faith. Poetry will help to keep us immovably centered.

Seeing the immense design of the world, one image of wonder mirrored by another image of wonder--the pattern of fern and of feather echoed by the frost on the window pane, the six rays of the snowflake mirrored by the rock-crystal's six-rayed eternity, I ask myself "Were those shapes moulded by blindness? Who, then, shall teach me to doubt?"

The poet speaks to all men of that other life of theirs which they have smothered and forgotten. The poet helps his brother men to be more merciful to each other, remembering the words, "Little children, Love one another." To Shakespeare, for instance, even the meanest thing that lives is worthy of the light of the sun.

Poetry has many uses. It is the deification of reality. Such poetry as Wordsworth's, for instance, teaches us that God is in everything, in a stone, in a straw. Poetry ennobles the heart and the eyes, and unveils the meaning of all things upon which the heart and the eyes dwell. It discovers the secret rays of the universe, and restores to us forgotten paradises.<sup>25</sup>

According to this definition, poets endeavour to unveil the hidden beauties of the world, the glory of the ideal, the meaning of disaster; they sing of passion, its ecstasies and its terrors; they sing of renunciation and its companion, Christian joy; they sing of the everlasting distinction between good and evil; but most frequently they sing of love and its glories. "All subjects are suitable to poetry, if they are sublimated and sifted through the poet's experience."<sup>26</sup> Miss Sitwell believes that the poet's function is to make life Deo-centric.

When Miss Sitwell compares the role of the poet to that of the priest, she is not suggesting that poetry should in any way supplant religion. Rather, she is suggesting that it should be an outgrowth of contemplation, although contemplation alone does not produce a poet. A cataclysmic gulf separates the Christian who writes poetry from the poet whose poetry reflects Christianity. It is not the proper vehicle for dogma, nor does

<sup>2</sup>5Edith Sitwell, "Of What Use is Poetry?" <u>Reader's Digest</u>, (August, 1955), pp. 75-76.

26Edith Sitwell, <u>Aspects of Modern Poetry</u> (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 232.

it lend itself readily to discursiveness. But by following a more devious route, by suggestion and association, rather than by statement and fact, poetry creates a spiritual effect and proposes a message that can best be conveyed through the subtle alchemy of its art.

To effect this end, the Christian poet erects a spire to the Eternal, and, indeed, is willing to attach this spire indiscriminantly to hovel or mansion, to sinner or saint. Miss Sitwell, whose vision is essentially tragic, is more concerned with the suffering of the poor, the insensitivity of the rich and the plight of the innocent, and hence she writes more frequently of the sinner and his suffering. But in this sinner she sees the man whom Christ has redeemed:

> No more is Man The noonday hope of the worm that is his brother---He who begins with the shape of that eyeless one Then changes to the world in the mother's side: For the heart of Man is yet unwearied by Chaos, And the hands grown thumbless with misuse, the workless hands Where the needs of famine have grown the claws of the lion, Bear now on their palms the wounds of the Crucified.

For now the unborn God in the human heart Knows for a moment all sublimities. . . . ("Holiday," p. 302.)

Seeing the sinner as a potential saint, Miss Sitwell anticipates the time when Christ will be born anew

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in fallen man. It is in this sense that Miss Sitwell cries:

I have seen the murdered God look through the eyes Of the drunkard's smirched Mask . . . "Gold Coast Customs," p. 245.

What are the qualities which distinguish a religious poet? A capacity for spiritual suffering, an exalted concept of the Deity, a realization of the reality of evil and a consequent view of the world which is not blindly optimistic should be present. By spiritual suffering is meant that restlessness of spirit that causes the poet to seek answers to the eternal questions. Or, in Yeats' pithy terms, "Out of our quarrel with others we make rhetoric, out of our quarrel with ourselves, poetry."27 For some poets, doubt has been the most productive state poetically, if the most painful personally. But even the certitude of faith brings suffering. No poet was more orthodox than Gerard Manley Hopkins, but his poetry attests to acute spiritual suffering.

A second essential in a religious poet is an exalted concept of the Deity. Poets have sung the praise of many gods, but most of the songs in honor of pagan gods were inspired by selfish motives,

<sup>27</sup>W. B. Yeats, <u>Per Amica Silentia Lunae</u> (London: Macmillan Co., Ltd., 1918), p. 21.

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such as prayers for good weather, or thanksgiving for a plentiful harvest. What makes Christian art, or poetry, superior is its solicitude for the spiritual man rather than the biological man. The God of the Christians encourages the artist to strip himself of the limited interest of his own paltry good, seeking a greater good capable of satisfying his deeper needs.

Finally, a religious poet should be aware of evil as well as good, although modern writers seem to err by being conscious only of evil. However, both are limiting attitudes for an artist who should bear witness to all facts of human existence without ignoring the unpleasant ones. The poet who is unaware of evil and unconcerned with the problem of sin apprehends a small part of truth. Good and evil, ugliness and beauty, sin and redemption are acceptable subjects for the poet. Any poet whose mental grip on these themes is tenuous can only offer an unreliable picture of reality. Blind optimism and blind pessimism are equally limiting attitudes for an artist:

No mind that is capable of contemplating the world as it is, and the facts of human experience, can avoid a degree of pessimism. But both optimism and pessimism are dead ends for the creative artist, and the one must

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always be tempered with the other. The geatest artist is he who is deeply aware of the reality of evil, ugliness, sin and suffering, and can yet affirm the world. If he deliberately ignores any aspect of reality he can but create a false beauty.<sup>28</sup>

In her later poetry, Miss Sitwell attains that felicitous tension between optimism and pessimism that is essential to good religious poetry.

Not all religious poetry reaches the heights towards which it aims; it is the loftiness of its aim that assures it a degree of failure. But much so-called religious verse is more properly termed pietistic. A religious poem must be born of more than a religious purpose. On this topic Miss Sitwell is adamant:

I wish people would try to remember that no amount of moral fervour, political or otherwise, will make a man a poet if he has no genius for poetry. To hate the order of the world is not enough. . . It must not be said (as it will be said, undoubtedly by people who spend their time in distorting meanings) that I am suggesting that nothing but pure poetry should be written. But I do say, and I do hold, that a lovely poem with no philosophy is preferable to a bad poem with philosophy.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Stuart Holroyd, <u>Emergence from Chaos</u> (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 57. Acknowledgement is here made to this author for much of the argument on the relationship between poetry and religion.

<sup>29</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Lecture on Poetry Since 1920," Life and Letters, XXXIX (November, 1943), p. 94.

Intention is not enough. A poem that results from no deeper spiritual need than a devout intention must of necessity sound trite and forced. Even a poet's private vision is apt to sound ridiculous to others unless a tolerable metaphor can be found to interpret it. One should remain mindful that religious poetry is poetry, and not religion.

Poetry, one way or another, is about human experience; there is nothing else that it can be about. But to whatever human experience it alludes, it is not that experience. Love poetry is poetry, not love; patriotic poetry is poetry, not patriotism; religious poetry is poetry, not religion. But good poetry does something more than allude to the subject; it is related to it and it relates us to it.<sup>30</sup>

Major poetry can only be the result of necessity, not of design. No example of religious poetry can surpass the Psalms which were written by men who saw God in the cosmic symbolism of His created Universe. Because they were God-inspired they pierced non-essentials to the Essential, opening vistas down which humanity has never tired gazing. The Christian poet continues in this tradition proposing questions that keep man God-conscious, since

• • • What is Man

But a hybrid between beast and plant and God? "Song of the Dust," p. 416.

<sup>30</sup>Charles Williams, <u>The English Poetic Mind</u> (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 3.

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For the most part, Miss Sitwell's poetry moves on two levels, that of time and that of Eternity.

An additional facet of the Christian poet is his involvement with his fellow man; to be Christian is to be motivated by charity. Concerning this, Miss Sitwell writes:

As for the poet taking no interest in his fellow human beings, the poet is not the coldly bored observer, or the enemy of, the sneerer at his readers. He is a brother speaking to a brother of "a moment of their other lives"--a moment that has been buried beneath the dust of the busy world. The poet supports his brother's flagging footsteps, telling them, as Shakespeare's Anthony said to Cleopatra before the darkness fell, "Come on, my queen; there's sap in't yet." Sap in the event, sap in the heart of man.

All great poetry is dipped in the dyes of the heart, and is, in Emerson's phrase, "a larger imbibing of the common heart."

The poet is the complete lover of mankind. . . The love that is in the soul of the poet stamps mankind indiscriminately, also, with grandeur. "Little children, love one another." This is the poet's message to his brothers. To him, every day is holy.

Again, it is part of the poet's life-work to find the rays of the universe that connect vision and reality. "Genius," said Emerson, "is the naturalist or geographer of the supersensible regions, and draws their mapp aquainting them with new fields of Activity."

The great artist in each of the arts retains <u>spiritually</u> (even if he is physically blind as Milton, physically deaf as Beethoven) the child's wondering vision of the glories of the world. His vision, his hearing, are closer to the quintessence of reality than any other vision or hearing. Like Moses, he sees God in the burning bush when the half-opened or myopic physical eye sees only the gardener's diurnal task--the burning of leaves on a garden path. . . It is a part of the poet's work to give each man his own view of the world--show him what he sees but does not know he sees. The poet, like the painter, harmonizes what seems to the "Vegetive Eye" irreconcilable aspects of the world, into a great design, a great balance. He shows the quintessence of the thing seen. His imagination is not a pretty fancy, but is the quintessence of reality. In Carl Jung's words, "Imagination is a concentrated extract of all the forces of life."31

Miss Sitwell seeks to reveal the divine quality in creation, uncovering the sordidness of life as well as the glorious potentialities of man. She sees the world as caught between chaos and order, with man vacillating between formlessness and form. But, through the black and desolate background of her later poetry, there flashes the scarlet fire of the Holy Spirit, so that

The thunders and the fires and acclamations
Of the leaves of spring are stilled, but in
 the night
The Holy Ghost speaks in the whispering leaves.
O wheat-ear shining like a fire and the bright
 gold,
O water brought from far to the dying gardens!
 "Invocation," p. 253.

This dying garden, which is the world, shall be brought to harvest and redemption. Conscious of the evil, suffering and ugliness, she still writes

<sup>31</sup>Edith Sitwell, "The Poet's Vision," <u>op. cit.</u>, pp. 26 and 126.

poetry of affirmation, which places her securely within the framework of the Christian tradition.

## CHAPTER III

## MISS SITWELL'S EARLY POETRY

Dr. Johnson, objecting to the presence of a lady Quaker in the pulpit, remarked:"A woman preacher is like a dog walking on his hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."<sup>32</sup> The same reflection might also be made with reference to women poets. Although many women write poetry, few succeed in rising above their own personal emotions. Their natural sensitivity prevents them from charging their poetry with any depth of meaning. Perhaps they are too involved to attain the degree of aloofness necessary for the production of art.

Yet there is one woman poet of our century who has gained a place in the field of English poetry which is not far from the highest; she is Edith Sitwell. With the benefit of hindsight, and in the light of her mature development, we find a new meaning in her early poetry was not immediately discernible. No longer can her work be dismissed as mere revolt and experimentation. It is this, but it is immeasurably more.

32 James Boswell, The Life of Johnson (New York: Random House, Inc. n.d.), p. 279. In one sense, every true poet ought to be a revolutionary, breaking through stale ways of perceiving and feeling the visible and invisible worlds about him, "bringing a new and heightened consciousness to life; and this fresh perception of natural objects comes, sometimes, as a shock to people who want comfort and not the truth."<sup>33</sup>

Miss Sitwell enjoys the rebellious role she has assumed on several occasions. Her early poetry is both revolt and experiment; revolt against the poetry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which is encumbered with false emotions expressed in dead forms, and experiment in the realms of rhythm, language and texture. The world as she saw it was insignificant because it possessed no true sense of value, and of this she chose to write. One may not agree with her vision of the world, but one cannot challenge her right to it. Her distortion is deliberate. If her style seems peculiar, Miss Sitwell finds the world peculiar; if her poetic technique is startling, only a language which is strange and bizarre can mirror the bucolic comedy, the false face, the facade of contemporary life which is the subject of her

<sup>33</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Poetry and Criticism</u>, op. cit., pp. 17-18.

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early poetry. But unlike Joyce, who in his later work rejected the world, she never strayed into word mazes.

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If Miss Sitwell's view of the world and man's condition is original, one should expect her technique to be original. It is. To reveal the malaise of modern society she has formulated a technique, created a suitable texture, framed a diction, coined a vocabulary, evolved a pulsating rhythm. These poetic tools, forged on the anvil of modern crisis, are intended to express the problem of man in the twentieth century and are ill-suited to express the conventional ideas of a former age. Those who object to her innovations in technique and her originality of vision have failed to understand her poetry. Innovation and originality are the essential essence of a live art without which it is condemned to inanition. Life means change, and if change in technique is in harmony with the thought expressed, it is justified. Hers is an effort to leave the known safe ground of poetry to find another land; a land where poetry shall be written by poets, not rhymsters, and where critics would not demand

the "praise of worthy home-life alternated with swollen inflated boomings and roarings about the Soul of Man."<sup>34</sup>

Miss Sitwell's work during this early period includes <u>Wheels</u>, which she edited and to which she contributed; <u>The Wooden Pegasus</u> which appeared in 1920; <u>Facade</u> in 1922; <u>Bucolic Comedies</u> in 1923, which also included a reprint of <u>Facade</u>; <u>Sleeping</u> <u>Beauty</u> printed in 1924, and Troy Park in 1925.

The appearance of <u>Wheels</u> evidenced a new birth in poetry. The delivery did not go unnoticed. The press both praised and reviled each of the five editions, and which of these the Sitwells enjoyed more is uncertain. On both they capitalized, using them as springboards to hurtle themselves and their poetic crusade into public prominence. <u>Wheels</u> introduced Aldous Huxley, Sherard Vines, Alan Poster, and Wilfred Owen to the literary world. But this was of secondary importance. More important were the trends which it introduced: the change in poetic fashion, the willingness to experiment, the complete indifference to simplicity. This was the voice of youth--the

<sup>34</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry," <u>Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature</u> (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 95-96.

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voice of a generation that was inexperienced, impudent, yet tired. From the start, no shadow of doubt crossed Miss Sitwell's mind about the authenticity of her talent, nor did she hesitate to mete out verbal annihilation to those who dared question her ability. She and her two brothers quarreled with their critics, wrote manifestos, and arranged for fantastic recitals of their poety. During this period Miss Sitwell began to adopt medieval-like costumes. All was part of a concerted effort to form an image in the public eye which could not be ignored.

Even at this early date, the characteristics of Miss Sitwell's later poetry were present. In the 1921 cycle of <u>Wheels</u>, there appeared "Fantasia for Mouth Organ," a poem which exhibits the poet's clever wit and preoccupation with the sound of words:

> She is tough as the armorian Leather that the saurian Sun spreads on the Sea--So she saved my life, Did the mother of my wife, Who is more than a mother to Me! 35

Here are the unconventional choice of words, the

<sup>35</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Bucolic Comedies</u> (London: Duckworth and Co., 1923), pp. 92-93. First appeared in the 1921 cycle of <u>Wheels</u>.

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juxtaposition of long and short lines, the gift of satire and wit for which Miss Sitwell's early poetry is famous.

Much may be learned of Miss Sitwell's attitude from her titles: <u>The Wooden Pegasus</u> refers to the nursery rocking horse; <u>Facade</u> and <u>Bucolic Comedies</u> suggest the meaningless existence of a life lived without values. These two attitudes, the unwillingness to leave the security of childhood and the awareness of the triviality of the adult world, are the two basic themes during this period.

Modern literature is largely concerned with the presence of evil in contemporary society, but this awareness of evil is the beginning, generally, of a new spiritual consciousness. "One opposite is known through the other, as darkness is known through light. Hence, also what evil is must be known from the nature of good."<sup>36</sup> As a keen observer of humanity, she sees man as peculiarly chaotic and measureless, a member of a society that has given more and more people less and less in which to believe.

Because she sees an inverted world, the metaphors she uses are inverted. Each level of creation is

<sup>36</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, <u>Summa Theologica</u>, Part I, Question 48, Article 1.

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degraded or described in terms of another level. This tends to deform reality and to dehumanize it. This is readily seen in the following quotation:

> The wooded châlets of the cloud Hang down their dull blunt ropes to shroud

> Red crystal bells upon each bough (Fruit-buds that whimper). No winds slough

Our faces, furred with cold like red Furred buds of satyr springs, long dead!

The cold wind creaking in my blood Seems part of it, as grain of wood;

Among the coarse goat-locks of snow Mamzelle still drags me, to and fro;

Her feet make marks like centaur hoofs In hairy snow; her cold reproofs

Die, and her strange eyes look oblique As the slant crystal buds that creak. "Early Spring," p. 9.

This dehumanization of art<sup>37</sup> is characteristic of other forms of modern art as well. By this means the modern poets extend the boundaries of poetry, leaving behind them the dead rhythmical and verbal forms of the poetry which immediately preceded them.

The aim of the new modernist poets is to discard the stanza or definitely measured line; to break the logic of formal patterns; to write entirely by

 $<sup>3^{7}</sup>$  Jose Ortega y Gasset, <u>The Dehumanization</u> of Art (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1948), p. 19.

ear, and to avoid the logical repetition in the beat and length of their lines for the sake of what might be called modulation. In the entire strain, they say, the ear is disappointed only if it expects a recurrence that it is not the object of the poet to give.<sup>38</sup> Miss Sitwell's early poetry is filled with elegant artifice indulged in to afford her an escape from the terror of the world. Part of the power of her poetry stems from the difficulty encountered at any attempt to translate her early poetry into meaning. A hasty appraisal of her work is not wise. What, at first glance, seems like imaginative madness, on closer acquaintance shows much method. Experimenting with changes in pitch and shifts in tempo, she achieves effects which to demand to be read aloud before they can be appreciated.

A knowledge of Miss Sitwell's mature work deepens the significance of her early poetry, revealing an underlying religious attitude. While it does not bear the evangelical stamp of her later work, it is not completely barren of such values. Examining Miss Sitwell's early work in isolation from her later work, one might believe it to be

<sup>38</sup>Osbert Burdett, "The Sitwells," London Mercury, XV (March, 1927), p. 521.

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the result of sterile negation born of a philosophy of despair. One now knows this to be false. While she paints a kaleidoscope-world which has only artificial surfaces, the inner theme of her early poetry is the moral bankruptcy of modern man lost in a new world of horror.

This religious attitude becomes more orthodox as Miss Sitwell develops. From its inception, Christianity has been engaged in battle with the powers of evil; this struggle continues today against the prevalent evils of our time. Poetry that issues from this struggle is both timely and pertinent to modern man; and, since this struggle is likely to continue, this poetry will continue to possess significance for future generations. "Our poesy is a gum which oozes / From whence 'tis nourished,"<sup>39</sup> and Miss Sitwell's poetry oozes from the social problems of our time, giving a vivid and valid image of modern man as she sees him reacting to the pressures which oppress him. Both T. S. Eliot and Miss Sitwell show man in a diminishing glass, dwarfed in stature, and robbed of his dignity.

To illustrate this aspect of modern man, Miss

<sup>39</sup>Shakespeare, <u>Timon of Athens</u>. I: 1, Lines 21-22.

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Sitwell uses the symbol of the clown, stripped of identity and defenseless against the inhumanity which surrounds him. He is a symbol of alienation, estrangement, unbelief. What Miss Sitwell says about the tragedy of separateness is penetrating and profound:

We have become accustomed to seeing a clown that is, perhaps, the clearest symbol of the modern world, showing, as he does, the terrible difference between his heightened exterior, so intensely restricted, and the limitless dark of his mind. He is above all, the man with nowhere to hide, the homeless one. . .

How well this piercing and undeceivable genius knows that the modern world is but a thin match-board flooring spread over a shallow hell . . . and there is the even more terrible lumbering darkness (if we are not careful it will break our matchboard flooring) where the bear crosses our stage. And there are terrifying passages wherein the rhythm is but the anguished beat of the clown's heart as he makes his endless battle against materialism. We are watching our own tragedy.<sup>40</sup>

This statement of Miss Sitwell's clarifies her use of the clown symbol.

This figure first appeared in <u>Facade</u>, and from the beginning Miss Sitwell associated him with materialism and the triumphant dust. One of the first poems in <u>Facade</u> is "Clown's House." The terrifying passages of her clown poetry reveal the anguished beat of the clown's heart as he battles

<sup>40</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Petrouchka," quoted in America, (December 24, 1960), p. 425.

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against materialism. The tragedy of his separateness echoes that of each individual, suffering from a sense of divorce from society. Man's meagre soul is covered by a thin and grotesque artifice. Miss Sitwell's characters possess a toy-like quality; when not clowns, they are puppets. Whether puppet or clown, the symbol has the same significance.

Miss Sitwell's characters bear a pronounced resemblance to the Prufrockian characters of Eliot's early poetry; his are hollow men, soulless creatures, measuring out their lives with coffee spoons. Both poets are preoccupied with the dearth of spiritual values in modern society. Life, having lost the spiritual dimension, is now restricted to the limits of the material world. Miss Sitwell expresses this thought in the following lines, with brutal imagery and intense passion:

<sup>41</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Vacuum," <u>The Wooden Pegasus</u> (Oxford: Blackwell, 1920), pp. 96-97.

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This picture of man, living a negative life, neither shaken nor inflamed by the reality of God's presence in the universe, reminds the reader that the proper relationship between body and spirit is yet to be realized.

How does Miss Sitwell reveal and interpret this crisis in modern life? Here Christian joy finds no foothold, only a terrible nervous galety which seeks meaningless activity as an anodyne to its sufferings, and a means of avoiding reality. All humanity is symbolized by the man with the green patch, whose

> . . . patch, will never let him see The real world, terrible and old, Where seraphs in the mart are sold And fires from Bedlam's madness flare Like blue palm-leaves in desert air; The prisons where the maimed men pined Because their mothers bore them blind--Starved men so thin they seem to be The shadow of that awful Tree Cast down on us from Calvary. ("The Man with the Green Patch," p. 43)

This is one of the few distinctly Christian references in Miss Sitwell's early poetry, but this Christian aspect of her poetry gained significantly in her later poetry. The similarity in structure between Christ's Cross and man's skeleton suggests that life for every Christian must be a crucifixion. If man is to be a follower of Christ, then he must imitate His ways. But modern man is unwilling to do this, "Your body has become your soul,"<sup>42</sup> claims Miss Sitwell. By this she does not mean merely lust, but the materialistic motives that move modern man to action. Bereft of spiritual values, man is reduced to the animal, vegetable and mineral level, so that earth is

> . . a low-hung country of the blind--A sensual touch upon the heart and mind. ("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 80)

where man has learnt

That movement is but groping into life--Under rough trees like shepherds' goatish tents. ("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 80)

Much of Miss Sitwell's early imagery is inspired by this vision of modern man who willingly chooses to live a debased life. In her introduction to <u>Bucolic Comedies</u>, Miss Sitwell pertinently states:

Modern heart-break is merely dulling and a retrogression, a travelling backward; till man is no longer the bastard of beasts and of gods, but is blind, eyeless, shapeless as the eternal stones, or exists with the half-sentience of the vegetable world--a satience that is so intensely concerned with the material world (as apart from the visual) that is like the sentience of the blind.<sup>43</sup>

No poet has better expressed the horror of this vegetive existence, this state of living death,

<sup>42</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Thais in Heaven," <u>ibid</u>., p. 90.

<sup>43</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Bucolic Comedies</u> (London: Duckworth and Co., 1923), p. 8.

where man, unappreciative of his potential grandeur, rests content with triviality.

This triviality characteristic of Miss Sitwell's characters makes them incapable of thought: Jane, the maid of "Aubade" fame, reduces all creation to eternities of kitchen gardens. Of her Miss Sitwell writes:

> 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,

Cockscomb flowers that none can pluck, And wooden flowers that 'gin to cluck. ("Aubade," p. 12)

To her bucolic mind, light is an empty thing which conveys nothing.<sup>44</sup>Symbolically representing modern man, Jane is incapable of moving from physical light to mental perception. Since this is Miss Sitwell's vision of the world, her characters are members of a simian race, living in a world where "All is surface and so must die."<sup>45</sup>

Man has lost his significance. Robbed of its spiritual values, modern society becomes a "Bucolic

44 Edith Sitwell, <u>Poetry and Criticism</u>, <u>op</u>. <u>cit</u>., p. 20.

<sup>45</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Spring," <u>Collected Poems</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 10. mime,"<sup>46</sup> "Destiny is wingless and bemires,"<sup>47</sup> while man makes his abode with "old pig-snouted Darkness."<sup>48</sup> Man, destined for a life of nobility, for a brief spell makes

> . . . an endless battle without hope Against materialism and the world. ("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 81)

But, lacking the moral strength for prolonged struggle, he capitulates. Man's tragedy lies in his contentment to live on the natural plane because the effort to gain the spiritual stature for which God destined him, makes too constraining restrictions upon him. He remains content with a life dwarfed into insignificance:

> Though they are winged for enchanted flight They yet remain upon the shore Of Eternity, seeking for nothing more, Until the cold airs dull their beauty And the snows of winter load these dazzling Wings and no bird-throat can\_sing! ("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 71)

Having lost the sense of God's glory, man's vision of Him

With such a remote vision of the Godhead, all sense of kinship with Divinity is impossible.

To the clown, puppet and carnival themes of her early poetry, Miss Sitwell added a nostalgic longing

46 Edith Sitwell, "The Sleeping Beauty," <u>ibid.</u>, p. 82. 47<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 82. 48<sub>Ibid.</sub>, p. 82.

der der,

for the child's fairyland world. This is the theme of "The Sleeping Beauty," a poem of exquisite loveliness containing some of her most beautiful lines. None of her earlier poems contain poetry of such simplicity as this:

> When we were young, how beautiful life seemed! ---The boundless bright horizons that we dreamed,

And the immortal music of the Day and Night, Leaving the echo of their wonder and their might

Deep in our hearts and minds. How could the dust Of superstitions taught in schoolrooms, lust

In love's shape, dim our beauty? What dark lie, Of cruelty's voice, could drown this Godmade harmony?

For we knew naught of prison-worlds man built Around us that we may not know man's guilt --

The endless vistas of the goatish faces Echoing each other, and the basis

Of clay, the plumeless wings of Destiny, The vistas leading only to the grave where we must lie.

("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 69)

Miss Sitwell sees the world through the eyes of a hapless child, still blind to the outward proofs of inner sickness. Her assumption, that childhood is the last refuge of human worth, is not unreasonable in modern times, when the universe lacks point and purpose, when society and the family lack cohesiveness, and when personality itself seems shattered as a psychic unit. In such a world, only a child transcends such malignant forces. Because the narrative of "The Sleeping Beauty" is so familiar, Miss Sitwell uses the imagery and symbolism to tell the story. The loss of the vision of youth and innocence, personified by the young princess, and the eventual subjugation of the princess by the wicked fairy Laidronette, are cleverly interwoven, revealing Miss Sitwell's originality. Her serious and successful manipulation of fantasy links her to the poets of the seventeenth century. Many sections of the poem are episodes embroidered on the main theme, but all lament <u>le temps jadis</u>, longing for a return to a golden age of youth and innocence, a desire

> To seek a waking, clearer land--A land whose name is only heard In the strange singing of a bird. ("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 46)

This interest in nursery rhyme and fairy tale appears in Miss Sitwell's work as early as <u>The Wooden Pegasus</u>, a volume that returns the rocking horse of the nursery to a place of prominence in the adult world. Of this fairy tale aspect of her work, no commentary is as pertinent as Miss Sitwell's own:

We all remember nursery afternoons when the snow's little musical-box gave out half forgotten tunes, and our nurse told us tales that fell with the same tinkling notes as the snow's tunes. . . 'Long ago and once upon a time.' But though this world has the same brightcolored clarity as those afternoons of our

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childhood, it is a different world. The snow lies close to our heart. Here we have a winter world, stripped bare of all its smiling leaves, and the soul is face to face with reality.<sup>49</sup>

Miss Sitwell's imagery is psychological as well as visual, and hence offers considerable difficulty to the reader. But since she proposes to destroy the conventional manner of thought, this unusual aspect of her imagery is not surprising.

This admiration for childhood, so frequently encountered in Miss Sitwell's early poetry, has strong scriptural support. The innocence of childhood is untried because the child is incapable But Christ did hold up for emulation and of sin. imitation the child's dependence, trust, and guile-These are essential to the adult Christian lessness。 in order that his life may become a spiritual childhood lived beneath the protective guidance of the Fatherhood of God. Unless the Christian strives to reach this state, he will remain one of the spiritual bumpkins of whom Miss Sitwell writes:

> The country bumpkins travel to the Fair, For Night and Day, and Hell and Heaven, seem Only a clown's booth seen in some bad dream, Wherefrom we watch the movements of our life Growing and ripening like summer fruits And dwindling into dust, a mirage lie:

<sup>49</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Bucolic Comedies</u>, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 94.

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Hell is no vastness, it has naught to keep But little rotting souls and a small sleep. ("The Sleeping Beauty," p. 83)

She sees man as not only incapable of good, but even incapable of evil on the grand scale.

To express this vision of contemporary society, Miss Sitwell has evolved her own peculiar style. She has always possessed a clear idea of what poetry is and how to produce it. Striking aspects of her work are her ability to communicate sensation rather than description, her untraditional imagery and metaphor, and her jazz-like rhythms. But what sets her poetry apart is her keen sense of the texture of words--the subtle variations of sound obtained by using vowels of varying thicknesses and thinnesses, as well as by the skilful use of This, Miss Sitwell believes, assonance and dissonance. has been neglected by modern poets. Much of her critical work deals with texture, and of this, she writes:

The truth is, that the texture of the poem has, in the past, been regarded as merely a matter of fatness or leanness--has been acknowledged only as producing richness, or sweetness, or harshness, in the poem; but the fact that texture is largely responsible for rhythm, for variations in the speed of the poem, this has not been acknowledged. Most of the technical experiments of our present time, are experiments in the effect that rhymes placed in an elaborate pattern throughout the poem (internally, outwardly, and at the beginning of lines), have upon rhythm, and the effect produced by variations of texture upon rhythm.50

No aspect of poetry has held a comparable fascination for Miss Sitwell. Her sensitive use of sibilants, her vowel-technique proclaim the presence of a poet of considerable technical ability. When discussing this aspect of Sacheverell's poetry, she remarked:

It cannot be denied that certain vowels, used in a certain way, not only alter the actual surface of a line, but actually widen and stretch it. These, and the cunning use of the liquids, give, too, the faintest and most subtle pauses, the feeling of a faint breath of air blowing between the words.51

To be effective, texture must be in such harmony with the theme as to be born of it, producing a sleek smoothness or a fiery fierceness as required.

At times, the reader feels that words hold too great a charm for this poet, becoming an end in themselves rather than a means. She chooses words not merely for their meaning, but for the sound, the number of syllables, the color and sharpness of the vowels, the texture, the speed or slowness, the thickness or thinness, and even the shadow which they cast on adjoining words.

<sup>50</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Alexander Pope</u>, first published 1930 (Harmonsworth: Penguin Publication, 1948), p. 219.

<sup>51</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>Aspects of Modern Poetry</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 144. Pope, whom Miss Sitwell deeply admired, believed that

Expression is the dress of thought, and still Appears more decent as more suitable.<sup>52</sup> Miss Sitwell's thoughts are always well clothed, and, in her early poetry, they are elaborately and exotically attired.

On this topic of texture, Miss Sitwell can become rhapsodic when discussing the various wave-lengths of vowels. Such discussions exceed the understanding of average mortals, who either yield the victory to Miss Sitwell on the grounds that, since she is a poet, she must be right, or attribute the pose to her Sitwellian idiosyncrasy. Probably, the truth is that it is a combination of both poetic ability and idiosyncrasy. Be this as it may, her keen discrimination of each sound nuance is exceptional, while her wealth of language and erudition is the result of a rapier intelligence coupled with strongself-discipline.

From Arthur Rimbaud, who was a powerful influence on her early poetry, she adopted the poetic technique of synesthesia. This deliberate interchange of the language of the senses produces a striking and

52Alexander Pope, "Essay on Criticism," 1. 318.

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bizarre poetry where blunt rain, whining light, shrill grass, giggling summer, and sprigged muslin waterfalls are repeatedly encountered. All this brilliant artifice is part of her renewal of poetry, but it is also a refuge from the terror of the world.

Her style has not always received the approbation which such technique and originality deserve. However, many will agree with the critic of the <u>Times Literary Supplement</u>, that Miss Sitwell does not always "discriminate between the poems in which her peculiar convention is necessary to the poem and those in which it is indulged in at the expense of clearness and even meaning."<sup>53</sup>Nevertheless, her poetry usually bears the signature of a powerful poet. The raciness of her verbal charms and the staccato phrasing are generally linked to her favourite theme: the unease of the human heart that seeks the transient rather than the permanent.

Richard Church, who considered her early work the result of a process too rigidly followed, admits that at first he found her imagery too bizarre, too strained, too garish. That opinion

<sup>53</sup>"Two Poets," Review of <u>Troy Park</u>, <u>TLS</u>, (May 28, 1925), p. 364.

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he has retracted in the light of her mature

development:

I see now that Miss Sitwell's experiments in this way were not a sophisticated game, a quick way to attract attention, but rather the workings of a naive talent. And where there is this naiveté, one can always expect to find true, disinterested poetic genius, or any other kind of creative power.<sup>54</sup>

Other critics have also changed their evaluation of her early work, but, as a general rule, her fellow poets have consistently praised her poetry. W. B. Yeats, who is probably the greatest poet of this century, in writing of her poetry, states:

Edith Sitwell has a temperament of a strangeness so high-pitched that only through this artifice can it find expression. One cannot think of her in any other age or country. She has transformed with her metrical virtuosity traditional metres reborn not to be read but to be spoken, exaggerated metaphors into mythology, carrying them from poem to poem, compelling us to go backward to some first usage for the birth of the myth; . . . . Nature appears before us in a hashish-eater's This dream is double; in its first dream. half, through separate metaphor, through mythology, she creates, amid crowds and scenery that suggests the Russian Ballet and Aubrey Beardsley's final phase, a perpetual metamorphosis that seems an elegant, artificial childhood; in the other half, driven by a necessity of contrast, a nightmare vision like Webster, of the emblems of mortality. . . . in poem after poem by Edith Sitwell. . . are 'bones'-ithe anguish of the skeleton,' 'the terrible Gehenna of the bone.'22

<sup>54</sup>Bichard Church, "Joy is My Name, "<u>Fortnightly</u>, CLX(Sept. 1943), p. 201. 55W. B. Yeats, "Introduction," <u>The Oxford</u> <u>Book of Modern Verse</u>(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), pp. xviii-xix. As for rhyme, Miss Sitwell uses it as a binding force to unify her poems. Possessed of amazing resources, she writes poetry of an almost limerick quality, coupling rhymes such as "my doors" with "midores"; "Crusoe" with "rues so"; "satyr" with "flatter". All types of rhyme are found in her work: initial, internal, and final.

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Another aspect of Miss Sitwell's work is the frenetic galety which is a comment on the contemporary scene. Senseless levity characterizes the world of which she writes. Commenting on the various kinds of laughter, she writes:

There are various kinds of laughter . . . . There is the laughter inspiring fear--the braying of the world of asses following the army of Darius, which, causing terror (because of the unknown, uncouth quality of the sound) among the horses of the Scythian hordes, who heard it for the first time, led to the flight of the horses and the defeat of the Scythians.--There is the laughter of those who have escaped from an earthquake and find themselves in known fields.--There is the laughter which represents the return to life of the Goddess of Vegetation.--And there is the pure laughter of the God, the manifestation in sound of his presence.<sup>50</sup>

The laughter of which Miss Sitwell writes inspires fear--fear of one's self, for one's self, and for all mankind. At times there is a distinctly Swiftian tang to her satire, a bite to her invective

<sup>56</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Of Clowns and Fools," <u>A Notebook on William Shakespeare</u> (London: Macmillan and Co., 1948), pp. 9-10. that "places in her hand not the sledge hammer of the typical pessimist but a jewelled knife, for her mind has been sharpened by close contact with the Queen Anne wits."<sup>57</sup> Under the guise of such irony--studied, cool, unmistakable--Miss Sitwell's anger burns. Concerning this gaiety in her early poems, she has written:

The gaiety of some poems masks darkness--the see-saw world in which giant and dwarf take it in turns to rush into the glaring light, the sight of the crowds, then, with a terrifying swiftness, go down to the yawning dark. An example is "Said King Pompey"--a poem about the triumphant dust.<sup>58</sup>

She is constantly concerned with the sterility of modern existence and the sense of individual decay in contemporary society. Her main interest is with what happens behind the facade of life, but first the banality of life must be revealed.

Music has been a salient influence in Miss Sitwell's poetry. She regards <u>Facade</u> as the poetical equivalent of Liszt's <u>Trancendental Studies</u>. Each line of her early work testifies to her love of jazz whose syncopated rhythms suited her poetic themes, while her later poetry owes its long flowing lines to the long musical phrases of Stravinsky. No one has been more dedicated in her

<sup>57</sup>Henry W. Wells, <u>New Poets from Old</u> (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 278. <sup>58</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Introduction," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. xviii.

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efforts to return poetry to its rightful place as one of the aural arts.

The jazz rhythms which she uses instinctively are linked to the sense. These sound patterns and rhythms originate from her interpretation of life. An excellent example of her jazz-influenced poetry is "Fox Trot," which must be read before it can be appreciated.

> Old Sir Faulk, Tall as a stork, Before the honeyed fruits of dawn were ripe, would walk And stalk with a gun The reynard-colored sun, Among the pheasant-feathered corn the unicorn has torn, forlorn the Smock-faced sheep Sit And Sleep;

("Fox Trot," p. 136)

The jarring rhythms are part of the false gaiety, but it is a terrible laughter masquerading as amusement, desperate and erratic. The fascinated horror with which she watched life increased until it reached a crescendo of expression in "Gold Coast Customs." She saw a world peopled by potential giants content to remain ant-men. Either "their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes,"<sup>59</sup> but in both cases the outcome is

<sup>59</sup>Tenessee Williams, <u>The Glass Menagerie</u>, "Introduction," Act I.

identical: a pygmy race whose life is a sound and fury signifying nothing. Her poetry possesses immediacy, and her purposeful technique is varied and flexible.

But no facet of Miss Sitwell's poetry has caused such consternation as her original imagery which many found extravagant beyond endurance, novel to the point of absurdity, original to the extent of being irrational. But the reason for this extravagance, this absurdity, and this irrationality is not because she is these things, but because she sees these qualities in society. What, after a cursory glance, appears as nonsense verse, on closer examination yields real meaning. On this topic, H. V. Routh writes:

. . . it was realized that she was seeking a direct approach to our inner selves, trying to recreate not so much the nonsense-verse of children, as the moods of childhood, the only core of sanity left in this light-witted world-life viewed as a fairyland deepened by adult sensibilities. Thus she hoped to awaken our drugged perceptions.60

Occasionally her original imagery conceals meaning too completely. "The Emily-colored primulas,"<sup>61</sup> and "the Martha-colored scabious"<sup>62</sup>brought forth cries of protest from the critics. To Miss Sitwell,

<sup>60</sup>H. V. Routh, <u>English Literature and Ideas in</u> <u>the Twentieth Century</u>(London: Methuen & Co., 1946), p. 179. <sup>61</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Spring, "<u>Coll. Poems</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 11. <sup>62</sup><u>Ibid.</u>, "The Sleeping Beauty," p. 77. Emily and Martha are bucolic names, while primulas suggest pink-cheeked country girls. These privacies of ornament create barriers of elegance between reader and poet, reducing the effectiveness of her early poetry.

Miss Sitwell finds that modern man stripped of the spiritual is less than man. With Eliot, her early poetry queries: "Where is the life we have lost in living?"<sup>63</sup> Dissociation is the hallmark of this early poetry; the world it creates is abnormal, lonely, uprooted, and shallow. At times, the images that flood her mind are too profuse to be effective; image follows too closely on image. However, as a poet who is dissatisfied with the world, Miss Sitwell must reflect this attitude in her poetry. She does.

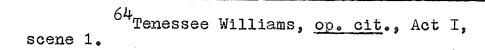
Miss Sitwell's early poetry reveals literary skill grafted on understanding. The authentic voice of poetry is present, but as yet it is a voice of promise rather than realization. She exhibits concern for things spiritual, but this is present largely by implication. The horror of her vision is metaphysical horror, while her endeavor to reveal the world as a monstrous illusion--false

 $^{63}\mathrm{T}_{\bullet}$  S. Eliot, The Rock (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1934), p. 7.

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and superficial--indicates the direction in which her future poetry will develop. What she offers us is "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion,"<sup>64</sup> always wittily expressed. Her early sense of comedy is an escape not from truth, but from despair. As such, it proved an escape into a deeper faith. Even her early poetry presages the advent of a Christian poet.

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#### CHAPTER IV

# TRANSITIONAL POETRY: A SITWELLIAN WASTELAND

With the publication of Rustic Elegies in 1927, a new facet of Miss Sitwell's poetry appeared. Although her poetic development has been continuous throughout, yet the poetry of this transitional period has distinct characteristics. A new depth of feeling, more intense and more human, replaces the former brittle gaiety. The superb technician is still present, but she is less conscious of her role as verbal emancipator. Now thought is less hidden. Remaining the frequent creator of the felicitous phrase, Miss Sitwell achieves a happier style, straining less deliberately after technical novelty. Her poetic characters are more human: Deborah Churchill, the little ghost who died for love, bears no resemblance to Jane whose wooden heart and wooden head prevented her from feeling and thinking; nor does Saul exhibit any kinship with Mr. Belaker, the allegro Negro cocktail- shaker. The world of Jane and Mr. Belaker has disappeared.

The elegiac and romantic tendencies of Miss Sitwell's poetry first became evident in <u>Bucolic</u> Comedies and "Colonel Fantock." W. B. Yeats regarded Miss Sitwell as the last of the romantics,65 not because she expresses the conventional characteristics of the romantics, but rather because she has a romantic temperament which abhors the gap between the actual and the ideal. This apparently irreconcilable cleavage moves the poet to barbed Swiftian satire which, while offering a camouflage to her romantic spirit, is no mask to the mind of the poet -a mind always investigating, always aspiring, always searching to cast some fresh ray on contemporary life, always striving to reduce the breach between the actual and the ideal, whether by means of the tom-tom beat of doom in the jungle darkness, or the brilliant atomic flash of radio-active rain over Hiroshima. Conflict and suffering are the source of much of her poetic inspiration, a romantic attitude that Alex Comfort consdiers essential to the production of art:

Romanticism, the belief in the human conflict against the Universe and against power, seems to me to be the driving force of all art and of all science which deserves the name.<sup>66</sup>

The Christian poet raises this conflict to the metaphysical level. The stark tragedy of "Gold

65 W. B. Yeats, op. cit., p. xxxvi.

<sup>66</sup>Alex Comfort, <u>Art and Social Responsibility:</u> <u>Lectures on the Ideology of Romanticism</u> (London: Falcon Press, 1946), p. 18. Coast Customs"bears eloquent testimony to the suffering from which it sprang, a suffering so acute that Miss Sitwell has stated that she would not willingly submit to it again. She is too aware of man's sufferings to remain untouched, too conscious of evil to be indifferent, too cognizant of communal guilt to be self-satisfied. Evil is never presented attractively; Lady Bramburgher's parties do not entice, they revolt. If "Gold Coast Customs" shocks her readers because they consider it a hymn of hate, they should remember that it prepares the way for "The Canticle of the Rose."

What Miss Sitwell sees in contemporary society is a waste land, a spiritual desert where theological virtues are inoperative. This resultant poetry is a significant comment on modern times, thrusting down roots which extend its meaning to the theological level, the level which is of interest in this study.

This new seriousness is evident in Miss Sitwell's increased concern with death. Much remains unorthodox in her attitude. The black despair of "Gold Coast Customs" is too unalleviated to issue from a philosophy of hope that is basic to Christianity, but it is a phase indicative of her

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religious attitude and growth. Ignoring her later work, one might conclude that her philosophy is tinged with existentialism which has influenced so much contemporary writing. The clown, common to Rouault's paintings as well as Miss Sitwell's poetry, is an accepted existentialist symbol of modern man's arbitrary position in a hostile world:

> There by the waterfalls we saw the Clown, As tall as Heaven's golden town, And in his hands, a Heart, and a Hambone Pursued by loving vermin; but deserted, lone,

("The Hambone and the Heart," p. 177) But Miss Sitwell and Rouault are not existentialists; therefore their work must not be interpreted according to a philosophy in which they place no credence.

In addition to the clown, the existentialists adopted Sisyphus as a symbol of the futility of human existence. Sisyphus, frequently used by the existentialist writer, Camus, appears in Miss Sitwell's poetry also:

> Thus light grief melts in craggy waterfalls; But mine melts never, though the last spring calls:

The polar night's huge boulder hath rolled this, My heart, my Sisyphus, in the abyss. ("Metamorphosis," first version, p. 208-9)

The same thought recurs in I Live Under a Black Sun:

And all the time he was weighed down by the misery of his heart. At times, that heart

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seemed heavier than the stone of Sisyphus, and he, the giant, must bear it up the steep slopes of the day for ever, only to have it sink back into a fathomless night.<sup>67</sup>

The world, without intelligence or intelligibility, has no meaning. This futility is symbolized by Sisyphus who endlessly pushes a stone that is endlessly falling back. There is despair, but in the case of Miss Sitwell there is also belief; where there is belief there can be no existentialism. As an astute observer of humanity, Miss Sitwell has penetrated the distraught recesses of the twentieth-century soul, making her poetry a testimonial of this period. In modern writers, this contemplation of suffering has produced two diametrically opposite reactions: Christian belief and religious repudiation. In Miss Sitwell's case, this contemplation has deepened her belief.

The serious Christian writer turns inevitably to considerations of Death, Sin, Purification, and Eternity. Maturity and the approach of old age force the poet to scrutinize "noseless death."<sup>68</sup> Wishing to escape death, man is yet driven to establish some kind of rapport with it. Like Donne, Miss Sitwell is aware that beneath the smiling face is the grinning skull:

<sup>67</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>I Live Under a Black Sun</u> (London: Victor Gallancz, <u>Itd.</u>, 1937), p. 373.

<sup>68</sup>E. Sitwell, "Elegy on Dead Fashion," <u>Coll.</u> <u>Poems, op. cit.</u>, p. 199. O Dead, your heart is gone, it cannot weep! From decency the skeleton must sleep;

O Heart, shrink out of sight, you have no flesh For love or dog or worm to court afresh,

Only your youthful smile is mirrored lone In that eternity, the skeleton. ("Metamorphosis," first version, p. 208)

Themes of decrepitude, physical decay and death found in Miss Sitwell's poetry remind the reader of Yeats, and explain why Yeats possessed such understanding of her poetry. Both saw the transient nature of creation blighted by death.

Conception. Breeding. Generation. The building of new worlds. What else do they need--all things that flower and bear fruit? Yet, in the centre of all, is the dark seed-death.<sup>69</sup>

This theme of doom in the seed recurs throughout her later poetry, and is consonant with the Christian attitude towards Death. Saint Augustine writes:

For no sooner do we begin to live in this dying body, than we begin to move ceaselessly towards death. For in the whole course of this life (if life we must call it) its mutability tends towards death.<sup>70</sup>

But both Christian and pagan must accept the reality of death; what will indicate whether he is Christian or pagan will be how he accepts this reality.

As yet, Miss Sitwell's treatment of death is not

<sup>69</sup>Edith Sitwell, <u>I Live Under a Black Sun</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 267.

<sup>70</sup>Saint Augustine, <u>The City of God</u>, Vol. II: <u>The Basic Writings of Saint Augustine</u>, Book XIII, Ch. X, ed. Whitney J. Oates (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 217. orthodox according to Christian principles. For the Christian, death is the threshold to complete knowledge, the vision of Beatitude, the possession of Ultimate Good. This attitude will appear in Miss Sitwell's later poetry, but during this period of transition she does not envisage death as a state of peace. The dead of <u>Rustic Elegies</u> live in a state of semi-death, being neither quick, nor dead, nor at peace. Deborah Churchill in her long cloak of brown mourns

> Like the small nightingale that dances down The cherried boughs, creep to the doctor's bare Booth . . . cold as ivy in the air, And, where I stand, the brown and ragged light Holds something still beyond, hid from my sight. ("The Little Ghost Who Died for Love," p. 174)

Deborah experiences no glorious awakening. Reality is witheld from her sight, and her life-after-death is fretful and unsatisfying. Her death-imagery is grisly and menacing:

> Alas! I dreamed that the bare heart could feed One who with death's corruption loved to breed--This Dead, who fell, that he might satisfy The hungry grave's blind need--

That Venus stinking of the Worm! Deep in the grave, no passions storm: The Worm's a pallid thing to kiss! She is the hungering grave that is

Not filled, that is not satisfied! ("The Hambone and the Heart," pp. 176-177)

Her death symbols are the bone, the worm, the cold, the skeleton, the dust. These Miss Sitwell manipulates

effectively, poetically, but still with no religious depth. At times, the Death of which she writes is that of the world rather than some individual character. Deborah's prophetic voice foretells the destruction of the world; her heart

> • • • still mourns Among the ruins--for it is not I, But this old world, is sick and soon must die! ("The Little Ghost Who Died for Love," p. 175)

Existing in a state of living-death, she calls attention to the death-in-life state of humanity, whose thin coat of flesh cannot disguise the dead spirit within:

> • • And yet when spring begins The nation of the Dead must feel old sins Wake unremembering bones, eternal, old As Death. Oh, think how these must feel the cold

In the deep groves: But here these dead still walk As though they lived, and sigh awhile, and talk. O perfumed nosegay brought for noseless Death: This brightest myrrh cannot perfume that breath. ("Elegy on Dead Fashion," p. 199)

But no myrrh is strong enough to stiffle the stench which rises from some of the poetry of this period. This is particularly true of "Gold Coast Customs" where imagery of death and decay juxtaposed against the savagery of the Congo threaten to overcome both poet and reader.

For eleven years after writing this poem, Miss Sitwell stopped writing poetry. But these were not lost years for her art, for the poetry which follows this time exhibited a more mature philosophy. Her anxiety has always been the source of her inspiration. But during this period of transition, her poetic vision lacks affirmation; she is too concerned with the negative aspect of man's experience to make an explicit avowal of faith.

Concerning explicit and implicit expression in poetry, religion, like any other topic, is best treated by implication. Poetry is the language of suggestion, intuition, association; it is not the proper conveyance for fact. Miss Sitwell, cognizant of this, allows no philosophical doctrine to obtrude. While her work rests upon firm Christian principles, these are never insisted upon unpleasantly. Miss Sitwell is not a poet of religious themes, she is a religious poet. As such, her purpose is to write poetry, and not to preach. On this topic Amos N. Wilder writes:

. . affirmation in art is properly implicit rather than explicit. The poet is rather an image-maker than a preacher, a celebrant than a teacher. It is true that poetry and religion are consubstantial in their origins. The poet at risk of being a magician in the bad sense cannot finally be distinguished from the seer and the prophet. Yet the poet ministers to true belief and right conduct not by indoctrination or didactic, but by enabling us to <u>see--</u> in Goethe's sense of <u>schauen</u>.71

71Amos N. Wilder, Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition: A Study in the Relation of Christianity to Culture (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. 232.

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This affirmation is present in Miss Sitwell's poetry by implication. Granted, it is often immersed in a seepage of despair and apparent negation; but in the light of her later work the reader knows that it is not actual negation. The poetry of this period is dehumanized because she sees humanity as less than human. Contemporary man is suffering from a sense of the lostness of the human soul. This time of crisis is a time of opportunity for Miss Sitwell. Her reaction is resistance to the forces of error and darkness about her. To modern man who seeks sensual pleasures and material benefits as ends in themselves, she brings the message that all created things are transient: love is for a day; Venus is an old crone; age has lion-claws to tear the cheek and heart. Her constant theme is the intractable flesh contending with the reluctant spirit. Coupling knowledge of the world with clarity of thought and felicity of expression, she reiterates her message: the heart of man is a plaguespot corrupt with greed, lust, and hatred; only a return to Christ's principles can save mankind and the world.

This is not negation; it is spiritual combat. Amid the burden of her frustration is detected the cloaked message of the Resurrection. Death is not

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death, but transfiguration. The theme of metamorphosis and transmutation permeates her poetry with recurring persistence and deepening meaning. Only with death will true wisdom be man's:

> Yet sighs of voyages and landing stages From unknown seas, and sylvan equipages,

And of a clime where Death's light on the eyes Could make each shapeless lump of clay grow wise; ("Metamorphosis," first version, p. 210)

This quotation shows the change which has taken place in the poet. She is more conscious of the driving forces of good and evil with which every man must wrestle. In this world where the tares are mingled with the wheat, there is no submission to the Holy Spirit which does not imply a struggle against the forces of evil.

But no picture of evil is as inexorable as that given us by Miss Sitwell in "Gold Coast Customs," a terrifying representation of the inhumanity of man. Nothing in modern poetry is comparable to it, except perhaps Ezra Pound's Hell Cantos. The poem compares the ceremonies of a predatory cannibal tribe with the social world of Lady Bamburgher. The technical perfection of the poem is exceptional. Writing of this aspect of the poem, C. M. Bowra says:

. . . Technically it shows all her consummate craft, her use of rhythms and sounds to convey

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the precise tones of various moods; Spiritually, it is her most powerful indictment of modern life, her deepest criticism of the world which greeted her when she left the dreams of childhood. When she says, "it was written with anguish, and I would not willingly relive that birth," it is all too easy to believe her; for it is the record of a soul in torment. Through her choice of symbols Miss Sitwell has found a way to speak from her inmost heart about the savagery and brutality of the world around her. The negroes come from Hegel who in <u>Philosophy</u> of <u>History</u> describes African natives who have no belief in the justice or morality or freedom or the immortality of the soul. The fundamental principle which he finds in them is the desire to sate the senses, and of this their cannibalism is an example.

In the world of "Rich man Judas, brother Cain,"<sup>73</sup> man is part beast, part worm, or is but worm turned vertebrate.<sup>74</sup>

Judged aesthetically, the poem is a masterpiece. All forms a perfect unity: imagery, rhythm, sound. Religiously, however, the poem is disappointing. At first, the final stanza was not a part of the poem, so that it ended in despair without hope of Redemption. Commenting on the poem, Miss Sitwell writes:

Throughout the poem, I have tried to produce, not so much the record of a world as the wounded and suffering soul of that world, its living evocation, not in history, seen through the eyes

72<sub>C</sub>. M. Bowra, <u>Edith Sitwell</u> (Monaco: The Lyrebird Press, 1947), p. 25.

<sup>73</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Gold Coast Customs," <u>Coll</u>. <u>Poems, op. cit.</u>, p. 244.

74 E. Sitwell, "Introduction," ibid., p. xxxix.

of a protagonist whose personal tragedy is echoed in that vaster tragedy.75

But the tragedy was too unalleviated; the despair was too stark. As a result, the poet added a final stanza which somewhat mitigated the suffering and lightened the despair. This is the ending:

> 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. ("Gold Coast Customs," p. 248)

The gloom of despair had been pierced by hope; it would never again be complete. Glancing at these final lines, it is remarkable how seminal the imagery is to her later poetry. Wheat, gold, fire, blood as symbols increase in significance after 1940.

Another well known poem of this period is "Metamorphosis," twice revised, and therefore of particular interest in tracing her development. Leaving us three versions containing the corrections she deemed necessary to conform with her new attitude, she demonstrates by these revisions the change that has taken place in her attitude towards death. The final version, written in 1946, shows how radical

75<sub>Ibid</sub>., p. xliv.

this change was. Both poems treat of a search for light out of darkness, but where the first poem called Death "our clime" and merely hints at the hope of

> • • a clime where Death's light on the eyes Could make each shapeless lump of clay grow wise;

("Metamorphosis," first version, p. 210)

the later one cries clearly

Death seemed our only clime--("Metamorphosis," second version, p. 217)

and ends with a miraculous bugle call of hope

So, out of the dark, see our great Spring begins--Our Christ, the new Song, breaking out in the fields and hedgerows,

The heart of Man: 0, the new temper of Christ, in veins and branches:

He comes, our Sun, to melt the eternal ice
Of Death, the crusts of Time round the sunken
 soul-Coming again in the spring of the world, clothed
 with the scarlet-colored
Blood of our martyrdoms--the fire of spring.
 ("Metamorphosis," second version, p. 221)

This is metaphysical poetry of high intensity, apprehending the ultimate reality which lurks elusively behind appearances. At such moments as these, Miss Sitwell is, in the essential sense of the word, a metaphysician, because her poetry proceeds from a mind which is aware of the eternal problems.

But this metaphysical attitude was only to become fully apparent during the period of her later poetry. But during her transitional period, Miss Sitwell continues to treat death without true Christian understanding. To the Christian, death is evil only if followed by divine retribution. "Death is good to the good, and evil to the evil."<sup>76</sup> The grisly death imagery stems from her view of decadent society rushing to damnation. These souls are as terrifying as any conceived by Dante:

> . . . \*Terrible these winter nights must be To the deserted Dead . . . if we could see

The eternal anguish of the skeleton--So fleshless even the dog leaves it alone!

Not theirs the sleep of love . . . alone they lie

While the spring heats, the fevers of the world, pass by:

For warmth, they have the rags about the bone; Devoured by black disastrous dreams; alone

The worm is their companion . . . vast years Pile mountain-high above, and the last tears

Freeze to gigantic polar nights of ice Around the heart, through crumbling centuries.<sup>1</sup> ("Metamorphosis," second version, p. 218-9)

Even the living are dead, for they lack the warmth of love which alone has the power to vivify.

The world of her transitional poetry is chaotic, robbed of the peace that emanates from the "tranquility of order."77 Because the God-ordained order of

<sup>76</sup>Saint Augustine, <u>The City of God</u>, <u>op. cit</u>., Book XIII, Chapter VIII, p. 216.

77 Ibid., Book XIX, Chapter XIII, p. 488.

creation has been reversed, man is in a state of constant turmoil. He must either conquer the world or be conquered; he must be its master or its slave. But if he becomes its slave, he must live through

• • • nights more dark than theirs, the Dead wherein we grope

From the more terrible abyss of hope

To soft despair . . . the nights when creeping Fear Crumples our hearts, knowing, when Age appear,

Our sun, our love, will leave us more alone Than the black moldering rags about the bone!

Age shrinks our hearts to ape-like dust . . . that Ape Looks through the eyes where all Death's chasms gape

Between ourself and what we used to be . . . My soul, my Lazarus, know you not me?

What gap of Death is there? What has Time done That I should be unworthy of the Sun? . . .

Time is the worm, but Death our Sun, illumining our old Dim-jeweled bones. Death is our winter cold

Before the rising of the sap . . . Death's light upon the eyes

Could make each shapeless lump of clay grow wise:

The topaz, diamonds, sapphires of the bone, That mineral in our earth's dark mine, alone Leap to the eastern light . . . Death-blinded eyes See beyond wild bird-winged discoveries. ("Metamorphosis," second version, p. 219-20)

Despite creeping fear and shrinking anxiety, Miss Sitwell pierces the gloom of human existence with a hope that filters, now faintly, now brightly, through her poetic lines. If Death is the winter cold that ends physical life, yet it is a prelude to the rising sap which brings a new enriched life wherein man, formerly a shapeless lump of clay, shall grow wise. The life-giving virtue is love, both human and divine. But the love with which Miss Sitwell is concerned is Christian charity which must be based on a personal love of Christ. All evil is viewed as an absence of this "Heavenly Love"<sup>78</sup> which alone is capable of arousing the Dead to Life, or Man's carrion to health. It alone can melt the polar night of evil that shrouds each individual soul. And if

> The myths of Earth are dead. Yet with an infinite Wild strength the grass of spring still finds the light

With all the weight of earth upon its eyes And strength, and the huge bulk of centuries. ("Metamorphosis," second version, p. 221)

The light-seeking grass is symbolic of the Christian soul seeking its Light, Christ. Perhaps the best commentary on this theme of light and darkness is Saint John:

What, then, is this message we have heard from him, and are passing on to you? That God is light, and no darkness can find any place in

<sup>78</sup>E. Sitwell, "Metamorphosis," <u>Coll.Poems</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 216. him; if we claim fellowship with him, when all the while we live and move in darkness, it is a lie; our whole life is an untruth. God dwells in light; if we too live and move in light, there is fellowship between us, and the blood of his son Jesus Christ washes us clean from all sin.

(Saint John, First Epistle, I: 5-8) From this time, the main theme of Miss Sitwell's poetry is the breaking forth of Christ, the New Song. in the fields and hedgerows, and how each man possesses in Christ the possibility of changing his poor clod of earth into a sun. Christ is the New Song, reharmonizing discordant society; the Sun destined to melt the white geography of a dead hell; the Spring whose heat will free each individual from his separate crystal prison and will assure his awakening in a purer clime. Gone is the illusion of the absence of God so overwhelmingly terrifying in "Gold Coast Customs;" it is when we most fiercely perceive the absence of God that we are most fully conscious of the necessity of God. The Christian does not invent God to fill a void; he discovers God. Miss Sitwell made this discovery during the period of her transitional poetry.

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## CHAPTER V

## HYMNS OF GLORY

After eleven silent years, Miss Sitwell's poetic voice was heard once again with increased range, depth and maturity. What critics and friends had predicted now happened. Less mannered, less concerned with verbal elegance than before, her later poetry shows a quality of human sympathy disconcertingly absent from her early work. What had been aloof, aristocratic, and a little inhuman, now became compassionate, committed, and, in the best sense, tragic. Living in London in the midst of extreme suffering and wide-spread destruction caused by the war, she gained a new appreciation of reality. The technical ability perfected during the period of her early poetry coupled with this new urgency of inspiration conspired happily to produce a poet who was eminently capable of expressing the dilemma of man's spiritual crisis. In his essay on Miss Sitwell's later style, Kenneth Clarke suggests that the reason she succeeds where so many have failed is that she both feels the tragedy and transcends it:

Like the great religious poets of the past, she has achieved the consciousness that all creation is one and is kept in motion by Love. In the expression of this consciousness she has evolved certain images. For example, Love is spoken of as the Sun or Gold, the heart of man, 'that second sun.'79

She manipulates with ease her symbols of life and death--roses, hearts, gold, lions, bones, tombs, skeletons, dust--voicing man's plight and her hope for his redemption through love. Believing Love to be the basis of all reality, the propelling lifeforce, the living principle of all spiritual ascent, achievement and vision, Miss Sitwell, as a Christian poet, has set herself the high task of giving holiness to each common day.<sup>80</sup> This exorcism of the ordinary gives a prophetic tone to her later work. Each object, worthy of admiration in itself, is raised to a new spiritual significance, making it a sign of God.

> 'God is everything! The grass within the grass, the angel in the angel, flame Within the flame, and He is the green shade that came To be the heart of shade.'

The gray-beard angel of the stone, Who has grown wise with age, cried 'Not alone Am I within my silence--God is the stone in the still stone, the silence laid In the heart of silence'... then, above the glade,

The yellow straws of light,

79Kenneth Clarke, "On the Development of Miss Sitwell's Later Style," <u>A Celebration for Edith Sitwell</u>, ed. J. Garcia Villa (New Jersey:New Directions, 1948),p. <sup>80</sup>E. Sitwell, "Introduction," <u>Coll. Poems</u>, p. 1

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Whereof the sun has built his nest, cry 'Bright Is the world, the yellow straw My brother--God is the straw within the straw:--All things are Light.' ("How Many Heavens . . ." p. 299)

All things reflect God, so that Nature in all its diversity proves an endless source of inspiration for Miss Sitwell. She sees God in the Burning Bush, and Christ's Wounds in the five-petaled rose. This Christian vision united to poetic inspiration fills Miss Sitwell's poetry with wisdom which sees beyond the surface of things and events, grasping something of the inner and sacred meaning of the cosmos which, in all its movements and all its aspects, sings the praises of its Creator and Redeemer.

Miss Sitwell has frequently commented on the close relationship between the experiences of the saint and of the poet. Concerning this, she writes:

I wish that everyone could share the rapture of the poet. In some ways--I say this with all humility--the experience of the poet in creation is akin to the experience of the saint. I do not believe that anyone who loves poetry could have an ugly soul. Human faults, yes. But the soul would still have radiance.81

As a Christian poet, she believes that poetry ennobles the heart of man, unveiling the meaning of all things upon which his heart dwells.

In accordance with this new religious message.

<sup>81</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Of What Use Is Poetry?" op. cit., p. 76.

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Miss Sitwell has evolved a new style consisting of long flowing lines in contrastato her former crisp and witty brevity. All is marked with remarkable growth in facility of expression, precision of phrasing, and flawlessness of sound effects. Only years of zealous craftsmanship could produce poetry of this quality:

> Where the green airs seem fanning palms and the green psalms Of greater waters, where the orange hangs huge as Orion, and day-long great gauds and lauds of light

Pierce their gold through the seeds, behold their secrets, And the weight of the warm air Shapes the exquisite corolla to a world of gold rain Closed in thick gold armor like a King's,

Old men, dark-gold with earth and toil, Praise their green heavens. . . . ("Gardeners and Astronomers," p. 379)

To technical excellence and textural ability, Miss Sitwell has added delicacy of perception. Both sound and imagery have been fused to produce a simpler and more passionate poetry. Like Hopkins, whom she greatly admires, she has the instinctive ability to modulate sound to sense:

> 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 for food, and squeezed the stems Of all that grows on the 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. ("Dirge for the New Sunrise," p. 365)

Her style, suited to the great themes and the powerful emotions of our age, changes with ease from what seems to be near ecstasy expressed in exultant poetry, to the muted diction which matches the grayness of modern daily life robbed of its spiritual values. If at times a metaphysical conceit detracts from a poem, more frequently a vital elegance is produced by the correct blending of sound, sense and feeling.

Following "Gold Coast Customs," Miss Sitwell's poetry becomes more affirmative. "Invocation" which initiates this new aspect of her work illustrates the change in attitude which the poet has undergone:

So when the winter of the world and Man's fresh Fall When democratic Death feared no more the heart's coldness Shall be forgotten, O Love, return to the dying world, as the light Of morning, shining in all regions, latitudes, And households of high heaven within the heart.

Be then our visible world, our world invisible! Throughout our day like the laughing flames of the Sun Lie on our leaves of life, your heat infusing Deep in the amber blood of the smooth tree. The panic splendor of the animal

Is yours--O primal Law That rules the blood (the solar ray in the veins, The fire of the hearth, the household Deity That shines not; nor does it burn, destroy like fire, But nourishes with its endless wandering Like that of the Golden Ones in the high heavens).

("Invocation," p.252-53)

Only love will cure the illness of our time, for modern man is sick with materialism, "the delirium of gold"<sup>82</sup> of which Miss Sitwell speaks. Only when man is motivated by Christian charity will the "hammer of Chaos"<sup>83</sup> be stilled in the human heart, only then will humanity be washed clean of the stain of "the universal Cain."<sup>84</sup> With Jung, she is preoccupied with modern man's sense of the abyss. One way in which this is shown is in the frightening feeling that life does not hold together, that man stands everywhere on shifting sands, a plaything at the mercy of some blind vortex. But transcending this awareness of

<sup>82</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Invocation," <u>Coll. Poems</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 251. <sup>83</sup><u>Ibid</u>., p. 254. <sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 254. the problems of society is Miss Sitwell's faith in the final triumph of love:

> For the Sun is the Ardent Belief That sees life in the aridities of the dust, In the seed and the base excrement and the world's fevers. . . . He loves alike, the common dust of the streets And the lovers' lips like the gold fires burning Troy. The Sun kisses the loveless, The mouth of the condemned by Man, the dogmouth and the lion-fang Deep in the heart. . . . He comes to the criminal whose nature Was crippled before his birth by a new gravitation That changed the solar system of the heart To a universe reigned over by deformation . . None is condemned. . . . Then why should we lie loveless? He will clothe us again in gold and a little love.' ("A Sleepy Tune," p. 334-35)

She believes that man's destiny in this life is to learn the nature of love, and through it, to attain to a spiritual rebirth. Each poem is a love poem in which she first denounces the evils of the age, then offers a remedy: Love of God which will inspire mankind to treat all men with equity. As a Christian poet, Miss Sitwell knows that if she is to bear witness to her times she must be involved in the movement towards community, unity, and brotherhood. Otherwise, regardless of literary skill, she will strike no human response, and she will touch no real problem. While there is a sense of urgency in the tone of Miss Sitwell's message, she never intrudes personally. Allowing her own feelings to filter gently through the masked correspondences of her poetry, she keeps her emotions in restraint. In this way, her message gains a universal quality that would otherwise be denied it. Personal suffering formed her heart and mind, but when she writes she interprets man's plight in an alien world. She speaks for all humanity and to all humanity, yet never from a private pulpit:

• • Dr. Sitwell abolishes the limitations of sex by speaking in the larger tone of all humanity. There have been very few poets--and none since the Romantic age--who have so successfully merged their private identity into the ideal figure of the poet. Even her admissions are of a prophetic order; • • • Absence, loneliness, heartache--the ordinary sources of poetic tears--count less for her than the plight of man. And the long discipline to which she has subjected her art has given her a fine precision in expressing what, in a less accomplished writer, might easily degenerate into a speech too consciously Delphic.<sup>85</sup>

Her constant theme is regeneration and resurrection through the vivifying power of love. Only when the Charity of Christ reigns in man's heart will he know and experience the peace that surpasses understanding.

Suffering is seen in a new light, because man no longer suffers alone but in union with Christ. At times,

85"Darkness and Splendours," (A Review of <u>The</u> <u>Canticle of the Rose</u> and <u>A Celebration for Edith Sitwell</u>), <u>Times Literary Supplement</u>, (September, 1949), p. 634. man seems to become one with Christ:

For the heart of Man is yet unwearied by Chaos, And the hands grown thumbless from unuse, the workless hands,

Where the needs of famine have grown the claws of the lion,

Bear now on their palms the wounds of the Crucified.

("Holiday," p. 302)

The cruciform shape of the skeleton recalls Christ's cross:

My leper-stick of bone

Covered with melting snows, to which I am crucified--Saw not Death gape wide Wearing my smile, and bade me come again as his

lover.

("Mary Stuart to James Bothwell," p. 336)

This thought recurs in the following lines:

Now, naked as the worm, unarmed As when in our first Hell, the womb, That shaped us for damnation, we, The outcast Tree of Bone

On which our Christ is crucified, Are fleshless as the skeleton Of Adam, and have known All deaths, from Adam's first sin to the resurrection Of the testifying, the accusing Dead. ("The Stone-Breakers: A Prison Song,"p. 360)

Redemption through suffering, her constant theme, reveals a deep moral preoccupation. Appalled by life which she sees as an enduring crucifixion, she transcends the suffering, speaking out of a sublime faith in love's regenerative power. Each Christian, like Christ, must submit to the passion of a Good Friday if he would aspire to the glory of an Easter Sunday:

Bound to my heart as Ixion to the wheel, Nailed to my heart as the Thief upon the Cross, I hang between our Christ and the gap where the world was lost

And watch the phantom Sun in Famine Street--The ghost of the heart of man . . . ("Dirge for the New Sunrise," p. 364)

There is a compulsive drive to her poetry, a pulse-beat that is the hall-mark of genuine art. Without this creative urgency, Miss Sitwell's technical competence would be wasted.

This compulsive drive rises from her poetic theory concerning the task of the poet. She believes that poetry is a means of attaining the reality that lies in the deep-down essence of things. As poet, her task is to interpret the world as she sees it, with the subsidiary duty of recreating it as it should be. For the Christian, all creation is an instrument of salvation, and all created beauty is a dim reflection of Uncreated Beauty. This Christian thought that everything that is, is holy is found in Miss Sitwell's poetry:

> • • • The least ore of gold And quality of dust Holds a vein of holiness, • • • ("Holiday," p. 302)

The sacramental ideal of nature whereby the externally perceived object becomes a sign of inward spiritual significance is basic to Miss Sitwell's later poetry:

Old people at evening sitting in the doorways See in a broken window of the slum The Burning Bush reflected, and the crumb For the starving bird is part of the broken Body

Of Christ Who forgives us--He with the bright Hair---

The Sun Whose Body was spilt on our fields to bring us to harvest. ("Holiday," p. 302)

Finite objects become symbols of Infinity. Poetry of this calibre is both prayer and praise, and Miss Sitwell's poetry praises Christ whose redemptive love alone can and will

> • • • wash the stain From the darkened hands of the universal Cain. ("Invocation," p. 254)

With T. S. Eliot and others, Miss Sitwell shares this doctrine of communal guilt indicated in the expression "universal Cain." Man shares in the guilt of the first murder as he shares in the guilt of Adam and Eve.

Miss Sitwell's later poetry differs from her early poetry in the hope that now qualifies her pessimism. Joy is Christian, despair can never be. Societies, like individuals, rise or fall as they nourish hope or let it die. Miss Sitwell reiterates that this world has no meaning for the materialist because he has eliminated heaven; the life of the materialist is nothing more than

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The counting of small deaths, the repetition Of nothing, endless positing and suppression of Nothing. . . . So they live And die of inanition. . .

The miser Foscue, Weaving his own death and sinking like a spider To vaults and depths that held his gold, that sun, Was walled in that grave by the rotting hand of dust, by a trap-door falling. ("The Song of the Cold," p. 287)

Denial of eternity devaluates time. Miss Sitwell's world is one without values, or rather, one with the wrong values. Both Foscue, the miser, and Dives, the rich man, are types that people her materialistic world. Lacking the sense of brotherhood, theirs is

> • • • the wisdom of the Spider Who spins but for herself--a world of Hunger Constructed for the needs of Hunger. • • • ("The Song of the Cold," p. 287)

Although a member of the aristocracy, Miss Sitwell understands the suffering of the poor, and experiences a genuine compassion for them. The modern Dives still live<sup>S</sup> off the poor. Descended to the animal level, man walks with the gait of the Ape and the Tiger:

The warmth of the heart is dead, or has changed to the world's fever--And love is but masked murder, the lust for possession, The hunger of the Ape, or the confession Of the last fear, the wish to multiply Their image, of a race on Oblivion's brink. ("The Song of the Cold," p. 286)

These saints of Mammon, dedicated to the cult of gold,

live death-in-life existences. Love is unknown; its warmth has not touched their hearts.

As love is warm and generative, so the absence of love is cold and sterile. Pursuing this parallel, Miss Sitwell has evolved a series of symbols for good and evil. The life-giving Sun is symbolic of Christ, the source of all spiritual life. But Miss Sitwell's symbols seldom mean only one thing; in the following quotation, the Sun is also the symbol of the human heart warmed by love:

The heart warmed by Christian charity will be the great source of heat to melt the crystal prison of each loveless heart. New life will be brought to souls dying of hunger and cold. Her war-poetry, published under the title <u>The Song of the Cold</u>, indicates the poet's fear that mankind is entering another ice-age, but this time the cold will come from the unfeeling, unloving, rock-like heart of man. Absolute Zero, the temperature at which all matter theoretically disappears, is an image of the loveless modern world, the cold in man's heart. But cold can be overcome by heat, and the heat which will accomplish this is love. Men, surrounded by luxuries and conveniences undreamed of by previous generations, have never been so insecure, so frustrated, so unhappy. They have everything of a material nature, but they have lost the sense of wonder and of love. They

> . . ache with the cold
> From the polar wastes of the heart. . . . See all they have given
> Their god! Are not their veins grown ivy-old,
> And have they not eaten their own hearts and lives in their famine?

Their huge Arithmetic is but the endless Repetition of Zero--the unlimited, Eternal. . . . ("The Song of the Cold," p.286)

The terrible Furies of past ages are now meaningless butterflies, for even evil is weak; man is incapable of even this on the large scale:

> I think we live now in the age of the terrible Furies

Changed into Butterflies, and of the Butterflyweather, gilding the hopeless heart

With the hues of false victories, of the fallen suns, fallen Caesars and cities--

The brightness of air--the Nothing-country that has no chart

Like our world that is drifting to Nowhere. Once the astronomer

Kepler, in plague-time, foretold a pestilence ending Man,

Having seen on his hands and his feet the Stigmata. But what were those signs of the Crucifixion? Only a little bright dust from a butterfly wing! ("Butterfly Weather," p. 394)

For such a world, Christ seems to have died in vain. The "Butterfly-pestilence" of pettiness has gripped the world, and man is like a tight-rope walker

> • • • on his tight-rope, stretched from beast To God, over a vast abyss

> Advances, then receded. Or, on his ladder of false light, Swings from mock heaven to real hell.... ("Street Acrobat," p. 355)

Perhaps no more mordant expression of this idea is to be found than "Lullaby," a description of the iron-age of inhumanity conceived as a return to prehistoric times when the Ape-nurse rocks the child to sleep. Written early during the war when few thought that the outcome could possibly be successful, this poem is almost unrelieved in its despair. In this respect, it stands apart from the other poems of this period.

Possessing a keen sense of the universal suffering Miss Sitwell writes a style of poetry from which the the personal has been stripped. Writing of this change which the war wrought in her work, Richard Church states:

By sacrificing personality, mannerisms, the pride of her art, she has, by this paradox which must be called <u>moral</u> action, at last full found herself; a self destitute of self, with a singing voice as much hierarchic as poetic in its authority. What gardens now she sings: no longer ornamental and peacock-trodden; but gardens of the future, still too far to be seen in substance, because the world is dark about them, and the storm is still raging.<sup>86</sup>

Probably no event contributed more to Miss Sitwell's thematic development than the war. Witnessing it, she learned to accept the event not merely as a disaster to be endured, but as an event in harmony with the state of the world. This is the New Fall presaging a New Redemption; a winter of the spirit to be followed by a spring which will revive Man's spirit in faith and wonder.

Perhaps no theme exemplifies better Miss Sitwell's Christian attitude than her treatment of death. No longer is it dealt with negatively and without dignity. The poet now sees it as a necessary condition through which man must pass to reach a new and greater maturity. Of this Kenneth Clarke writes:

In particular her image of death has taken on a new and mysterious meaning for her. It has become a source of peace and wisdom, a necessary state through which we must pass before love can be reborn; and her last volume opens with an invocation to this once dreaded darkness.<sup>87</sup>

Much of the horror is gone out of death. The following quotation reveals Miss Sitwell's new serenity:

<sup>86</sup>Richard Church, "Edith Sitwell," <u>A Celebration</u> for Edith Sitwell, <u>op. cit</u>., p.99.

<sup>87</sup>Kenneth Clarke, "On the Development of Miss Sitwell's Later Style," <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 64.

As I went my way from the cities of the living Dead to cities of the dead Living, airs and prayers Arose from the fertility of vines,

From cornucopias and corruptions, continents Of growth, from where those seeds, the Dead, are sown

To be reborn, and germs of evil that exist in Matter

Are changed by holy earth, to the common good, To usefulness, fertility.

("The Road to Thebes," p. 385 - 386)

This is poetry of Christian affirmation. Moral exhortations to the good life are neither wise nor necessary in poetry. They are better suited to the sermon or the political speech which seeks to sway the listener. If Miss Sitwell's poetry survives the test of time, it will be because it is good poetry and not because it is Christian. However, the new religious intensity of her work has raised the level of her poetry to a new height. In comparison, her early work seems cleverly witty, but trivial, against the dark intense work of this later period. The closing lines of "Harvest" illustrate this Christian affirmation:

> The universal language of the Bread--(O Thou who are not broken, or divided--Thou who art eaten, but like the Burning Bush Art not consumed--Thou Bread of Men and Angels)--The Seraphim rank on rank of the ripe wheat--Gold-bearded thunders and hierarchies of heaven Roar from the earth: 'Our Christ is arisen, He comes to give a sign from the Dead.' ("Harvest," p. 259-260)

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According to Charles Morgan, clever dilettantes of poetry might conceivably have written "Gold Coast Customs," but only a poet regenerated, only a poet of faith and wonder whose originality welled up from the religious tradition could have written a poem like "Harvest."<sup>88</sup> The Worm, grisly companion of the grave in Miss Sitwell's early poetry, has become the messenger whose kiss gives Eternity, transforming death into rebirth.<sup>89</sup> For the Christian, death is the climax of life, but it is a thought that preoccupies the pagan also. To the pagan, death ends all; to the Christian, death leads to life. The Existentialist. a modern pagan, finds life absurd because he denies the existence of God. Lending meaning to his life by revolt or engagement, he seeks to better the position of his fellow man; the Christian affirms his belief in God by submission. To the pagan, death is annihilation; to the Christian, resurrection. Thus, the dominant Christian thought concerning death is that of a new life, and this message is voiced repeatedly in Miss Sitwell's poetry:

> . . . Speak then to my dust: Tell me that nothing dies But only suffers change--And Folly may grow wise.

So shall we be transmuted-- . . . . ("A Hymn of Venus," p. 343-44)

<sup>88</sup>C. Morgan, "Miss Sitwell's Poetry," <u>A Celebration</u> for Miss Sitwell, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>89</sup>E. Sitwell, "Bagatelle," <u>Coll. Poems</u>, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 378.

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and again,

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 Judgment 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. ("The Shadow of Cain," p. 372)

Man, having cast out the unity between time and eternity, is enslaved by the here and now; nothing remains for him but small dusty deaths and the mask of his despair.<sup>90</sup>

War and death are irrevocably linked in Miss Sitwell's poetry. Air raids, bombings, and the resultant human suffering are given considerable attention. In the sense that she is a commentator on the human scene, she is a moralist. She is contemporary not merely because she is alive and writing in our generation, but because she has suffered in her own flesh with our generation. She is both of us and with us because her poetry deals with the burning issues of the day.

Some indication of how closely her poetry is linked with the war is shown by an examination of her <u>Three Poems of the Atomic Age--particularly</u> "Dirge for

<sup>90</sup>E. Sitwell, "The Madwoman in the Park," <u>Collected Poems</u>, <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 396.

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the New Sunrise," which bears a note indicating the event which inspired it: "Fifteen minutes past eight o'clock, on the morning of Monday the 6th of August, 1945." The event was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Excellently conceived and tightly woven, the poem contrasts the Light of the World, who is Christ, with the blinding light of the atomic bomb which in our age has become a symbol of evil threatening all mankind. Coupled with this light symbolism, Miss Sitwell uses imagery of blindness and sight:

> And the ray from that heat came soundless, shook the sky

> As if in search for food, and squeezed the stems

Of all that grows on the 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.

("Dirge for the New Sunrise," p. 365)

Another aspect of Miss Sitwell's poetry is her concern with <u>Time</u>. She accepts the structure of time which is essentially that of flux and of transmutation. Unlike Keats who sought to immobilize time, to freeze into permanence some moment of peace or illumination so that he might have it forever, and thus share in that quality of eternity which does not move but simply <u>is</u>, Miss Sitwell accepts the structure of time as something perpetually in motion, but this movement leads to eternity. So she writes,

And fear not change or Time and darkness, but behold

The elements are but as qualities

That change forever, like all things that have known generation, like a gold Image taking a new form forever--mutable

As the child who is innocence and oblivion, acceptance,

A new beginning, primal motion, a self-moving game that changes Like the heart of forgetful spring.

("Out of School," p. 352)

Connected with this theme of time, is her concern with age:

I, an old woman whose heart is like the Sun That has seen too much, looked on too many sorrows,

Yet is not weary of shining, fulfilment, and harvest, . . . ("Harvest," p. 257)

As the corn is planted that it may ripen into a new life, so the soul must experience a similar change that it in turn may enter into a new life; all creation is effected by the rhythm of time.

> Plants, beasts, and men, must follow those of heaven; The rhythms of our lives Are those of the ripening, dying of the seasons, Our sowing and reaping in the holy fields, Our love and giving birth--then growing old And sinking into sleep in the maternal Earth, mother of corn, the wrinkled darkness. So we, ruled by those laws, see their fulfilment. ("Harvest," p. 259)

For Miss Sitwell, "ripeness is all."91

Perhaps no symbolism which Miss Sitwell employs is of greater importance to an understanding of her meaning, than her imagery of light. As an ancient symbol of God, it has become a generally accepted sign signifying good, while darkness signifies evil. The principal light symbol found in Miss Sitwell's work is the Sun which she uses as a symbol of Christ, the Light of the World, and the source of truth and life.<sup>92</sup> Christ repeatedly used this imagery with reference to Himself.<sup>93</sup> As the sun is the source of all terrestrial life, so Christ, the Son of God, would share His Divine Life with men. Miss Sitwell would have man quit the comfortable half-light for the full radiance of the Intelligible Light which is Christ:

Come, we will leave the gray life, the half light

Where we are like the blind, live but in Time When Toil, the arithmetician, rules the beat Of blood and heart.

Beneath the flowering boughs of heaven The country roads are made of thickest gold--They stretch beyond the world, and light like snow Falls where we go, the Intelligible Light Turns all to gold, the apple, the dust, the unripe wheat-ear.

91 Shakespeare, King Lear, V, 11.

<sup>92</sup>Acknowledgement is hereby made to Pius XII's Easter Message of 1958, "The Light of the World, "<u>The Pope Speaks: Addresses and Publications of the Holy Father</u>, Vol. IV, No. 4, (Soring, 1958), pp. 387-391.
93John: 3:9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35; 46.

Young winds and people have winged feet like Mercury, And distance is dead, the world ends in the heart. ("Holiday," p. 301)

Analogous to the action of the sun on vegetative life which revives dormant life, is the action of the Intelligible Light which transforms the spirit, turning all to gold. The heart and mind of man must be exposed to Christ's divine rays of charity if it would know truth, and if it would live in peace and harmony.

> The winter, the animal sleep of the earth, is over, And in the warmth of the affirming sun All beings, beasts, men, planets, waters, move Freed from the imprisoning frost, acclaim their love That is the light of the sun.

So the first spring began Within the heart before the Fall of Man. ("A Mother to her Dead Child," p. 279)

Light, in Miss Sitwell's poetry, is an important philosophical symbol, revealing the parallel action between physical light upon the eye and the dawning of wisdom upon the mind and soul. The idea of Spiritual Light as opposed to Spiritual Darkness is an archetypal form of symbolism. Spiritual awakening is frequently represented as a passage through the realms of darkness into the realms of light.

No more the accusing light, revealing the rankness of Nature,

All motives and desires and lack of desire In the human heart; but loving all life, it comes to bless

Immortal things in their poor earthly dress--The blind of life beneath the frost of their great winter,

And those for whom the winter breaks in flower And summer grows from a long-shadowed kiss. And Love is the vernal equinox in the veins When the sun crosses the marrow and pith of the heart

Among the viridian smells, the green rejoicing. ("Green Song," p. 294)

This type of imagery has occupied an important and honored position in both poetry and religious thought. Biblical sources abound with symbolic imagery derived from the sensible world, so that the realities of religion are often revealed by analogies to the natural world.

An absorption with the cyclic character of nature is revealed in Miss Sitwell's later poetry. The continual rhythm of day and night, of the seasons, of birth and death have a prominent position in her poetic thought. Treating of this thought, Pope Clement I, in the year 95 wrote to the Corinthians:

Let us understand, dearly beloved, how the Master continually showeth unto us the resurrection that shall be hereafter; whereof He made the Lord Jesus Christ the first-fruit, when He raised Him from the dead. Let us behold, dearly beloved, the resurrection which happeneth at its proper season. Day and night showeth unto us the resurrection. The night falleth asleep, and the day ariseth; the day departeth, and night cometh on. Let us mark

the fruits, how and in what manner the sowing taketh place. The sower goeth forth and casteth into the earth each of the seeds; and these falling into the earth dry and bear decay: then out of their decay the mightiness of the Master's providence raiseth them up, and from being one they increase manifold and bear fruit.

These symbols of day and night, and seasonal changes are used by Miss Sitwell as symbols of man's resurrection. All living things are caught up in the cosmic rhythm of the universe:

> Gestation, generation, and duration--The cycles of all lives upon the earth--Plants, beasts, and men, must follow those of heaven; The rhythms of our lives Are those of the ripening, dying of the seasons, Our sowing and reaping in the holy fields, Our love and giving birth--then growing old And sinking into sleep in the maternal Earth, . . . ("Harvest," pp. 258-259)

In all this imagery of seasonal change, and in the wheat-seed which in dying gives birth, there is a union of pagan, Judaic and Christian rites. The pagan festival of the first grain coincides with the Judaic feast commemorating the flight to Egypt; while the Christic feast of the Resurrection is also set in the framework of the Passover. These three rites are incorporated into the very structure of the Liturgy, as well as Christian symbolism, and become figures of the

94Pope Clement I, "Letter to the Corinthians," <u>Apostolic Fathers</u>, Part I, Vol. II, (Life and Liturgy Series), p. 284.

springtime of a new creation that has been inaugurated by the resurrection of Christ.

In modern times there has been a swift decline in the sense of corporate Christianity, in the sense of the unity of all creation, in the sense of the unshakable relationship between the spiritual and the material, the abstract and the concrete. This attitude results in the turning away from a Christocentric culture to a secular culture. A repudiation of the sanctification of natural things results in an assault on the validity of the poetic symbol. Miss Sitwell possesses the sense of the uniqueness and incarnate dignity of all things. She is imbued with an intense and immediate feeling for the Person of Christ. She has left the <u>via media</u> for a more challenging and dedicated form of spirituality that is everywhere evidenced in her later poetry.

Although Miss Sitwell is fully aware that the message of Christ has been rejected by many, yet she reminds us that in spite of this apparent failure, He has not died in vain:

. But in the cities,
New criminals and sages, pariah Suns in heavens of evil,
Ripen new forms of life from primeval mud.
And Man, the planet-bacillus, acts new virtues (The eunuch's chastity, the gentleness of the untoothed tiger,
More insolent than youth, more cruel than spring,) ("Gardeners and Astronomers," p. 380)

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In this quotation, Miss Sitwell draws our attention to the fact that virtue implies a choice between good and evil. Where this choice is absent, there is no real virtue. The chastity of the eunuch and the gentleness of the untoothed tiger are negative since they do not have the freedom of choosing otherwise.

An outstanding characteristic of Miss Sitwell's symbols is their lack of static meaning, their ability to develop and gather meaning as they are repeatedly used. Frequently, they may even have diametrically opposite meanings: thus, the Sun is used for both Christ and the atomic bomb; Gold is a symbol of spiritual good, but it is also a symbol of the delirium of gold that infects materialistic twentieth century man; Rain is a symbol of Christ's redemptive Blood, but it refers also to the bombs which fell over Britain during the last war. Jack Lindsay, writing of "The Shadow of Cain," comments on the dual aspect of her symbols, and to his comment Miss Sitwell adds her own:

• • he says of the end of the poem: 'the gold fights and unites; the opposing forces are broken down into a new unity; the fission in Man, reaching down through all levels, is made the basis of a new wholeness. Because the horror is faced and understood at all levels, Christ arises out of the split sepulchre and womb. A Judgment Day of all that distorted and divided.'

Often a line can mean several things--all equally true. What Mr. Lindsay says of the use of

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Lazarus as a symbol is of the deepest truth. I used the symbol thus. I used the symbol, also, as that of Poverty, now moved into a new tomb of useless gold, in which, until the fires of love and spiritual rebirth reach him, he will lie as dead as in the tomb of mud. Lazarus, the symbol of the new <u>earthly</u> resurrection of Man, that cold idealists believe is to be brought about by the new experiments. Lazarus, the terrible ideal of useless suffering. Lazarus, the hero of death and the mud, taking the place in men's minds of the Hero of Life Who was born in a stable.<sup>99</sup>

The dual symbolism of gold is exemplified in the following quotation:

> • • • Ere it is too late You must discriminate

Between true gold and false, between the Sun that is the ghost

Of your own heart and the Sun the world has lost. ("Out of School," p. 350)

There is the gold which heals and there is the gold which corrupts. Both meanings are used by Miss Sitwell.

Some of Miss Sitwell's symbols are medieval in origin. The rose is such a symbol, and in her mature work, it is given a place of considerable prominence. In modern times, it has become the accepted sign of every positive value, blossoming in profusion where despair has been routed and defied; a symbol of fulfillment, operating on both the secular and religious planes. Under Miss Sitwell's masterly touch, the rose has served as a flexible vehicle for a wide range of desires and beliefs. But it is also

95Edith Sitwell, "Introduction," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems</u>, op. cit., p. xlviii. a symbol of evil for her ailing rose is a symbol of the unnaturalness and decay of our age:

• • • Civilization's Disease, a delirium flushed like the rose And noisy as summer? • • • ("Poor Young Simpleton," p. 275)

Miss Sitwell generally uses the rose as a symbol of Christ, identifying it with Christ's wounds -- the five petals signifying His five wounds. Then again, it represents love, that redeeming and revitalizing force which alone can save the world and man. Almost all of her recent poems use this symbol repeatedly, while one of her most recent books of poetry is entitled The Canticle of the Rose. She, like other religious writers who seek to express the inexpressible, who "see great things mirrored in littleness," <sup>96</sup> finds the rose an evocative symbol. Dante and Eliot are two poets who repeatedly used the rose symbol. In its secular connotation, the rose is associated with human love, with death, and the transitory nature of all created things. Used in this sense, it may be traced to the Book of Wisdom in which Solomon states: "Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they be withered."97

96Edith Sitwell, "The Poet Laments the Coming
of Old Age," <u>Collected Poems</u>, <u>op. cit</u>., p. 309.
97Book of Wisdom, 2:8.

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In Miss Sitwell's poetry the rose nearly always has religious significance. Sometimes it is a Passion flower because its color suggests blood, the surrounding thorns recall Christ's crown of thorns, while the five petals signify the five wounds of Christ:

The Rose upon the wall Cries-- Tam the voice of Fire: And in me grows The pomegranate splendor of Death, the ruby garnet almandine Dews: Christ's Wounds in me shine! ("The Canticle of the Rose," p. 373)

The same imagery returns at the end of the poem:

But high upon the wall The Rose where the Wounds of Christ are red Cries to the Light--'See how I rise upon my stem, ineffable bright Effluence of bright essence. . . From my little span I cry to Christ, Who is the ultimate Fire Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man. Springs come, springs go. . . "I was reddere on Rode than the Rose in the rayne . ." "This smell is Crist, clepid the plantynge of the Rose in Jerico."' ("The Canticle of the Rose," p. 374)

As a Christian, Miss Sitwell is aware that the conflict of this life will never be completely resolved; this life is a time of trial which determines his eternal reward or damnation. But Miss Sitwell has eliminated much of the anguish by noting that beyond the immediate horror of the present can be seen a future when man will return to a state of human dignity.

Associated with the rose image is that of Fire. The manner in which she uses this image enables her to unite many of the other images which recur; thus fire is frequently used in close juxtaposition with the Sun, the rose, harvest, and light. Although the following quotation is lengthy, its pertinence to the way the poet manipulates her symbols so that they become a cohesive force in the poem, will, I think, be sufficient excuse.

> And I who stood in the grave-clothes of my flesh Unutterably spotted with the world's woes Cry, 'I am Fire. See, I am the bright gold That shines like a flaming fire in the night--the gold-trained planet,

The laughing heat of the Sun that was born from the darkness--

Returning to darkness -- I am fecundity, harvest.' For on each country road,

Grown from the needs of men as boughs from trees, The reapers walk like the harvesters of heaven--Jupiter and his great train, and the corn-goddess, And Saturn marching in the Dorian mode.

We heard in the dawn the first ripe-bearded fire Of wheat (so flames that are men's spirits break from their thick earth),

Then came the Pentecostal Rushing of Flames, God in the wind that comes to the wheat,

Returned from the Dead for the guilty hands of Caesar

Like the rose at morning shouting of red joys And redder sorrows fallen from young veins and heart-springs,

Come back for the wrong and the right, the wise and the foolish,

Who like the rose care not for our philosophies Of life and death, knowing the earth's forgiveness And the great dews that comes to the sick rose: For those who build great mornings for the world From Edens of lost light seen in each other's eyes, Yet soon must wear no more the light of the Sun But say farewell among the morning sorrows.

("Harvest," p. 259)

This tightened framework of imagery, so characteristic of her recent poetry, accomplishes a perfect blending of symbols that are Christian, classical and pagan. The harmony of her poetry lies in its metaphorical design in the closeness and completeness with which its rich and varied elements are linked through almost inexhaustible analogies. There is a certain priest-poet-prophet tone in her language that reminds the reader that he is a spectator at a religious rite that moves from religious incantation through to the gift of spiritual exaltation. Her style has developed into a medium through which her view of God and man is expressed with insight and perception. Her poetry is an emphatic statement on the human condition which has strong metaphysical overtones of moral choice. She has looked into the shadow of life, and, is keenly aware of the duality of this life, torn between good and evil. Of this dual aspect of life, T. S. Eliot writes:

There is also a practical sense of realities behind it, which is antiromantic: not to expect more from <u>life</u> than it can give or more from <u>human</u> beings than they can give; to look to <u>death</u> for what life cannot give. The <u>Vita Nuova</u> belongs to the 'vision literature'; but its philosophy is the Catholic philosophy of disillusion.'

The Christian is fully aware of man's ambiguous moral position in the world, but he transcends the evil, even

98T. S. Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry," <u>The Adelphi</u>, September-June, 1945, p. 275.

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drawing good from it. The results of Original Sin are everywhere evident; ignoring them does not cure them. The positive affirmation of her poetry lies in her belief that man has a destiny, not merely a career, and that that destiny has its place in the supernatural life beyond this present life. Through her poetry she keeps us mindful of its existence.

Because of this positive religious content of her poetry, Miss Sitwell may justly be considered a Pentecostal Poet. Her symbolic use of fire is religious, frequently referring to the Holy Spirit. In her comment on Blake and Whitman, she writes:

The tongues of fire descended upon them as they awaited the moment when the murdered Christ, the murdered soul of man, should rise from the tomb.99

This statement is true of her own poetry which is filled with His Spirit. As in the Book of Genesis, the creative power of God is compared to a great bird wheeling over the waters, rousing life from them, so the Holy Spirit, the dove, planes over the world drawing new creation from old:

• • • O Spirit moving upon the waters, Your peace instil In the animal heat and splendor of the blood--The hot gold of the sun that flames in the night And knows not down-going But moves with the revolutions in the heavens.

99Edith Sitwell, "Whitman and Blake," <u>Proceedings</u> of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the <u>National Institute of Arts and Letters</u>, Second Series, No. 1 (New York, 1951), p. 57. The thunders and the fires and acclamations Of the leaves of spring are stilled, but in the night

The Holy Ghost speaks in the whispering leaves. O wheat-ear shining like a fire and the bright gold,

0 water brought from far to the dying gardens!

Bring peace to the famine of the heart and lips, And to the Last Man's loneliness

Of those who dream they can bring back sight to the blind!

("Invocation," p. 253)

This she has made her poetic task: "to bring back sight to the blind;"<sup>100</sup> "to make all the days of our life, each moment of our life, holy to us."<sup>101</sup> Dame Edith sees her poems as "hymns of glory to the glory of Life."<sup>102</sup> This is the theme that runs through her work: a quest for the fullness of life and a combat to the death with all that threatens that life--natural and supernatural. With this thought in mind, she writes:

Poetry is the light of the Great Morning wherein the beings whom we see passing in the street are transformed for us into the epitome of all beauty, or of all joy, or of all sorrow.

Hers is a world transfigured, filled with the rich Christic symbols of the living God as He reveals Himself

100Edith Sitwell, "Invocation," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems, op. cit.</u>, p. 253. 101Edith Sitwell, "Of What Use is Poetry?" <u>op. cit.</u>, p. 78 102Edith Sitwell, "Introduction," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems, op. cit.</u>, p. 1. 103Ibid., p. 78. in His magnificent work of nature and of history. Her poems radiate Christian belief which transcends the horror of modern life until

'. . .the rich and the poor are no longer separate
 nations-They are brothers in night.'
 ("Street Song," p. 271)

and all is washed in the Love and Fire of Christ, our Sun, Who

. . . shouts through all creation. His gold fires Shake from each heaven . . . and at his kiss From hemisphere to hemisphere the rising fires in all the hearts and homes of Men Respond; . . . ("Spring Morning," p. 346)

## CHAPTER VI

#### Analysis of the Christian Theme in "Still Falls the Rain"

Perhaps no poem of Miss Sitwell is so consistently praised and so generally loved as "Still Falls the Rain." This is partial explanation for its selection here. However, there are additional and more cogent reasons. While this poem is indicative of the change which has taken place in the poet's mind, it is still sufficiently brief to lend itself to a study which must, of necessity, be confined to the limits of one chapter. Many of her later poems are considerably longer, and hence were discarded on this consideration alone. Furthermore, "Still Falls the Rain" possesses that urgency of expression, that intellectual complexity, that spiritual insight which are inseparable from her recent work. Form, feeling, and intention give evidence that a poet of compassionate sensitivity, of intellectual compression, of evocative language characteristic of the metaphysical style, has emerged into the full mastery which her early poetry promised, but failed to realize. At last the new wine of her thought has burst the old bottles of her style.

Moreover, since the major portion of Miss Sitwell's work has now been completed, "Still Falls the Rain" is recognized as the fulcrum for the whole corpus of her poetry. It looks before and after, sharing qualities with both her early and late poetry. Lacking the frenetic agitation of "Gold Coast Customs," and the lyrical mysticism of "The Canticle of the Rose," the chosen poem follows a <u>via media</u> which captures and holds the reader's interest by the limpidity of the verse and the skill of the artistry.

"Still Falls the Rain"<sup>104</sup> is distinguished among Miss Sitwell's poems. It strikes and sustains a consistently excellent note, incorporating images and motifs recurrent in the body of the work, fusing them into a single coherent statement of her fundamental attitude towards the world. Thematically, it treats of salvation gained through suffering, developing poetically the story of man's sin, purgation, and resurrection.

Although inspired by the air raids over Britain in 1940, this poem transcends time and place. It speaks to the soul of every man who has suffered, giving the poem a universality of tone which is catholic.

104<sub>For</sub> convenience, "Still Falls the Rain" can be found in Appendix III, p. 182.

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The overpowering impression made by "Still Falls the Rain" is the magnificently sustained quality of Miss Sitwell's writing, always controlled and reticent, yet coupled with masculine impact and feminine compassion. Throughout, it is excellently conceived, carefully organized, and meticulously executed. Moving on the double level of time and eternity, the poem meshes all contributing factors--words, images, sound, and rhythms-into a firm fabric of meaning. Of such consummate poetics, a terrible beauty is born.

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Its beauty is terrible because it is inspired by acute anguish. As a Christian poet, Miss Sitwell links this suffering with Christ's. He alone renders meaningful an existence which without Him is unbearable. Because she has been forced by the exigencies of two terrible wars to build her poetic structure on the rocky reef of modern man's human condition, her poetry possesses a highly dramatic quality through the intense feeling of pain and pity. The suffering referred to in this poem is the result of man's inhumanity to man, making it the more terrible, the more incomprehensible. But although man has brought this suffering on himself, yet, through it, he may be redeemed. Passing from a vision of horror to one of spiritual regeneration, the poem moves from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from the Passion to the Resurrection. While she emerges triumphantly as a poet of light, she is intimately acquainted with the black powers that rule the world, and the dark places of the human heart.

The title introduces the basic metaphor of the poem which runs like a chain-thought through the work. Many of Miss Sitwell's poems are written around a single unifying symbol or image; thus, "The Song of the Cold" uses the imagery of ice and cold to symbolize evil; "Eurydice" employs fire imagery; "Harvest" uses fire and the Sun. The imagery in each case communicates much of the meaning of the poem, pointing to objects and relationships which are important to the particular experience of which she is writing. The title of "Still Falls the Rain" is repeated six times, each time accumulating meaning, as it shifts to a completely new meaning. This ambiguity is, of course, both deliberate and effec-The effect Miss Sitwell intends to produce is tive. similar to a photograph with a double-exposure; both concepts are present, and whichever is uppermost modifies the meaning of the other. The reader is meant to think both of the rain of bombs and the redemptive rain of Christ's blood at the same time, and Miss Sitwell introduces both meanings in the opening stanza:

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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.

Still falls the Rain

With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat

In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:

Still falls the Rain

- In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain
- Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain. 105

The bomb metaphor and the Blood metaphor, although so dissimilar, still have common points of reference. Comparing the two, we find that the cause of the first rain is hatred, while the reason for the second is Love; the first is a symbol of human suffering, the second, of Divine suffering; the first brings disaster, and possible damnation, the second brings Redemption. Here, again, is the oft repeated Christian theme of salvation through suffering.

When the symbol of <u>rain</u> is used with reference to the bomb, Miss Sitwell chooses imagery of darkness, blindness and fear. Indicative of the poet's state of mind, she sees London as a Potter's Field, a huge burial

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>105</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Still Falls the Rain," <u>Collected Poems, op. cit.</u>, p. 265. All further poetry quotations in this chapter which are from this poem will have no additional footnotes.

ground which threatens to inter the whole human race. But the tension is heightened when it is called a Field of Blood, similar in nomenclature to that field which Judas bought with the thirty pieces of silver. The parallel is obvious: Judas, by his betrayal, occasioned the Passion and Crucifixion of Christ; man, by his deliberate betrayal of his fellowmen, betrays also the God who created man. The evil which men commit extends Christ's Passion endlessly through time, so that the nineteen hundred and forty years since that event are spoken of, Hy Miss Sitwell, as so many nails which have fixed, and continue to fix Christ on the Cross. Miss Sitwell obtains some of her most impressive effects by the virtuosity with which she uses metaphor. The metaphors and imagery of her early poetry differ greatly from those of her later poetry. Her early poetic language was frequently controlled by her stylistic purpose; however, the stylistic level of her later poetry is controlled by the meaning.

While she continues to write of the disparate and chaotic elements in contemporary life, they no longer dismay her. Her Christian faith enables her to feel that events such as the war and the atomic bomb are aberrations from a norm which exists somewhere, though perhaps

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only outside this present life. Her early poetry was almost exclusively concerned with the aberrations; her later poetry is concerned with the norms, or beliefs, which explain these aberrations. Characteristically, the imagery of the destructive and chaotic forces contains the seeds of their opposites. Thus darkness produces light, chaos leads to order, and death creates a new life; time leads to eternity.

Time continues to be a theme in "Still Falls the Rain." Present suffering is qualified by the past sufferings of Christ, raising it to an eternal level. The awesomeness and dignity of human life for Miss Sitwell lie in the impingement of time on the timeless and of the timeless on time. Eternity is a component part of her world, poising her poetry between the ephemeralities of this world and the eternal verities of the next. The opening stanza of the poem seems to embrace all time, past and present, while the last stanza further extends the poem into the eternal realm. Man can escape neither time nor suffering, but Christian faith enables him to transcend it.

While the first stanza links both Christ's Passion and the bomb symbolism, the rain symbol in the next section of the poem shifts meaning to signify the Blood of Christ:

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Still falls the Rain

At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross. Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us--

On Dives and on Lazarus:

Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain--

Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side:

He bears in His Heart all wounds--those of the light that died,

The last faint spark

In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,

The wounds of the baited bear --

The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat On his helpless flesh . . . the tears of the hunted hare.

The destructive rain is transformed into redemptive rain, both of which fall indiscriminately on just and on unjust, on rich and on poor, for under the rain, the sore and the gold are as one. Again, gold is used in a dual sense for both good and evil: the gold of life in the corn and the gold which cures all sores, as opposed to the destructive gold of Dives which corrupts and defiles. These dual symbols both oppose and unite. Lazarus is Miss Sitwell's symbol for the new earthly resurrection of Man, that cold idealists believe is to be brought about by the new experiments; Lazarus, the terrible ideal of useless Suffering, the hero of death and mud who has usurped in men's minds the place of the Hero of Life Who was born in a stable. 106 In Christ's

106 Edith Sitwell, "Introduction," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems</u>, <u>op. cit</u>., p. xlviii.

wounds the wounds of all the world are united: those of the spirit, those of the body; those which man inflicts on himself, those which he inflicts on others. But it is inevitable that Christian literature should be about the sinner since he is the reason for Christianity. The reason for Christ's coming to earth was to redeem sinners; it was also the reason for His Passion and Death. Thus, all sinners are paradoxically present in His wounds. The rain imagery which was originally evil becomes transformed into the source of man's glory---Using the same symbol, Miss Sitwell has bridged Christ. the abyss between evil and good without sign of strain. Referring to the immense span of her vision. Mervyn D. Coles writes:

Miss Sitwell has great admiration for all the beauties of Nature but also sees the harsh cruel laws that sometimes come into force, the torture imposed by the strong on the weak and the sadistic streak that runs through all humanity. She is horrified by the cruelty that goes on in the World, a cruelty that has remained throughout the centuries, the cruelty that nailed Christ to the Cross, inflicting World War on civilized nations and has now culminated in the advent of the atomic bomb.<sup>107</sup>

The destructive force is transformed into a regenerative force. Suffering becomes the purgative way which leads to salvation.

107<sub>Mervyn</sub> Coles, "The War Poetry of Edith Sitwell," <u>The Contemporary Review</u>, CXVIII (February, 1959), p. 122.

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Miss Sitwell's intentions may be determined not merely from her use of symbols, but also how she uses them--whether in ascending or descending order. In this poem, there is an ascending motion, a fall which moves towards redemption, a journey from darkness into light. The very way the poet uses these symbols, therefore, gives the poem a sense of affirmation. Imagery which is used in this way is functional, serving as a means of communication, illustrating both the particular and the universal tragedy in which all mankind is implicated.

Running parallel with the rain imagery is the imagery of darkness and light, suggestive of despair and hope, of spiritual aridity and spiritual peace. This imagery is immediately introduced in the sub-title of the poem: "Night and Dawn." Returning to the abovementioned term, the reader notices that the words are placed in ascending order. In the first section of the poem, the poet uses dark imagery; thus we find such words as <u>dark</u>, <u>black</u>, <u>night</u>, <u>loss</u>, <u>blind</u>. But as the poem progresses and the theme of redemption is introduced, the imagery lightens, so that words such as <u>dawn</u>, <u>day</u>, <u>gold</u>, <u>spark</u>, <u>fires</u>, and finally <u>light</u> bring the imagery to a climactic close.

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The experience of evil and suffering which produces an attitude of pessimism may be built on a firm foundation of Christianity. Pessimism is not despair, and so can have a place in Christian philosophy. Writing of this topic, Nicholas Berdyaev states:

The experience of evil and suffering, and the consciousness of them, have instigated a controversy as to the validity of a pessimistic or an optimistic attitude to life. But pure pessimism or optimism is not a spiritual state or attitude to life. The current forms of pessimism and optimism are related to Eudaemonism, and determine their relation to life by the absence or presence of pleasure. But the idea that man is a creature longing for happiness is erroneous, just as the idea of happiness itself is invalid, a mere fiction. Nevertheless pessimism is a profounder attitude to life and shows a greater sensitivity to suffering and evil. Optimism is more superficial and lacks this sensitivity. There is, for example, the optimistic theory of progress which regards every concrete human personality as an instrument of future perfection. Pessimism is a more noble philosophy than optimism, because it is more aware of evil, suffering and sin, and of the more profound aspects of life. Christianity is opposed to an absolute hopeless pessimism, but a relative sort of pessimism is in accord with the Christian consciousness.  $^{108}$ 

Miss Sitwell's pessimism is relative, and she is too realistic to be an optimist. The problem of evil is a definitive mystery, and true spirituality cannot ignore it. Linking man's sufferings with those of Christ, the poet shows that the very acceptance of the Cross is in itself an alleviation of suffering, while to refuse to take up the burden of the Cross makes of suffering a dark incalculable force.

[]108Nicolas Berdyaev, Spirit and Reality, (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, first published 1939, reprint 1946), trans. George Reavey, p. 114. A remarkable effect is gained by the frequent repetition of the word <u>still</u> which seems to extend man's agony interminably through time. But toward the end of the poem, Miss Sitwell cleverly interposes the word <u>then</u> twice, which has the effect of limiting the despair and lightening the agony.

The last section of the poem is an open avowal of the Christian faith:

Still falls the Rain--

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man Was once a child who among beasts has lain--'Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.'

Man, the victim of his fellow men's inhumanities, is compared to Christ who, at his birth, lay among animals. Christ continues to shed His Light even for those in whom the last faint spark is dead. In her imagery, Miss Sitwell withholds the word <u>light</u> until the end, emphasizing that man will remain locked in the night of evil until he accepts the source of Light--Christ.

The sound effects in the poem are impressive. In the opening section the sounds suggest fear: the whine

of the falling bombs, the staccato beat of the frightened heart, the hammer-beat in the Potter's Field, the stamp of the impious feet on the Tomb. While the Tomb refers to Christ's tomb, there is the added parallel of the death and burial of the war victims. Man is called "that worm with the brow of Cain," because he, like Judas, sins seriously for paltry gain. There is drive to these opening lines which, with ever mounting tension, unfold the terrible story of man's betrayal of light. Darkness, brilliantly used, is the dramatic background for the black secrets and the blacker crimes of the human heart in this gross darkness of the night of the world. As image replaces image, and symbol blends into symbol, a kind of regeneration goes on within the poem, a cycle of death and life repeated, but never the same. Some of the urgency of utterance undoubtedly comes from the sense of growth in the poem itself, and the logic so evident in the imaginative progression through pattern and image. In the final stanza, the last mystic vision of the rain is invoked producing a light and harmony that is more brilliant because of the total darkness of the opening. Her vision is of the whole being of man as he wars through time to find some eternal order.

One of Miss Sitwell's poetic techniques is the recurrence of imagery in slightly changed patterns, or

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the repetition of patterns in somewhat different imagery. This device, which as a verbal convenience will be called <u>transmutation</u>, occurs often enough in "Still Falls the Rain" to be considered part of the poem's unity, and an emphasis of its theme. When one image reappears, thus modified, the transmutation gains something of the tension of life. Moving through the <u>rain</u> of present consciousness, the transmuted image has both continuity and change, familiarity and surprise, thus achieving a paradoxical kinetic poise. However, none of these changes in the image symbol are arbitrary, because all are tied neatly together in the opening stanza.

In the last section of the poem, Miss Sitwell incorporates two lines from Marlowe's <u>The Tragical</u> <u>History of Doctor Faustus:</u>

> • • • O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune--See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:

these lines gain considerable meaning when studied in relation to their position in the play. They are uttered by Faustus just prior to his damnation. Although he commits himself to his fatal course of action early in the play, still the Good and Evil Angels continue to contend for his soul because the issue of his fate is still in doubt. But Faustus, being Faustus, never avails

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himself of the possibility of redemption. In Marlowe's play, the disturbing spectacle of the divinely given powers of reason being employed to justify allegiance to the world, the flesh--and consequently, the devil, emphasizes the excellence of Faustus as a symbol for modern man, whose vacillations between good and evil bear such resemblance to those of Marlowe's hero. Both are fatally drawn to the delights of this world; both are bent on enjoying these at the expense of their immortal souls. Reason becomes the defense of passion, and, this being so, knowledge turns to ignorance as evil is hailed as the greatest good. In addition to his symbolic representation of modern man, Faustus is as well a symbol of the strife between science and humanity so pertinent to modern society. He is a theme of incalculable meaning for our times, because we have bartered our souls and our peace of mind for everything Faustus wanted. All this, and more, is compressed within these two brief lines. Miss Sitwell would have us conscious of the abyss on which we balance. Like Faustus, mercy is man's if he would; if not, then justice. Man remains a free agent; this is his greatness, it may also be his ruin.

It is possible that "Still Falls the Rain" gains further meaning from this quotation. In the play there is a scene which parodies the Passion of Christ. There

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is a scene where Satan is enthroned as king of evil, during which he is given a broken crown and drinks a potion. Like the sacramental wine, the potion produces a rebirth, but for Faustus it is a rebirth of the body, not of the spirit. Because the quotation from the play is immediately followed by a reference to the crown of thorns, there seems to be some justification of this interpretation. These lines are:

> It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart That holds the fires of the world--dark-smirched with pain As Caesar's laurel crown.

Applying the principle of religious parody expressed in the rejuvenation ritual, we are reminded of another mock coronation involving reed-sceptre and crown of thorns. Taken as an integral part of the Mephistophelian mockery of Christianity, it lends meaning to the poem. The Eucharist is preeminently a sacrament commemorative of the Passion of Christ. Modern man's mockery of the Passion is linked with that of Mephistopheles. Seldom, if ever, has this poetic device been used more provocatively.

What is the connection between Christ's crown of thorns and Caesar's laurel crown? Christ is a symbol of spiritual power, Caesar is one of temporal power; both were betrayed and murdered by their own people. Here the analogy stops. And so the final note of the poem is one of hope and joy. For, having refused the world's proffer and having overcome darkness, the pilgrim walks in the subdued light of earthly day, knowing that at life's end will be Light and Love transcending all his powers to envision. Light dispels darkness, Love conquers hate. The poem, beginning in man's passion, ends with his redemption.

Miss Sitwell has but one basic theme in her late poetry: Love. "Still Falls the Rain" is but another variation on this theme. All her thoughts lead to this one supreme truth: the close relationship of God and man, and the mutual bond of charity which cements this relationship. Whether viewed as the love of God for man, or that of man for God, the social wound and charity are indissolubly linked. Man must be reborn in charity. Little can be made of the poem unless acknowledgement is made of the dominance of Christian thought in the symbols.

Miss Sitwell sees sin and redemption as two parts of a single sacramental whole. God and the world are separated, but paradoxically even in that separation they remain united. God's mercy for fallen mankind, rebellious and disobedient, is never denied. This kind of symbolism follows a unity in plurality. In the broadest sense, Miss Sitwell succeeds in uniting the respective spheres of the religious and the secular, God and man, into a union which reflects the combination of divinity and humanity in both, and transcendentally resolves the dialectical conflict between them. Yet, at the same time, they remain separate <u>orders</u>. Man is not God, and God is not man; similitude is not identity. Man is not the Image, but only made in the image. God and man differ in substance, but a union of the two, without loss of substance by either, is not only possible, but the most desirable of all things in life. It is Life itself.

The poem is filled with echoes of the Crucifixion, emphasizing the human analogy of Christ's Passion, whose Blood is shown to have unmistakable power to protect against harm. The Christian pattern of thought behind the poem is evident.

To those familiar with the impressive ceremonies and ritual of baptism, there are baptismal echoes in the rain imagery. From the earliest times in the Church, the symbolism of the baptismal ceremony by submersion was based on the passage in Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans:

Know you not that we, who are baptized in Christ Jesus, are baptized in his death? For we are buried

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together with him by baptism unto death; that as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father so we also may walk in the newness of life.

In the primitive baptismal ceremony which took place on Holy Saturday immediately after the blessing of the new baptismal water as part of the Easter vigil service, the redemptive death and burial of Christ and the sinner's death to sin were symbolized by the submersion of the catechumen in the baptismal waters. Christ's triumphant resurrection and the sinner's new life of grace were in turn symbolized by his emergence from the waters. The fact that the waters represented death and sin and the power of Satan in this ancient baptismal rite is suggested by the prayers that are still said on Holy Saturday at the blessing of the new baptismal water:

Therefore may all unclean spirits, by thy command, O.Lord, depart from hence; may the whole malice of of diabolical deceit be entirely banished; may no power of the enemy prevail here; may he not fly about to lay his snares; may he not creep in secretly; may he not corrupt with his infection. May this holy and innocent creature be free from all the assaults of the enemy and purified by the removal of all his malice.<sup>110</sup>

To the reader familiar with this symbolic meaning of immersion into and emersion from waters infested by the powers of hell and purified by the powers of God, it would have been natural to see in the symbolism of the

109Saint Paul, Epistle to the Romans: 6: 3-4. 110Dom Gaspar Lefebre, O. S. B., <u>St. Andrew</u> <u>Daily Missal</u> (Saint Paul, 1937), p. 609. rain of bombs transformed into the rain of Christ's redemptive Blood, a symbolic representation of the death and burial and resurrection of Christ, and, in the purification through His Passion, a symbol of the redemption of man from the poisonous powers of evil.

Throughout the poem, there are no loosely related thoughts, no whimsical allusiveness, for the lines form an intensely forceful statement, precisely suited to the thought. By an economy of language she has produced an expansion of significance.

Miss Sitwell's avoidance of sentimentality endorses her thought with integrity and indicates the power of her poetic art.

"Still Falls the Rain" has the uniqueness, authority, structure and felicity of expression characteristic of a permanent contribution to the poetry of the English language.

# CHAPTER VII CONCLUSION

Like the age which produced her, Dame Edith Sitwell is a culmination and a beginning. In her the symbolist movement flowers; in her the effect of the Atomic Age burgeons; in her the main currents of contemporary thought converge. But of the many themes and currents present in Miss Sitwell's poetry, none is more significant to our time and more central to her development than her treatment of Christianity.

During this century, Christianity experienced a reinvigorating return to its rightful place in the world of letters. Miss Sitwell has been instrumental in effecting this return. Perhaps no one contributed more to the realization of this Christian restoration than T. S. Eliot, who dared to espouse the cause of religion when his fellow-writers had relegated it to the musty closet of superstition, suited to the fetid atmosphere of an outmoded era, but incompatible with the liberated twentieth-century mind. But soon reassuring echoes were detected in the works of other writers.

Such a voice is Miss Sitwell's. Among the most vocal in the increasing chorus of Christian writers, she proclaims that the poet's mission is "to lead men back from the delusion of Hell."<sup>111</sup> To achieve this, she has chosen poetry as a medium to dissipate the unrelatedness and apprehension which modern man carries within him. But as a Christian poet, she sees through and beyond man, seeking the cause of his religious dilemma, and anticipating "a rebirth of faith and of wonder"<sup>112</sup> for him under the democratic rays of Christ's love.

Above all, the theme which marks Miss Sitwell's poetry as Christian is her treatment of Love, for love is the vocation of the Christian. No man is truly Christian whose heart is swayed by hatred of any kind. Each individual, by his nature, is lonely and incomplete; his world is fragmented and his heart is sterile. Miss Sitwell, in writing of this world and this heart, may rightly be ranked among the religious poets. Love conquers death in "Eurydice," compensates for the loss of youth in "An Old Woman," redeems the suffering of "Still Falls the Eain," and melts the ice of the human heart in "The Song of the Cold"; Love, with its infinite ramifications, is Miss Sitwell's sole theme.

<sup>111</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Preface," <u>The American</u> <u>Genius</u> (London: Messrs. John Lehmann, 1951), p. xi. <sup>112</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Invocation," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems, op. cit.</u>, p. 251.

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As her sympathies broaden, her reflections deepen. Imbued with the belief that Christianity is the only force of sufficient power to overcome all evil, she speaks of the way of suffering that leads to salvation; of Christian love that has no end and cannot be defeated. It alone possesses the required vigour to arouse man from his lethargy. Positive and forceful, she speaks as one who has learned the deepest truths through suffering.

Proposing to "bring back sight to the blind,"<sup>113</sup> she brings groping humanity second sight so that the quality of revelation behind the immediacies and appearances of life may be experienced by all men. All creation speaks to her of God; each symbol, image, and metaphor carries conviction, pulsating with the rhythm of the universe -- that of the planets, stars and constellations; that of the blood in the vein and the sap in the plant. But whatever her convictions, she remains objective in her presentation of them. never intruding on the personal beliefs of the reader. She loves life, and has never been tempted to retire to the security of the ivory tower, as Emily Dickinson did. Rather her position is in the eye of the contemporary cyclone from which she observes with perception

113<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 253.

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and compassion the accelerated destruction whirling about her. Miss Sitwell has accomplished what she said could not be done -- she has fused the heart and the mind. Her poems, which as "hymns to the glory of life"114 have made her, celebrant of the absurdities and beauties of this life, warning us wittily against ourselves, but exposing us to the healing quality of Love. Possessing this Love herself, she speaks of profundities without embarrassment. This is the lode stone which guides her bardic boat, the secret of her personal art. She envisages her poetic function as an exploration of life and its mysteries. То accomplish this, she endeavours to see life steadily and wholly, for Truth is one. But this oneness may be expressed in countless ways; this is its splendour, this is its poetry. Her attitude and behaviour on the scene of Being are at once intelligent, dynamic and reverent. This union of Poetry and Truth communicates a quality of the eternal that comes directly through her flowing lines and artful balance.

Discussing this religious aspect of all good poetry in an interview conducted by Miss Elaine Grand, Miss Sitwell had this to say:

<sup>114</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Introduction," <u>Collected</u> <u>Poems, op. cit., p. L.</u>

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Miss Sitwell: Of course, in the beginning of time, poetry and magic were supposed to be one, were they not?

Miss Grand: Perhaps they still are.

Miss Sitwell: Oh, yes, they are. I mean, poetry without magic is no good.

Miss Grand: Well you, of course, believe that all poetry should be, and is, a religious thing.

Miss Sitwell: Oh, definitely, it is in praise of God.

Miss Grand: All good poetry?

- Miss Sitwell: All good poetry is religious. Even when it is not consciously so, it is, because if one is praising the beauty of the world, one is praising God, isn't one? . . . And if one is reproaching the world for not being what it should be, that again is religious.
- Miss Grand: So anything good, then, by your terms, is religious; anything that helps people is religious.

Miss Sitwell: Yes, everything that helps people is religious, and anything that throws any light on the world is religious.<sup>115</sup>

With such a poetic theory, Miss Sitwell establishes herself as a Christian poet of recognizable poetic and moral vision.

But vision is not enough, regardless of how exalted it may be. Technical skill is the prime requisite for poetry. Stylistically, Miss Sitwell is a

115Elaine Grand, "Interview with Dame Edith Sitwell," <u>Close Up</u> (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), March 12, 1959. master-technician. Religious poets have always tended to link the simplest feelings with the most sophistocated techniques. Miss Sitwell is no exception. Possessing an unusual sensitivity for language, she treats words with a glorious profligacy. She thinks, smells, and tastes in verbal images. Seldom has a love affair with language been more intense. Where the reader expects to find softness of feminine sentimentality, he is surprised by toughness of masculine vigour. Tough-textured and contemporary, her poetry cuts through spiritual lassitude to reality. Of significant interest is the list of poets who have influenced Miss Sitwell's poetry: Blake, Rimbaud, Yeats and Eliot; all might be classed as visionary poets whose poetry speaks above the mortal mouth.

Miss Sitwell's poetic and spiritual journey has constituted an interesting journey from darkness to light, from negation to affirmation. Against the chaos of modern times, she has set her Christian faith. This positive attitude serves the purpose of discriminating truth from error, of establishing a pattern for belief and conduct, and of laying the foundation for a hopeful outlook on life. A backward glance at her poetic development reveals how successfully she has merged her literary and religious creeds into one stem of faith. She has

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found the explanation of suffering: to transcend by acceptance, to suffer in union with Christ. Through her relentless wrestle with words, she has gained new understanding of the Word. The struggle to keep this goal within her vision has been her suffering; the stretching towards it has been her joy.

These lines which conclude Miss Sitwell's <u>Collected Poems</u> indicate how consistently the dymanics of her poetry rest on ultimate values:

> 'If every grain of my dust should be a Satan---If every atom of my heart were Lucifer---If every drop of my blood were an Abaddon --Yet should I love.' ("A Song of the Dust," p. 418)

Modern man cannot regain the cosmic privileges of Paradise Lost which would enable him to move with ease amid created things because his heart is unconverted. Creation has not changed, but man has lost his brotherly innocence in dealing with it. Miss Sitwell would hasten this paradisal reconciliation which would reestablish the universe as a cosmic temple in which man would accomplish his earthly task perpetually aware of the awesome Presence of God. Such an attitude reveals Miss Sitwell to be a poet who might be justly called a Merchant of Light seeking to speed the advent of a New Atlantis. <sup>116</sup>

116Francis Bacon, "New Atlantis," The Quest for Utopia (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), p. 376.

# APPENDIX I

## FACADE

Dame Edith Sitwell is well known today for the reading of her poetry. Since the essential reason for enjoying it is to discover a new world of the senses, Dame Edith recites aloud with a dramatic art that she has made her own. Horace Gregory in the <u>Saturday Review</u> states, "Her readings have become part of a Sitwellian legend and have revived the enjoyment of hearing poetry as music is heard in a concert hall. In these circumstances the poet adds another art to the one already possessed."<sup>1</sup> Yet she had her days when such statements were not made about her. She has often been accused of dabbling in words for their own sake. This charge was brought against <u>Facade</u> which aroused a storm of protest when produced as poetry set to music in 1920. Admittedly, there is some substance to the charge.

William Walton set the poems of <u>Facade</u> to music. The purpose of this performance jointly undertaken by Miss Sitwell and William Walton was

. . . 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 as a separate entity--and thus to be able to reach for once that unattainable land which, in the finest songs, always lies looming

<sup>1</sup>Horace Gregory, "Gardeners and Astronomers," <u>Saturday Review</u>, XXXVI (December 19, 1953), p. 15. 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 attain, was the elimination of the personality of the reciter, and also--though this is 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.<sup>2</sup>

There was a special curtain designed by Frank Dobson, at the centre of which was painted a large blond mask, back of whose gaping mouth was a megaphone through which the poet recited her poetry. Thus neither speakers nor musicians were visible to the audience. The audience saw only this black curtain, relieved by the immense formalized mask of fair hair with high angular coloring.

The idea of <u>Facade</u> did not burst full-grown from the mind of Miss Sitwell; there had been an arduous preparation for it; a time of assiduous essay during which she composed poetry to the rhythm of waltzes, polkas, and foxtrots, using the medium of words rather than music. The three Sitwells joined with William Walton to assure the success of the work.

Two relatively private performances in the nature of try-outs preceded the public performance which took

<sup>2</sup>Osbert Sitwell, <u>Laughter in the Next Room</u>, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1948), p. 207. place in Aeolian Hall at three o'clock on the afternoon of June 12, 1923. Memorable indeed was the occasion, but scarcely for the reason that the Sitwells had anticipated. Feeling ran so high that friends of the Sitwells scurried back-stage to warn them against making any appearance before the audience. For months they went about London feeling as though they had perpetrated some crime. No one can gainsay that the entire undertaking was stamped with Sitwellian originality, and hence some excuse may be advanced for audience and critic. Both were completely unprepared for what they had seen and heard.

But <u>Facade</u> has since been admitted to respectability; the first night scandal has even contributed and enhanced its popularity. It was chosen for the International Music Festival at Siena in 1929, when William Walton directed and Constant Lambert recited.

A near-disastrous incident occurred prior to this concert. The curtain which had been sent from England could not be located, and without it the performance was impossible. Fortunately, on the day preceding the scheduled event, the curtain was discovered in Florence, and the concert was given without further mishap.

Thus, the scandal of <u>Facade</u> has gradually faded; this literary experiment has been received with enthusiasm in many parts of the globe: The Hague, London,

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Siena, and New York. When performed in New York at the Museum of Modern Art in 1949, it attracted an elite audience who vied with one another for admittance.

More recently on the CBC, Philip Keatley presented <u>Facade</u> with a third dimension added--namely, ballet. This was presented on August 28, 1957. The ballet was more in the nature of a distraction than an aid to the sense of the poetry and music, and essentially defeated the prime purpose for which Miss Sitwell and William Walton wrote the work. There are times when the visual interferes with the meaning; it was so in this case.

But this experiment has brought results in the poetic world. It was one of the initial attempts to return poetry to its rightful position of being heard rather than silently read. It was arnew form of art which has become fully accepted today. Concerning new art, Wallace Fowlie writes:

New art, if it is great, seems destined to appear scandalous. "La poesie est toujours un scandale," wrote Cocteau. But the most permanent mysteries of religion are scandalous also to the world. Whatever is great in thought and faith and in art is allied with revolution which is usually a form of rejuvenation.

Miss Sitwell's revolution has been instrumental in bringing about a rejuvenation in poetry.

<sup>3</sup>Wallace Fowlie, <u>Jacob's Night: The Religious</u> <u>Renascence in France</u>, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), p. 29.

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#### Facade

Miss Edith Sitwell

#### on her

#### Sengerphone

## with accompaniments, overture and interlude by W. T. Walton

- ([1) Overture. 2) Madame Mouse Trots. 3) 4) The Octogenarian. ( Aubade. 5) 6) The Wind's Bastinado. Said King Pompey. 7) ( Interlude. 8) Jumbo's Lullaby. 9) Small talk (1) (2)(10) Rose Castles. (11)Introduction and Hornpipe. (12)Long Steel Grass. (13) (14) When Sir Beelzebub. Switchback. (15) Bank Holiday (1) (2)(16)Springing Jack. (17)En Famille.
- (18) Mariner Men (Presto).

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#### Facade

All these poems, and some additional poems, will appear in a book entitled "Facade" which Miss Edith Sitwell is publishing privately in a limited edition with a special frontpiece in colour by Gino Severeni . . . at the Favil Press, Kensington.

#### APPENDIX II

#### POETRY AND BELIEF

For dear to gods and men is sacred song. Self-taught I sing; by Heaven and Heaven alone, The genuine seeds of poesy are sown. Homer, Odyssey.

Poetry is theology. Boccacio.

Quod deus hortatur, michi scribi penna paratur. John Gower, Works of John Gower.

# God maketh his habytacion In Poetes . . . and solourns with them and dwelles. John Skelton, <u>Replication</u>.

Only the poet . . . lifted up with the vigor of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature, as the <u>Heroes</u>, <u>Demi-gods</u>, <u>Cyclops</u>, <u>Chimeras</u>, <u>Furies</u>, and such like. . . Nature never set forth the earth in so rich a tapestry as divers Poets have done, neither with pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers. Her world is brazen, the Poets only deliver a golden.

Sir Philip Sidney, An Apologie for Poetrie.

There are in us, as in a flint, seeds of knowledge. Philosophers adduce them through the reason; poets strike them out from the imagination, and these are the brighter.

Descartes.

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling, Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven; And, as imagination bodies forth The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing A local habitation and a name. Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Poetry "was ever thought to have some participation of divineness."

Francis Bacon, The Advancement of Learning.

It was well said by Aristotle, 'that the mind hath over the body that commandment which the lord hath over the bondman; but that reason hath over the imagination that commandment which a magistrate hath over a free citizen', who may come also to rule in his turn. For we see that in matters of Faith and Religion, we raise our Imagination above our Reason; which is the cause why Religion sought ever access to the mind by similitudes, types, parables, visions, dreams. Francis Bacon.

Unjustly poets we asperse: Truth shines the greater clad in verse, And all the fictions they pursue Do but insinuate what is true. Swift, "To Stella".

My unpremeditated verse. Milton, Paradise Lost.

The root of all is God. But it is not the way to receive fruits to dig to the root, but to reach to the boughs. I reach for my creation to the Father, for my redemption to the Son, and for my sanctification to the Holy Ghost: and so I make the knowledge of God, a tree of life unto me, and not otherwise. John Donne, Sermon CIX.

Some, whose temper of body humours the constitution of their souls, are born poets; though indeed all are naturally inclined into rhythm. Thomas Browne, <u>Religio Medici</u>. Delight is the chief, if not the only end of poetry; instruction can be admitted, but in the second place; for poetry only instructs as it delights. Dryden, Defense of an Essay of Dramatic Poetry.

Poetry is the natural language of Religion. John Dennis, Grounds of Criticism in Poetry.

If there be a moral in the subject, it will appear, and the poet has nothing to consider but the effective and artistic treatment of his subject. If a poet has as high a soul as Sophocles, his influence will always be moral, let him do what he will. J. W. Goethe, Conversations with Eckermann.

The individual can only be happy and at rest when he finds himself as part of the whole. J. W. Goethe, Poetry and Truth.

If a poet would influence politics he must join a party, and then he is lost as a poet: goodbye to his free spirit and his open mind. . . The poet as a man and a citizen will love his native land, but the native land of his genius lies in the world of goodness, greatness and beauty, a country without frontiers or boundaries, ready for him to seize and shape wherever he finds it.

J. W. Goethe, Conversations with Eckermann.

One character belongs to all true poets, that they write from a principle within. . . . S. T. Coleridge, Lectures on Poetry.

Poetry is the identity of all other knowledges, the blossom and fragrance of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language. S. T. Coleridge, <u>Biographia</u> Literaria.

If the doors of perception were cleans'd everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern. William Blake. One Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision.

William Blake.

#### Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation. William Blake.

"What", it will be Question'd, "when the Sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea?" "Oh no, no, I see an Innumerable Company of the Heavenly Host crying Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty." I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more than I would Question a Window concerning a Sight. I look thro' it & not with it.

William Blake, Vision of the Last Judgment.

Blessings be with them, and eternal praise, Who gave us nobler loves, and nobler cares,--The Poets, who on earth have made us heirs Of truth and pure delight by heavenly lays! William Wordsworth, "Personal Talk".

What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him? -- He is a man speaking to men; a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions . . . and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and what he feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings

which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

William Wordsworth, "Preface", Lyrical Ballads.

Byron speaking of Pope:

"In my mind, the greatest of all poetry is ethical poetry, as the highest of all earthly objects must be moral truth. Religion does not make a part of any subject; it is something beyond human powers, and has failed in all human hands except Milton's and Dante's, and even Dante's powers are involved in his delineation of human passions, though in supernatural circumstances. What makes Socrates the greatest of all men? His moral truth--his ethics. What proved Jesus Christ the Son of God hardly less than his miracles? His moral precepts. And if ethics has made a philosopher the first of men, and has not been disdained as an adjunct to his Gospel by the Deity himself, are we to be told that ethical poetry, or didactic poetry, or whatever name you term it, whose object is to make men better and wiser is not the very first order of poetry . . ?"

Byron, "Letter to John Murray," Letters and Journals.

[Le poète] doit marcher devant les peuples comme une lumière et leur montrer le chemin. Victor Hugo, "Préface", Odes et Ballades.

A moral should be wrought into the body and soul, the matter and tendency, of a poem, not tagged to the end, like a "God send the good ship into harbour" at the conclusion of our bills of lading. Charles Lamb, "Letter to Southey."

. . A drainless shower Of light is poesy: 'tis the supreme of power; 'Tis might half slumbering on its own right arm. Keats, Sleep and Poetry. . . . the honors paid by Man to Man are trifles in comparison to the Benefit done by great Works to the Spirit and pulse of good by their mere passive existence.

Keats in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, February 19, 1818.

The excellence of every art is its intensity. ... John Keats, in a letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817.

To be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful; in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression.

P. B. Shelley, A Defence of Poetry

It acts in a divine and unapprehended manner, beyond and above consciousness. P. B. Shelley.

Didactic poetry is my abhorrence; nothing can be equally well expressed in prose that is not tedious and so superogatory in verse.

P. B. Shelley, Preface to Prometheus Unbound.

Qu'est-ce, en effet, que poésie? . . . C'est l'incarnation de ce que l'homme a de plus intime dans le coeur et de plus divin dans la pensée, de ce que la nature visible a de plus magnifique dans les images et de plus mélodieux dans les sons. C'est à la fois sentiment et sensation, esprit et matière: et voilà pourquoi c'est la langue complète, la langue par excellence qui saisit l'homme par son humanité toute entier, idée pour l'esprit, sentiment pour l'âme, image pour l'imagination, et musique pour l'oreille.

Lamartine, "Des Destinées de la Poésie".

The merit of poetry, in its wildest forms, still consists in its truth--truth conveyed to the understanding, not directly by words, but circuitously by means of imaginative associations, which serve as its conductors.

Macauley, "On the Athenian Orators," Essays.

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us.

Matthew Arnold, "The Study of Poetry," Essays in Criticism.

Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life. Matthew Arnold, "Wordsworth".

Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth.

Matthew Arnold, Essays in Criticism.

With Christians, a poetical view of things is a duty, --we are bid to color all things with hues of faith, to see a divine meaning in every event, and a superhuman tendency.

Cardinal Newman, Essays Critical and Historical.

The finest poetry was first experience. Emerson, "Of History," <u>Essays</u>.

The true poem is the poet's mind. Emerson, "Of History," Essays.

"The poet," he wrote, "is charged with humanity, even with animals . . . The poet shall define the quantity of the unknown which awakes in his time, in the universal soul. . . . I say that it is necessary to be a seer, to make oneself a seer. The poet makes himself a seer by a long, immense,

and reasoned unruliness of all his senses. Every form of love, of suffering, of madness, he seeks within himself, and he draws from them all their poisons in order to preserve only the quintessences. Ineffable torture, where he has need of all faith, all superhuman force; where he becomes among all men the great invalid, the great criminal, the great accursed -- and the supreme Savant!"

Arthur Rimbaud, "Lettre du Voyant".

And I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than death,

And I will thread a thread through my poems that that time and events are compact,

And that all the things of the universe are perfect miracles, each as profound as any.

I will not make poems with reference to parts,

But I will make poems, songs, thoughts, with reference to ensemble,

- And I will not sing with reference to a day, but with reference to all days,
- And I will not make a poem nor the least part of a poem but has reference to the soul,

Because having look'd at the objects of the universe, I find there is no one nor any particle of one but has reference to the soul. Walt Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok".

He the great poet judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falls around a helpless thing. As he sees the farthest he has the most faith. His thoughts are the hymns of the praise of things. . . . he sees eternity in men and women . . . he does not see men and women as dreams or dots. . . . Now he has passed that way, see after him! There is not left one vestige of despair, or misanthropy, or cunning, or exclusiveness, or the ignominy of a nativity or colour, or delusion of hell; and no man thenceforward shall be degraded for ignorance or weakness or sin.

Walt Whitman, Preface to Leaves of Grass.

Poetry is speech framed for contemplation of the mind . . . for its own sake and interest over and above meaning. Some matter and meaning is essential, but only as an element necessary to support the shape which is contemplated for its own sake. Gerard Manley Hopkins, <u>The Notebooks and</u> Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins.

The seer and speaker under the descent of the god is the 'poet,' whatever his form, and he ceases to be one only when his form, whatever else it may nominally or superficially or vulgarly be, is unworthy of the god: in which event, we promptly submit, he isn't worth talking of at all. He becomes so worth it, and the god so adopts him, and so confirms his charming office and name, in the degree in which his impulse and passion are general and comprehensive--a provision for them that makes but a mouthful of so minor a distinction, in the fields of light, as that between verse and prose.

Henry James, Preface to The Golden Bowl.

The mission of poetry is to record impressions, not convictions.

Thomas Hardy, Notebooks.

Man is not civilized, aesthetically, until he has learned to value the semblance above the reality. Bernard Bosanquet, <u>Three Lectures on</u> Aesthetics.

I ask that literature should give me pleasure; I do not dictate to writers by what route they shall approach me.

Sir Edmund Gosse, Leaves and Fruit.

All symbolic art should arise out of a real belief, and that it cannot do so in this age proves that this age is a road and not a resting place for the imaginative arts. I can only understand others by myself, and I am certain that there are many who are not moved as they desire to be by that solitary light burning in the tower of Prince Athanais, because it has not entered into men's prayers nor lighted any through the sacred dark of religious contemplation.

William Butler Yeats, Discoveries.

God guard me from those thoughts men think In the mind alone; He that sings a lasting song Thinks in a marrow-bone. William Butler Yeats, "A Prayer for Old Age,"

Collected Poems.

The poet does not consciously wish to persuade anyone of the attractiveness of beauty, or the joyousness of virtue. His function is only to express these, to reveal them in being, as he reveals the terror of discord, or the ferocity of blind force. That true beauty must convert man to wisdom, humanity and joy, is for man to prove by submitting himself to the experience of art. The poet is occupied only in providing the true experience. Hugh I'Anson Fausset, <u>Studies in Idealism</u>.

Poets . . . are the unconscious heralds of larger dispensations.

H. L. Silverman, In Abysm of Time.

Poetry does not teach us, but it allows us to be taught, as life and the universe permit us, if we will, to learn. The poet's sense of ethical values, if he has it, may communicate itself to us, as Shakespeare's does, implicitly, without the intrusion of a moral sentiment.

John Livingston Lowes, <u>Convention and</u> Revolt in Poetry.

Faith without works is not more dead than the loftiest themes of poetry may be, as poetry, if they have not been drenched in the creative deeps, and fashioned afresh by that architectonic energy which is the effluence of the creative will. John Livingston Lowes, The Road to Xanadu.

Verse, whether directed to the ear or to the eye, is the outward and visible sign that we are entering the world where truth of literal fact yields place to another truth.

John Livingston Lowes, <u>Convention and</u> Revolt in Poetry.

about something too small for anyone to see. G. K. Chesterton, All Things Considered.

Poets will tend toward orthodoxy for a perfectly plain reason: because it is about the simplest and freest thing now left in the world. G. K. Chesterton, All Things Considered.

Poetry inclines above all to the roots of the knowledge of Being.

Charles Maurras, Preface to <u>La Musique</u> Intérieure.

. . . great poets have always been those who believed that poetry was by nature the worthiest vessel of the highest argument of which the soul of man is capable.

John M. Murry, Aspects of Literature.

The basis and root of poetry is spontaneous utterance of the undivided being. It is not the utterance of thought, neither is it the utterance of emotion: it is the utterance of the being before these faculties are differentiated. . . . The conflict of Thought and Emotion is the beginning of self-consciousness; the conflict and the condition are really synonymous. Poetry is, essentially, prior to this conflict and condition; it is the utterance of a whole experience, which demands to be completed by utterance as whole as itself.

John M. Murry, Shakespeare.

Complete submission is an essential phase in that process of mastering the emotion with which the poet's creation begins, for the poet himself has to be changed; he plunges into the depths of his emotion to rise mysteriously renewed. Only then will the words he utters bear upon them the strange compulsion of a secret revealed; only then can he put his spell upon us and trouble our depths. For the problem of poetry is not primarily, or even largely, a conscious problem; true poetry begins with an act, a compelled and undeliberate act, of obedience to that centre of our being where all experience is reconciled.

John M. Murry, The Evolution of an Intellectual.

I would say that it <u>poetry</u> is a touching of the Life of the Universe, a lifting into the Universal Mood. . . The greater poetry is a flowing in of light from the source of all light, from that King from whom comes all our knowledge of the kingly, in whose wisdom we advance, under whose majesty we move, and in whose beauty, if we have care for beauty, we may come to dwell. His ways are ways of light; His words are words of light, vouchsafed to a few great men of light, so that this world may know a little of the wisdom, beauty and power which are the daily bread in Paradise.

John Masefield, "Address on Poetry".

. . . if there be any means by which we may artificially strengthen our minds' capacity to order themselves, we must avail ourselves of them. And of all possible means, Poetry, the unique linguistic instrument by which our minds have ordered their thoughts, emotions, desires . . . in the past, seems to be the most serviceable. It may well be a matter of some urgency to us, in the interests of our standards of civilization, to make this highest form of language more accessible. From the beginning, civilization has been dependent upon speech, for words are our chief link with the past and with one another, and the channel of our spiritual inheritance.

I. A. Bichards, Practical Criticism.

Coleridge, when he remarked that "a willing suspension of disbelief" accompanied much poetry, was noting an important fact, but not quite in the happiest terms, for we are neither aware of a disbelief nor voluntarily suspending it in these cases. It is better to say that the question of belief or disbelief, in the intellectual sense, never arises when we are reading well.

I. A. Richards, Practical Criticism.

felicities is to substitute an easy aesthetics for the main issue; such is the school-mistress' tradition, and its romance is lacking in dimension.

For great literature has ever been a search for a larger meaning in life as against the easy acceptance of life's routine and ready-made philosophies. Only in it may one readily discover the rich complexity of the living ideas that have made the tradition of humanity. Only it can reveal a rich and vital meaning for those quarrelsome words that ordinarily are as empty of significance as battle-cries or bludgeons-terms like optimism and pessimism, urbanity and nature, reason and instinct. It is there that the best search can be made for clues that may reveal all that is implied by character, moral discipline, and freedom. For in a manner far more vital than the speculation of philosopher or moralist, the vision of the poet discovers the stature of man and the secret of the good life.

Philo M. Buck, The Golden Thread.

L'objet de la poésie, ce n'est donc pas, comme on le dit souvent, les rêves, les illusions ou les idées. C'est cette sainte réalite, donnée une fois pour toutes, au centre de laquelle nous sommes placés. C'est l'univers des choses visibles auquel la Foi ajoute celui des choses invisibles. C'est tout cela qui nous regarde et que nous regardons. Tout cela est l'oeuvre de Dieu, qui fait la matière inépuisable des récits et des chants du plus grand poète comme du plus pauvre oiseau. . . Le but de la poésie n'est pas, comme dit Baudelaire, de plonger "au fond de l'Infini pour trouver du nouveau," mais au fond du défini pour y trouver de l'inépuisable. Paul Claudel, "Introduction à un poème sur

Dante".

The poet is then the representative of man, the acknowledged type of his race. But today (I refer particularly to English conditions) the poet makes his signals to a numb and indifferent body. He is ignored. There has surely never been a period in our literary history when poetry was so little read

and the poet so little recognized. There are poets who find a fickle and ephemeral public, but they generally suffer that worst pain and ignominy of living to see their work neglected and finally ignored. Herbert Read, The Phases of English Poetry.

There are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made up of metaphor. So also is philosophy--and science, too, for that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment from a friend. Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing.

Robert Frost, "The Constant Symbol".

Poets are the first in their time to divine the darkly moving, mysterious currents, and to express them according to the limits of their capacity in more or less speaking symbols. They make known, like true prophets, the deep motions of the collective unconscious, 'the will of God' . . . which, in the course of time, must inevitably come to the surface as a general phenomenon.

Carl G. Jung.

Nobility, intensity, courage, generosity, pity-qualities like these cannot by themselves make a poem good, any more than they can make a face beautiful. . . . But in a poem, as in a face, no perfection of form in their absence can reach the highest beauty. And in a poem, as in a face, the presence of their opposites -- of vulgarity or morbidity or poltroonery or meanness or cruelty--is a flaw for which no perfection of form can atone.

F. L. Lucas, The Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal,

Religion is never so secure or so irresistible as when she boldly uses the methods and spirit of poetry, its colorful words, its types, its imagery. Charles Allen Dinsmore, The Great Poets and the Meaning of Life.

Inspiration, according to many poets, creates a state in which they see as a whole what normally they see only in fragments as parts of a temporal process, and are able to grasp from outside in the full pattern of its movement what normally they know only from inside in separate and limited stages of development. It is not surprising that in such circumstances they feel that they have passed into eternity. C. M. Bowra, Inspiration and Poetry.

The poet is a man who, seeing something ineffable behind the things of this world, and seeing it as beauty, makes an effort to express it in words: in words that, even as they come, make the vision itself a little clearer to himself and to others. Victor Gollancz, <u>More for Timothy</u>.

Poetry does not move us to be just or unjust, in itself. It moves us to thoughts in whose light justice and injustice are seen in fearful sharpness of outline.

J. Bronowski, The Poet's Defence.

Poetry is the fruit of a contact of the spirit with reality, which is in itself ineffable, and with the source of reality, which we believe to be God himself in that movement of love which causes him to create images of his beauty. That which is thus conceived in the mysterious retreats of being is expressed with a certain savory illogic, which is not nonsense, but a superabundance of sense. Raïssa Maritain, The Situation of Poetry.

Poetry is therefore an image of divine grace. And because it brings to light the allusions scattered through nature, and because nature is an allusion of the Kingdom of God, poetry gives us, without knowing it, a foreshadowing, an obscure desire for supernatural life. I remember how Baudelaire put it: 'It is at once by poetry and through poetry, by and through music, that the soul catches a glimpse of the splendors lying beyond the grave.' And he added: 'When an exquisite poem brings tears to the eyes, these tears are not the proof of an excessive joy, they are rather the testimony of an

irritated melancholy, of an insistence of the nerves, of a nature, exiled in imperfection, that would like immediately to take possession, on this very earth, of a paradise that has been revealed.

Jacques Maritain, "The Double Heart".

Poetry is ontology. . . . The true end of poetry is not knowledge, but joy. Jacques Maritain, <u>Art and Scholasticism</u>.

Poetry is not a substitute for philosophy or theology or religion; it has its own function. But as this function is not intellectual but emotional, it cannot be defined adequately in intellectual terms. We can say that it provides 'consolation': strange consolation, which is provided equally by writers so different as Dante and Shakespeare.

T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca".

My complaint against modern literature is of the same kind. It is not that modern literature is in the ordinary sense 'immoral' or even 'amoral'; and in any case to prefer that change would not be enough. It is simply that it repudiates, or is wholly ignorant of, our most fundamental and important beliefs; and that in consequence its tendency is to encourage its readers to get what they can out of life while it lasts, to miss no 'experience' that presents itself, and to sacrifice themselves, if they make any sacrifice at all, only for the sake of tangible benefits to others in this world either now or in the future. We shall continue to read the best of its kind, of what our time provides; but we must be tirelessly criticize it according to our own principles, and not merely according to the principles admitted by the writers and by the critics who discuss it in the public press. . . . The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not can be determined only by literary standards. T. S. Eliot, Contributed to the symposium "Faith that Illumines",

Without doubt, the effort of the philosopher proper, the man who is trying to deal with ideas in them-

selves, and the effort of the poet, who may be trying to <u>realize</u> ideas, cannot be carried on at the same time. But this is not to deny that poetry can be in some sense philosophic. The poet can deal with philosophic ideas, not as matter for argument, but as matter for inspection. T. S. Eliot, <u>The Sacred Wood</u>.

Out of the slimy mud of words, out of the sleet and hail of verbal imprecisions,

Approximate thoughts and feelings, words that have taken the place of thoughts and feelings,

There spring the perfect order of speech, and the beauty of incantation.

T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets.

A man does not join himself with the Universe so long as he has something else to join himself with . . . and Christians have had something better. Stoicism is the refuge for the individual in an indifferent or hostile world too big for him; it is the permanent substratum of a number of versions of cheering oneself up.

T. S. Eliot, "The Social Function of Poetry".

The material of the artist is not his beliefs as <u>held</u>, but his beliefs as <u>felt</u> (so far as his beliefs are part of his material at all). T. S. Eliot, "The Use of Poetry".

. . .

Because Poetry, my God, it is you. Jean Cocteau, <u>Orpheus</u>.

The living language of dream, the dead language of awakening. We need an interpreter, a translator. Jean Cocteau, <u>Opium</u>.

• • • art is but an expression of our needs; is feeling, modified by the writer's moral and technical insights.

Marianne Moore, "Feeling and Precision".

As for the poet taking no interest in his fellow human beings, the poet is not the coldly bored observer, or the enemy of, the sneerer at, his readers. He is a brother speaking to a brother of "a moment of their other lives"--a moment that had been buried beneath the dust of the busy world. The poet supports his brothers' flagging footsteps, telling them, as Shakespeare's Antony said to Cleopatra before darkness fell, "Come on, my queen; there's sap in't yet." Sap in the event, sap in the heart of man.

All great poetry is dipped in the dyes of the heart, and is, in Emerson's phrase, "A larger imbibing of the common heart."

The poet is the complete lover of mankind. "Now he has passed that way," wrote Walt Whitman, "see after him! There is not left any vestige of despair or misanthropy or cunning or exclusiveness, or the ignominy of a nativity or colour or delusion of hell or the necessity of hell; and no man thenceforth shall be degraded for ignorance or weakness or sin."

It is a part of the poet's work to give each man his own view of the world--show him what he sees but does not know that he sees. The poet, like the painter, harmonizes what seems to the "Vegetative Eye" irreconcilable aspects of the world, into a great design, a great balance. He shows the quintessence of the thing seen. His imagination is not a pretty fancy, but is the quintessence of reality. In Carl Jung's words, "Imagination is a concentrated extract of all the forces of life."

Therein lies the difference between poetry and platitude. Without live words, we cannot hope for live rhythms, the Tongues of Fire that came to the Apostles. "Coleridge's father," de Quincey tells us, "used to delight his flock on Sunday, with Hebrew quotations, which he always introduced as 'the Immediate language of the Holy Ghost.'"

We do not need the Hebrew language. The English language will serve us well enough. But we do need the Tongues of Fire.

Edith Sitwell, "The Poet's Vision".

"For poetry must embrace all those who are born of her nature, which includes all beauties -- the ripe summer weather, and the cold sharp flakes of snow. falling softly, as the first shade of age falls on some golden cheek. The beauties of poetry are unconfined; they grow like a tree, to give our summer a pleasant shade, they ripen like fruit, and spring like a fountain to cool our thirst. All the wings of the world are hers, for she flies like an eagle, near to the summer sun, and seeks the darkness like a nightingale, and floats in beauty like the swan. The pleasures of poetry are unconfined as the heavenly airs among which she moves, clothed in the splendours and glamours of ancient worlds and of unvisited horizons.

Edith Sitwell, <u>The Pleasures of Poetry: The</u> <u>Victorian Age</u>.

Blake had the innocence of the flower, and his innocence did not come from ignorance, but from wisdom. The extreme poles, innocence and wisdom, are alike. And wisdom, both heavenly and infernal, was his.

The Spirit told him, as it told Caedmon, to "sing the Beginning of Created Things," and these opened to him their essential nature.

Edith Sitwell, <u>The Atlantic Book of British</u> and American Poetry,

I believe poetry to be a possible way of gaining and imparting knowledge--a son of the same father as science: the brothers may quarrel from time to time, but each in his own field they are working towards compatible ends.

Cecil Day Lewis, The Poet's Way of Knowledge.

The poet has a duty to love and to praise, to be serious and honest, to remain forever dissatisfied with his past attempts and alive to what the present holds out: it would be surprising indeed if his work did not have a moral tendency. Nor do I see any valid reason for debarring dogma from poetry, if dogma is the best gist for your particular mill. Doctrinal verse, didactic verse are very well: but they are not poetry, unless the moral truths have been translated into poetic truth. This, I realize, may be taken as an elaborate way of saying that poetry is not poetry unless it is poetry.

Cecil Day Lewis, The Poet's Task.

The writing of poetry is a vocation, a game, a habit, and a search for truth. . . . The poet's vocation, then, as every poet knows, is to discover for us what Shelley called 'the hitherto unapprehended relations' between things. All poetry, therefore, is fundamentally metaphor, and every poet's work rests on an act of faith: for, if reality were a chaos of nomads milling around in a vacuum, his work is evidently based on a gigantic fallacy; or alternately, if all the relations between things could be sufficiently apprehended in the light of natural laws which are discoverable by science, then the poet's vocation will one day be superfluous -- he must give way, as gracefully as he can, to the scientist, with Peacock's words buzzing in his ears: 'While the historian and the philosopher are advancing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the grown babies of the age.

Cecil Day Lewis, The Poet's Task.

False beliefs lead us to bad poetry, and bad poetry leads us to a falsification of belief. W. H. Auden, The Intent of the Critic.

Poetry is not concerned with telling people what to do, but with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessary action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible to make a rational and moral choice.

W. H. Auden, Introduction to The Poet's Tongue.

One might define a creative writer of genius as one with the greatest power of seeing what is extraordinary within what is ordinary. The lesser artists are those who need the stimulus of what is surprising and in itself poetic, to create the poetic in art. Stephen Spender, Life and the Poet.

The teaching of Patrice de la Tour du Pin's School of Tess is that the poet has to make not formal and verbal choices, but spiritual ones, selecting from among the impulses of his soul those which are suitable for poetry, and choosing the dedicated life

Stephen Spender, Introduction to The Dedicated Life in Poetry.

Apocalypse means revelation, and when art becomes apocalyptic, it reveals. But it reveals only on its own terms, and in its own forms: . . . poets are happier as servants of religion than of politics, because the transcendental and apocalyptic perspective of religion comes as a tremendous emancipation of the imaginative mind.

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism.

For the poet, the verbal image of the object is his only means of reproducing the world he knows, in which he is, at the worst, moving on a similar plane to any representational painter or composer of programme music. The poet who, rightly or wrongly, is dissatisfied with the world he knows, has no alternative but to change that world, and where the metamorphosis is effected by a casual, arbitrary selection, the result may be paranoiac and pathological, and is nothing short of Surrealism in the Bad Old Manner. But where the change is consciously willed and motivated by a sincere and consistent philosophy, the result, though possibly startling, as are so many things when seen clearly for the first time, or seen set against a new background, must be artistically rejuvenating, and at the lowest level, psychologically useful.

Henry Treece, How I See Apocalypse.

Poetry in its most primal sense is incantation; the words must echo through the mind, hence rhymes, assonances and alliterations. The verbal rhythms must predispose the muscles to movement just as the rhythmic patterns of a drumbeat might do.

Poetry is the drum of the sophisticated medicineman, the poet. He is the dream-maker, the spellbinder, who is master over the most potent weapon man knows--the word.

And because the word is so powerful, for good or evil, the poet's trade is almost a sacred one.

He is the unacknowledged legislator of the world, but not at the council table; his magic works in the subterranean level from which dreams spring. He moves men by sly words and phrases that creep quietly and effectively through the barricades of sense, camouflaged by their colours and rhythms. Henry Treece, How I See Apocalypse.

To me, Apocalyptic writing is that which seeks to interpret the cataclysmic nature of life, . Henry Treece, How I See Apocalypse.

The poet, like the wizard, can make a man happy or sad, can fill him with the gloom of hell, or a sense of glory that will carry him clean off his feet. Henry Treece, How I See Apocalypse.

Philosophy even in the strict sense may be the material of poetry, but poets are not chiefly philosophers. A poet whose main passion is to get his doctrine--or his personality or his local color-into his poems is trying to justify a medium in which he lacks confidence. There is a division of purpose, and the arrogance of facile 'solutions' that thinks that it can get along without experience. The poet had better write his poetry first; examine it; then decide what he thinks. The poetry may not reveal all that he thinks; it will reveal all he thinks that is good--for poetry. Poetry is one test of ideas; it is ideas tested by experience, by the act of direct apprehension.

Allen Tate, On the Limits of Poetry.

Great poetry will cease to be written when poets cease to be men for whom the invisible world exists. Robert Lynd, "The Religious Background of Literature".

A wizard; a seer; a mystic; an explorer of the unknown. All these descriptions would suit one of our modern poets.

Gilbert Highet, A Clerk of Oxenford.

The source of poetry is rooted in the otherness of mental and spiritual realities; these, however, are a 'nothing' until mated with earthly shapes. Creation is thus born of a union between 'earth' and 'heaven', the material and the spiritual. Without 'shapes' the poet is speechless; he needs words, puppets of the drama, tales, ....

G. Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire.

Poetic language is an incarnation, not a transcription of thought: it is a seizing on truth beyond the writer's personal thinking through submission to the object. Such submission conditions the deepest self-realization, since what normally passes for thought is merely a cheap currency drawn from and touching the mental centres only.

G. Wilson Knight, The Crown of Life.

Poetry is the language in which man explores his own amazement. It is the language in which he says heaven and earth in one word. It is the language in which he speaks of himself and his predicament as though for the first time.

Christopher Fry, Broadcast Talk: "A Playwright Speaks".

While we have all to be on our guard against automatically equating the intellectual and emotional truth of an author with his poetic ability, we do well to remind ourselves that no poem in which the substance is trivial, superficial, trite, feeble or false, can have 'value' as poetry.

Elizabeth Drew and John Sweeney, <u>Directions</u> in Modern Poetry.

• • • and my contention really is that in poetry as in philosophy a final word can never be spoken, nor do I feel it particularly unfortunate that this should be so. If we all thought and felt alike the result would be spiritual and intellectual stagnation. • • • in a passage from John Stuart Mill: 'The difficulty,' Mill declares, 'between the poetry of the poet, and the poetry of a cultured but not naturally poetic mind, is, that in the latter, with however bright a halo of feeling the thought may be surrounded and glorified, the thought itself is always the conspicuous object; while the poetry of a poet is Feeling itself, employing thought only as the medium of its expression.

Forrest Reid, The Milk of Paradise.

Poems and stories are written by memory and desire, love and hatred, daydreams and nightmares--by a being, not a brain.

Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age.

Precision, zest, unsentimentality--these are the qualities that we may legitimately demand of the poet's account of the world around him, . . . . John Press, The Fire and the Fountain.

One task of the poet is to jolt us out of our familiar acceptance of what we observe in our daily lives, by showing us hitherto unsuspecting facets of common objects, or by presenting an ordinary scene in a fresh guise, pointing out queer relationships between objects, revealing the poetry that lies beneath the stale routine of living. The innocent eye of the child and the experienced heart of the man combine in the poet to communicate both the freshness and the significance of what is seen. John Press, The Fire and the Fountain.

The point may be raised that, unless we judge a poet by what he says, we are evacuating poetry of all moral content and reducing it to a sequence of patterned sounds, thereby reverting to the triviality of the aestheticism fashionable in the nine-If the concept of good poetry is a valid one, ties. we must admit a scale of values by which we can distinguish the elegant minor poem from the superb major poem, and we cannot afford to ignore the context of the poem, the moral element that gives depth to the poet's vision. We can agree unreservedly with this argument, provided we recognize that the values inherent in great poetry arise from the poetry and are not imposed upon it by the didacticism. We consider one poem greater than another because it seems to us more universal in its scope and more true in its philosophy. I believe that no poem can win that recognition from us unless it expresses with complete fidelity the personal vision

of the poet. The more piercing, exact, coherent, and complex the vision, the greater the poem, but the essence of the vision is its individuality, its undistorted reflection of the total experience of one man. The representation of a set of dogmas, held even with complete sincerity, can never be a substitute for this personal experience in which belief and doubt, passion and thought, memory and desire are so closely blended that nobody can distinguish the one from the other. The poem is a whole world of order and beauty, instinct with the morality that grows from the acceptance and the understanding of experience. It is not the expression in rhyme and metre of political and religious formulae.

John Press, The Fire and the Fountain.

The end of art is art, not moral virtue, not social uplift, not political reform.

Ruth Z. Temple, The Critic's Alchemy.

I am aware of the problem of literature and belief and have no simple answer for it. I am aware of the didactic fallacy and have sought to avoid it. I recognize that a work of art is first of all and always to be understood in its own aesthetic terms. I am, indeed, persuaded that critics are disposed to lean over backwards on these issues to safeguard the autonomy of art in a time when it is under all kinds of alien pressures. I believe, moreover, that all imaginative creations from the oldest myth and ritual to the most recent poem have their own kind of declarative or cognitive role, offer "news of reality." It is in this respect that modern literature opens itself to theological and moral scrutiny.

Amos N. Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature.

It is true that in the greatest literature we look for great affirmation. But if we exclude all art or poetry that lacks such explicit faith we rule out a vast amount of profoundly significant work. Especially in a time like ours it is inevitable that the experience of evil will occupy a large place in the contribution of the imaginative artist. No doubt ultimately 'poetry is praise' and poetry is joy, but real poetry must take up into its praise and joy the negative aspects of our experience as man.

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Amos N. Wilder, <u>Modern Poetry and the</u> Christian Tradition.

Moreover, affirmation in art is properly implicit rather than explicit. The poet is rather an imagemaker than a preacher, a celebrant than a teacher. It is true that poetry and religion are consubstantial in their origins. The poet at risk of magician in the bad sense cannot finally be distinguished from the seer and the prophet. Yet the poet ministers to true belief and right conduct not by indoctrination or didactic, but by enabling us to <u>see--in</u> Goethe's sense of <u>schauen</u>.

Amos N. Wilder, <u>Modern Poetry and Christian</u> Tradition.

Even when the Christian heritage is not involved in any overt way the artist is characteristically a voice against the dehumanization all around us, whether of intellect, of technology, of social routines or of mass dogmas. He represents "the blessed rage for order" (Stevens), rediscovery of "the antique courtesy of your myths" and of "the living wound of love" (Tate), the building of "the Just City now" and the replacing of phantasy for Living Love(Auden), the "Nevertheless" affirmed against disaster, and the freedom acquired through "relinquishing what one would keep" (Marianne Moore), the protest against Usura Contra Natura (Pound), against the "waste sad time stretching before and after"(Eliot), and against the "anger" in which man is caught "exact as a machine."

Amos N. Wilder, <u>Modern Poetry and the</u> Modern Tradition.

Having learned to dream over the subject, the thinker must learn not to obtrude his own personal wishes but to follow where the truth leads him. He who wishes to express <u>himself</u> is on the wrong track: his aim should be to express beyond himself. In fact the procedure bears an analogy to the mystic way. The sinking of the personality; the retirement for the time being of the intellect from

everything irrelevant; holding the intellect by the will so that it watches, but does not disturb, the natural development of the idea; merging himself into the great sea of life beyond himself in order that he may become one with it--these are the

characteristics alike of mystic, seer and thinker. Rosamond Harding, An Anatomy of Inspiration.

A poet, though he must be 'a sensitive instrument' need not be a weather-cock, 'a feather to every wind that blows'. He can possess an identity of his own before allowing it to be momentarily possessed. Otherwise he is at the mercy of circumstances, of any personality or fleeting impulse he comes in contact with. Identification may be a willed identification, a temporary loss of one's own self for the sake of the poem, a surrender from a known centre. For surrender of some kind still remains a pre-requisite of poetry. No poet can find himself in creation without losing himself. The act of poetry is an act of love.

Clive Sansom, The World of Poetry.

Poetry is revelation. A poem gives the world back to the maker of the poem, in all its original strangeness, the shock of its first surprise. It is capable of doing the same for the rest of us. John Hall Wheelock, Poets of Today.

Good poetry of any age is good forever: the point is that in order to <u>be</u> good poetry, it must be the expression of actual and immediate experience at first hand, the vision of the eternal through what <u>is</u>, here and now--not through what <u>was</u>, yesterday. • • • Somehow or other, poetry has <u>always</u> to come to terms with the modern contemporary consciousness. Aubrey de Selincourt, On Reading Poetry.

Poetry . . . is something that happens when words are so used as to communicate an aspect or nuance of reality otherwise incommunicable. The operative word is 'happens'. I say poetry happens, because in the last analysis it is an event beyond the poet's conscious contriving. The chances are that but for his disciplined skill, his command of language, and above all his self-dedication to the arduous business of meditation, it would not happen; but when it does it is something given, something that comes by grace.

Gerald Bullett, The English Mystics.

It is the function of art by its intensity to penetrate . . incongruities, to perceive some aspect of order in the chaos of living, some aspect of beauty in that order, some aspect of truth in that beauty, and so to distil experience that we are made partakers of its essence and are enabled to re-imagine it and to renew ourselves. Charles Morgan, Liberties of the Mind.

# APPENDIX III

## "Still Falls the Rain"

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.

Still falls the Rain With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet On the Tomb: Still falls the Rain In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain. Still falls the Rain At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross. Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us--On Dives and on Lazarus: Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one. Still falls the Rain--Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side: He bears in His Heart all wounds -- those of the light that died, The last faint spark In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark, The wounds of the baited bear--The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat On his helpless flesh . . . the tears of the hunted hare. Still falls the Rain--Then--O Ile Leape up to my God: who pulles me doune--See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament: It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree

Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart

That holds the fires of the world--dark-smirched with pain

As Caesar's laurel crown.

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man Was once a child who among beasts has lain---'Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee.'

#### APPENDIX IV

Additional Poems by Miss Edith Sitwell<sup>4</sup>

## "The War Orphans"

(Written after seeing a photograph of Korean children asleep in the snow.)

The snow is the blood of these poor Dead . . . They have no other ---These children, old in the dog's scale of years, too old For the hopeless breast -- ghosts for whom there is none to care--Grown fleshless as the skeleton Of Adam, they have known More acons of the cold than he endured In the first grave of the world. They have, for bed, The paving stones, the spider spins their blankets, and their bread Is the shreds and crumbs of dead Chance. In this epoch of the cold, In which new worlds are formed, new glaciations To overcast the world that was the heart, There is only the architecture of the winter, the huge plan Of the lasting skeleton built from the hunger of Man, Constructed for hunger--piteous in its griefs, the humiliation Of outworn flesh, the Ape-cerement, O the tattered foolish clothing, Rags stained with the filth of humanity, stink of its toiling --But never the smell of the heart, with its warmth, its fevers, Rapacity and grandeur . . . for the cold is Zero In infinite intensity, brother to democratic Death, our one equality, who holds Alike the maelstrom of the blood, the world's incendiarism, The summer redness and the hope of the rose,

<sup>4</sup>These are poems which Miss Sitwell has published since the appearance of <u>Collected Poems</u>, published by Vanguard Press, 1954. The beast, and man's superiority o'er the beast--That is but this:

Man bites with his smile, and poisons with his kiss. When, in each dawn

The light on my brow is changed to the mark of Cain, And my blood cries "Am I my brother's keeper?" seeing these ghosts

Of man's forgetfulness of man, I feel again The tigerish spring in my veins. . . J, who only Have the lonely Lethe flood for tears.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Atlantic Monthly, CC, No. 5, (Nov. 1957),

p. 78.

"The Death of a Giant"

(To Alberto de Laeerdo)

Outside the wall of the death-room where the tall Prometheus lay, As grey as a boxing kangaroo Eternity's sea is fighting A ghastly ghost -- a ghost with a donkey's bray: 'Hee-haw, See-saw, Now up, now down! Now king, now clown! I am the new Equality, mine is the day!" Watched by no Furies, for in their place are flies Who with the beating of dark wings are finding The world's new rhythm (a small buzzing in air, then silence,) In which the giant and dwarf take it in turns To rule: up, Giant, down, Dwarf! Up Dwarf, Down Giant! thin as Man's faith, or the Writing on the Wall, The teachers laugh: Jim No-One, small Joe None, Jack Straw and John Raw, And Man is alone. 'Not much of a world to leave,' Prometheus said. Then, as world-long he lay on his death-bed With the marrow of his bone and brain clean-eaten By those who were his friends, the great fires beaten To ash from the Burning Bush that was his heart, His Will was read to those friends. No deserts hold A more desperate set of beasts--horses pretending to be men, And riding men for horses, foxes, jackals, Hiding behind their human faces. Bold, The little Jackal (with his gilded pelt

The little Jackal (with his gilded pelt Hiding the leprous spot and the world's rot), Battening upon the Lion's kill, the old world's ill, Giggles 'No more need I know the Lion's weather But a time to sprawl and to wear the Ape's feather: I shall boast of the Lion's kill as my own, And shall build my castle of the Lion's bone.' And with that all the animals hell-howled together With yawning mouths like Time into whose maw In the end all Caesars, sirens, cities, suns, Will in their ruin fall--(Yet more voracious.) But the giant's Will said

'My loving friends, on my life you have richly fed. But now you have left me bare to the heart and the bone You must look to One you starved in your greed---Not the see-saw world (there is no world left, all is loss),

There is only the echo that quenches the thirst in Hell--The sound of the terrible Tears that will fall from the Cross.'

<sup>6</sup>The London Magazine, V, No. 11, (November 1958), pp. 11-12.

# "Elegy for Dylan Thomas"

Black Venus of the Dead, what Sun of Night Lies twined in your embrace, cold as the vine? O heart, great Sun of Darkness, do you shine

For her, to whom alone All men are faithful--faithless as the wave To all but her to whom they come after long wandering.

. . .

Black giantess who is calm as palm-trees, vast As Africa! In the shade of the giantess He lies in that eternal faithfulness.

He, made of the pith and sap of the singing world--Green kernel of a forgotten paradise Where green-hued, grass-soft suns brought the first spring (Green fervours, singing, saps, fertilities) And heat and moist lay on unseeing eyes Till shapeless lumps of clay grew into men, now lies Far from the Babel clamour. In his rest He holds the rays of the universe to his stilled

breast.

Before our Death in Birth, our Birth in Death, Teaching us holy living, holy dying, we who cry At the first light and the first dark, must learn

The oneness of the world, and know all change Through the plant, the kingly worm (within whose shape all Kings begin,

To whom all Kings must come) through beast, to Man.

The fraternal world of beast and plant lies on his eyes: The beast that holds all elements in itself --The earth, the plant, the solar system: for each beast Is an infinity of plants, a plant, or a moon, A flower in the green dark, freed from its stem in

earth. Shrouded with black veils like the mourning Spring, Under the vines of Grief (the first plantation since the Flood)

The mourners weep for the solary iris that God showed to Noah ---

Our hope in this universe of tears. But he is gone---He sleeps, a buried sun That sank into the underworld to spread A gold mask on the faces of the Dead---

Young country god, red as the laughing grapes When Sirius parches country skins to gold and fire.

And he, who compresses the honey-red fire into holy shapes,

Stole frozen fire from gilded Parnassian hives,

Was Abraham-haired as fleeces of wild stars That all night rage like foxes in the festival Of wheat, with fire-brands tied to their tails under the wheat-ears

To avert the wrath of the Sun, gold as the fleeces Of honey-red foxes. Now he is one with Adam, the first gardener. He sang

Of the beginning of created things, the secret Rays of the universe, and sang green hymns Of the great waters to the tearless deserts. Under The fertilization of his singing breath Even the greyness of the dust of Death Seemed the grey pollen of the long September heat

On earth where Kings lie wearing the whole world as their crown,

Where all are equal in the innocent sleep That lulls the lion like a child, and is the clime Of our forgiveness. Death, like the holy Night Makes all men brothers. There, in the maternal Earth, the wise and humbling Dark, he lies--The emigrant from a forgotten paradise--The somnambulist Who held rough ape-dust and a planet in his fist--

Far from the empires of the human filth Where the Gorgons suckle us with maternal milk Black as the Furies', and the human breast Can yield nor even the waters of the Styx. But rest

For these he brought; to the Minotaur in the city office Crying to the dunghill in the soul 'See, it is morning!' And seeing all glory hidden in small forms, The planetary system in the atom, the great suns Hid in a speck of dust.

So, for his sake, More proudly will that Sisyphus, the heart of Man, Roll the Sun up the steep of heaven, and in the street Two old blind men seem Homer and Galileo, blind Old men that tap their way through worlds of dust To find Man's path near the Sun.

7Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1957), pp. 422-424.

"'His Blood colours my cheek'"8

(For M. C. D'Arcy, S.J.)

His Blood colours my cheek. Ah! were but those Flames the tongue wherewith I speak Of the small ambitions I have seen Rise in the common street Where the bell that tolls in Bedlam tells the hour! Yet still great flowers like violet thunders break In air, and still the flower of the five-petalled senses Is surely ours. I, an old dying woman, tied To the winter's hopelessness And to a wisp of bone Clothed in the old world's outworn foolishness--A poor ape-cerement With all its rags of songs, loves, rages, lusts, and flags of death Say this to you, --My father, Pithecanthropus Erectus, your head once filled with primal night (You, who stood at last after the long centuries Of the anguish of the bone Reaching upwards towards the loving, the all-understanding sun), And to you, who no more walk on all fours like the first Gardener and Grave-digger, yet are listening Where, born from zero, little childish leaves and lives begin: I hear from the dust the small ambitions rise, The white ant whispering "Could I be man's size, My cylinders would stretch three hundred feet In air, and man would look on me with different eyes!" And there the Brazilian insect all day long Challenges the heat with its empty noise: "Were I as great as man, my puny voice Would stretch from pole to pole, no other sound Be audible. By the dictatorship the round World would be challenged -- from my uproar would a new Civilisation of the dust be born, the old world die like dew," I watch the new race of rulers, the snub-nosed, the vain, four-handed,

Building a new Babel for the weak

<sup>8</sup>A saying of St. Agnes

Who walk with the certainty of the somnambulist Upon the tight-rope stretched over nothingness---Holding a comet and the small ape-dust in their fist Over the grave where the heart of man is laid I hear the empty straw whine in the street Of the ghost that has no bread, the lonely ghost That lacks prosperity: "I am your Wheat: Come, and be fed."

But I see the sun, large as the journeying foot of man,--see the great traveller Fearing no setting, going straight to his destination.

So am I not dismayed.

His Blood colours my cheek--No more eroded by the seas of the world's passions, greeds, I rise

As if I never had been Ape, to look in the compassionate, the all-seeing Eyes.

<sup>9</sup>Edith Sitwell, "'His Blood colours my cheek'," <u>The Month</u>, CCV, New Series, XIX, No. 5 (May, 1958), pp. 261-262.

#### "Praise We Great Men"

## (For Benjamin Britten)

Praise we the Gods of Sound--From all the hearths and homes of men, from hives Of honey-making lives; Praise with our music those Who bring the morning light To the hearts of men, those households of high heaven! Praise

We the great Gods of Sound Who stole the boney red, the frozen fire--Oh, beyond all delight and all desire--From gilded hives upon Mount Parnassus (Hives gilded by the light), who brought to us That fire compressed into such holy forms As those of the gold wanderers in heaven! Praise

Those who can raise Gold spirits of mankind from the rough ape-dust, and can show

The planetary system in the atom, and great suns Hid in a speck of dust. Praise we the just Who have not come to judge, but come to bless Immortal things in our poor earthly dress And ripen lives and rule our hearts and rhythms, Immortal hungers in the veins and heart.

Praise be to those who sing Green hymns of the great waters to the dry And tearless deserts in the souls of men, until Under the fertilization of their singing breath Even the grayness and the dust of Death Seem the gray pollen of the long September heat. Oh, praise

With lion music such as that heard in the air When the roaring golden lion that roams the heavens Devours the dark, and multitudes and magnitudes respond To that lion music . . . and on wings Of music let us rise Like velvet honey-flies To praise the Gods of Sound with those bee murmurings Praise we these earthly Gods--Praise with the trumpet's purple sound, Praise with the trumpet flower And with that flower the long five-petaled hand That sweeps the strings. Praise with that angel of High God, the voice! Oh, let us still rejoice And praise we these great men from the first hour

Of the spirit's birth until our earthly setting

Into the night of Death. Praise with our last breath These earthly Gods who bring All sounds, all faiths, delights and splendors lost Beneath the winter's frost Back to the hearts, the hearths, and homes of men.

Fires on the hearth, fires in the skies, fires in the human heart-Praise we Great Men!9

<sup>9</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Praise We Great Men," <u>Atlantic Monthly</u>, CCIV, No. 5, (November, 1959), p. 97.

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