**Sitwell, Edith (1887–1964)**

Dame Edith Sitwell was an experimental poet known for her eccentric behavior and aesthetics. A skillfully controlled reading voice, along with dramatic clothes and jewelry, led to her widespread recognition as an exceptional performer. Though she has received little attention within modernist studies, she significantly influenced the development of twentieth-century art with literary productions like *Façade* (1922) and her patronage of other artists, including DYLAN THOMAS. Her brothers OSBERT and SACHEVERELL SITWELL were two of her closest companions and collaborators. With them, she endeavored to build an avant-garde artistic society rivaling the BLOOMSBURY GROUP.

Born into the British aristocracy, Sitwell had a strained relationship with her parents, Sir George and Lady Ida Sitwell, daughter of the Earl of Londesborough. A tall girl with an aquiline nose and hooded eyes, Sitwell did not conform to their idea of beauty, so her parents forced her to wear metal appliances to correct her spine and nose—an experience described in her autobiography, *Taken Care Of* (1965). Lady Sitwell’s trial for fraud exacerbated this dysfunctional family dynamic during the same year in which Edith published her first literary work, *The Mother and Other Poems* (1915). However, she had already moved to London in 1914 with former governess Helen Rootham, where she established a literary salon in austere rooms at Pembridge Mansions.

Sitwell’s distinctly anti-establishment and anti-war attitude distinguished her from many poets of the period, like WALTER DE LA MARE. In response to EDWARD MARSH’s *Georgian Poetry*, Sitwell edited the little-discussed series *Wheels* (1916-1921), which included poems by NANCY CUNARD, ALDOUS HUXLEY, and WILFRED OWEN, among others. Sitwell went on to became a prominent member of the avant-garde movement with the performance of her most influential text, *FAÇADE* (1922)*,* written with composer WILLIAM WALTON. This collection was read with Walton’s music by a person standing behind a curtain and speaking through a Sengerphone—a megaphone covering both the nose and mouth—whose opening aligned with a hole cut in the curtain. In such dramatic works, Sitwell experimented with the textures of sound “to find rhythmical expression for the heightened speed of our time,” according to her introduction to the second edition of her *Collected Poems*.

*Façade* made Sitwell and her brothers infamous, particularly after NOËL COWARD parodied them in *London Calling!* (1923). She responded with a series of more orthodox works but later received recognition from such figures as W.B. YEATS for innovation in *Gold Coast Customs* (1929). Like *Façade*, this collection foregrounds rhythm but more overtly attends to politics. The later *Street Songs* (1942) takes her political commitment even further with poems like “Still Falls the Rain,” which Sitwell is rumored to have read publicly during a 1944 air raid. However, these poems also manifest Sitwell’s growing interest in religion, which culminated in her conversion to Catholicism in 1955. (EVELYN WAUGH and ROY CAMPBELL served as godparents.)

To gain international support for her work and supplement her meager income, Sitwell conducted U.S. lecture tours in 1948, 1950, and 1957. She eventually achieved popular success writing biographies, such as *Victoria of England* (1936), *Fanfare for Elizabeth* (1946), and *The Queens and the Hive* (1962), which helped her to achieve financial security.

Sitwell was made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1954 and a Companion of Literature in 1963. She died while working on *Taken Care Of*, which was published posthumously.

**References and further reading:**

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**Selected Bibliography**

**Poetry:**

* *The Mother and Other Poems* (1915)
* *Façade* (1922)
* *Bucolic Comedies* (1923)
* *The Sleeping Beauty* (1924)
* *Troy Park* (1925)
* *Gold Coast Customs* (1929)
* *Collected Poems* (1930)
* *Street Songs* (1942)
* *Green Song & Other Poems* (1944)
* *The Shadow of Cain* (1947)
* *Collected Poems* (1957)—awarded the Foyle Poetry Prize
* *The Outcasts* (1962)

**Novels:**

* *I Live Under a Black Sun* (1937)

**Criticism:**

* *Aspects of Modern Poetry* (1934)
* *A Poet's Notebook* (1943)

**Biographies:**

* *Alexander Pope* (1930)
* *Bath* (1932)
* *The English Eccentrics* (1933)
* *Victoria of England* (1936)
* *Fanfare for Elizabeth* (1946)
* *The Queens of the Hive* (1962)
* *Taken Care Of* (1965)

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**Possible Images to Accompany Entry:**

* Sengerphone, Sitwell with Neil Porter (77): from Pearson, John, “*Façade* and the Twenties,” *The Sitwells and the Arts of the 1920s and 1930s* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1994), 74-119.
* Façade, original curtain designed by Frank Dobson (92): from Pearson, John, “*Façade* and the Twenties,” *The Sitwells and the Arts of the 1920s and 1930s* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 1994), 74-119.
* Sitwell, by Wyndham Lewis. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lewis-edith-sitwell-n05437> for details.
* There is currently a YouTube video with a recording of *Façade* online that you may want to consider linking to. It’s pretty amazing to hear. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5AlUOJs2dI>