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Introduction

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“What are you going to be when you grow up, little E.?”

“A genius.”

This anecdote from early childhood is recounted in Dame Edith Sitwell’s autobiography and last book, *Taken Care Of* (Sitwell 1965, 29). As with much of Sitwell’s writing about herself, the story is exaggerated, embellished, and possibly apocryphal, but it is all the more illustrative for that.¹ Edith Sitwell *was* a genius and she set out to make herself a genius in the public imagination. The essays in this volume reflect the idea that Sitwell was highly and deliberately self-fashioned: she was flamboyant, eccentric, ornate, and original. So too was her life’s work, both prose and poetry. However, *The Many Façades of Edith Sitwell* also points to a gap in British literary studies generally and modernist studies: it is the first book-length study of Edith Sitwell’s work since James Brophy’s *Edith Sitwell: The Symbolist Order*, published in 1968.

The gap we are trying to close with this book lies between Sitwell’s public persona and her literary contributions. The chapters make a case for the inextricably entwined nature of persona and poetry, at least in the case of this avant-garde genius. Sitwell’s lapse into relative critical obscurity has its own history rooted in the histories of modernist canon-building. F. R. Leavis established the prevailing assumption about Edith (and her younger brothers Osbert and Sacheverell, with whom she is inevitably associated) as part of his fashioning of the accepted canon of serious modernist writing. In *New Bearings in English Poetry*, he excluded her work from serious consideration precisely because she had developed a self-conscious poet-

persona, saying famously that “the Sitwells belong to the history of publicity rather than of poetry” (Leavis 1932, 73). The fact that the reader will find this statement referred to often through these chapters emphasizes a fascinating effect. Leavis’s comment establishes a neat method by which modernism has been defined and delimited, by identifying what it is *not*. In fact, we might go so far as to argue that the now-conventional canon of modernism was established partly in opposition to that other avant-garde, the Sitwells, particularly Edith. Although Leavis sets up an apparently unassailable binary of value between self-promotion and serious literature, the Sitwells provide a productive case study for the necessary and inextricable combination of these things. Unfortunately, over the years, critics, readers, and scholars have often taken at face value Leavis’s assumption that publicity and poetry are opposed, placing more interest and attention on the life than on sustained consideration of the work.

The Life: “Monarchs of modern culture”

In a dismissive review of Victoria Glendinning’s 1981 biography, *Edith Sitwell: A Unicorn among Lions*, Blake Morrison expresses horror that the Sitwells might ever achieve their ambition to be crowned “monarchs of modern culture” (Morrison 1981, 88). He repeats the assumption started by Leavis that Edith’s love of drama, costume, and performance exaggerate and displace any real value that might be found in her poetry, repeating a label often attached to her by both literary and personal critics: “Queen Edith.” Part of Edith’s uncomfortable place, or displacement, in the history of twentieth-century poetry may indeed owe to the sentiment represented by Morrison and the reality it expresses, namely that she played up her aristocratic roots and found an affinity with figures such as Queen Elizabeth I, about whom she wrote a popular biography, *Fanfare for Elizabeth* (Sitwell 1946). However, if she was a monarch of modern culture, that was a more complex acting engagement than mere snobbery.

Edith was born in 1887 to Lady Ida and Sir George Sitwell. She has a birth-right claim to aristocracy since her father, Sir George, was fourth baronet. However, laws of primogeniture dictated that as a woman, she was never heir to his land or title, and since she chose not to marry, she lived on a very small allowance supplemented by her writing and public lectures. So while she may have had cultural privilege, she was not born to economic security. Her childhood was famously unhappy, and this misery prompted her to form a

tight bond with her equally artistic, intellectual, and iconoclastic brothers, Osbert and Sacheverell.² These three actively sought to fashion a London avant-garde. Their first foray into establishing a mouthpiece for new poetry came with their founding of the periodical *Wheels* (the First Cycle was published in 1916, the Sixth and last in 1921). This project was designed as a counter to what they saw as the clichéd, conventional, and provincial work of the Georgian poets, represented by Edward Marsh. The trio's entry into a fully performed modernist self-fashioning is perhaps most famously exemplified by their collaborative production of *Façade*, a suite of poems written and recited by Edith, set to music by English composer William Walton, and staged by Osbert and Sacheverell. The first public performance of *Façade* at London's Aeolian Hall in June of 1923 was something of an avant-garde *scandale* that helped establish the Sitwells' significant role in shaping experimental public art.³

In London and Paris, Edith moved among the extensive networks of British, French, and American writers, fashioning an identity as a public poet and intellectual, participating energetically in feuds and rivalries, and making deep friendships with other writers and artists among the salons of both cities. Sitwell was prolific writer; she published fifty-three monographs. She considered poetry to be her vocation, so her most important publications were her many volumes of poetry. However, she also published popular biographies in addition to *Fanfare for Elizabeth*, such as *Alexander Pope* (1930) and *Victoria of England* (1936), literary criticism, and one novel, *I Live under a Black Sun* (1937). Because of her love of poetry, she was also an active anthologist and essayist; she edited or wrote the introductions to at least sixty volumes and made countless submissions to newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals. By the end of her career, she had been awarded the Royal Society of Literature medal for poetry; three honorary doctorates, from Leeds, Durham, and Oxford; and the DBE, among many other honors. Interest in her place as public figure has been sustained over the years by many fine biographies, most recently Richard Greene's *Edith Sitwell: Avant Garde Poet, English Genius* (2011). Greene's impressive achievement brings together a serious and sensitive consideration of her poetry and a well-told story of her fascinating life.⁴

Her work and life also intersected in her contributions to the networks of poets and artists that formed London's avant-garde communities. Though she made enemies, she also had many loyal friends who balanced the "Queen Edith" reputation with an awareness of her deep sensitivity. Natasha Spender,

for example, claimed that “her soul was fired by devotion to friends and to unfortunates: her famous solitude was less that of a queen than of an abbess, even at times a hermit” (qtd. in Greene 2011, 290). Another such friend was Stella Bowen,⁵ who said of Sitwell:

I think the most extraordinary thing about Edith Sitwell is the big gap that exists between her quite wonderful but alarming façade and the soft and flagrantly human woman whom it conceals. The English aristocrat, six feet tall, aquiline, haughty, dressed in long robes and wearing barbaric ornaments, was a strange sight in happy-go-lucky Montparnasse. But the sweet voice, the almost exaggerated courtesy and the extreme sensitiveness to other people’s feelings were so immediately winning that we all took her to our hearts at once (Bowen 1940, 172).

This assessment comes primarily from Edith’s friendships with two women, but it also illustrates the combined facets of Sitwell’s life and work that Leavis’s comment sunders. Sitwell’s façade, like her elaborately stylized and ornamental poetry, was crafted, imposing, and alarming. She cultivated fashion as costume, wearing elaborate dresses, coats, headdresses, and jewelry. Indeed, her visual presence was so striking that she was the subject of countless portraits, in photography, painting, sculpture, and (less welcome to Sitwell) caricature.⁶

She emphasized her identity as a public intellectual by giving many readings, performances, and lectures and by hosting literary parties. At perhaps the height of her international celebrity in 1951, Edith visited New York and Hollywood on an American tour during which she performed some recitations of *Macbeth*, dressed as Lady Macbeth.⁷ After the Hollywood reading, Sitwell reported to John Lehman that

lots of film stars, including Harpo Marx, came. And during my reading of the *Macbeth* sleep walking scene, I was just announcing that hell is murky, when a poor gentleman in the audience uttered the most piercing shrieks and was carried out by four men, foaming at the mouth. As one of the spectators said to me, “You ought to be awfully pleased. It was one of the most flattering things I have ever seen.” (qtd. in Greene 2011, 368)

The force of poetry and the power of personality are emblematic in this no-doubt-embellished anecdote. With this iconic story, “Queen Edith” turns her own poet’s performing body into a kind of text and at the same time embod-

ies the word, generating a dramatic effect in her audience. At the heart of her work, however, was the “soft flagrantly human woman” who created poetry and a supportive community for poetry to flourish. She was deeply invested in helping writers less known than she was into public view, such as Wilfred Owen, Gertrude Stein, and Dylan Thomas. Her efforts at forging human and professional relationships and her own public performance of identity are reflected in the shifting emphases in her poetic oeuvre.

The Work: “A woman of extraordinary individualism”

She has never belonged to any school except that of her own making
(Lehmann 1952, 7).

As the sketch above suggests, Edith Sitwell’s work and vocation as a writer was intertwined with her performance of herself as a poet and avant-garde genius. While the appealing eccentricities of her character have led to some appreciation of her role in the “history of publicity,” her place in the history of poetry has been eclipsed by that other side of the Leavis binary. The neglect of her literary reputation comes partly because Leavis held the Sitwells up as an example of what modernism should *not* be. In keeping with T. S. Eliot’s notion that poetry should be the escape from personality, Leavis’s assessment suggests that personality is antithetical to poetry. However, the very performative excesses that make Edith a figure for publicity are also central to her poetic experiment and to many of her prose works. Her poetry in particular represents a distinctly different kind of avant-garde than the one scholars have come to associate with canonical modernism. Instead of aspiring to the spare, depersonalized masculine aesthetic of Ezra Pound or T. S. Eliot, Dame Edith’s poetry and personality revel in play, camp, flamboyance, excess, ornament, the baroque and the glittering surfaces of decadence. As a poet and as a biographer, her focus throughout her life was on the ways a self is constructed and performed and on the material medium of literary work, the sounds of words. Indeed, one aspect of Edith Sitwell’s work that has contributed to her neglect, one that is noted in many different ways throughout this volume, is her debt to the Symbolist tradition. While it is unfashionable for a Leavisite modernist, this legacy nevertheless played a central role in her development of completely original avant-garde poetics in the 1920s and 1930s.

Though this is a reductive assessment, we can divide her poetic oeuvre

into two main phases: the playful verbal experiment of her poetry before World War II and the more serious spiritual and socially critical work she produced during and after the war. The first phase is perhaps most famously exemplified in *Façade*. These poems emphasize surprising imagery, rhythm, rhyme and wordplay, producing a sensuality that has often been attributed to Sitwell's interest in Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and Algernon Swinburne.⁸ James Brophy's (1968) discussion of Sitwell's work focuses on this integration of the earlier, postromantic tradition, and contemporary feminist scholar Deryn Rees-Jones demonstrates that Sitwell attempts "to reconfigure the decadent aesthetic for a modern century, during and after the trauma of the war" (2005, 35). Unlike the Eliot-Pound imagist-modernist rupture with the fin de siècle, Sitwell's avant-garde retains an emphasis on fluid language, sensuality, and pleasure.

This earlier poetry experiments with sensuality in language from the point of view of image by drawing in Symbolist synesthesia and Decadent exoticism, in poems such as "Aubade" ("Jane, Jane, / Tall as a crane, / The morning light creaks down again"; in Sitwell 1930b, 16) or "The Greengage Tree" ("And each bird angel comes / To sip dark honey from my plums"; in *ibid.*, 235). Perhaps more challenging to expectations and close reading skills is the way her poetry literally embodies the sensuality of words themselves, not just image. This technique is established most explicitly in her poems for *Façade*. This brilliant collaboration sparkles with playful allusions to children's verse and to popular music, as we can see in, for example, "Polka": "Tra la la la—/ See me dance the polka,' / Said Mr. Wag like a bear, / 'With my top-hat / And my whiskers that—/ (Tra la la la) trap the Fair'" (in *ibid.*, 141). Verging on the edge of nonsense, the poems have often been dismissed largely as experiments in sound.

Anthony Thwaite expresses the prevailing view in the latter half of the twentieth century that while Sitwell "was, in the popular mind, the leader of the 1920s avant-garde (far more so than Eliot) . . . her verbal and rhythmical fancies, such as *Façade*, took no notice of social matters" (1978, 63).⁹ While some of the essays collected below demonstrate that this assessment does not bear up under close investigation, her work did take a turn toward the more socially minded as the 1920s moved on. Sitwell was increasingly struck by disturbing contrasts between rich and poor in urban spaces, responding with outrage to the spectral presences of out-of-work veterans and hunger marchers in London. Her response was to write *Gold Coast Customs* in 1929. John Pearson points out that "here she is in the territory of Eliot's *Waste Land*,

crying out against the cruelty and filth and spiritual bankruptcy of her time” (1978, 253). Using a now obviously problematic racist analogy,¹⁰ her idea was that the city state is a corrupt capitalist urban wasteland where the “cannibal” rich feeds off the poor.

The second phase of Sitwell’s work begins with her response to the horrors of World War II and gradually merges with an increasing devotion to her Christian faith. As her friend, the contemporary critic and editor John Lehmann, noted in his book *Edith Sitwell* (1952), Sitwell struggled to find a language for the effects of war, including the use of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II. He claims that she rose to become “one of the three or four supreme poetic voices of an age of tragic world upheaval and social leveling” (ibid., 7). While Lehmann claimed Sitwell as a pioneer or nearly lone voice in this regard (ibid., 30), Mark S. Morrisson points out that Edith Sitwell was “one of the many people who groped for a vocabulary with which to understand Hiroshima” (Morrisson 2002, 605). Her later war poems have mainly been considered for their religious implications (see ibid., 606n6), but they also engage with the problem of atomic war, looking unflinchingly at the heart of human suffering and expressing the awesome power of love as the only response:

The Rose upon the wall
Cries—“I am 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,”
in Sitwell 1930b, 377)

Sitwell’s late poetry moves away from the dramatically ornamental emphasis on rhyme, rhythm, assonance, and layered wordplay in her earlier work to a visionary, idea-based poetry that was still rich with image. Her later poetry also shows the “flagrantly human woman” inhabiting the “inside” of her performance of self. This is the poet who responds to the needs of “friends and unfortunates,” as Stella Bowen and Natasha Spender noted, and the poetry that responds to the dark suffering of a nuclear age that has lost sight of divine love. Her prose, too, seems to tend in this direction. Her biographies focus on figures of privilege but often take the perspective that they too are “unfortunates,” tortured by themselves and by others and forced into making sacrifices for their own vocations. The queens, Elizabeth and Victoria, give up much to inhabit the position of woman monarch; her biography of