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ALIENATION AND ATONEMENT IN

THE POETRY OF EDITH SITWELL

by



JOHN BERNARD OWER

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled ALIENATION AND ATONEMENT IN THE POETRY OF EDITH SITWELL submitted by John Bernard Ower in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

  
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ABSTRACT

Despite its surface variety, the poetry of Edith Sitwell is marked by an underlying organic unity. This renders it an "intensive manifold," in which every part is bound up with every other part or, alternatively, a teleos or organic development whose principles of growth are inherent from its inception. Thus, Sitwell's earliest lyrical and dramatic poems, published during the period 1913-20, provide a remarkable anticipation of the poet's later work in their style, imagery and themes. Sitwell's earliest lyrics suggest her continuing vision of the universe as a divinely inspired and unified organism. Her early dramatic pieces, particularly through their treatment of the corruption of sexual love into a destructive lust, lay the basis for her explanation of evil as resulting from the corruption of the immanent spiritual energy through its association with matter. At the same time as she was publishing her visionary lyrical and dramatic pieces, Sitwell was developing an ironic and satiric poetry based upon her vision of materialistic modern civilization as a sterile and demonic antitype of the sacramental cosmic organism. This satiric development finds its culmination in the Facade poems (1922), in which Dame Edith



ingeniously manipulates lyrical technique partly in order to present a satirically heightened image of a sterile, mechanized and dissociated world, and partly in order to "dissolve, diffuse, dissipate" that world to suggest her vision of a spiritually vitalized universe. During the remainder of the Twenties, Sitwell is largely preoccupied with the problem of the destructiveness of time in relation to both the individual and the race. Sitwell's lamentations over personal mortality, and over the "fall" of both the individual and the race from a primeval Eden of communion with God and nature, are expressed particularly in the three long poems, The Sleeping Beauty (1924), Elegy on Dead Fashion (1926), and "Metamorphosis" (1928). In the last of these pieces, the crisis of time is resolved by the poet's vision of a divinely inspired rebirth which takes place through a process of metamorphosis and through the organic cycles of nature. However, even after she has solved the problem of time, Sitwell has still to come to grips with a society whose blind materialism is now perceived as not merely sterile, but positively satanic. "Gold Coast Customs" (1929) copes with the spectacle of a world wracked by economic injustice and violence by placing it in the context

destruction of the sacramental cosmic organism by human evil, it is ultimately seen by Sitwell as being subsumed in the twofold divine plan of salvation.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the poetic career of Edith Sitwell was one of the most flamboyant of the first half of the Twentieth Century, and there is some danger that its pyrotechnic quality will obscure its very considerable aesthetic and intellectual interest. From the year 1916, when the poet assumed the editorship of the avant-garde anthology Wheels, to the writing of her autobiography at the end of a long and stormy literary career,<sup>1</sup> Sitwell attracted and even courted public controversy. This situation has lead to an undoubtedly unjust tendency to concur with F. R. Leavis' suspicion that Edith Sitwell belongs to the history of publicity rather than of poetry.<sup>2</sup> Together with Dame Edith's combativeness, her assiduous cultivation of the public mask of aristocrat and aesthete made her appear susceptible to the twin charges of insincerity and eccentricity. Both in her personal life and in her art, Edith Sitwell followed certain of the French Symbolist poets in deliberately assuming stances which would mystify or outrage conventional opinion. There is something in Anglo-Saxon temperament which finds the cultivation of an

attitude at once offensive and incomprehensible, and the regal splendor of Sitwell's public appearances undoubtedly detracted from her reputation as a serious artist. A fairly considerable body of criticism has already done much to show that Sitwell was a sincere and a weighty poet, whose genuine importance places her beyond the narrow confines of either a coterie or a fashion. However, much still remains to be done in order to establish a basis for the full understanding and appreciation of her poetry. An examination of the twin themes of alienation and atonement in her work serves the important purpose of illuminating one of the most prominent and fundamental aspects of her imaginative vision.<sup>3</sup>

The poetic career of Edith Sitwell falls naturally into two major periods. The first extends from Sitwell's initial publication of a poem in 1913<sup>4</sup> to the appearance of Five Variations on a Theme in 1933. Aesthetically speaking, this is a period of experimentation, of a painstaking endeavor to fully master the craft of poetry. Spiritually it is a time of relative uncertainty, of a dialectic in the poet's mind between forces of spiritual affirmation and of negation. Dame Edith's difficulties come to a crisis with her long experimental poem "Gold Coast Customs" (1929), a

piece in which her sense of the total moral breakdown of the modern world catalyzes an apocalyptic vision of the eventual regeneration of society by the destructive yet redemptive "fires of God".<sup>5</sup> Perhaps even more than the financial difficulties which made it necessary for Sitwell to turn to the writing of prose, or even the painful task of nursing her mortally ill friend, Helen Rootham,<sup>6</sup> Dame Edith's need to consolidate the revelations of "Gold Coast Customs" may serve to explain her poetic silence during the Thirties. At any rate, when Dame Edith again began to publish poetry with the onset of the Second World War, there appears in her work both a new assurance of style and tone, and a much greater capacity to cope with her spiritual difficulties.<sup>8</sup> Such firmness of vision and technique, together with a marked tendency to establish a matrix of repeated themes and images,<sup>9</sup> indicates that Sitwell has now reached artistic maturity. The poetry which appeared in the volumes from Poems New and Old (1940) to The Outcasts (1962), although embracing considerable variety, is best regarded in terms of an overall contextual structure rather than of a continuing process of essential change.

Although it is natural and perhaps even essential to discuss the themes of alienation and atonement in the

poetry of Edith Sitwell within the framework provided by her artistic evolution, such an approach involves certain critical difficulties. The first of these, the provision of an adequate critical background, stems partly from the current state of the criticism of Dame Edith's poetry. Although there has been some sensitive and intelligent discussion of her verse, there has still been neither detailed, in-depth analyses of a number of key poems in the early work, nor a full comprehension of some central imaginative patterns in the later poetry. Unfortunately, both are basic to an understanding of the themes of alienation and atonement in the two major periods of Sitwell's artistic development. Moreover, because of the organic nature of Edith Sitwell's vision, in which no idea or image can properly be treated in isolation from any of the others, it is absolutely essential for the proper understanding of her major concerns that these be placed in as full a context as possible. For these reasons, the approach to the study of the themes of alienation and atonement in each of Sitwell's two major periods will be first of all to discuss in considerable detail certain relevant poems and themes, and only then to proceed to the topic at hand. The employment of such a method is not to treat the subject of alienation

and atonement as an afterthought, but rather to recognize firstly that it grows out of a body of specific poems, and secondly that it must in the last analysis be regarded simply as a useful angle of approach to a larger imaginative totality.

Some further critical problems are offered by the peculiar mode of operation of Sitwell's imagination. As James Brophy has suggested in a recent book, Dame Edith's poetry represents what is perhaps the furthest possible development of the organicist aesthetic and metaphysic of Romanticism.<sup>10</sup> Superficially, Sitwell's early poetry manifests a remarkable variety of style, tone and approach, and her imagination in all periods of her career tends to work in terms of antithesis and apparent contradiction.<sup>11</sup> However, variety and opposition are in Sitwell's poetry always subsumed within a matrix of organic unity. Brophy's book has suggested that not only each individual poem, but also the whole body of Sitwell's work is ultimately what T.E. Hulme terms an "intensive manifold":<sup>12</sup> an organic totality of which each part is simultaneously bound up with and implies every other part.

Because of its organic unity, Sitwell's poetry provides an outstanding example of what Joseph Frank terms the "spatial



form" of modern literature.<sup>13</sup> That is, instead of following the sequential or "temporal" progression of the narrative or of discursive thought, Sitwell's art is constructed in such a way that it must be grasped "spatially" as a simultaneous totality like a work of sculpture. Such a simultaneous apprehension is necessary not only for the understanding of individual poems, but also must be applied to the whole body of Sitwell's work. In a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, W.B. Yeats commented upon the difficulty of anthologizing even the apparently diverse earlier poetry, saying that the detachment of individual works from the corpus was like "cutting a piece out of a tapestry".<sup>14</sup> The same unity is even more apparent in the later work, and a careful reading of the mature poetry in relation to the pieces which precede it shows very clearly that almost every important theme and symbol in the later poetry is anticipated at some point in the earlier work. Particularly remarkable in this respect is Sitwell's Frazerian drama "The Madness of Saul", a very early piece which contains in embryonic form almost the whole of her mature poetry.

Thus, although Edith Sitwell appears superficially

to be what Northrop Frye terms a "metamorphic" artist, whose career is marked by sudden unprecedented developments, she is in reality much more nearly what he terms an "unfolding" poet, whose growth is the gradual articulation of a structure possessed by the poet, although perhaps for the most part unconsciously, from the beginning of her career.<sup>15</sup>

Edith Sitwell's poetic development is really a teleos, an organic growth or unfolding from within which proceeds in accordance with principles of order inherent from its inception. Such an apparent disjunction as that which separates the earlier poetry from the later work is really one of the transformational stages which mark any process of organic growth, a seemingly unprecedented metamorphosis which in reality can only be understood fully in terms of that process as a whole. Dame Edith's description of the composition of a modernist poem in "Lecture on Poetry since 1920" provides a revealing comment upon the progress of her own artistic career:

Now she [i.e. poetry] appears like the  
sister of horticulture, each poem growing  
according to the laws of its own nature  
... bearing leaves, bearing flowers,  
bearing fruit....<sup>16</sup>

In such poetry, in which it is ultimately impossible to separate meaningfully the leaf, the blossom and the bole,

a major problem facing the critic is to translate what Marshall McLuhan would term a "concentric"<sup>17</sup> poetry into the "temporal" mode of discursive thought. The inevitable result of attempting what T.E. Hulme would see as, by definition, the impossible task of explicating an intensive manifold is a certain amount of repetitiveness and circularity. Thus, a "historical" survey of Sitwell's poetry, such as is attempted in the present study, will involve the reiteration of a number of the poet's basic ideas in varying contexts. This procedure is necessary to emphasize properly the degree to which Dame Edith's work constitutes a set of variations on themes which are limited in number, and yet highly complex in their ramifications. Moreover, the teleological nature of Sitwell's poetic evolution makes it possible and even necessary to assume, as essential background, ideas which may be explicitly articulated only later in her work. Dame Edith's poetry is generally suggestive rather than direct, and even the considerable body of her prose criticism and of her commentary upon her own work does not openly and systematically discuss many matters essential to the understanding of her poetry. In many cases, moreover, the poet seems to be intuitively, through the medium of poetic symbolism, feeling out issues which she

was not fully capable of consciously formulating. Consequently, contemporary documentation for many essential assumptions is impossible to provide, and it may seem on occasion that the study is jumping to conclusions unwarranted at least for the particular works of which they are posited. Finally in discussing the later work, it has been necessary to deal more than once with the same themes and symbols, although from different angles of approach. It is hoped that the reader will excuse any clumsiness arising from the difficulties just discussed, attributing them not to critical ineptitude, but rather to the peculiar difficulty of dealing discursively with a poetry whose fundamental assumptions are antithetical to those of discursive thought.

Despite the problems that such an approach involves, the treatment of the themes of alienation and atonement in the present study of the poetry of Edith Sitwell will be historical, proceeding within the framework of the two major stages of Dame Edith's development. With regard to the early period, when evolution and experimentation seem at least as significant as the matrix within which they are contained, the approach will be to study a number of key works, none of which have, to date, been fully

explored critically. This study will, of course, be oriented towards pieces illustrating the themes of alienation and atonement, themes whose central importance in Sitwell's developmental period will be discussed in a detailed summation. The later work, which shows a much more obvious coherence and consistency, will be approached from the point of view of its two basic principles of imaginative organization, principles which are fundamental to an understanding of the continuing dialectic of alienation and atonement in Sitwell's mature work. This will be followed by a chapter summarizing the themes of alienation and atonement in the later poetry, and suggesting their balance and synthesis. It is hoped that the approach just outlined will do justice to the study of two of the most important themes of a poetry whose difficulty and singularity is amply justified by its resonance and power.

There is one further point which should be mentioned at this juncture. This concerns the problem of allusion to the manifold sources and analogues of an artist who, like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, is notable for her poetic bias towards eclectic assimilation. A Poet's Notebook<sup>18</sup> is, for example, essentially a pastiche of quotations from a wide variety of sources, and Sitwell's poetry, both early and

late, is a fruitful source of studies of special influences. Of these, perhaps the most fully treated has been Edith Sitwell's affinity with the French Symbolist poets, a matter which has been the subject of an article by Ihab Hassan and also of a doctoral dissertation.<sup>19</sup> Because of the influence of the French Symbolist poets upon Edith Sitwell has already been discussed in some detail, the following study will make relatively few allusions to these artists. Moreover it seems that there has been too great a tendency to regard Edith Sitwell's poetry as an exotic phenomenon with no real roots in English literary tradition.

Jack Lindsay has, I believe, struck a proper balance in emphasizing equally Sitwell's kinship with the "dissident European avant-garde culture" and with the great English Romantics.<sup>20</sup> Edith Sitwell's anthologies of British and American poetry<sup>21</sup> bear witness to her familiarity with and sensitivity to the poetic traditions of the English-speaking world. The present study has accordingly emphasized Edith Sitwell's obvious kinship with English Romanticism. In particular, as the poet's appreciative review of Northrop Frye's Fearful Symmetry indicates,<sup>22</sup> her poetry displays a more than coincidental similarity with that of William Blake. Therefore, without wishing to give the appearance

of minimizing the importance of other influences, the allusions in the following pages will be biased towards suggesting the very significant kinship of Edith Sitwell with her English Romantic predecessors.

## CHAPTER I

## THE SEEDS OF VISION

One of the most striking illustrations of the organic unity of the poetry of Edith Sitwell is provided by certain of the pieces which she published during the years 1913-1920 at the outset of her career.<sup>1</sup> Technically, these poems display at times a derivativeness or an angularity which marks them as the work of a beginner. This uncertainty of touch makes the way in which certain of these pieces anticipate Dame Edith's later development seem all the more remarkable. From the point of view of their visionary and apocalyptic note, their themes and their imagery, the poems published in Edith Sitwell's first volume The Mother and Other Poems (1915) and her Frazerian closet drama The Madness of Saul (1917-1918) not only anticipate much that is to follow in the early period, but even more strikingly foreshadow the imaginative framework of the mature poetry. It is almost as if in the course of fifty years Dame Edith's poetic development had traced a circle, ending with an amplified and technically perfected version of her first poems. The prophetic anticipation of the mature poetry in these very early pieces is all the more strange



in that their visionary and apocalyptic quality is quickly replaced by the ironic and satiric note which characterizes much of Sitwell's poetry during the early Twenties.<sup>2</sup> The beginnings of this satiric development and its integral relationship with the apocalyptic vision of the earliest poetry will also be briefly treated in this chapter.

Sitwell's earliest visionary and satiric pieces display two further resemblances to her mature work beyond those already mentioned. As these involve some further problems which face the interpreter of Dame Edith's poetry, they should be mentioned at the outset of our study. Edith Sitwell was from the beginning of her poetic career a keen student of the French Symbolists, and even her earliest pieces share with the work of those poets two tendencies which may baffle the uninitiated reader. These are to use symbolic imagery to convey most, if not all, of a poem's meaning, and to employ images, conceits and patterns of symbolism which are esoteric, subtle and obscure. Accordingly, in order to come really to grips with one of Sitwell's poems, one is forced to read between its lines and to venture interpretations which may at times appear eccentric or extreme.

The poems in The Mother... fall into two obvious divisions: a group of three visionary love lyrics, and two longer

pieces which for want of a better term may be described as "melodramatic monologues". As the love poems define the thesis to which the monologues are the antithesis, it will be best to begin with a critical discussion of the former. The little pseudo-Elizabethan lyric "Serenade" is typical of the style and tone of these pieces:

The tremulous gold of stars within your hair  
Are yellow bees flown from the hive of night,  
Finding the blossom of your eyes more fair  
Than all the pale flowers folded from the light.  
Then, Sweet, awake, and ope your dreaming eyes  
Ere those bright bees have flown and darkness dies.<sup>3</sup>

Sexual love is treated in "Serenade" as an apocalyptic experience, in which the object of desire takes on a cosmic significance, becoming a revelation in symbolic form of profound metaphysical truths. To put the matter in a slightly different way, the spiritual and emotional union of man and woman in love is the agency of the reintegration of the perceiving subject with the object-world, a spiritual "marriage" which is one of the central tendencies of the Romantic imagination. In this regard, as Sitwell implies by the image of a network of hair which seems to contain all of the stars, the beloved becomes the ultimate, most comprehensive object of non-mystical awareness: the encompassing universe. The cosmic insight which is provided by love in "Serenade" takes the form of an intuition, of an immediate imaginative and

emotional perception as a simultaneous whole of the complex nature of the universe. This organic mode of cognition corresponds with the nature of the truth which is revealed. What is intuited in "Serenade" is the metaphysical matrix of a universal organism within the encompassing and unifying totality of which such manifest contraries as heaven and earth, light and darkness, are subsumed and reconciled. This fusion of opposites in the cosmic organism stands in turn as a sign of a radical ontological unity of all beings which makes it imaginatively valid for the poet to identify stars with bees, or eyes with flowers. However, these two "conceits" suggest not only the unity which characterizes the living organism, but also its all-pervasive vitality. Ultimately, then, "Serenade" implies the characteristically Romantic vision of the universe as a spiritually inspired organism, which is unified and rendered instinct in every part with life by an omnipresent "world-soul". Such a sacramental fusion of spirit and matter is suggested in "Serenade" by the attraction of the star-bees to the blossom-eyes, an ingenious variation on the traditional use in Romantic poetry of a star-flower identification to imply the union of spirit and matter in creation.<sup>4</sup> As is the case with the poetry of Shelley, "Serenade" appears to posit a

universal divinely inspired eros, of which the love of spirit for matter is the archetype, the operations of nature a manifestation, and the love of man and woman a microcosmic reflection.

In "The Web of Eros," another of the short love lyrics, we have a fuller treatment of the poet's vision of love as a metaphysical revelation of a cosmic matrix by which contraries are encompassed and reconciled. As was the case in "Serenade," the cosmic framework is suggested in "The Web of Eros" by the beloved's hair:

Within your magic web of hair lies furled  
 The fire and splendour of the ancient world:  
 The dire gold of the comet's wind-blown hair,  
 The songs that turned to gold the evening air  
 When all the stars of heaven sang for joy;  
 The flames that burnt the cloud-high city Troy;  
 The maenad fire of spring on the cold earth,  
 The myrrh-lit flames that gave both life and birth  
 To the soul-Phoenix, and the star-bright shower  
 That came to Danae in her brazen tower,  
 Within your burning web of hair lies furled  
 The fire and splendour of the ancient world.<sup>5</sup>

In "The Web of Eros," love becomes the medium of spiritual insight through its recreation of the mythopoeic vision of the Classical world. The images of "singing stars" and a comet's "wind-blown hair" imply by means of their anthropomorphic animism that the Ancients conceived of the universe as a living organism. They also intimate through their reference to the nature-gods of Classical paganism the

the belief that the cosmos is unified and inspired in every part with vitality by the omnipresence of the "fire" of a divine energy. As Sitwell's allusion to Danae suggests, this union of spirit and matter is brought about and manifested through the agency of a mutual love-attraction or eros. However, as both the traditional ambiguity of the fire-image and the poet's allusion to a "dire" comet of ill-omen imply, the union of heaven and earth has as its concomitants not merely love and beauty, but also terror, destruction and death. "The Web of Eros" is thus a poem conveying the archetypal occult vision of a God Who manifests Himself through His creation in terms of contrary qualities. This notion is most obviously implied by Sitwell's allusion to Helen of Troy, whose divine origin and destructive attractions make her an appropriate symbol for an avatar in which the beautiful and the terrible are simultaneously present.<sup>6</sup> It is also suggested by similarities between "The Web of Eros" and Blake's poem "The Tyger," a piece which on one level deals with the perception of the Divinity from the conditioned perspective of fallen man in terms of polar opposites. The similarity between the two poems is suggested by the faint yet unmistakable echo of Stanza 5 of "The Tyger" in the line "When all the stars of heaven sang for joy."

It appears also in the "framing" of Sitwell's poem by the employment at both its beginning and ending of nearly identical lines suggesting the notion of a "fearful symmetry." Both of these allusions significantly recall parts of "The Tyger" in which the paradoxical and contradictory nature of the revelation of the Divinity is particularly stressed.

The "fearful symmetry" of "The Tyger" alludes not simply to the manifestation of the Godhead in terms of contraries, but also to the reconciliation and fusion of such opposites in a higher imaginative and metaphysical synthesis. The same double vision seems to obtain in "The Web of Eros," in which it is conveyed with particular imaginative address by the image of the beloved's hair. Not only does this weave together light and darkness, which throughout Sitwell's poetry stand as symbols of being and non-being respectively,<sup>7</sup> but it also suggests the nature of the universal matrix as both a womb and a tomb. The mesh of hair implies on the one hand an enveloping and strangling web or net, a labyrinthine prison with a Minotaur at its centre. On the other, it intimates a framework in the sustaining and protective embrace of which all of the contraries of existence can creatively interact. The way in which these two apparently contradictory aspects of an ambivalent universe are in fact

reconciled in an encompassing synthesis is suggested by the image of the Phoenix, which is periodically immolated only to be reborn from its own ashes. Life and death, creation and destruction are reconciled in an organic cycle of death and re-birth, whose metaphysical function of subsuming and uniting contraries is neatly encapsulated in Sitwell's reference to the "maenad fire of spring on the cold earth."<sup>8</sup>

The vision of an organic universe bound together by a spiritually inspired love has an exact antitype in the perspective of the protagonist of "The Drunkard." In its plot, characterization and melodramatic tone, this monologue bears a resemblance to "Porphyria's Lover," being the story of a half-crazed alcoholic who brutally mistreats and finally murders his wife. However, the real interest of "The Drunkard" lies not in its story or in what may be termed "realistic" psychology, but rather in its dramatization of the protagonist's inverted spiritual perspective, a state of soul which reveals a good deal about Sitwell's notions concerning the nature and origin of evil. Whether as the root cause or the end result of his dissipation and cruelty, the drunkard resembles Browning's Agricola in being theologically insane. His crime is carefully placed in a metaphysical framework by his reference at both the beginning

and the ending of his monologue to a universe ruled by malignant powers which are at once sinister, punitive and destructive:

This black tower drinks the blinding light.  
Strange windows livid white,

Tremble beneath the curse of God.  
Yet living weeds still nod

To the huge sun, a devil's eye  
That tracks the souls that die.

The clock beats like the heart of Doom  
Within the narrow room;

.....  
...in dark corners secret-sly  
New-born Eternity,

All spider-like doth spin and cast  
Strange threads to hold Time fast.<sup>9</sup>

There is in fact method in the very madness of this psychotic vision. Upon the one hand, it constitutes a demonic reversal of the Christian vision of a loving God Who providentially makes His sun shine alike on the just and the unjust. Upon the other, it is an inversion of the Romantic vision of a universe which is inspired with vitality by an immanent Divinity and which is bound together by His love. The drunkard is on one level a Calvinist, who projects his own sickness in the vision of an angry God Whose curse predestines a depraved creation to annihilation. The instrument of this divine vengeance is the death-machine of a "linear"



In "The Drunkard," Sitwell accordingly seems to see human evil as originating in an inverted spiritual perspective, a perversion which in turn expresses itself morally in the conduct of human affairs. The drunkard's phantasms of a God of cruelty and of a universe of destruction are reflected respectively in his own monstrous behavior and in his hatred of his wife, to whom as woman he attributes the cunning malignity of the cosmic Maya. In more abstract terms, the protagonist's inability or refusal to affirm the forces of life and love in the universe is expressed in the inversion of his own self-love and self-regard into a suicidal dissipation, and in the twisting of what should have been his love for his wife into treachery and cruelty. What in theological terms is a blind or wilful denial of God's goodness and creativity becomes in the sphere of human relationships a betrayal of an immanent Divinity as He is manifested in self and others. This motif of betrayal, which is of fundamental importance in Sitwell's treatment of evil, is emphasized in "The Drunkard" by the treacherous manner in which the speaker murders his wife. It appears also in his insane projection of his own serpentine motives upon the dead woman, whom he accuses of having "some sly plan"<sup>11</sup> in lying so still in death. The drunkard's

treatment of his wife as a mere reflection and extension of himself suggests at the same time how his denial and betrayal has effectively isolated him from the cosmic matrix, and thus ultimately from the very source of his own being. Like Milton's Satan or Blake's spectres, he has been condemned by his inverted vision to the paradoxical status of a negation of true existence. Sitwell's dramatic presentation of the drunkard suggests that as a mere wraith or husk, he is as much to be regarded with a mixture of irony and pathos as he is to be condemned.

The motif of evil as betrayal is even more prominent in "The Mother,"<sup>12</sup> in which its spiritual significance as an offence against a divinely inspired life and love is emphasized and illuminated by placing it in the context of Biblical typology. The speaker of the poem is a murdered mother. The old woman tells the story of how she was slain and robbed by the son whom she cherished, so that he might buy the favors of a vicious harlot. In order to be properly understood, the action of "The Mother" must be viewed in terms of the Christian doctrine of the Fall, with its "knowledge" or lived experience of the contrasting and yet inextricably interwoven elements of good and evil. This paradoxical and often tragic knowledge is rendered in "The

Mother" in the form of a series of contrasting pairs of themes and symbols, whose relation-in-opposition is ingeniously suggested in terms of a parodic antithesis.

The most important and comprehensive of these antitheses is love and lust. Theologically speaking, love is, as we have seen, the sacramental expression and reflection of God's Self-giving regard for His creation. It is thus a manifestation of the Spirit or, in more precise Christian terms, of the Holy Ghost. On a metaphysical plane, love is a microcosmic reproduction of the divine inspiration of the cosmic organism, of the universal "womb" which nurtures and affirms all of its constituent entities. The human mother thus stands implicitly in Sitwell's poem for the cosmic matrix. On the third level of interpersonal relationships, love takes the form of a sacrificial self-giving for the sake of the beloved, an oblation which makes the mother analogous to Christ:<sup>13</sup>

Our dreams create the babes we bear;  
Our beauty goes to make them fair.  
We give them all we have of good,  
Our blood to drink, our hearts for food;<sup>14</sup>

This Christ-like self-sacrifice in love temporarily undoes the work of the Fall, returning both mother and son to the joyous innocence of Eden:

When he was born, it seemed the spring  
 Had come again with birds to sing  
 And blossoms dancing in the sun  
 Where streams released from winter run.

His sunlit hair was all my gold;  
 His loving eyes my wealth untold.  
 All heaven was hid within the breast  
 Whereon my child was laid to rest.<sup>15</sup>

On all of the planes which have just been mentioned, human love stands in opposition in "The Mother" to lust. Theologically, lust is seen by Sitwell as a manifestation of the powers of evil which infect a fallen world. Thus, the prostitute who seduces the son is described by the mother as an incarnate demon, "False-hearted as Hell's blackest shame."<sup>16</sup> From a metaphysical point of view, this witch-figure is associated by means of winter-imagery with the negative aspect of the cosmic matrix:

Her hungry, wicked lips were red  
 As that dark blood my son's hand shed;  
 Her eyes were black as Hell's own night,  
 Her ice-cold breast was winter-white.--<sup>17</sup>

The harlot thus stands for the universe as "tomb," the enveloping and destructive "hag"<sup>18</sup> who drains and destroys her children and her lovers. She is, in this regard, identical with Blake's Vala,<sup>19</sup> the material nature who imprisons and eventually annihilates all "generated" creatures in the tomb of "cold, blind earth" and in the cycles of organic time.

In diametrical opposition to love as a sacramental

expression of the Holy Spirit, lust is purely materialistic, being concerned only with the satisfaction of physical appetite. As a wholly corporeal drive, it degrades the human soul "to the dust."<sup>20</sup> The degeneration of the soul through its surrender to carnal appetite is best understood in terms of the Platonistic theology which the poetry of Edith Sitwell appears to share in some degree with that of W.B. Yeats.<sup>21</sup> Man's psyche in capitulating to carnal desire dissipates its powers so that it loses its transcendental and formative status with regard to the physical world, becoming the slave and prisoner of matter to the extent that it surrenders all of its distinctive qualities. The spirit thus assumes the likeness of its captor, becoming a chaotic and destructive energy which squanders itself at the same time as it furthers the tendency of matter towards amorphous inertia. It is presumably in this manner, rather than from any inherent duality in the Godhead Himself, that there arises the ambiguity which is manifested by the immanent Divinity in "The Web of Eros."

Lust also parodies love in being self-centred as opposed to self-giving, its egocentricity inevitably leading it into the betrayal of others so as to gain its ends. The sordid materialism and vicious treachery of lust are both suggested

by the money which the prostitute demands as payment for her favors, and for the sake of which the son murders his mother. In recalling the betrayal of Christ by Judas, the money both strengthens the association of the mother with the self-sacrificing Savior, and marks off her son and the whore as her spiritual antitypes. This opposition is underlined by the fact that, rather than leading like love to a redemptive return to Eden, the son's appetite motivates a terrible crime. In fact, by rejecting and betraying the paradise of maternal love, his act of matricide constitutes a repetition of the Fall:

So light his footfall. Yet I heard  
Its echo in my heart, and stirred  
From out my weary sleep to see  
My child's face bending over me.

The wicked knife flashed serpent-wise.--<sup>22</sup>

Sitwell's vision in "The Mother" is thus almost exactly the opposite of that in "The Web of Eros." The latter poem presents the spiritually inspired love of man and woman as a microcosmic reflection of a universe in which all of the opposites of man's imaginative experience stand reconciled. "The Mother" uses a story of betrayal, crime and lust to present these antitheses in spiritual and moral opposition. This clash is only heightened by their inextricable association in human experience. Even the mother herself, who is

on one spiritual plane the embodiment of the divinely inspired forces of life and love, is ultimately involved in the Fall. She is not, moreover, entangled merely as an innocent and suffering victim. Her final "sacrifice" for her son as a victim of matricide is a parodic crucifixion, which leads to her child's damnation rather than to his redemption. In fact, the worms in the mother's grave insinuate that her own blind love for her child has become the instrument of his eternal torment. In part, the mother's fruitless sacrifice in death and its disastrous consequences are used by Sitwell to emphasize the pathos of mother and son as the hapless victims of the powers of evil. However, the negative consequences of her immolation as a murder victim also reflect ironically upon her previous oblation for her child. Although the mother tears the worms from her breast and reaffirms her love for her betrayer, the nature of her avowal suggests that they have uttered at least a half-truth. Once again she offers herself up for her son, this time by taking the burden of his guilt upon herself:

He did no sin. But cold blind earth  
 The body was that gave him birth.  
 All mine, all mine the sin; the love  
 I bore him was not deep enough.<sup>23</sup>

The opposition of spirit to matter in a fallen world is thus manifested not simply in the antithesis of love and lust, but also within motherhood itself. The mother really embodies the negative as well as the positive aspect of the cosmic matrix, and the harlot is accordingly a projection of one side of her own nature. The intimate relationship of the mother with her apparent opposite is to be seen on an emotional level in the fact that the Eden of mother-son love is after all for the latter a state of passive, helpless dependence. Like Blake's Vales of Har,<sup>24</sup> the maternal Eden is for the son a womb-world which will rapidly become a prison and a tomb unless he can break away from it and enter into an adult emotional relationship. His lustful infatuation and murder, crimes though they remain, may be read as inverted attempts to achieve emotional independence and an adult love. In short, the mother in the poem may have betrayed her son as much as he has played the Judas with her. This irony clinches the paradoxical opposition-in-association of good and evil upon which Sitwell's poem ultimately turns.

The themes with which Sitwell deals in "The Mother" are elaborated in "The Madness of Saul," an interesting experiment with the dramatic form which first appeared in the



Wheels anthology of 1917, and which was subsequently published in an expanded version in the volume Clowns' Houses (1918). The subject of this piece is Saul's distraction by guilt and remorse over his murder in sexual rivalry of his twin brother.<sup>25</sup> Sitwell casts her story in the form of a Classical Attic tragedy, and her choice of genre has obvious thematic implications. Thus, Gilbert Murray's theory of the origins of Attic tragedy in the fertility rites of ancient pagan naturalism<sup>26</sup> is reflected alike in the symbolism, the "archetypal" characterization<sup>27</sup> and the ritualistic stylization of "The Madness of Saul." Dame Edith's implicit allusion to the ancient fertility cults in connection with her Old Testament subject-matter suggests her attempt to achieve in her play the same fusion of Biblical typology<sup>28</sup> and a visionary Romantic nature religion that was so thematically central to "The Mother."

"The Madness of Saul" begins with a series of odes recited by two semi-choruses of Ethiopian women. In their tone of visionary ecstasy, in their elevated "prophetic" style, and in their symbolism, these speeches anticipate to a truly remarkable degree Sitwell's mature poetry:

O vineyards of the world, cry to the Dawn--  
Great streams of light that water all the world  
And flow like music in our veins, bring life  
To those unborn, O founts and waterways  
Of the young light, flow down and lie like peace  
Upon the upturned faces of the blind.<sup>29</sup>

The dominant image of this passage, a "light-process"<sup>30</sup> which simultaneously vitalizes and unifies physical creation, implies the main thematic purpose of the opening choruses of "The Madness of Saul." This is to place the action of the play in the metaphysical context of a sacramental cosmic organism. In this regard, as its function of consoling and illuminating the human spirit implies, the light-image functions as a symbol of God's gift to creation of His own divine essence, which is love. This infusion of supernatural love into the cosmos is also presented in terms of the tradition of erotic mystical symbolism deriving from the Song of Songs:

We sat beside the rivers and we wept,  
 For we are black beneath the Sun's hot kiss.  
 The Sun hath left his tent and kissed our breasts  
 Till they were sweeter than the budding grapes--<sup>31</sup>

The sexual symbolism of the opening choruses of "The Madness of Saul" suggests like "Serenade" that God's immanent grace takes the form of a universal eros or love attraction. This cosmic eros, in which God's affirmation of all beings is manifested and mirrored in their attraction for one another, forms the basis of the economy of the universal organism, a fusion of energy and order by which matter moves in a harmonious cyclical rhythm within the framework of space and time. Just as Sitwell's erotic imagery has

metaphysical connotations so, conversely, the poet implies that the love of man and woman is a microcosmic embodiment of the synthesis of vitality and order in the universe at large:

With eyelids like the flashing of a sword  
And lips like fire of flowers or frankincense  
We builded Day with our immortal kiss.<sup>32</sup>

The replication in sexual love of the cosmic "marriage" of energy and form is suggested in these lines in the "Day" which combines the vitalizing force of the light-process with the order of the cyclical time of nature.

However, the thematic implications of the day-image in the passage just quoted are broader still. Not only does it suggest the diurnal cycle as an ordering principle in the natural world, but also the first morning of creation, in which the genesis of light from darkness at God's command initiated the cosmogenetic process.<sup>33</sup> The double significance of the dawn-image implies that each new day is a repetition of the framing of the universe. This in turn suggests that Dame Edith subscribes to the occult belief, found also in the poetry of Shelley, of a continuing creation of order from the chaos towards which matter, when left to itself, continually tends.<sup>34</sup> In other words, the doctrine of continuous creation implies an ambivalent universe, in

which the infusion of energy and order by God into His creation is countered and followed by the innate tendency of the physical to lapse into chaos and inertia. This ever-present bias of matter towards a formless deadness is reflected in the tragic passion of Saul, which is placed by Sitwell in the metaphysical context of an imprisoning and destructive "wheel" of cyclical time, in which all beings eventually crumble into the azoic and amorphous "dust."<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the microcosm-macrocosm analogy which obtains between the love of man and woman and God's inspiration of the cosmic organism has an antitype in the connection of Saul's lust, crime and madness with the ever-present tendency of the universe to lapse into the primeval chaos. This second correspondence becomes in "The Madness of Saul" the basis of a rich and powerful contrapuntal symbolism. This symbolic counterpoint, like that of King Lear, functions on the four levels of the personal, the familial, the social, and the cosmic. In particular, Sitwell in "The Madness of Saul" follows the lead of Shakespeare's tragedy in expressing the disorder of passion and madness in the microcosm of man in terms of the collapse of the macrocosm into chaos:

We built new worlds with our immortal kiss,  
Then Madness swept like Time across our worlds.  
And when we spoke, all space broke into flower,  
Till Madness came like winter withering.

And time was but the beat of heart to heart  
 Till Madness sealed the heart-beat of the world.  
 Bull-throated now the fires of madness blast.  
 All space becomes one golden wheel of flame--  
 The agony of endless moons and suns;  
 That giant red hole that was the ancient sea  
 Is fill'd with wreckage of the ruined sky,--  
 The world's vast walls reel blindly,--then collapse.<sup>36</sup>

The disruption of the individual by chaotic appetites and emotions is reflected in the breakup of the family, the basic unit of human society. Saul's lust for a wanton harlot is an inversion and a negation of the spiritually inspired and fruitful sexual love which is the cornerstone of family life. It is therefore entirely appropriate that his passion should result in the murder of his brother, and that this crime should distort his mother Atarah's maternal love into hatred and into the agony of loss. Just as infatuation and madness result in a violence which wrecks the family, so the larger brotherhood of mankind is shattered when the baser human passions and desires lead to war. The latter subject, which was of obvious contemporary relevance at the time when "The Madness of Saul" was published, is treated in the speech of an old woman named Amasa who has apparently lost her sons in war. The lamentations of Amasa provide a thematic counterpoint to those of Atarah in suggesting that man's murderousness, in whatever context it occurs, simultaneously offends against and counters the divinely inspired

eros and vitality of the cosmic organism:

The old grey hungry men, said one word-war-  
And wrung my children's bodies dry of blood  
And hid them in a hole lest I should kiss them.<sup>37</sup>

In "The Madness of Saul," human misdeeds are thus linked by means of a complex poetic symbolism with metaphysical and theological questions. The exact nature of this connection, which is basic to an understanding of Sitwell's view of the origin of evil, is suggested by two interrelated patterns of symbolism which permeate her drama. These are first of all her images of sight and blindness and secondly those of fire and light.<sup>38</sup> These symbols appear first in the opening choruses of "The Madness of Saul." As has been suggested, these choruses present man as a spiritually inspired, sacramental microcosmos, in whom the divine energy is wedded to a controlling order. In terms of the human psyche, the fire of affective and imaginative energy, which originates in the unconscious mind, expresses itself consciously in a state of spiritual vision or illumination. In acquainting the individual with his place in the organic order of the universe, and in channelling his actions accordingly, such illumination corresponds to the divine logos or cosmic word. This visionary logos, which grows out of incarnate spiritual energy and yet at the same time controls it, is rendered in

the opening choruses of "The Madness of Saul" by the image of the sun. This symbol is appropriate for Sitwell's purposes for several reasons. Not only does the energy of the sun combine heat with light, but the appearance of its rayed disc and the movements by which it initiates the seasonal cycle both suggest a combination of energy and order. Moreover, in functioning simultaneously as an "eye of God" and as the fount of divine energy in the universe, the sun conveys perfectly the notion of a fusion of inspiration with illumination.

In symbolic opposition to a visionary logos which fuses heat and light, Saul's passion and madness are rendered in terms of an imagery of fire and of a parching solar heat. Such symbolism implies that man becomes a prey to chaotic and destructive emotion when energy breaks loose from order, inspiration from vision. This divorce of "fire" from "light" is connected in several of Atarah's speeches, and also in the closing choruses of "The Madness of Saul," with the notion of spiritual blindness:

Pull down the heavens like a sackcloth pall  
To spread upon our faces, sealed with night.<sup>39</sup>

Such blindness is attributed by Saul himself to the helpless imprisonment of the spirit in the deadening and corrupting pall of matter:

But God hath spread the earth with reeling night,  
 With blackness thicker than a wall. Our tears  
 That fall like silver stars are all the light  
 He sends us, in our night,<sup>40</sup>

Saul's statement presumably constitutes only a half truth or else he would not be guilty in a moral sense for his actions. Sitwell's formal employment of the Greek tragedy in "The Madness of Saul" might be taken to imply her subscription to the notion of a cosmic fate which controls all human actions, and which therefore makes defilement a question of tragic misfortune rather than of genuine culpability. However, Dame Edith's use of a Biblical story, with its inevitable suggestions of the importance of the individual will and the reality of moral responsibility, implies clearly that Saul's crime is defined but not determined by its cosmic setting. This setting is best understood in terms of the Biblical notion of the Fall. In "The Madness of Saul," both man and the universe are fallen in the sense that spirit is associated with, and is always in danger of being assimilated by, a matter whose inherent tendency is towards chaos and inertia. This means that eros, the attraction which is felt by the soul for the material is spiritually and morally ambiguous. Depending upon whether or not it remains controlled by illumination, eros can lead either to a creative inspiration and ordering of matter, or



to an abject surrender by which spirit abets the tendency of the physical towards an amorphous deadness. In this way, man's psyche possesses the potentiality for both good and evil. Since in its original state of illumination the human soul can be supposed to possess a prior awareness of its twofold potentiality for good and evil, it can only become blind will through a deliberate choice of the latter.

In Saul's case, the surrender of spirit to matter consists in succumbing to the blandishments of the harlot, who is associated by Sitwell with the dead and amorphous "dust" towards which the material always tends. Dame Edith's recurring symbol of a woman's hair is also used in connection with the harlot to suggest the entangling web which is spun for the spirit by physical creation:

The light is dead, for with your long black hair  
That twists and writhes like hell's long hissing river  
You quenched the light. O you are very pale:-  
White with the dust of aeons is your face--  
Things ground to powder by the mills of lust.--<sup>41</sup>

On the metaphysical plane, the harlot thus functions symbolically as an antitype of the sacramentally inspired matter of the cosmic matrix. In this regard she stands in symbolic opposition to Atarah, who embodies the maternal fruitfulness and protectiveness of the cosmic organism. The antithesis of the harlot to Atarah suggests the two

sharply defined spiritual poles between which Saul has been able to choose. His surrender to the temptation of lust constitutes a repetition of the Fall of man in the sense that it actualizes the potentiality for evil which is implicit in the incarnation of spirit in matter:

She came, a snake, and stabbed my veins with love:  
Her fangs grew in my blood. I killed my brother.<sup>42</sup>

The poems which have been treated to this point may be described as presenting in a microcosmic or an embryonic form the imaginative development which comes to an efflorescence in Sitwell's mature work. It is possible here to touch only in passing upon the most important of the remarkable resemblances between the pieces just discussed and the poetry published from 1940 to the end of Sitwell's career. In the first place, there is the poet's sacramental and hylozoistic vision of the universe as an organism which is inspired with life and bound together with love by the presence of an immanent Divinity. This vision constitutes the imaginative foundation of all of Sitwell's subsequent verse and is particularly prominent in her mature poetry. The motif of the clash and ultimate reconciliation of polar opposites, together with the specific antitheses of Fall and Redemption, good and evil, love and lust, are likewise central to the later poetry. Moreover, in "The Web of Eros"

Sitwell anticipates her mature vision of the reconciliation of such antinomies by means of an organic cycle of death and rebirth. The chief symbols which are used in the later poetry to suggest such an organic cycle, the sun and the rhythm of the seasons, also appear in her very early pieces. Finally, in noting the similarities between Sitwell's first visionary poems and her mature work, we should mention the rich sensuousness, the bold mythopoeic conceits, the prophetic tone, and the stately rhythms which "The Madness of Saul" and the love lyrics from The Mother... share with Sitwell's later odes.

As has already been mentioned, the oracular mode of these very early poems is in marked contrast with another development which was taking place at the same time that they were being written. This is an ironic and satiric impulse which was, until the mid-Twenties, to absorb the greater part of Dame Edith's poetic energies. However, as is so often the case with the apparent contradictions and antitheses in Sitwell's poetry, the contrast at the outset of her career between the satirist and the prophet masks an underlying organic unity. The remainder of this chapter will accordingly be devoted to a discussion of two very early satiric pieces which illustrate the continuity between

Dame Edith's "role" as an ironist and the apocalyptic interest which is manifested in the poems which have been under discussion.

The organic relationship which exists between Sitwell's first satiric poetry and her early visionary pieces, which makes the latter indispensable for an understanding of such works as Facade,<sup>5</sup> is clearly illustrated by "Pedagogues." This work was collected in Sitwell's second volume of poetry, Twentieth Century Harlequinade (1916). The opening stanza of the poem illustrates very well Dame Edith's characteristic satiric device of a blatantly anti-naturalistic treatment of her target. By means of this deliberately theatrical stratagem, a holiday resort is transformed in "Pedagogues" into a stylized and symbolic stage-set, upon which highly colored and radically simplified characters perform a metaphysical pantomime:

The air is like a jarring bell  
That jangles words it cannot spell,  
And black as Fate, the iron trees  
Stretch thirstily to catch the breeze.<sup>43</sup>

The repetition of this stanza at the conclusion of "Pedagogues" suggests that it is intended by Sitwell to provide a metaphysical "framework" for the ensuing satiric description. This metaphysic is implied by the symbolism of the opening quatrain. The image of the "jarring bell/That jangles words

it cannot spell" suggests a world which, because it lacks any comprehensive principle of meaningful order, is epistemologically chaotic or absurd. The bell of course also connotes death, a notion which is given metaphysical overtones by its connection with a terrible Fate. This destiny, by means of its metaphysical association with the trees which "Stretch thirstily" to catch the wind, is in its turn revealed as the "web" of matter which traps and devours all beings. More specifically, if the breeze is allowed its traditional connotations as a symbol of the spirit, then the opening stanza as a whole suggests a psyche which has been blinded and imprisoned through its association with matter. Sitwell is implying that the surrender of the soul of materialistic modern man to the physical has led to his loss of any vision of a higher spiritual order, and to his entrapment in a blind and meaningless physical determinism which is a thinly veiled disguise of the chaos and ultimate absurdity of the material order.

Sitwell's blatantly anti-natural images of "iron trees," and of the air as a "jarring bell" emphasize the way in which the metaphysical situation described in the opening stanza of "Pedagogues" is in the last analysis man-made. Both of the conceits just mentioned imply a double process

of parody, in which Sitwell is highlighting through her outrageous poetic licence of a "metallic" nature the way in which modern industrial society, working from purely materialistic premises, has unwittingly created a grotesque and demonic caricature of the sacramental cosmic organism. The concrete manifestations of modern society's distortion of the sacramental cosmic organism will be discussed as our analysis of "Pedagogues" proceeds. On the mental or imaginative plane, modern man's perversion of God's creation takes the form of the metaphysical nightmare of Stanza One, of an "anticosmos" which paradoxically combines total absurdity with a complete determinism.

Stanzas Two and Three of "Pedagogues" suggest some of the devices by which modern man attempts to escape the metaphysical wasteland which he himself has created:

The fat leaves pat the shrinking air;  
The hot sun's patronizing stare  
Rouses the stout flies from content  
To some small show of sentiment.

Beneath the terrace shines the green  
Metallic strip of sea, and sheen  
Of sands where folk flaunt parrot-bright  
With rags and tags of noisy light.<sup>44</sup>

The first method of escape is implied in the grotesque image of "fat" leaves patting the air like some rotund lecher fondling the figure of a well-fleshed girl. This is a

consoling and anaesthetic absorption in an over-indulgence of bodily appetite. Such gross sensuality, as we shall see, constitutes a mechanistic travesty of the organic fertility of a divinely inspired cosmos. The second avenue of flight which is taken by modern man from a universe which is ruled by determinism and absurdity is the escape into the complacent emotional and spiritual deadness of a well-fed, self-satisfied bourgeois prosperity. This course has the advantage of combining the carnal self-indulgence of the fly with the moral self-approval which is conferred by respectability and social status.

A third method of escape, which is described in Stanza Three, is a carnival-world of frivolous amusement, superficial gaiety and sensory over-stimulation. The metaphysical inauthenticity of this circus setting is conveyed by Sitwell through an imagery of artifice, surface and fragmentation. In opposition to the material universe as a living, sacramental symbol of the Spirit, an organically complex and infinitely deep manifold of significance, the carnival world is an empty, meaningless husk of dead physical appearance. The raggedness and the chaotic absurdity of this wilderness of flimsy surfaces reveal the ultimate hollowness of a purely materialistic dispensation. In the last analysis,

then, the circus world ironically constitutes a direct revelation of the spiritual vacuum which it was intended to hide.

The metaphysical status of the amusement-park milieu as a negation of the sacramental cosmic organism is also suggested in Stanza Three of "Pedagogues" by Sitwell's employment of a beach setting, with its implicit play on the two contrasting and yet interrelated Romantic symbols of the sea and the desert. As W.H. Auden argued in The Enchafed Flood, the sea is a standard Romantic icon for the life and growth, the potentiality and renewal, which are inherent in cosmic nature. As such, the ocean stands in opposition to the desert, which symbolizes the sterility and deadness of a spiritually arid human civilization.<sup>45</sup>

In the imagery of Stanza Three of "Pedagogues," we have an extremely sophisticated play with the two symbols of the desert and the sea. The ultimate purpose of Sitwell's ingenious symbolic wit is to suggest the contrast between the barrenness and death of the carnival world and the vitality of a divinely inspired universe. However, through the medium of the conceits by which they are reduced to the same level of superficial and dead artifice, the sea and the sandy beach, the natural and the human worlds, are at the



first glance compared rather than contrasted. Sitwell's parodic reduction of the sea to the sterility and artifice of the human wasteland is presumably intended to suggest the spiritual blindness of materialistic modern man, who cannot see the universe of life which encompasses the world of death which he has constructed. The sea-land juxtaposition in Stanza Three of "Pedagogues" accordingly reinforces Sitwell's parodic use in her poem of the wind and light images which are stock Romantic symbols of the inspiration and illumination of man by the spiritual forces immanent in the universe.

Stanzas Four and Five of "Pedagogues" are devoted to a grotesque antithesis of the imaginative illumination which, in such poems as "Serenade" and "The Web of Eros," leads to an intuition into the nature of a divinely inspired cosmic organism. This travesty of true visionary insight further emphasizes the metaphysical inauthenticity of the carnival world with which it is associated. As an ironically unsuccessful attempt to escape the nihilistic philosophy of Stanza One, it also suggests the basic outlook and the mental processes which are responsible for that metaphysical impasse:

The brass band's snorting stabs the sky  
 And tears the yielding vacancy--  
 The imbecile and smiling blue,  
 Until fresh meaning trickles through;

And slowly we perambulate  
 With spectacles that concentrate  
 In one short hour, Eternity,  
 In one small lens, Infinity<sup>46</sup>

The humor of Stanza Four turns upon an implicit fusion of the mechanistic and the sexual. This incongruous combination throws into relief the contrast which Dame Edith sees between the dead mechanical routine of modern society and the fertility of a divinely inspired cosmic organism. In the early visionary poems, sexual love is presented as a psychic reflection of such a sacramental vitality. Not only does the love of man and woman generate new life on the corporeal level, but it is also a spiritually creative or fertile one in the sense of conveying an organic intuition of a truth whose "infinite variety" can never be exhausted by discourse. In contrast to the love which is a vitalizing experience for the human imagination, a mechanistic and mindless sexuality becomes in Stanza Four of "Pedagogues" the metaphor for a blundering mental rape of the universe. The purblind intellect of materialistic modern man "stabs" and "tears" at the cosmic organism in an attempt to ravish its secrets but finds little more than a "yielding vacancy" which ironically reflects its own impoverishment. The stupidity of such scientific ratiocination, and the quality of the metaphysic at which it arrives, are both summed up in the

phrase "imbecile and smiling blue." However, as the image of rape suggests, this imbecility is also destructive and vicious, a fact which is projected in the nightmare quality of the vision at which it arrives in Stanza One. Thus, in Stanza Four of "Pedagogues," Sitwell draws through her mechanistic antitype of a spiritually fruitful sexual love, a sharp contrast between the fertility of the cosmic organism and the dissociation, destructiveness, sterility and death which characterize modern man's rationality and the world which it creates.

Stanza Five of "Pedagogues" presents us with a "revelation" which emphasizes the sterility of the human mind which is dissociated from the sacramental vitality of the universe. By means of her parody of Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" in lines 3-4 of Stanza 5,<sup>47</sup> Sitwell suggests through a travesty of the Romantic visionary experience the way in which modern man has lost the capacity for a true religious comprehension. In opposition to the spiritual depth of a visionary insight into the mystery of God's eternity and infinity, the pseudo-revelation of the circus world remains on the superficial level of physical "spectacle." The religious experience has been debased to a mere entertainment, in which symbolic ritual is reduced to

a vulgar theatricality. In contrast to the mental expansion stimulated by an insight which encapsulates intuitively the whole of the organic complex of meaning inherent in the universe, the revelation of the amusement-park diminishes and and trivializes the spiritual. This diminution of modern man's vision is of course ironically emphasized in the punning allusion to eye-glasses in the word "spectacles." Rather than expanding the human mind to correspond with a perception which is infinite, the "spectacles" of a spiritually myopic civilization "concentrate" the mysteries of the cosmos into images small enough to enter its "vegetated" eye. In the last analysis, the pseudo-mysticism of the holiday resort constitutes yet another escape into illusion from the metaphysical abyss created by modern materialism. The irony of this process can be seen in the fact that it constitutes a reversal of the visionary process whereby the gulf of absurdity might be filled with the plenitude of God.

As attempts to escape from "hard reality"<sup>48</sup> to a womb-world of blissful ignorance and soft gratification, the various metaphysical evasions which Sitwell is satirizing in "Pedagogues" are, as James Brophy suggests, spiritually infantile.<sup>49</sup> Such spiritual namby-pambyism is intimated in Stanza Five of "Pedagogues" by the verb "perambulate,"<sup>50</sup>

with its ironic allusion to the English term for a baby-carriage. The satiric conceit of an adult who is a spiritual baby is, as Brophy suggests, a contributing factor to the irony of Stanza Six:<sup>51</sup>

With children, our primeval curse,--  
We overrun the universe--  
Beneath the chattering lights of noon,  
White as a tired August moon.<sup>52</sup>

Stanza Six of "Pedagogues" is of course also an attack upon the "polyphiloprogenitiveness"<sup>53</sup> of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Such reproductomania resembles the sexuality to which the poet alludes in Stanza Four in being a mechanized travesty of the fertility of the cosmic organism. Like industrialization, it is one of the ways in which, spiritually as well as ecologically, modern civilization aggrandizes itself at the expense of nature. As the last two lines of Stanza Six indicate, such a bustle of mechanistic activity is simply a means of masking the absurdity and the physical decay which haunt modern man's existence. Sitwell's ironic revelation of the emptiness which underlies the breathless mechanical pace of contemporary life is reinforced by her concluding repetition of the first stanza of her poem. Like the last two lines of Stanza Six, this quatrain suggests both the spiritual death of absurdity, and the prolonged physical agony of a being doomed to annihilation

by the "Fate" inherent in its own materialistic philosophy. It is this double death which the mass-production of enormous families is an inane and futile attempt to escape. The ultimate satiric conceit of Stanza Six of "Pedagogues" is accordingly that of a parenthood which is spiritually infantile.

"Pedagogues" has been chosen for detailed analysis not only because it illustrates the organic connection which exists between Sitwell's visionary and satiric impulses, but also because in its imagery, style and subjects it is characteristic of Dame Edith's earlier satiric poetry.<sup>54</sup> For example, "Clowns' Houses," which was also published in Twentieth Century Harlequinade, recalls "Pedagogues" in both its themes and its techniques. "Clowns' Houses" uses the same imagery of surfaces, harsh light and discordant sound as does "Pedagogues." It also employs the same satiric devices of synesthesia and of the representation of nature in artificial terms. The poet's target is once again a world of superficiality, unreality and deadness:

Beneath the flat and paper sky,  
The sun, a demon's eye,  
Glowed through the air, that mask of glass;  
All wand'ring sounds that pass

Seemed out of tune, as if the light  
Were fiddle-strings pulled tight.  
The market square with spire and bell  
Clanged out the hour in Hell;<sup>55</sup>

"Clowns' Houses," like "Pedagogues," deals with the Blakean notion of an imaginative nightmare which has become the reality in which the perceiving subject finds itself imprisoned.<sup>56</sup> In "Clowns' Houses," this nightmare world is appropriately identified with Hell. The full irony and horror of this conceit lies in the fact that Sitwell's Hell is simply a satirically heightened version of the society created by modern materialism. Thus, in "Clowns' Houses" Hell is drawn in terms of the same carnival world which in "Pedagogues" represents one of modern man's attempts to conceal the metaphysical desert which he has created:

The dust lay dead and white

As powder on a mummy's face,  
Or fawned with simian grace  
Round booths with many a hard bright toy  
And wooden brittle joy.<sup>57</sup>

The sin which condemns modern man to Hell is, as these lines suggest, his sensual immersion in matter and the flesh to the point at which he is blinded to the sacramental nature of reality. The offence of materialism against the God Who inspires His cosmos with life and love is epitomized in "Clowns' Houses," as it is in "Pedagogues," in the reduction of sexual love to a mere carnal self-indulgence:

Blind are those houses, paper-thin;  
Old shadows hid therein  
With sly and crazy movements creep  
Like marionettes and weep.<sup>58</sup>

This stanza, through its echoes of Oscar Wilde's powerful poem "The Harlot's House," suggests a furtive and dessicated sexual depravity. In such a wizened lust, the sexual relationship is reduced to a mechanized, joyless and sterile inversion of an activity which should encapsulate the divinely inspired fertility of the universe. This travesty of true human fertility by a blind carnality occurs on an imaginative as well as a physical plane. In opposition to a love which is a microcosmic reflection of a universe which is in turn a revelation of the Divinity, lust in "Clowns' Houses" is connected with the vision of absurdity which is the direct outgrowth of contemporary materialism:

Tall windows show Infinity;  
And, hard reality,  
The candles weep and pry and dance  
Like lives mocked at by Chance.<sup>59</sup>

Infinity can only be perceived by the materialistic mind as an enormous vacant darkness. In relation to the human subject, this emptiness becomes the death which threatens at any moment to engulf the individual's tenuous existence. Within this framework of nothingness, man's destiny is controlled absolutely by the animated absurdity of a blind chance, which is fate become unfathomable and meaningless because it is utterly capricious. It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of "Clowns' Houses," the poet presents



herself, despite her ironic detachment, as somehow involved or entrapped in this chamber of metaphysical horrors:

The rooms are vast as sleep within:  
When once I ventured in,  
Chill Silence like a surging sea  
Slowly enveloped me.<sup>60</sup>

In Sitwell's early apocalyptic poems, there are already present the seeds of the vision by means of which the poet can escape the spiritual dungeon which she describes in "Clowns' Houses." However, it will take many years of imaginative labor before this transcendence is fully achieved.

"Pedagogues" and "Clowns' Houses" present the main outlines of Edith Sitwell's ironic vision of contemporary society, and also incorporate the most important of her satiric images and techniques. However, in one important respect there remains a major step to be taken by Dame Edith as a satiric poet. The burden of her prose criticism lies in her minute analyses of the subtleties of poetic language, of the sound-patterns and rhythms which she considers to be the incarnation of poetic thought in the same way in which the material world is a sacramental embodiment of spirit.<sup>61</sup> To be sure, the verse of "Pedagogues" and "Clowns' Houses" possesses an angular quality and mechanical movement which are appropriate to the poet's targets.<sup>62</sup> However, it remains

for Facade<sub>5</sub> to develop with full subtlety and complexity Alexander Pope's dictum that "the sound must seem an echo to the sense."<sup>63</sup> This exploration of sound-pattern in Facade<sub>5</sub> is in turn part of an ingenious experimentation with the visionary and satiric possibilities of the lyric form. It is to the full flowering of Sitwell's unique satirical method in Facade<sub>5</sub> that the next chapter will be devoted.

## CHAPTER II

## HARLEQUIN AS RADICAL AND SINGER:

THE BACKGROUND OF EDITH SITWELL'S FACADE<sub>5</sub>

Perhaps the best description of the effect of the first public recital of Edith Sitwell's Facade<sub>5</sub> is that of a shock-wave generated by a minor explosion. Since the evening upon which reporters scurried to interview passers-by who might confirm their opinion as to the poet's madness,<sup>1</sup> Facade<sub>5</sub> has achieved a popularity beyond mere notoriety. This is partly attributable to the charm of William Walton's music, but the sophisticated auditor is bound to take an equal pleasure in the witty combination of virtuosity and singularity displayed by Sitwell's poems. Together with a sense of the poet's engagingly irreverent high spirits, a performance of Facade<sub>5</sub> leaves us with the impression of a virtuoso deliberately isolating certain aspects of her art for self-conscious exploration and development. In the introduction to her Collected Poems, Sitwell confirms our sense of her painstaking craftsmanship. The poet informs us that the pieces in Facade<sub>5</sub> were meant to be "exercises in technique of an extreme difficulty, in the same sense as that in which certain studies by Liszt are studies in transcendental

technique in music."<sup>2</sup> In the same introduction, Sitwell also provides us with detailed descriptions of the elaborate experiments which she conducted in Facade<sub>5</sub> with poetic sound-pattern or "texture." In the course of these same discussions, however, it becomes evident that Dame Edith's serious artistic purpose extends far beyond her "abstract" if sophisticated exercises in technique. A consideration of the meanings which lurk between the lines of Sitwell's poems suggests that far from being a piece of gratuitous clowning, Facade<sub>5</sub>, like "Pedagogues" and "Clowns' Houses," is meant to be a barbed and often terrible indictment of a sterile civilization. Dame Edith's "entertainment" really belongs in spirit with such works as Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Huxley's Point Counter Point and T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land." As a product of that paradoxically fertile period of depression and irritation of spirit which followed the First World War. Facade<sub>5</sub> is in fact profoundly serious in its fundamental intent.

In none of her discussions of Facade<sub>5</sub> does Sitwell make any mention of poetic form, and yet it is through her experiments with the lyric medium that the real gravity of Facade<sub>5</sub> is most easily apprehensible. A critical discussion of the lyric genre which seems tailor-made for Facade<sub>5</sub> is

Northrop Frye's suggestive study of the subject in his Anatomy of Criticism.<sup>3</sup> Frye derives the lyric impulse from two processes of unconscious association, which he relates to Sigmund Freud's discussion of wit and dream. The first of these sequences is based upon the universal human delight in sound-play, and comprehends such facets of the lyric as rhyme, assonance, alliteration and paranomasia. This stream of verbal association, whose elemental and subconscious origins are suggested by Frye's term "babble," is ultimately responsible for an "oracular rhythm" which in the lyric stands apart from either the metrical or the semantic patterns of the poem. Frye's second element of lyric association, which he terms "doodle," consists of such forms of image-play as simile, metaphor and juxtaposition. Doodle grows from a rudimentary fusion of sensation with reflection, and as such bears the same radical relationship to children's riddles as babble does to childish incantation.

A point which Frye does not make is that as the expression of a generally repressed unconscious energy, which furthermore differs radically from the normal patterns of empirical and discursive thought, the lyric is potentially a revolutionary form. The attempt of the poets of the late

Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century to free the associative lyrical rhythm from conventional metre<sup>4</sup> may therefore possess a more than symbolic connection with the radically alienated and subversive character of a good deal of early modern literature. The use of the term "revolutionary" in connection with such writing should not be taken to suggest a literature of political or social propaganda, but rather a conception of art in the light of which "Le Bateau Ivre," Finnegans Wake or "The Wreck of the Deutschland" are far more radical in their fundamental intent than say an art of "socialist realism." All of the works just mentioned share the assumption, self-consciously formulated as a revolutionary principle by Blake and Rimbaud,<sup>5</sup> that the true radical thrust of the literary work lies in its imaginative boldness and energy, which can force an apocalyptic shift in man's spiritual perspective. The lyric, in whose babble and doodle the creative energies of the imagination are most directly and forcefully expressed, would seem to be particularly suited to the modern artist's work of revolution and revelation. Moreover, the witty, subversive and offhand manner in which the creative lyric "play" turns its back upon what is generally accepted as "reality" allies it very closely with the ironic and satiric impulse

of so much of contemporary literature. As Blake realized in writing The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, visionary fantasy and satire are closely allied. One highly effective way of ironically stressing the inauthenticity of prevailing norms of human behavior is by imaginative distortions which reveal their evil or their unreality. The visionary imagination also is in fundamental accord with satire when it projects an ideal which is far superior to actuality, and yet ironically has no discernible connection with it.

In his incisive discussions of Edith Sitwell's early poetry,<sup>6</sup> Jack Lindsay stresses both its imaginative radicalism, and also its more specific connection with the spiritual and cultural crisis triggered by the First World War. Lindsay associates the spirit of Sitwell's early poetry with that of the "dissident European avant-garde culture."<sup>7</sup> with movements like Expressionism, Dadaism and Surrealism which, in their deliberate departure from traditional norms of perception and expression, attempted to voice the crisis of a dissociated spirit in a collapsing world. As Lindsay suggests, what makes Edith Sitwell's early verse a part of this radical movement is her conception of poetic language,<sup>8</sup> a matter which is particularly germane to a criticism of Facade.

5

Like so much that is essential for an understanding of her work, the subject of poetic language is nowhere discussed systematically by Sitwell herself. Her thought on this vital topic must be reconstructed partly from scattered observations, and partly by reading "between the lines" of her poetry and criticism. The subject can be best approached through Marshall McLuhan's notion that man's civilization is composed of media, or extensions of the human self.<sup>9</sup> McLuhan sees the media of our present electronic age as externalizations of our highly complex central nervous system, and this notion provides a useful basic description of Sitwell's view of poetic language. It is necessary, however, to emphasize at once that the term "nervous system," with its scientific and quasi-mechanistic connotations, can be applied only with due qualification to an activity in which the human sense organs and physique function as sacramental embodiments of an incarnate spiritual energy. The epistemological point of departure of Sitwell's aesthetic is precisely that of William Blake, whose theory of art is based upon the two inseparable premises that "Man has no body distinct from his Soul," and that "the five Senses" are the "chief inlets of Soul in this age."<sup>10</sup> As Sitwell makes plain by statements like "technique is very largely



a matter of physique," or "We must have...the Lion's acuity of sense,"<sup>11</sup> the act of imaginative perception certainly begins with man's physical makeup, with his musculature and his sense-organs. However, although the imaginative process which results in the creation of poetry begins with the body and with the senses, it cannot ultimately be separated from what Sitwell regards as the artist's divinely inspired powers of vision and creation. Dame Edith is typically Romantic in asserting as intimately related premises of her psychology and aesthetic firstly the organic unity and interconnection of all of man's faculties, and secondly the participation of his imagination and passions in an immanent Godhead. In the process of poetic creation, sensation and intellection cannot be separated, and as Sitwell tells us in Poetry and Criticism (1925), "The modernist poet's brain is becoming a central sense, interpreting and controlling the other five senses."<sup>12</sup> Such bold synesthetic rearrangement of what the man of common sense would regard as the normal or rational mode of perception is in turn meant to suggest Sitwell's belief that the poet's productive energy partakes of the creative fiat of a divine "esemplastic power," a dynamic world-soul which inspires the cosmos in each and every part. In "Some Notes on the Making

of a Poem," for example, Sitwell relates the creation of a poem to Jacob Boehme's account of the genesis of a flower, a process in which the "qualities" of the divine creative power are dynamically incarnated in a physical form.<sup>13</sup>

The participation of the artist's creative personality in an omnipresent and dynamic world-spirit means that all seeing is actually double, involving the simultaneous perception of the world as both physical fact and apocalyptic symbol:

We know, too, that every sight, touch, sound, smell, of the world we live in, has its meaning - is the result of a spiritual state ...is, in short, a kind of psycho-analysis. And it is the poet's duty to interpret those meanings.<sup>14</sup>

As this passage suggests, the symbolic dimension of the poetic image relates not only to a visionary perception of the numinous within the natural, but also to the spiritual state of the observing subject. All consciousness involves a "pathetic fallacy," a projection and reflection of the subject's inner life which constitutes a "psycho-analysis" of his prevailing state of mind. In Sitwell's early poetry, both the insight of the artist and the oversight of modern man are expressed by means of radical similes and metaphors which highlight the visionary awareness or visionary blindness of the human subject. In "Said King Pompey" from

Facade, for instance, the epithet "hairy sky" suggests not only cirrus clouds in the warm summer heaven, but also the sensual materialist's perception of the world solely in terms of his own bodily comfort.

Just as the "central imaginative system" ingests empirical phenomena and disposes them in spiritually significant patterns, so in the act of poetic creation these symbolic configurations are once again externalized into the sensible world in a visionary arrangement of language. As this statement implies, words are for Sitwell not mere semantic counters, the bodiless abstract spectres of discourse. To Dame Edith's acute senses, words are as immediately concrete as the objects which they represent. Their primary appeal is, of course, to the ear, but since the senses are imaginatively one, they also possess synesthetically such tangible qualities as warmth, coolness, depth, weight and surface. Thus, in her discussion of Facade in the introduction to her Collected Poems, Sitwell states that in "The Bat" "some of the 'a's and the 'u's have neither depth nor body, are flat and death-rotten."<sup>15</sup> Statements of this sort make it plain that Sitwell intends the sound of her verse to recreate the object-world for all five of the senses. The basis of her poetic art is

accordingly what she terms "texture," an aesthetically pleasing modulation of sound pattern, "speed" and poetic rhythm. In "tickling" the ear, texture stimulates the "central sense" to conjure up the whole gamut of sensations implicit in the poet's subject.

The aesthetic appeal of poetry as concrete artifact is not of course a simple affair. It involves not only the titillation of a single stimulus enjoyed in isolation, but also the aesthetically pleasing pattern which Gerard Manley Hopkins terms "inscape." As Hopkins recognized, "inscape" by its very nature as incarnate order or design forms a half-way house between sensation and intellect, between physical and spiritual perception.<sup>16</sup> This is more especially true of poetic texture, whose "inscape" is dynamic or sequential, and can therefore be perceived only through a process of imaginative association. When Sitwell compares the rhythm and texture of the poetry of T.S. Eliot to the "splendour of the muscles rippling under the fiery surface of the skin as the Tyger moves according to the needs of his nature,"<sup>17</sup> what she means is that the concrete presence of his poetry is, like the body of W.B. Yeats' dancer, a spiritually directed and coordinated system, moving in elaborately calculated patterns so as to express symbolically

a complex spiritual significance. In Sitwell's own early poetry, such "verbal conceits" as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and dissonance are cunningly manipulated so as to create patterns of significance which lie behind or beyond a poem's literal message as exposition or narrative. In many of the pieces in Facade<sub>5</sub> the normal grammatical syntax of the English language is maintained but, as the poet tells us, "Words and thoughts never brought together since Babel, clash into a protesting combination."<sup>18</sup> Sitwell's preservation upon one level of a semantic structure which is so blatantly violated upon another is in part intended to provoke us to look to the poem's texture for a synthesizing principle of order and meaning.

Much of Edith Sitwell's criticism is devoted to explicating the patterns of meaning implicit in the texture of her own and other poets' work. Such discussions appear much less eccentric if we remember that Sitwell invariably presses the synesthetic implications of lyric babble to the point at which it becomes in effect image-pattern or doodle. Dame Edith's habitual translation of sound into concrete imagery suggests the organic relation which exists in Facade<sub>5</sub> between texture and her "grammar" of symbolic images. In "Said King Pompey," for example, the inevitable

decay of a purely secular civilization is implied by an ironic contrast between Indianapolis and the Acropolis. Sitwell's juxtaposition of the images of the city and the ruin in order to suggest the inevitable fate of modern culture is meant to be reinforced by the clashing sounds of the two words, "'Acropolis' being a hollow darkened echo of 'Indianapolis' broken down and toppling over into the abyss."<sup>19</sup> In Façade<sub>5</sub> babble and riddle are cognate aspects of the same process of poetic communication. Each is imaginatively interchangeable with and is intended to reinforce the other.

The twin premises that perception is first of all bodily and language is essentially concrete are as fundamental to Sitwell's poetic image-play or doodle as they are to her lyric babble. In Façade<sub>5</sub>, the poet's primary aim in her employment of such "imagistic conceits" as simile and metaphor and juxtaposition is "to pierce down to the essence of the thing seen, by discovering in it attributes which at first sight appear alien, but which are acutely related - by producing its quintessential color (sharper, brighter than that seen by an eye grown stale) and by stripping it of all unessential details."<sup>20</sup> Through their austerity and compression, and through the relatively large imaginative

distance between their terms, the "shock conceits" which fill Sitwell's early poetry are meant to galvanize our minds into an acute sensitivity and freshness of response to the physical world, freeing our senses to perceive once again with the vividness and radical naiveté of the primitive and the child.

However, as Dame Edith tells us in Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet (1920), the child and the artist perceive everything not only with a startling freshness, but also as "infinite."<sup>21</sup> Because the material world is ultimately a sacramental embodiment of the divine, and because physical and spiritual sight are properly one, the "essence of the thing seen" is also a quintessence. The object vividly and accurately perceived by a mind unspoiled by convention becomes revelation of a noumenon lying in and behind the phenomenal, "the cry of that waiting, watching world, where everything we see is a symbol of something beyond to the consciousness that is yet buried in this earth-sleep."<sup>22</sup> Just as the phenomenon is an apocalyptic symbol, so the simile or metaphor is for Sitwell ultimately a sort of visionary syllogism, in which a third spiritual term is inferred from an imaginative association of two phenomena. This syllogism takes two distinct yet

intimately related forms. The first is a figure in which the qualities of one object or sense-impression are brought to bear upon those of another in order to reveal the latter's quintessential significance. The second is the image in which esoteric "correspondences" between apparently unrelated objects are used to infer "the immense design of the world," and thus the existence of a conscious, intelligent and artistic Creator.<sup>23</sup> In such an image as "the wan grassy sea" from "Waltz" in Facade, both processes are taking place simultaneously, the poet's visionary energy moving both inward to the spiritual essence at the core of the individual entity, and outward to embrace the spiritually significant design of the whole of creation.

For Sitwell, catachresis thus implies two closely related metaphysical postulates. The first is a universe which as a whole and in each and every part is a symbolic manifestation of the divine. The second is that as a spiritually unified organism, such a cosmos is an "intensive manifold," in which each part is bound up with and implies every other part.<sup>24</sup> Given the unity and ultimate identity of all phenoma in the ground of the spiritual, the language of poetry is by its very nature symbolic, metaphorical and apocalyptic quite simply because that is the way in which



the object world presents itself to the fully awakened  
 "central sense" controlling the artist's consciousness:

To the child and the artist...the roundness  
 of an apple is a portrait of the world,  
 with its bright flashing summer colours;  
 and the kingfisher quivering in its beauty  
 upon a green bough, has the same lovely  
 plumes as the sun. The house and the man  
 who lives in it are equally imbued with life....<sup>25</sup>

Although Sitwell lays her greatest emphasis upon language  
 as the imaginative fruit of individual cognition, she does  
 not ignore the fact that it is also inherited and communal.  
 Language is a "given" which exists prior to its employment  
 by any single person and which is used by the poet not  
 merely to embody his own vision, but also to communicate  
 with an audience. This matter may be put in McLuhanesque  
 terms by saying that just as language as "medium" is an  
 externalization of the central imaginative system, so man  
 is in turn conditioned by his words to become their "servo-  
 mechanism."<sup>26</sup> The bias of Edith Sitwell's criticism towards  
 minute analyses of texture, and her impatience with poets  
 whom she considers to be deficient in this respect, are  
 both attributable to the fact that she sees poetry in terms  
 of this dynamic interplay of mind and "medium." In a  
 great poem, even "the accident of a rhyme calls forth a  
 planetary system from the shadow."<sup>27</sup> Conversely, an

insensitivity to texture and conventionality of diction and imagery reflect the dullness or inertia of the writer's sensibility. To Sitwell, bad poetry is the result of mental timidity, lethargy or conformism, in which the reactions of the central imaginative system are governed by predetermined, conventional responses. Because our consciousness is ultimately regulated by our imagination, such "programmed" responses act as a veil or censor, either dulling our sensory awareness, or falsifying it by channelling it into conventional modes of seeing and hearing:

The senses of many people are practically unused - not through their fault but because they have been taught that inherited ideas are the best. The result of this is that there is no connection between their senses and their brain, and it irritates them excessively when these are brought into relation with each other.<sup>28</sup>

Since the senses are the "chief inlets of Soul" their sterilization by predetermined modes of thought and perception renders the latter impervious to change. Similarly, the language of bad poetry, by confirming the mind in its conventional responses, helps to render it a closed or "feedback" system, fossilized in its spiritual inertia and its established habits of perception. In this manner the sensibility can be lulled by bad poetry into a state of infantile acquiescence, moulded by it into reactionary modes

of thought, feeling and action, and, worst of all, conditioned to accept a world which is sterile and out of contact with fundamental human realities. In Poetry and Criticism Sitwell suggests how bad establishment poetry has falsified both the intellectual and emotional life of the public:

For at least, in centuries of which we speak, poetry was...not...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 the flimsy, unshaped outpourings of an emotion which would shame men in real life....<sup>29</sup>

In his reading of Ulysses, Hugh Kenner suggests that for Joyce dead verbiage functions as a sort of spiritual contraceptive.<sup>30</sup> The interposition of this linguistic "diaphragm" between the mind and reality prevents the "begetting" of concepts, and thus forestalls mental life and growth. Kenner's suggestive remark provides a useful approach to Sitwell's view of both the proper use and the abuse of literary language. As a reflection of the dynamic congress of the mind's divinely inspired powers of perception and creation with a universe which is "charged" with nouminous vitality, the language of genuine poetry possesses both the energy and the scope of what is loosely termed "life." Both the interaction of the various elements within the internal structure of a good poem, and also its effect upon

the mind of its audience, are most accurately described in terms of the biological processes of generation and growth. For example, in the introduction to her Collected Poems, Edith Sitwell states of her own poetry that she is striving for a "vital language - each word possessing an infinite power of germination."<sup>31</sup> Such a "vital language," by virtue of the intense stimulation which it affords to the imagination, will excite in the reader a "growth of consciousness" which will enlarge his awareness of both physical and spiritual realities. This fuller perception will in turn result in a further mental growth:

To put it in a nutshell - one of the principal aims of the new poets is to increase consciousness.... It is,...to give us increased vitality and a more passionate sense of life and power for living.... All this enriches life, it adds experience ...it will eventually increase the consciousness of the race.<sup>32</sup>

Ultimately, then, good and bad poetic language are expressions of the life or death of the human soul. One mirrors and stimulates an imaginative fertility which draws upon the vitality of a nature instinct with God's own creative power. The other reflects and reinforces the sterilizing effect of a dead convention which seals off the mind from the sources of spiritual life and growth.

Of all poetic forms the lyric, reflecting directly as

it does the creative and subversive energies of the poet's unconscious mind, is potentially the most vitalizing to the imagination. In terms of Edith Sitwell's own aesthetic, the incantatory babble of the lyric is texture, the apocalyptic dance of concrete language in spiritual motion. Metaphorical doodle is the radical imagery which in penetrating to the physical essence of phenomena reveals their sacramental and microcosmic character as cells in a divine organism. In her essay "Modern Values" (1928), Sitwell suggests that, when opposed to the fundamental presuppositions of the modern West, such lyric revelation and the spiritual growth which it inspires are profoundly revolutionary. The two "values" upon which the whole structure of contemporary society rests are mechanical speed and a materialistic obsession with money, values which are antithetical to those of the artist, who "creates...real 'desirabilities,' working in a spiritual world, and bringing his values from spiritual sources."<sup>33</sup> The continuance of the intellectual, economic and social orders which presently prevail is quite literally dependent upon the deadening of man's imagination, whether deliberately or by default. The reign of a mechanistic technology and of an economy of wasteful over-consumption is contingent upon the blinding

of the human mind by materialism. The continuance of the stuffy conservatism of bourgeois convention, and of the mechanized routine essential to an industrial economy, similarly demand that the imagination be staled by custom and shackled by inflexible regulation. In this situation the lyric poet, who stimulates spiritual vision and the creative vitality of the imagination, is a far more dangerous radical than the bomb-tossing Bolshevik.

Because contemporary society depends upon the deadness of the human imagination, it finds as firm an ally in the bad poet as it does an intractable enemy in the great. Sitwell's scathing attack in Aspects of Modern Poetry (1934) upon the "threadbare" quality of the thought and expression of the "respectable" poetry of the years 1890-1920<sup>34</sup> thus reflects much more than an aesthetic objection to vulgarity and artistic incapacity. On the one hand, as has been suggested, the deadness of bad modern poetry promotes a debility which is essential to the continuance of modern society. On the other, the inferior verse of the era is a direct reflection of the assumptions and conventions which have sterilized the mind of Western man, preconceptions which deaden the imagination all the more effectively because their materialistic basis denies the mind's spiritual

sources of life and growth. "Establishment" verse is thus both a reflection and a prop of the spiritual foundations of modern society. In her bitter denunciation of the "frightened rush" of the poets of the late Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian periods "to conform to the point of view of the Man in the Street, to provide a simple dress for his simple thoughts, with simple gloves to protect his hands from the touch of raw life,"<sup>35</sup> Sitwell is really attacking contemporary society at its roots.

As mere versified sentimentality or platitude, whose sterile mental conformism is reflected technically in the "dead and expected"<sup>36</sup> patterns of its texture and imagery, the "establishment" poetry against which Sitwell levels her critical guns constitutes an inversion of the radical imaginative purpose of true lyric poetry, which is to stimulate a "growth of consciousness" by bringing the mind into contact with a divinely inspired nature. This point is made with particular address in Dame Edith's wicked parody of poetic namby-pamby in the "Jodelling Song" from Facade:

'We bear velvet cream,  
Green and babyish  
Small leaves seem; each stream  
Horses' tails that swish,

In "Jodelling Song," the imaginatively vitiating conventionality of an effeminized Romantic nature-worship and of

the Victorian poetaster's mawkish effusions of romantic and domestic sentiment is highlighted by means of the poet's witty juxtaposition of the natural with a world of sentimental and trivial artifice. This contrast is beautifully epitomized in the atmosphere of a fashionable Swiss mountain resort, in which the guests are carefully insulated from the beauty and grandeur of the surrounding scenery by a liberal application of the ersatz, the maudlin and the trivial. The unholy conspiracy of a comfortable middle-class conformism to smother the human spirit in saccharine is reflected not only in the imagery of "Jodelling Song," but also in the poem's deliberately effete rhythms and texture.

The flaccid quality of both the imagery and the sound-patterns of "Jodelling Song" constitutes a parody of the debilitated babble and doodle of a pseudo-lyrical "establishment" verse which is profoundly anti-lyrical in its effect. Such an anti-lyricism, which maintains a superficial impression of "song" through its liberal use of stale convention, is appropriately answered by means of a lyrical "anti-lyric," in which babble and doodle are wildly exaggerated so as to shatter what Jack Lindsay terms the "phoney harmonies"<sup>37</sup> arising from the employment of "dead



and expected" patterns in form and content. Such lyric exaggeration is evident throughout Sitwell's early poetry, but it is particularly noticeable in the "heightened" rhythms and images of Facade.

As "Jodelling Song" suggests through its ironic reference to a resort in which "Ganymede sells drinks," and "angels' eggs" are "Sold by the dozen," the lyrical hyperbole of Facade has an integral relationship with the imaginatively galvanizing mythopoeia which constitutes an important part of Romantic radicalism. It is worth noting in this regard that one reason for Sitwell's attack on the Georgian verse which she singles out for special condemnation as an example of lifeless poetic conservatism is that it represents a debilitation of the Wordsworthian side of the English Romantic tradition:

The poetry of to-day has been much debased by the sub-Wordsworthian ideals... [of the Georgians]... in the verse of that time... the praise of worthy home life alternated with swollen inflated boomings and roarings about the Soul of Man. These reigned triumphant, together with healthy, manly, but rather raucous shouts for beer, and advertisements of certain rustic parts of England.... Yet, in spite of this, the business man's careful logic was never absent, combined... with the innocence of the country clergyman.... 38

Such poetic vitiation is really a parody and a negation of

this weltgeist endows creation with the unity and vitality of a living organism. Within the matrix of this cosmic organism, every part of the universe is interconnected in a nexus with every other part. Moreover, because the essential core of all entities is the same Divinity, there obtains a radical ontological equality and identity of all beings. Each part of the universe not merely implies and incorporates every other part, but also embodies the cosmic whole. Besides their universal or microcosmic character as cells in a sacramental organism, all beings are endowed through the dynamic immanence of the Godhead with a capacity for activity and growth. Not only is each entity alive in itself, but it also interacts genetically with other beings, thereby contributing to the life which is possessed by the cosmos as an animated whole. The vitality and continual renewal of the universal organism constitute a sacramental revelation of God's creative energy and of His providential love for all of His creatures.

Because it acts as a revelation of God's creative power and of His providential purpose, nature is at the same time an ideal work of art or model for the poet, and an ideal society or pattern for human culture as a whole. As Facade suggests obliquely through its burlesque mythopoeia,

this syzygy of grace, nature and civilization lies at the basis of Sitwell's aesthetic. In working from this serious religious premise, it follows that even as a comedian and satirist, Sitwell regards herself as a seer and a prophet, and her art as a revelation. The purpose of her poetic prophecy is to harmonize society with God by bringing it into communion with His Self-revelation and Self-expression in His creation. In Sitwell's early satiric works such as Facade<sub>5</sub> this aim is approached indirectly. It is achieved not only through a simple attack upon a dead social order, but also, as we have seen in our discussions of "Pedagogues" and "Clowns' Houses," through a depiction of the modern world in terms which simultaneously negate and yet suggest the divinely appointed order of nature.

Because she takes the dynamic organism of nature as a model for the ideal society, Sitwell in Facade<sub>5</sub> satirizes the modern world not so much from the viewpoint of the moral categories of good and evil as from the basis of the more inclusive concepts of spiritual death and vitality.<sup>39</sup> Hell appears in several of the Facade<sub>3</sub> poems, but in all of these it is related to spiritual lifelessness rather than to sin as it has been traditionally understood.<sup>40</sup> In "En Famille," for example, the lot of the damned is ironically depicted

as an imprisonment in a straitjacket of bourgeois propriety which renders all self-expression and spiritual growth impossible:

The Admiral said, 'You could never call--  
I assure you it would not do at all!  
She gets down from table without saying "Please,"  
Forgets her prayers, and to cross her T's,  
In short, her scandalous reputation  
Has shocked the whole of the Hellish nation;

The dead and restrictive ritual of polite earthly society really constitutes a sort of Hell, isolating man from God and nature, and condemning him to a state of spiritual death-in-life.

The spiritual nature of the earthly Hell is intimated particularly in Facade<sup>3</sup> by Dame Edith's ironic manipulation of the image of the sea, an important Romantic symbol of potentiality and renewal.<sup>41</sup> In a number of the poems in Facade<sup>3</sup>, as was the case in "Pedagogues," the sea is described by means of conceits by which it is reduced to the level of a dead and trivial artifice. In "En Famille" we have a "peruked sea," in "Sir Beelzebub" "the sea's blue wooden gendarmerie," in the "Trio for Two Cats and a Trombone" the "castanetted sea" and in "Hornpipe" the "breakers' rocking-horses." By her use of such blatantly anti-natural imagery, the poet is once more hinting that the root of the contemporary Hell lies in the straitened vision of spiritually

wizened modern man, who diminishes and deadens everything under his control by constraining it within the narrow compass of the synthetic and the conventional.

The sea-imagery in Facade<sup>5</sup> suggests the way in which the contemporary world parodies the divinely appointed order of nature in being an empty artifice as opposed to a spiritually inspired organism. Rather than expressing the creative plenitude of the Divinity, the material order as modern man has recreated it is a series of brightly painted surfaces which only partially conceal the metaphysical vacuum behind them. As Dame Edith suggests in "The Bat," the facade from which her satirical series takes its title is the existential wall of an incomprehension which masks nothingness. This "Castle wall" of the ultimate Shade" has, however, been intentionally erected by the modern world for its own self-protection. As a deliberate defence against Tillich's abyss of non-being,<sup>42</sup> the facade of contemporary culture has a subjective counterpart in all of the various acts which modern man ritually performs in a futile attempt to allay his metaphysical terror. Facade<sup>5</sup> is on one level theatre of the absurd, and, like Beckett in Waiting for Godot, Sitwell uses the stage as a metaphor for various forms of existential inauthenticity. In fact, the puppet

and the clown can be regarded as the dominant underlying metaphors for man in Facade.<sup>43</sup> The puppet is Dame Edith's symbol of the spiritual lifelessness of modern man, reduced to a dead mechanism which passively and unconsciously responds to the pull of physical instinct, determinism and chance. The clown, whose brightly painted face and hysterical laughter barely conceal "the limitless darkness of his mind,"<sup>44</sup> represents those more sensitive souls who are aware of the gulf of nothingness within, but who are unable to muster any response beyond the public mask of a tormented gaiety:

[In Stravinsky's Petrouchka,] there is one short march, quick and terrible, in which the drum-taps are nothing but the anguished beat of the clown's heart as he makes his endless battle against materialism. And we know that we are watching our own tragedy. Do we not all know that little room at the back of our poor clown's booth - that little room with the hopeful tinsel stars and the badly-painted ancestral portrait of God? Have we not all battered our heads through the flimsy paper walls - only to find blackness?<sup>45</sup>

As Ralph Mills suggests, both the supineness of the puppet and the agonized existential awareness of the clown provoke in Sitwell's audience a grotesque mixture of irony, fear and pathos, a "terrible gaiety" which underlines the tragic absurdity of modern man's futile attempt to evade the

nothingness which he himself has created.<sup>46</sup> Our incongruous emotional reaction to the metaphysical plight of the characters in Facade<sub>5</sub> is heightened by the poet's evocation of the lower theatrical modes such as the music-hall and the harlequinade.<sup>47</sup> The humor of the "low" theatre, with its liberal use of farce and its elements of exaggeration and stylization, degrades its characters to caricatures of true humanity which are at times simultaneously laughable and pathetic, and at others both ludicrous and sinister. The blatant theatricality of Facade<sub>5</sub> thus emphasizes how modern man, in denying both God and nature, has reduced his civilization and his humanity to absurd negations teetering on the brink of non-existence.

Not only does the world of Facade<sub>5</sub> substitute nothingness for the divine plenitude which substantiates nature, but in its dead dissociation it is also antithetical to the vitality, unity and the ontological democracy of the cosmic organism. Entities are no longer equal as cells in a sacramental body which is instinct in every part with divine vitality. Rather, they are in the process of rapidly crumbling to the dead sameness of the "dust," the disconnected, lifeless aggregation of featureless atoms into which matter disintegrates without the vivifying and

and consolidating presence of the Godhead. Short of the equality of the "dust," in which the chaos which preceded God's original act of creation has returned, there is no effective principle of order and unity left in the modern world. Such anarchy has not only an ontological, but also an epistemological significance. Instead of an "intensive manifold" in which every being is infinitely meaningful because it implies both God and every other entity, the divided world of Facade<sub>6</sub> is one in which each phenomenon exists in inconsequential isolation. Thus, Dame Edith says of the first version of "Said King Pompey" that it "deliberately guttered down into...meaninglessness."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, in her kaleidoscopic employment in Facade<sub>3</sub> of words and thought which "clash into a protesting combination," Sitwell is deliberately negating sense in order to depict the ultimate absurdity of a world which lacks any principle of meaningful order. However, the dissociation which pertains in the world of Facade<sub>3</sub> not only deprives the individual entity of any significance. Along with the shell of empty convention by which it is hidden and yet propagated, such anarchy also counteracts the fertilizing interconnection which brings about both the vitality and rebirth of nature and the growth of the human spirit. As



Sitwell suggests in the ending of the second version of "Said King Pompey," the vitalizing interaction of elements within the cosmic organism has ultimately been replaced in contemporary society by a destructive "clash" of warring polarities which is rapidly reducing civilization to ruins.

The vital order and unity of the cosmic organism also possesses an antitype in the inflexible routine imposed by the machine age. The incongruous combination of an iron-clad order with frenetic activity which is enforced by the all-pervasive mechanization of contemporary life is reproduced in the dance-rhythms of many of the Facade poems:

If you ask why rhythms have become more violent, the answer is: that this is an age of machinery - a wild race for time, confined within limits that are at once mad and circumscribed. Try to get out, and you knock your head against the walls of materialism. This state of things is mirrored in modern syncopated dance music, which removes music from the world of inspiration, which evolves itself organically from the inner need of the artist, and brings it into the world of machinery where form is super-imposed as a logical idea. There is no time or space in which to dream. It is because of this that in these poems [i.e. Facade] which deal with the world crumbling to dust, with materialism building monstrous shapes out of the deadened dust, I, for one, use the most complicated dance rhythms which could be found....<sup>49</sup>

Such rhythms reflect the deadening of human consciousness

by the rigid and endlessly repeated routine of an industrial society or, alternatively, its disintegration under the pressures of a breathless pace of activity. The "beat" of the modern dance, with its mechanistic travesty of the ancient sacred dances which mimic the organic rhythms of nature, also suggest the sterility of a movement which ends exactly where it begins, and thus precludes growth or even real change. Moreover, as a reflection of "an orchestra where each player is on his own, straining to break up this inorganic whole of many units by taking an independent course - but bound together in an ensemble...by the iron necessity of a common rhythm,"<sup>50</sup> modern dance suggests that the unyielding regularity of the machine in fact promotes chaos in the very act of imposing a superficial order.

Facade<sub>5</sub> is thus like T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land" in depicting the modern world in terms of an inversion of a divinely inspired natural organism, which in turn constitutes the basis of a spiritually authentic culture. The wasteland world as travesty functions primarily as an instrument of satiric condemnation, but it does so only by implying its opposite. The satire in Facade<sub>5</sub> is visionary and idealistic as well as ironic, and its lyric impulse accordingly cuts two ways at once. One of several functions of Sitwell's

babble and doodle is to provide us with an image of a modern world which has become at the same time demonic and absurd. This image is heightened by what we may term "hyper-lyricism" to the point of a caricature in which its own disproportioning and inversion of the divine dispensation is made manifest. Babble and doodle, aural and visual perception are in some instances intensified in Facade<sup>5</sup> to a pitch at which the senses are over-stimulated and their imaginative harmony is destroyed. The poet's manic technique implies both the spiritual insanity of modern man and the madness of his world, each of which exists in a servo-mechanistic relationship to the other. In "I Do Like to be Beside the Seaside," for example, we are tossed upon a mechanized rhythm which moves at a breathless pace and is violently modulated. Our ears are assaulted with imbroglios of alliteration, assonance, dissonance and rhyme, in which both variation and repetition come so hard and so fast as to throw the aural sensibility out of kilter:

When

Don

Pasquito arrived at the seaside  
 Where the donkey's hide tide brayed, he  
 Saw the banditto Jo in a black cape  
 Whose slack shape waved like the sea--  
 Thetis wrote a treatise noting wheat is silver  
     like the sea; the lovely cheat is sweet as  
     foam; Erotis notices that she

highly wrought artifice implies the way in which the sensitive spirit is made continually aware of the gulf of absurdity behind the contemporary façade. The poet's lyric clash likewise mirrors both modern society's ontological and epistemological negation of the organic unity of nature, and also the resulting war of opposites which is reducing civilization to "dust." Finally, Dame Edith's union of a kaleidoscopic combination of jarring sounds and images with iron-clad rhythms suggests how a mechanistic routine, far from producing life and growth, merely modulates or drives anarchy and disintegration. The lyric technique of Facade<sub>3</sub> thus in many instances reflects and reinforces the whole of the poet's complex parody of organic nature. Its general effect on this negative level of significance is to create a spiritual vertigo by which the mind is pitched through a shattered universe into a "limitless darkness."

Viewing the matter of lyric technique from the opposite side of the poet's double perspective, Facade<sub>3</sub> can be seen as a sly anti-pastoral, in which the "harmonious numbers" and the Edenic spontaneity and freshness of imagery which characterize traditional lyric ecstasy are satirically transmogrified into an image of Hell. However, just because

... the typical modes of the  
"song of innocence," it strongly implies its antitype. As Jack Lindsay suggests, the lyric impetus which in Facade<sub>3</sub> drives us towards nihilism could at any moment rebound towards a paradisaal rhapsody.<sup>52</sup> We are at least sublimely aware that the babble and riddle which in Facade<sub>3</sub> constitutes an anti-statement mirroring the "crisis of meaninglessness" in the modern world are at the same time manifestations of the subversive yet creative wit of the subconscious. In "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," Sitwell informs us that the Facade<sub>3</sub> poems represent a deliberate "plunge" into the "chaos" of the unconscious mind.<sup>53</sup> The purpose of this potentially dangerous venture is to break down sterile, conventional patterns of awareness into fragments, thereby releasing the energy latent in their constituents so as to create a new and more vital order. As Dame Edith suggests by her assertion that the "accident" of even a single one of her rhymes could for the sensitive reader conjure up a whole "planetary system" from the "shadow," the apparently arbitrary wit of Facade<sub>3</sub> is not simply fanciful. Its ultimate purpose is to imply the existence of a revolutionary and redemptive imaginative energy which possesses the capacity to "dissolve, diffuse, dissipate" the dead order of

modern society in order to "recreate" it as a vital unity in accord with the divinely inspired world-organism.<sup>54</sup>

On one level Sitwell's lyric technique in Facade<sup>5</sup> shows that way in which she shares with Blake and Shelley the serious revolutionary purpose of attacking a moribund spiritual and cultural order. However, the combination of comedy and imaginative radicalism in the babble and doodle of Facade<sup>5</sup> creates a poetic stance of considerable subtlety and complexity, in which the apocalyptic is mediated through the ironic. As Blake's Marriage of Heaven and Hell brilliantly illustrates, satiric fantasy of the sort created by the lyric hyperbole of Facade<sup>5</sup> can be as highly effective an expression of the revolutionary imagination as propagandistic broadsides or prophetic condemnation. In its ironic interchange of the spiritual roles of the heavenly and the demonic, Blake's satiric prophecy suggests a further dimension of complexity in the lyric comedy of Facade<sup>5</sup>. Implicit in the "satanism" of The Marriage of Heaven and Hell is the notion that in a society which constitutes a perversion or a reversal of the divine dispensation, God Himself goes "underground" to become a subversive force. In such negative circumstances, He manifests Himself in a form which is paradoxically unlike Himself, but which is

ironically appropriate to the inverted spiritual perspective of a wilfully blind and sterile civilization. It is obvious that the "underground" God suggested by Blake's satire is closely analogous to the forces of subconscious creativity which Frye sees as the source of lyric association. In fact, the satiric babble and doodle of Facade constitute a peculiarly fitting voice for such a Divinity or for His prophets.

A characteristic form of the archetypal figure of the disguised God or disguised prophet which is especially appropriate to the comic yet apocalyptic lyricism of Facade is the clown or fool-satirist, whose subversive ridicule is intended to amuse, irritate or bludgeon respectable citizens into a new way of feeling, thinking and seeing. The radical fool is the ideal prophet for the self-satisfied Philistine. His anti-language of irony and parody and nonsense is, as Lewis Carroll demonstrates, the proper reply to a world of pompous but hollow solemnity:

'Do not take a bath in Jordan,

Gordon,

On the holy Sabbath, on the peaceful day!'  
Said the huntsman, playing on his old bagpipe,  
Boring to death the pheasant and the snipe--55

Lewis Carroll writes ostensibly for children, and, as Frye's association of the lyric with the infantile suggests, the

naughty child is another form of the disguised prophet especially germane to Facade. In a society whose spiritual authority is vulnerable to pin-pricks in direct proportion to its inflated emptiness, the high-spirited and mischievous child with the subversive irrelevance, exaggeration and irreverence of his babble and riddle can like the clown function satirically as a "mighty prophet." The gaiety and naughtiness of his half-nonsensical effusions can be a profoundly serious and even terrible unmasking of the inauthenticity of the adult world. This is seen, for example, in the poem "One O'Clock," in which the apparently nonsensical levity of a light nursery rhyme in fact reflects the mental torpor and irrelevance which blind us to the tragic facts of history. The sack of Troy is imminent, but Priam is snoozing in blissful oblivion of his impending doom:

And Time is a-boring  
 From Troy to Great Snoring.  
 But Time, the grey mouse,  
 Can't wake up the house,  
 For old King Priam  
 Is sleepy as I am!

The combination of whimsical humor and Cassandra-like prophecy in "One O'Clock" suggests that the inversion of conventional spiritual perspectives in Romantic radicalism can lead not only to the satanist and the revolutionary prophet,



but also to the impish child and to the satiric clown. The naughty child and the fool-prophet are such potent satirists not only because of the deadly efficiency of their ironic facetiousness. Their stance is also effective because they attack a fallen and purblind society, albeit indirectly, from the transcendental perspective of a radical innocence. The ironic and apocalyptic effect of Facade<sub>3</sub> is ultimately analogous to that of Blake's "Auguries of Innocence," in which the apparent trivia of a fallen world are seen through the eyes of the child-like spirit in the full horror of their demonic opposition to the divine purpose. Sitwell's stance is of course much less overtly prophetic than that of Blake in the "Auguries of Innocence." However, there is already implicit beneath the poet's lyric high jinks her two opposed yet inseparable visions of the fallen world of modern experience and the oracular innocence which graces the childhood of both the individual and the race.<sup>56</sup> It is from this spiritual contrast that there in turn arises the "fearful symmetry" of Dame Edith's later poetry, a transcendent synthesis of good and evil in a divinely appointed order of reconciliation and redemption.

However, in order to achieve a balanced view of the place of Facade<sub>3</sub> in Edith Sitwell's spiritual and artistic

evolution, it is necessary to emphasize the limitations as well as the achievements of the poet's stance or ironist and satirist. Even with its apocalyptic and revolutionary connotations, the satire of Facade<sub>5</sub> turns essentially upon a contrast of a dead society and a spiritually vital universe. This antithesis, while highly effective in the mainly negative task of attacking modern society's alienation from a divinely appointed ideal, suggests only obliquely the means of the contemporary world's redemption. Moreover, Sitwell's negative and indirect method of coping with the problems of her world suggests that she is herself not entirely free from the spiritual prison which it has created. Without the most unequivocal of attachments to a transcendental system of values, the rebel who attacks a particular social order is in danger of becoming a mere servo-mechanism to that order. The satiric method of Facade<sub>5</sub>, in placing the world which Sitwell attacks in the foreground, while relegating the spiritual basis of that attack to an essentially secondary position, reveals a dangerous ambivalence in the poet's spiritual stance. To put the matter in relatively abstract theological terms, Sitwell in Facade<sub>5</sub> is aware of the two poles of negative and positive spiritual knowledge which arise with the Fall, and

of their essential opposition. However, she is herself caught upon the horns of this antithesis. The next stages of Sitwell's imaginative development accordingly consist of a movement by which the poet frees herself from any involvement with the materialism of the contemporary world, and attaches herself unambiguously to a higher value-system. It is this movement with which the two following chapters of this study will be concerned.

## CHAPTER III

## THE CRISIS OF TIME

Between the appearance of her Facade<sup>5</sup> and the virtual cessation of her poetic activity in 1933, Edith Sitwell published four long poems in which her crisis of spiritual alienation is pushed to a climax and at least partially resolved. These four poems (The Sleeping Beauty, 1924; Elegy on Dead Fashion, 1926; "Metamorphosis," 1928; and "Gold Coast Customs," 1929-1930) not only belong together as steps in a single spiritual movement, but also share certain distinctive features of approach and technique. All four pieces deal with metaphysical and social problems of the utmost seriousness, but all for the most part abjure either a discursive presentation of their themes or the language of philosophy and propaganda. The cruxes which Sitwell discusses in her four poems are issues so fundamental as to involve the whole person. Their roots extend so deep into her personality that they embrace passion as well as reason, the unconscious as well as the conscious level of mental activity.<sup>1</sup> As Ralph J. Mills, Jr. has suggested, the poems under discussion mark the stages of a symbolic

descent into a terrible underworld in quest of a divine wisdom.<sup>2</sup> As such, it would be facile to judge these pieces according to the canons of clarity and consistency appropriate to empirical, rational or narrative modes of exposition. Rather than employing methods proper to discourse, Sitwell deals with her difficulties poetically in terms of an imaginative and religious symbolism which is both richly sensuous and complex in its connotations. The poet's expression of her spiritual crisis in terms of an imagery which Jung would see as belonging to the "archetypal" unconscious is in accord with the mythopoeic or dream-structure of her four poems.<sup>3</sup> All of these pieces display the logic or non-logic of emotional and imaginative association which characterizes primitive mythology, folk and fairy stories, dream and fantasy, and the literary mode which Northrop Frye terms "romance."<sup>4</sup> They are characterized sometimes by a phantasmal succession of apparently unrelated images, which combine unexpected and apparently inexplicable transitions with seemingly incongruous associations. On other occasions, these poems display the obsessive repetition of symbols characteristic of the fixated dreamer who is examining and attempting to resolve his deepest psychic problems. What Freud would

aptly term the "dream-work"<sup>5</sup> of Sitwell's four poems creates an organic imaginative architecture in which meaning is for the most part conveyed by a grammar of symbolic images. Form and significance arise from a genetic interaction of symbols inspired by the play of a Romantic imagination which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates"<sup>6</sup> the phenomenal realm of normal conscious experience in order to recreate the world in terms of a religious awareness centering around the archetypal spiritual states of a paradisaal innocence, fall and redemption. In her spiritual quest, the poet laments the lost Golden Age of her own personal childhood and of the race, confronts and passes through the demonic nightmare created by a fallen mind and a fallen civilization, and finally makes her way to the paradisaal dream of a recovered innocence. This new innocence is more secure than that of man's spiritual childhood because it is based upon a honest recognition and a hard-won transcendence of the terrible facts of evil and suffering.

The series of lengthy poems from The Sleeping Beauty to "Gold Coast Customs" are important not only in marking a critical stage in Sitwell's spiritual and artistic evolution, but also in foreshadowing the final results of that process. As has been suggested, Dame Edith's poetic

development when viewed as a whole will be seen to be teleological, and even such apparently metamorphic disjunctions as that between the poetry written before and after her long silence during the Thirties appear on close examination to be steps in a process of organic unfolding. The four poems to be discussed in the next two chapters not only illustrate the major tendencies which the poet's imagination was to follow in the work published after 1940, but also the main outlines of the mythopoeic vision underlying the mature poetry.

As is the case with the later poetry, the vision of the pieces to be discussed in the following two chapters is rooted in a perception of all experience in terms of the conflict and reconciliation of polar opposites.<sup>7</sup> Among the most important expressions of this basic awareness are the treatment in The Sleeping Beauty of individual or personal time as a fall from innocence into experience, and the analogous vision in Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis" of historical or racial time as a degeneration from a Golden Age of elegance, innocence and spiritual and physical vitality into the modern "wasteland" world of superficiality, artifice and deadness.<sup>8</sup> In the Eden of childhood and of the Golden Age, all of the polar opposites upon which the

sensibility of modern man is crucified were still undifferentiated. Among these contraries are Creator and creation, civilization or art and nature, subject and object, moral law and natural instinct, the physical and the spiritual, past, present and future, and life and death. Just as Sitwell's crisis of alienation in the poems under discussion is based upon the fall of both her own personal sensibility and that of the culture around her into the bitter spiritual experience of such contradictions, so its resolution begins with the reconciliation of opposites in a higher synthesis. In "Metamorphosis," Sitwell's perception of time as linear degeneration is subsumed in a vision of a cyclical process of transformation in which the contraries of life and death, growth and decay, evolution and atavism are atoned as mutually interdependent stages of an endlessly repeated cyclical process. In "Gold Coast Customs," the division of a fallen society into rich and poor, exploiter and oppressed, is healed by means of a redemptive judgement of "Rich man Judas"<sup>9</sup> which will pave the way for a just distribution of material wealth. However, the ultimate tendency of Sitwell's synthesizing proclivity extends beyond a simple reconciliation of contraries. As is suggested by the metaphorical telescoping of the space-time-matter



continuum in all of the poems under discussion, her ultimate vision is one of an organic unity which precludes not only contradiction, but even the absolute differentiation of individual entities.

The Sleeping Beauty is a complex symbolic meditation upon one of Edith Sitwell's central themes: degeneration in time as both a result and a reiteration of the Fall of man.<sup>10</sup> This concern is of course a focal point of Romantic sensibility, and The Sleeping Beauty bears a close resemblance to Blake's Book of Thel, Coleridge's "Christabel," Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, and Shelley's "Sensitive Plant." Sitwell's poem is ostensibly a redaction of Perrault's fairy-tale, but in her recasting of his story the narrative element has virtually disappeared. Plot-line is on the one hand buried beneath a rich encrustation of ornamental and symbolic detail. On the other, it is subsumed in what may be termed a musical arabesque,<sup>11</sup> in which motifs appear, vanish and are reiterated in such a way as to weave a complex pattern of resonance through a skilful modulation of harmonies and discords. The Sleeping Beauty is in fact a classic instance of what Joseph Frank terms the "spatial form" of modern literature,<sup>12</sup> a form in which a linear sequence of logically related ideas or

events whose significance unfolds "temporally" is replaced by a "spatial" nexus of ideas and images which can only be perceived in retrospect as an imaginative whole. Like Ulysses or the "Waste Land," The Sleeping Beauty cannot really be read, but only re-read.<sup>13</sup>

The basic themes of The Sleeping Beauty are established in the gardener's song<sup>14</sup> with which the poem both begins and ends. This song consists mostly of a re-working of the Biblical story of Jonah into a symbolic parable concerning the spiritual condition of what may be termed "natural" or in Blake's terms, "vegetated" man.<sup>15</sup> Jonah begins his sea-voyage in search of a "waking, clearer land,"<sup>16</sup> a journey which, to employ an analogy with W.B. Yeats, suggests the spiritual quest of the individual over the sea of flux or "generation" in search of a higher state of illumination which will somehow transcend time and nature.<sup>17</sup> In the case of Jonah, the archetypal quest is a failure. The sea is "sharper than green grass," and rises in "wroth" at the hero "Like the turreted walls of Jerusalem" or the "towers and gables seen/Within a deep-boughed garden green."<sup>18</sup> The sailors will not let Jonah pass, and cast him in the sea to drown. The significance of Jonah's fate is couched in Sitwell's apparently arbitrary associations

of the sea with grass and gardens upon the one hand, and with the walls of Jerusalem upon the other. These similes imply a disjunction between that state and destiny of redeemed Christian man, who is ultimately to be translated into a condition of beatific vision in the "New Jerusalem," and fallen, "vegetated" man for whom the protective garden of an unfallen nature has become an encompassing prison, a monstrous "Leviathan" which is at once a womb and a tomb. For "natural" man the New Jerusalem has, like the lost Eden, become a prison in reverse, a tantalizing yet forbidden enclosure from which he is barred entry. The theme of entrapment in the womb-tomb of nature is reiterated by Sitwell in a more explicit manner in the words which close the gardener's song:

And oh, far best," the gardener said,  
 "Like fruits to lie in your kind bed,-  
 To sleep as snug as in the grave  
 In your kind bed, and shun the wave,  
 Nor ever sigh for a strange land  
 And songs no heart can understand."19

This passage suggests William Blake's conception of natural man as a spiritual "seed,"<sup>20</sup> who can either grow into the realm of revelation and grace, or else remain buried in the material world in a state of unfulfilled potentiality. As the gardener's closing comment upon Jonah's fate implies,

the individual who remains in this condition of latency in the womb-tomb of nature can with equal truth be regarded as undeveloped or dead, as either an embryo or a corpse. The ultimate destiny of Sitwell's Sleeping Beauty is to be perpetually retarded in this state of spiritual somnolence, in which she is all but absorbed into the inanimate and soulless lump of dead matter towards which fallen nature is perpetually striving.

As a poem about a soul in a state of suspended animation, The Sleeping Beauty bears a certain resemblance to William Blake's Book of Thel. This likeness is not limited to spiritual or metaphysical matters, but also extends to the psychological plane. The arrested development of Sitwell's heroine, like that of Thel,<sup>21</sup> is sexual as well as spiritual. Whether Dame Edith consciously intended it or not, The Sleeping Beauty is a very "Freudian" poem, whose imagery is full of subtle yet pervasive erotic overtones. Thus the gardener's song, in which the old man plays his bagpipe "To make the melon's gold seeds ripe,"<sup>22</sup> conveys through its connection of the obviously phallic symbol of the pipes with an image which evokes a body swollen with pregnancy, the frankly sexual character of the primitive fertility rites. Such intimations of male potency and female fruition

are, however, in apparent ironic contrast with the gardener's advice, which on a sexual level implies either a passive infantile gratification in which libido is satisfied by immersion in the maternal womb, or else a state of chastity in which the "seeds" of reproduction lie unused in the generative organs. As is the case in the poetry of William Blake, such suspended or frustrated sexuality is for Sitwell a death-symbol.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, however, the fulfilment of sexuality has in The Sleeping Beauty paradoxically the same negative connotations as its frustration. On one level, The Sleeping Beauty is a poem of the "romantic agony,"<sup>24</sup> with its identification of the womb with the grave, and of sexuality with death. Such a negative view of erotic passion is, however, essentially symbolic of Dame Edith's concern with the entrapment of the human psyche in nature, which is par excellence the world of generation.<sup>25</sup> The oneness of physical love and death is really an expression of the tragic fact that in nature all fertility, life and growth, is ultimately a movement towards death. In The Sleeping Beauty natural time is circular in the purely negative sense of an entrapment in a state of nightmare death-in-life, a fact which is suggested by the placing of the gardener's song at both the beginning and the end of Sitwell's poem.

Because he possesses unique psychic endowments which include a consciousness of himself and of his surroundings, the imprisonment of man in the cyclical time of nature is spiritual and psychological as well as physical. His bodily incarceration in nature's eternal round of "Birth, and copulation, and death"<sup>26</sup> is projected mentally in three psychic states, which can be termed innocence, experience and despair. The first of these, which corresponds to childhood, is treated in Sections 1-11 of The Sleeping Beauty. Sitwell follows Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode in treating the innocence of childhood as a reduplication of the original unfallen condition of man in Eden. However, as the shadows of mortality which are strategically scattered throughout Sections 1-11 suggest, Sitwell in part regards the innocence of childhood negatively as simple ignorance of the hard facts of life. The ironic paradise of the child's negative innocence involves firstly what, in the light of the ultimate destiny of natural man, must be described as a false spiritual consciousness, a deception by the "mirage/Of an eternal beauty that is not."<sup>27</sup> In childhood, nature is seen not as a prison or a tomb, but rather as a beautiful revelation of a protective father-God:<sup>28</sup>

Those were the days when the fleet summer seemed  
 The warmth and infinite loveliness of God,  
 Who cared for us, within a childish heaven  
 We could believe then! Oh the lips and eyes  
 That spoke of some far undimmed paradise!<sup>29</sup>

The child's vision of nature is ironically possible only because of his lack of the knowledge of good and evil, which in terms of the natural world takes the paradoxical form of an awareness of the union of sex and death in the cycle of time. The sexuality of the child is not a tragic self-interment in the womb-tomb of generation, but rather a joyous immersion in a world in which sexual gratification cannot be differentiated from the security provided by parental protectiveness. The natural paradise of sensory and emotional delight presided over by a benevolent avuncular God becomes in Section 1 of The Sleeping Beauty a sexualized garden of "female" fruit. The garden is fructified by a satyr whose psychological disguise as a wise old man does not conceal his role as the erotic father-figure upon whom the female child's libido is projected:

The gardener was old as tongues of nightingales  
 That in the wide leaves tell a thousand Grecian tales  
 And sleep in golden nets of summer light.  
 "Sweet fig," he called me, and would stay the flight  
 Of plums that seemed Jove's golden-feathered rain.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to their twofold suggestion of the erotic father-figure in the gardener and in the Jupiter who seduced Danae, these lines also evoke the maternal in the form of an enveloping womb-world in which all experience is erotic, and all desire is totally gratified. By the time we reach Section 8 of The Sleeping Beauty, such infantile sexuality has developed as far as the idealistically sublimated passion of the nubile virgin on the threshold of womanhood. The etherealized love of early adolescence is ironically related to the cycles of natural time through the image of the beautiful yet fragile and evanescent flower which opens its petals to the fickle and ephemeral softness of the spring weather.

The "spring" of early female adolescence gives way in Sections 11-14 of The Sleeping Beauty to a false "summer" of adult sexual awareness, in which the identity of erotic fulfilment and death becomes apparent. In Section 12, the princess loses a "round compact gold ball,"<sup>31</sup> a fairy-tale motif which suggests not simply the passing of sexual innocence, but also an accompanying loss on both physical and emotional planes of the sense of the self-contained wholeness, perfection and integrity which pertains to childhood. Sex is a form of psychic death in the sense that it destroys



the self-possession of the child, leaving the adolescent personality miserably incomplete. Wholeness can paradoxically only be regained through the further loss of personal integrity which is involved in the physical and emotional giving of the self to another in sexual love. Sections 13-15 develop symbolically the adolescent's traumatic experience of sexuality as a form of self-loss or death. In Section 13, we are introduced to a "reynard-haired Malinn,"<sup>32</sup> a character whose sly coquettishness and continual association with the color red suggest her function as a symbol of a fully awakened, self-conscious female sexuality. In Section 14, Malinn indulges in a sexual fantasy inspired by a hearth whose flames function as a symbolic projection of her own secret desires:

"The purring fire has a bear's dull fur,  
 Its warmth is sticky, dark as a burr....  
 Come drowse, for now there is no eye  
 To watch, no voice to ask me why!  
 All night I hear my animal blood  
 Cry to my youth, 'Come to the wood!'.<sup>33</sup>

The ambiguous connotations of this passage, with its implication that sexual experience is as terrible as it is desirable, are summed up in the image of the fire, which like the epithet "reynard-haired" and the symbolic color red, implies that love is not simply a matter of creative personal fulfilment, but also of the destruction and death

of the self. Sitwell's vision of the essential identity of sex and death is crystallized in the symbolism of the remainder of Section 14. Immediately after her erotic daydream, Malinn tears her dress upon a thorn, an image which connects the loss of virginity with physical pain and a loss of personal integrity:

She cried out to the naiad: "I have torn  
My flimsy dress upon a thicket's thorn;  
The petal of a briar-rose lies forlorn  
Upon it."<sup>34</sup>

At this point the wicked fairy, Laidronette, appears and offers to spin a new dress for Malinn. No sooner has Malinn accepted her offer than the princess comes, picks up the spindle, pricks her finger and swoons into the sleep induced by the wicked fairy's spell. The close symbolic resemblance between the tearing of Malinn's dress and the piercing of the princess' finger suggests that the two have experienced an identical initiation into the terrible mystery of the oneness of sex and death:

She picks up the spindle, "Oh, the curious bliss!...  
...It pricks my finger now. How strange this is,-  
For I am like that lovely fawn-queen, dead  
Long since, - pierced through the pool-clear heart,"<sup>35</sup>

This sexualized swoon, of which ecstasy and suffering are equally prominent elements, suggests that the psyche of the innocent princess is too delicate to sustain the rending

conjunction of pleasure and pain which characterizes mortal love. The result of her simultaneous experience of fulfillment and death is a withdrawal into a state of traumatic shock in which death is triumphant. Like the flight of Blake's Thel back into the Vales of Har, the endless sleep into which the princess lapses constitutes both a parody of a dream-world of innocence which has been irrevocably lost, and a passive succumbing to the forces of death in a fallen nature.

The sexual themes which are treated in Section 14 of The Sleeping Beauty are in the opening lines of that section placed in the context of the cyclical time of nature:

The birds, strange flashing glints of another life  
Peck at the fruit of summer, that too soon  
Will fade into a little gilded dust.<sup>36</sup>

Love and death are imaginatively fused by Sitwell because sex is the most obvious expression of life in the world of nature, in which all growth and ripening are in the last analysis movements towards death. In the case of man, this temporal movement through sexual awakening towards death is as much a metaphorical process taking place on the psychic and spiritual planes as it is a literal dissipation of physical vitality. The immediate effect of sexual experience is not literally to kill lovers, but rather to

produce in them an intense awareness of mortality. This painful awakening leads in turn to the emotional and spiritual death of a metaphysical despair over the hopeless lot of natural man. Thus, the golden ball which symbolizes the Sleeping Beauty's lost sexual innocence is also for Sitwell an image of "this hard world, grown dry of any love."<sup>37</sup> As such it suggests the inevitable fall of the individual from the illusory paradise of childhood. The nature which for the child seemed a beautiful revelation of a provident God has now become a dead mechanism:

Now that the summer only seems the sad  
Mechanical dull action of the light  
And shadow playing over a dead world -  
Dead as my heart - it seems too long ago  
For the remembrance of the beauty and the  
world we used to know.<sup>38</sup>

This vision of nature as a Godless, lifeless machine is followed in Section 12 by intimations of the futility and falseness of natural man's quest for "worlds we cannot see."<sup>39</sup> These are accompanied by hints of the inevitable decay and death by which he will be swallowed up by the grave of time and matter. The same themes are reiterated with more explicitness and detail in Section 16, in which natural man is seen as being imprisoned both spiritually and physically in the material world. Nature is a "low-hung country of the blind," whose "sensual touch upon the

heart and mind" conceals the spiritual world behind "the dark hairiness of bestial skies."<sup>40</sup> In this state of besotted materialism, not only have the great spiritual truths of Christian revelation been shrivelled to the empty triviality of "a clown's booth seen in some bad dream,"<sup>41</sup> but even the pagan vision of nature as instinct with a spiritual presence has eroded away. The two ruling powers of the natural world as it is perceived by sensual materialistic natural man are a "wingless and bemired"<sup>42</sup> Destiny which is equatable with the corporeal decay produced by time, and a "pig-snouted Darkness"<sup>43</sup> which is of course the death towards which the decay of the body inevitably moves. In the world created by the spiritual blindness of natural man, youth, joy and love are fragile illusions which are quickly dispelled by the terrible awareness of the inevitable corruption and perishing of both body and spirit:

Like harsh and crackling rags of laughter seems  
 The music, bright flung as an angel's hair -  
 Yet awful as the ultimate despair  
 Of angels and of devils.... Something dreams  
 Within the sound that shrieks both high and low  
 Like some ventriloquist's bright-painted show  
 On green grass, shrill as anger, dulled as hate:  
 It shrieks to the dulled soul, "Too late, too late!"  
 Sometimes it jangles thin as the sharp wires  
 Whereon the poor half-human puppets move;  
 Sometimes it flares in foliage like hell's fires,  
 Or whispers insincerities for love.<sup>44</sup>

In these lines we have reiterated the vision and the imagery of Sitwell's early satiric attacks upon modern society.

The perspectives of natural and of contemporary man are one and the same spiritual state, a fact which in turn suggests that Sitwell's problems in The Sleeping Beauty are to be attributed to her personal involvement in the crisis of her age. As we shall see, this point is of considerable importance for an understanding of Elegy on Dead Fashion, "Metamorphosis" and "Gold Coast Customs."

Perhaps the greatest tragedy of man immersed in the womb-tomb of nature is that his unique powers of mind, which render him more acutely aware of himself, his surroundings and of time than any other creature, ultimately serve only to make him agonizingly conscious of his own eventual annihilation. From the emotional and psychological point of view, the despairing youth of Section 16 are already old, being immersed in a painful awareness of death which can only be intensified with the onset of bodily decrepitude. To put the matter another way, man has a unique if unfortunate perspective upon natural time which allows him to perceive the essential unity of its various phases, and thus the ultimate oneness of life and death. It is this unhappy fact which explains Sitwell's ironic

juxtaposition in Sections 1-14 of the innocence of the young princess with the senility and despair of old age.

Just as the negative effect of the passage of time appears in youth primarily in the tragic conjunction of sexuality and death, so the penultimate destruction of man by time in the physical and mental decay of old age is represented by Dame Edith in the form of an intensified yet frustrated sexual desire. Old age is a time of enforced virginity, in which a thwarted libido takes a number of distorted and essentially negative forms. Thus, the malice of the wicked old fairy, Laidronette, towards the princess can be in large part explained as the result of an unfulfilled and therefore jealous lust:

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

And ancient satyrs whose wry wig of roses  
Nothing but little rotting shames discloses.<sup>45</sup>

The crankiness of old Poll Troy, the housekeeper of the princess' palace, is similarly attributable to frustrated eroticism and to sexual envy. The fantasy-experience of Poll with a sexualized fire in Section 22 is obviously meant to be ironically compared with that of Malinn in Section 14. The kindling of a fire by Mrs. Troy represents

really an attempt to revive the flagging passions of youth. The futility of her attempt to whip up her decayed eroticism is suggested ironically in Sitwell's rendering of the episode in terms of a pretty but trivial artifice which is becoming to youth, but more than a little ridiculous in an aging coquette. However, the tone of the passage quickly turns from light irony to horror with the sudden appearance of Laidronette in the fire:

Dead is the pointed flames' small minuet -  
And from the shrilling fire leaps Laidronette.

The ghostly apparition that appeared  
Wagged from her chin a cockatrice's beard;<sup>46</sup>

The hot-house sexuality of age is quite appropriately climaxed by a horrific apparition suggestive of its unnatural depravity. As the song which Laidronette sings from the fire implies, the emotion proper to old age is not desire for life and love, but rather despair over the imminence of death. Old Poll is doomed to frustration and hopelessness, her only emotional outlets being work, anger, jealousy, and a domineering over her unfortunate housemaids.

The frustrated eroticism of old age is only one of several pathetic manifestations of the terrible senility of body and spirit to which man is eventually doomed. In Section 5 of The Sleeping Beauty we are introduced to a



"Dowager Queen" whose only remaining occupations are to read "Latin/Missals"<sup>47</sup> and to listen to the singing of a stuffed parrot. Such a wizened restriction of life to utter triviality is all the more terrible because it is the result not of simple mental incapacity, but rather of the terrible ennui and despair to which the aged are reduced by their ever-increasing impotence of body and spirit. The Dowager Queen has come to a full realization of the tragic plight of man trapped in the cycles of natural time, in which youth is simply a brief prelude to age and death:

But the Dowager Queen shook her old head: .  
 "The rose, the peach, and the quince-flower red  
 And the strawberry flower in the snow are dead.  
 If none of the rose-tribe can survive  
 The snow, then how can our poppet live?"<sup>48</sup>

In these lines, the seasonal symbolism which is one of Sitwell's metaphorical expressions of the entrapment of man in the cycle of natural time, is connected with another metaphor which is of fundamental importance in The Sleeping Beauty. This is the association of humanity with the vegetable world. Like Blake, who describes natural man as "vegetated," Sitwell finds in the plant an ideal image of a life which is completely immersed in nature and utterly dependent upon it. When it is associated with the plight

of man who, as an acutely conscious being, can only become aware of his own imprisonment in the womb-tomb of time and matter, the vegetation image is at once ironic and tragic. It suggests that insofar as he assimilates to nature, man becomes passive and insensate, losing his own unique capacities for feeling, seeing and acting. If, however, he preserves his human identity, he falls into the tragic dilemma of Shelley's sensitive plant, which by its simultaneous existence on the two irreconcilable levels of nature and human awareness is crucified upon the agonizing paradox of a spiritual and physical death-in-life.

Even as a dream-sequence and a work of romance, whose chief attraction is intended to lie in its color and symbolic suggestiveness, The Sleeping Beauty is apt to strike the reader as somewhat lacking in artistic structure. Elegy on Dead Fashion (1926) marks a significant advance in Dame Edith's powers of organization, a gain in tightness and coherence which does not materially restrict the poet's fertile and exuberant imagination. In order to employ principles of structural and thematic organization compatible with her dream-world of mythopoeic imagination, Sitwell makes use both of technique analogous to those of the film,<sup>49</sup> and of a "grammar" of related symbolic images. In

several places in Elegy on Dead Fashion there are sudden shifts of the poet's imaginative "camera-eye" from past to present or from present to past. Such "flashbacks" are part of the imaginative "montage" which characterizes Sitwell's poem, a superimposition which contributes at the same time to two apparently opposite imaginative effects. Upon the one hand, Sitwell's montage creates a sense of an organically unified tradition of art and civilization, while upon the other it emphasizes the contrast being drawn by the poet between a lost ancestral Eden of an apocalyptic innocence and a spiritually degenerate modern culture. The thematic implications of the latter opposition, which is central to the meaning of Elegy on Dead Fashion, are expressed very largely in terms of a nexus of symbols which resembles Robert Graves' "White Goddess."<sup>50</sup> The figure of a nubile maiden and a fertile mother are employed in connection with the vision of man and nature belonging to a pastoral innocence, while that of a devouring hag is associated with a spiritually fallen modern civilization.

The theme of a fall from a pristine innocence into a world of bitter experience is thus associated in Elegy on Dead Fashion not with the development of the individual, but rather with that of the race. To express her sense of

the historical degeneration of humanity, Sitwell turns to the traditional myth of a lost Golden Age. In this Eden of pastoral innocence, human consciousness is not yet dissociated from instinct or passion, and "natural law and moral" are therefore "but one."<sup>51</sup> Life in the Golden Age is simply a matter of spontaneous self-expression, and man lives without the interference of a critical self-awareness. He is accordingly untroubled by frustrated desire or by a sense of guilt.

Because the innocence of the Golden Age consists in an unreflective and untrammelled obedience to natural instinct, it has traditionally been connected with a pastoral state of civilization. In this bucolic setting man lives in intimate association with the vegetable and animal worlds which embody the elemental forces of nature. However, in apparently paradoxical contrast with its primitivistic associations, pastoral literature has traditionally been an affair of elegant artifice, in which the shepherd is seen through the eyes of the urban sophisticate, and often in fact assumes many of his characteristics. Far from attempting to eliminate or smooth over this dichotomy, Sitwell in Elegy on Dead Fashion emphasizes it as heavily as possible by the creation of a "rococo" pastorate populated by

"fashion-plate"<sup>52</sup> nymphs dressed in the elegant styles of the 1840's.<sup>53</sup> The effect of Dame Edith's sartorial pageant is accentuated by its combination with imagery in which nature is rendered in terms of a highly refined artifice:

Manteaux espagnoles by the water's sheen  
Where trees resemble a great pelerine,  
Are spread about the groups upon the lawns  
Smooth as an almond's husk or coats of fawns.

And cavaliers and ladies on the grass  
Watch Chloe and young Damon as they pass,-  
The shepherdess that runs from her swain's kiss  
Through leafy nets in a gown a l'Amadis<sup>54</sup>

Chione, Cleopatra, Boreas' daughters  
Walked beside the stream's drake-plumaged waters  
In crinolines of plaided sarcenet,<sup>55</sup>

Sitwell's metaphorical device of a "violent yolking"<sup>56</sup> of the apparent contrarities of art and nature, of the rustic and the civilized, is so blatant and so pervasive that the poet obviously attaches to it some special significance. In fact, its explanation takes us to the metaphysical basis of her poem. For the purposes of the present discussion, this weltanschuuang is best approached in terms of the "clothes-philosophy" outlined by Herr Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle's Sartor Resartus.<sup>57</sup> Nature, the empirical or phenomenal world of space, time and matter, is really a "garment" woven from "uncouth earth"<sup>58</sup> by an immanent Divinity or "world-soul." The presence of God in material

creation is, in accordance with the traditions of Platonistic symbolism, suggested in Elegy on Dead Fashion by Sitwell's continual reference to the nature gods and spirits of Classical paganism, figures which imply that the elemental forces of the physical are in fact divine. The nature of this divinity is suggested by Dame Edith's symbolic employment of Prometheus as a creator-god, a demiurge or logos who shapes all natural entities from inchoate matter:

There are great diamonds hidden in the mud  
Waiting Prometheus' fire and Time's vast flood.<sup>59</sup>

Sitwell's use of the figure of Prometheus recalls Blake's blacksmith-god Los.<sup>60</sup> Like Los, Sitwell's Prometheus is a symbol of a divine imaginative energy, continuously at work in the space-time-matter continuum in order to create harmony out of chaos, life from inert matter. Prometheus as immanent divine imagination is at the same time a creator and a divine artist, whose heavenly "fire" vitalizes matter, and whose logos or organizing wisdom gives shape and pattern to the living forms which he has created. Nature for Sitwell is God's work of art, and as such is analogous to human art and civilization. The poet's characterization of Prometheus as a demiurge is therefore not incompatible with the traditional role of the Titan as a culture-hero. In terms of the clothes-metaphor which

dominates Elegy on Dead Fashion, the "bound, or outward circumference"<sup>61</sup> of the divine imaginative energy in the natural world is the richly patterned "tapestry" of ordered phenomena, which in its turn forms the "garment" of the immanent Godhead. In the world of man, the human body can be regarded as a "costume" assumed by the "god's soul"<sup>62</sup> which is present in each and every individual person. All of the artifices and refinements of a civilized elegance are by the same token the "clothing" woven by the creative spiritual powers with which man is endowed by the "esem-plastic power"<sup>63</sup> within him.

We must not, however, be misled by the implications of the clothes-metaphor into assuming that any of the "garments" of the creator-God are merely extraneous or incidental ornament. As Sitwell intimates in Elegy on Dead Fashion by her continual allusions to the fur and feathers of natural creatures, the clothing of the immanent Divinity, although in any individual case expendable, is still an organic outgrowth of God's essential nature. The relationship of the world-soul to any one of its creations is that of a soul to the body which it informs and animates. The divine energy and the form which it assumes cannot accordingly be treated except in conjunction.

The reconciliation of art and nature in Elegy on Dead Fashion can be approached from another angle which is equally useful in penetrating the poem's meaning. In the Elegy..., as in her earliest visionary poetry, Sitwell envisions the creative and artistic Divinity as manifesting Himself in nature as vital energy or life-force:

But far are we from forests of our rest  
 Where the wolf Nature from maternal breast  
 Fed us with strong brown milk...  
 .....  
 And natural law and moral were but one,-  
 Derived from the rich wisdom of the sun.<sup>64</sup>

To employ the terminology of Joseph Campbell, the super-conscious of the Divinity has through its incarnation in nature become the subconscious.<sup>65</sup> It is therefore "moral" to obey natural instinct because that is the voice or inspirational breath of the immanent Divinity. If followed in a spirit of unconstrained innocence, the Dionysian energy of subconscious instinct will express itself consciously as civilized order. This characteristically Romantic postulate is rendered symbolically in Elegy on Dead Fashion in the image of dancing satyrs:

The satyrs danced the sheep-trot all the day

In wooded gardens where the green baize leaves  
 Hid fruit that rustled like Ceres' gilt sheaves  
 They danced the galloppade and the mazurka,  
 Cracoviak, cachucha, and the turka,<sup>66</sup>



The dance is of course a perfect symbol for the expression in terms of a civilized order and refinement of the instinctual energy of natural appetite and passion. The satyrs themselves constitute one of the first appearances of the characteristically Sitwellian symbol of the beast-god. This paradoxical figure, because his instinctual activity constitutes both an intuition and an expression of the Divinity Who is present in nature, is the purveyor of an Apollonian wisdom and beauty. The beast-god is thus a symbol of man in his paradisaical state of natural innocence. In this pristine condition, consciousness has not yet ceased to be the function and the expression of an unconscious energy which is God manifested in corporeal form. The unity of the conscious and the unconscious in the Golden Age is the basis of a state of psychic and metaphysical unity in which God and man, the individual and the cosmos, the divine and the natural, energy and order, art and nature, the bucolic and the urbane, morality and instinct, are all impossible to distinguish from one another, let alone to characterize as polar opposites. The world vision appropriate to the bucolic paradise of Elegy on Dead Fashion is accordingly one of an organic unity, but it is organic in the special sense of an embryonic undifferentiation of opposites.

The contrast which Sitwell draws in Elegy on Dead Fashion between her paradise of pastoral innocence and the degenerate modern world centers upon two opposing visions of time. In the Golden Age, time functioned as the instrument of the creative artist-Divinity. The movement of time energized and shaped matter into divinely fashioned works of art:

And far are we from the innocence of man;  
When Time's vast sculptures from rough dust began,<sup>67</sup>

As is the case with Keats' Hyperion, this vision of time as a continuing movement of aesthetic creation is associated in the Elegy... with an evolutionary view of nature.<sup>68</sup> In this developmental process, the "rough" and "uncouth"<sup>69</sup> shapes which are the first products of the artist-Divinity are gradually replaced by more "finished" and highly developed forms of life.

However, in the present epoch of human history, time is not creative but destructive. As in The Sleeping Beauty, the individual imprisoned in time is seen in Elegy on Dead Fashion as doomed to the inevitable decrepitude and death of both body and spirit. This terrible fate is powerfully evoked in the Elegy... by Sitwell's use of the conceit of a continuing life in the grave, in which the dead are tormented by loneliness and decay. Sitwell's grotesque idea is

presumably not meant to be taken literally, but rather to suggest its "converse." That is, it is meant to convey the notion that for man as a conscious, sensitive being, who is only too aware of his ultimate fate, life in time is a spiritual and emotional death-in-life. Although the poet is still a young woman, she knows that time will destroy the physical vitality of her youth, and replace love with despair. Her foresuffering of her old age condemns her to a premature despondency:

Now night like lava flows without a chart  
 From unremembering craters of the heart,  
 Anguished with their dead fires.-Beneath the caves  
 And crags the Numidean Sibyl raves;

We hear the Sibyl crying Prophecy.  
 'There where the kiss seems immortality  
 I prophesy the Worm...there, in the kiss,  
 He'll find his most imperial luxuries.'"70

It must be emphasized that this vision of time as bringing about on both the physical and the psychological level the triumph of thanatos over eros belongs only to the present state of human evolution, and is therefore itself a function of time. Age and death have assumed such overwhelming proportions for modern man because he is the end product of a long historical degeneration, in the course of which man's spiritual powers and perspective have been sadly diminished.<sup>71</sup>

The apocalyptic intuition and the civilized elegance of the

Golden Age have been replaced in the modern world by the empty triviality which is consequent upon a purblind materialism. Such materialism is only capable of seeing the physical surface of creation and not the spiritual fires within:

...people build like beavers on the sand,  
Among life's common movements, understand

That Troy and Babylon were built with bricks.  
They engineer great wells into the Styx  
And build hotels upon the peaks of seas  
Where the small trivial Dead can sit and freeze.<sup>72</sup>

Contemporary man's ability to create a culture which truly reflects and expresses the spiritual power immanent in the universe has diminished in direct proportion to the atrophy of his spiritual insight. In fact, as Sitwell emphasizes in her early satiric poems, the civilization which he has created worsens his plight by systematically devaluing and abusing what powers of soul remain to him:

...Psyche has become a kitchenmaid;  
The world, that pitiful old catchpenny,  
Whines at her booth for pence, and finds too many,

Showing the gods no larger than ourselves,<sup>73</sup>

In modern man's present debilitated state of soul, he is no longer capable of coping spiritually with external circumstances, let alone of interacting with them creatively. In contrast to the Golden Age, in which the "god's soul" within

man engaged on a basis of equality in a "dance" with "divine deathless Chance,"<sup>74</sup> the life in time of contemporary humanity has become a Hardy-esque nightmare of victimization by random, unintelligible happenings:

A showman came; he smiles like Time and mocks  
Me, takes his marionettes from their small box,-

The gods, time-crumbled into marionettes.  
Death frays their ageless bodies, hunger frets  
Them, till at last, like us, they dance  
Upon the old dull string pulled now by Chance.<sup>75</sup>

The derelict condition of the modern individual as the helpless prisoner of a relentlessly destructive time raises the further question as to how and when the historical time of the race ceased to be a process of creative evolution and became one of spiritual degeneration. Sitwell is not explicit about this matter in Elegy on Dead Fashion, but we may conjecture that man's spirit began to wither when his consciousness developed to the point at which it broke away from his instinct. The conscious mind was in this way rendered an independent critical power which turned back destructively upon the instinct. This cleavage in the human psyche not only precipitated man's fall into a tormenting sense of sin, but also fragmented the undifferentiated unity of his world-vision into a labyrinth of conflicting contraries. In particular, the individual was set apart from

and also in the image of nature as a she-wolf, who feeds all creatures from her "maternal breast" with "strong brown milk."<sup>76</sup> It should be noted that, as a savage carnivore, the wolf is an ambiguous symbol which also implies the third side of Sitwell's White Goddess: the devouring hag. The terrible and destructive bitch-goddess, who is harmlessly latent in the nature of the Golden Age, appears not only in the wolf, but also in the form of a Diana, whose arrows are aimed only at vegetable marrows in greenhouses. In the passages of Elegy on Dead Fashion which describe the physical and spiritual plight of a humanity for whom nature has become a prison and a destroyer, the hag figure appears in several forms which manifest all of her fearsomeness and savagery. One of these is the goddess Fortune, who presides over the chance happenings which govern man's life in time:

"Oh the blond hair of Fortune in the grove!  
Lean from your carriage, hold her lest she rove."  
"Her face is winter, wrinkled, peaceless, mired,  
Black as the cave where Cerberus was sired."<sup>77</sup>

Another manifestation of the devouring hag is the "Numidean Sibyl"<sup>78</sup> who in prophesying the triumph of death over love, functions as a symbol of the terrible despair which grips the individual whom nature has doomed to suffering and ultimate extinction. Finally, we should mention the interesting figure of Venus as crone. The earth-mother who

herself suffers from physical decay in time constitutes a reversal of the motif of nature as devouring hag. The significance of Venus as crone is not entirely clear, but she is perhaps intended to suggest materialistic modern man's withered vision of both himself and nature as subject to an inevitable decay and death.

Elegy on Dead Fashion is to a large extent a reiteration of the nexus of themes which were stated in The Sleeping Beauty. In the Elegy..., however, the plight of the individual trapped in the prison of time and matter is expressed less in terms of an immediate emotional response and more as a spiritual problem to be understood if not solved through deliberate contemplation. By meditating upon her spiritual problems rather than simply agonizing and despairing over them, Sitwell has taken a major step towards their solution. Her new reflective stance is even more in evidence in "Metamorphosis" (1928),<sup>79</sup> in which it produces a tentative solution to her paralyzing obsession with the decay and death which are the inevitable doom of natural man.

The outlines of the resolution of the problem of time which is offered in "Metamorphosis" in fact appear in the Elegy..., but they are merely touched upon in passing, being neither developed nor offered with great assurance or finality.

In her meditation upon the pastoral Golden Age in Elegy on Dead Fashion, Sitwell has implied the vitalizing presence of of the Godhead in the universe, an immanence which on the one hand binds nature together into an organic unity, and on the other makes time the creative instrument of the divine energy.<sup>80</sup> In lines 273-284 of the Elegy..., Sitwell suggests that the same world-soul which made time in the Golden Age a process of creative evolution may bring about a renaissance of that happy era:

There are great diamonds hidden in the mud  
Waiting Prometheus' fire and Time's vast flood.  
Wild glistening flowers that spring from these  
    could know  
The secret of how hell and heaven grow.<sup>81</sup>

The particular manner in which the rebirth of the Golden Age is envisioned in these lines is highly significant. As is also the case in lines 273-274 of Elegy on Dead Fashion, in which Dame Edith sits apart "Feeling the jewel turn flower, the flower turn heart,"<sup>82</sup> the poet conceives of the revival of the pastoral Eden through the agency of a process of organic evolution,<sup>83</sup> in which progressively higher forms of life develop out of the inanimate matter to which all beings are reduced by the destructive activity of time. Such a vision suggests not only the creative presence of the divine vitality in the natural world. It also implies the organic



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unity of nature, a oneness which has already been intimated in the Elegy... by Sitwell's development of a network of arcane correspondences between apparently unrelated phenomena. What Dame Edith is now suggesting is a dynamic or "temporal" unity of nature, which takes the form of a process of metamorphosis. Through the agency of this transformational succession, any one entity will in the course of time be translated into others which are apparently unlike itself. In terms of this metamorphic process, what seemed to be the tomb of nature is in fact also a womb, in which the passing of one form involves not simply its destruction, but also its creative change into another form of being.<sup>84</sup> The movement of time therefore comprehends not only degeneration and death, but also rebirth in a new form. In the Elegy..., the flicker of hope offered by the poet's momentary insight into the metamorphic process in nature is quickly extinguished by the despair which dominates her poem. In "Metamorphosis," the same vision is developed into the foundation of the mood of tempered ecstasy which predominates in Sitwell's later poetry.

The opening stanza of "Metamorphosis" introduces the same negative themes which dominate Elegy on Dead Fashion:

The coral-cold snow seemed the Parthenon,  
 Huge peristyle of temples that are gone  
 And dark as Asia, now is Beauty's daughter,  
 The rose, once clear as music o'er deep water.<sup>85</sup>

These lines suggest the destruction of each and every individual entity in the cycles of natural time. They stress particularly the inevitable obliteration of each generation of men, together with the material aspects of its civilization. The opening stanza of "Metamorphosis" implies also the spiritual degeneration of the human race from a heroic Golden Age of the sort suggested by the nature divinities of the Elgin Marbles. For Sitwell as for Keats, these sculptures seem to imply an organic community of God, man and nature which in turn finds expression in the spiritually inspired creation of an apocalyptic art.<sup>86</sup> The two intimately related themes of the ruinous effect of time upon the individual and the race are developed further as "Metamorphosis" proceeds. In lines 27-102, Sitwell meditates upon the imprisonment of the individual in time in terms of the same ideas that dominated The Sleeping Beauty and Elegy on Dead Fashion. Time is once again seen as not only destroying the body, but also leading to a psychic death-in-life which arises from despair and from the agonized awareness of lost love. In lines 123-144, Sitwell laments the passing of the Golden Age of the race. This lost Eden is once again

populated with the elegantly dressed nymphs who symbolize the happy state in which man was not set apart by his consciousness from God and nature, and in which the "outward circumference" of instinctual energy was a civilized elegance.

Through its association of the imprisonment of man in time and matter with the historical degeneration of the race, "Metamorphosis," like Elegy on Dead Fashion, characterizes the problem of the individual's victimization by temporal decay as a peculiarly modern phenomenon. In speaking of her painful awareness of decay, death and the loss of love, Sitwell in both poems employs the pronoun "we," as if to suggest her own personal involvement in the spiritual malaise of her age. To be sure, in those passages of the Elegy... in which the sterility of her milieu is regarded ironically or again in those in which its sufferings are viewed with pity, Sitwell displays a certain detachment from the spiritual plight of her contemporaries. In an even more significant passage which has already been mentioned, the poet sits "apart" from the modern world and muses over the possibility of a process of metamorphosis which will overcome time and death. In no case, however, does Sitwell's detachment in Elegy on Dead Fashion amount to the genuine transcendence which is displayed in the

concluding lines of "Metamorphosis":

I too from ruined walls hung upside down  
And, bat-like, saw only Death's ruined town

And mumbling crumbling dust...I saw the people  
Mouthing blindly for the earth's blind nipple.

Their thick sleep dreams not of the infinite  
Wild strength the grass must have to find the light.

With all the bulk of earth across its eyes  
And strength, and the huge weight of centuries.<sup>87</sup>

In these lines Sitwell recognizes that the reason why she shares the obsessions with time and death which haunts her contemporaries is that she had been viewing life from their own inverted perspective. That is, she is at least in part a spiritual prisoner of the very world which she satirized in Facade. In meditating upon decay and "Death's ruined town"<sup>88</sup> from a viewpoint in which time is seen only in terms of degeneration, Dame Edith has been indulging, albeit in a somewhat more detached and philosophical manner, in the same materialism which is at once the cause and the symptom of the spiritual rot of the modern world. Sitwell's agony is really a fleshly despair, which is merely the reverse side of the coin of the besotted sensuality which is sanctioned and encouraged by a purblind materialism. Having recognized the mote in her own spiritual eye, the poet is now able to remove it and to rise to the new perspective on time and nature which is implied in her ecstatic vision

Madness of Saul" by the traditional symbol of light. The image of light implies a creative, fertilizing energy which suggests the Romantic conception of the Divinity as life-force. The idea of God as life-force in turn leads to Sitwell's dynamic conception of the unity of nature in terms of a fertilizing organic interconnection and interaction among its various parts. The strawberry is the product of the creative dialectic of the soil with dew and light, of the "rubies" buried in the mineral earth with the rainbow and the rose. Such interactions give rise to a generative process which brings about life and growth. This divinely inspired fertility takes the form of an organic evolution, a metamorphic succession of progressively higher forms in which the earth becomes jewel and the gem becomes fruit.

Sitwell's vision of the natural organism in terms of a series of genetic interactions which result in a process of metamorphic growth provides the poet with the metaphysical basis for a transcendence of her vision of the destructiveness of time. The exact nature of this transcendence is suggested in the complex and subtle symbolism of lines 166-226. This passage opens with a presentation of the pastoral Golden Age in terms of a marriage of the apparent opposites of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, of instinct

and vital energy with civilized refinement and order. Such a creative union of opposites is expressed in terms of images of light and darkness, in which the latter is associated with the productive matrix of the natural world of matter:

An ambassade of Amazons; rich trees  
 And Abyssinian glooms have fostered these.  
 .....  
 In this vast empire of eternal shade  
 Where leaves seem Memphis, Thebes, from music made.<sup>90</sup>

As James Brophy has convincingly argued in his book Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order, the interaction of light and darkness is a fundamental metaphor in Dame Edith's poetry for a genetic interconnection which produces life and growth.<sup>91</sup> When she is describing this creative process as it takes place in the organic body of the work of art, in which the poet imaginatively modulates similarities and differences in sound, image and idea in order to stimulate a "growth of consciousness" in the reader, Dame Edith employs the term "texture." Texture is the organic imaginative pattern which emerges as the work of art is created or read. It combines energy with order, content with form. It is at the same time static and dynamic, an unfolding process and a finished artifact. In her descriptions of nature in lines 166-224, Sitwell seems to be applying

the same complex notion of texture to the natural world. This passage not only makes continual use of contrasting images of light and darkness, but also refers to a number of "textured" objects, in which the two are interwoven. These include "mittens with golden fringe," "branches gold-mosaic'd," "shaggiest caves," the "bright mesh" of dew, and "green baize forests."<sup>92</sup> Nature is in other words seen in "Metamorphosis" as a "texture" woven by the genetic interaction of light and shade, a notion which we have already seen in embryonic form in the early visionary poem, "The Web of Eros."

If light is the symbol of the vital energy of the immanent Godhead, Whose creative presence inspires life and growth throughout the material world, then it would seem only natural that shade or darkness should imply its metaphysical opposite. More specifically, if light associated with essential being and the positive process of becoming which is organic development, then darkness suggests non-being, degeneration and death. If light is active, creative spirit, then shade is the inertia of matter which brings about the decay which overtakes all natural entities in the course of time. If the genetic interaction of light with matter brings about the transformation of the inanimate



earth into a succession of progressively higher living forms, then darkness must be associated with atavism, the end result of which is a re-absorption of life into formless, inert matter. The interaction of light and darkness in the natural world can accordingly be seen in terms of Paul Tillich's theology as a cosmic interplay of being with non-being.<sup>93</sup> Alternatively, it can be regarded in the light of a Platonist theology like that of Spenser's "An Hymne in Honour of Love." In the latter poem, as in "Metamorphosis," a celestial eros which is at once energy and order gives vital form to a matter which left to itself would be chaotic and thus essentially dead.<sup>94</sup> Finally, the intercourse of light and shade can be related to the organic metaphysic of Romanticism, which tends to view the whole of existence in terms of a systolic and diastolic rhythm of life and death.

The notion of a nexus of interconnected organic cycles, in which light and darkness, life and death, follow one another successively, is a dominant imaginative pattern in "Metamorphosis," and ultimately constitutes an important element in Sitwell's solution in that poem of the problem of man's entrapment in time and matter. "Metamorphosis" makes repeated allusions to the seasonal and diurnal cycles. These natural rhythms are in turn related metaphorically to

the course of human life, in which bodily decrepitude and death follow the vitality of youth, and in which despair and loneliness succeed the joys of love. In a similar fashion, the history of the race has moved from the "spring" of the Golden Age to the "winter" of the spiritual death-in-life of materialistic modern man. However, in "Metamorphosis," the cyclical rhythm which governs existence in time and matter is not regarded in a purely negative fashion as it is in The Sleeping Beauty. Thus, with regard to Dame Edith's own personal spiritual state, "Metamorphosis" begins with the winter of the poet's despair over time and death, but, at the conclusion of the piece, there are definite signs of the approach of the spring of a spiritual rebirth. Dame Edith's own personal renascence begins appropriately with a meditation upon the renewal of nature in the seasonal cycle with the thought of the "infinite/Wild strength"<sup>95</sup> of grass pushing from the earth in response to the waxing sunlight. This idea calls to the poet's mind the organic succession of forms that are latent in "winter's glooms,"<sup>96</sup> a notion which in turn suggests to her the possibility of her own eventual rebirth through the metamorphic process from the "winter" of physical death. The "cycle" of Dame Edith's conversion from a despairing vision of

personal annihilation to the tempered hope of the "sad eternities"<sup>97</sup> of an endless transformation is itself related to her rebirth from the spiritual death-in-life of materialism. This latter renewal is once again expressed in terms of seasonal imagery:

Then my immortal Sun rose, Heavenly Love,  
To rouse my carrion to life and move

The polar night, the boulder that rolled this  
My heart, my Sisyphus, in the abyss.

Come then, my Sun, to melt the eternal ice  
Of Death, and crumble the thick centuries,  
Nor shrink, my soul, as dull wax owlish eyes  
In the sun's light, before my sad eternities.<sup>98</sup>

The "dark night" of the poet's soul was in other words not simply a matter of useless and hopeless suffering, but rather a necessary spiritual preparation for a visionary illumination and conversion. Similarly, the decay and eventual death of her body is merely an anticipation of rebirth in a new form, a renewal which involves on a physical level metamorphosis, and on the spiritual plane a metempsychosis. Both of these transformations involve a sacrificial embrace of the cosmic organism, a giving of self to other beings in love. In the natural and the human spheres alike, decay and death are now envisioned by Dame Edith as "shadows" of birth and growth, states of potentiality rather than of negation which contain in a latent condition their positive

counterparts.<sup>99</sup> Nature is a womb as well as a tomb, and time, rather than being merely destructive, is the medium by which creative change, life and growth are brought to birth from the matrix of matter and death.

Sitwell's vision in "Metamorphosis" of rebirth in the cyclical movement of time is one of the most important of the elements contributing to her transcendence of the despondent outlook of The Sleeping Beauty and Elegy on Dead Fashion. However, her conception of the "marriage" of light and shade in terms of texture implies a form of interrelationship beyond a simple succession. It also reaches beyond a Yeatsian view of the contraries as latent in one another in such a way as to die each other's life and live each other's death.<sup>100</sup> The idea of texture ultimately implies that in the process of organic life and growth, light and darkness not merely follow one another in a cyclical rhythm, but are always simultaneously present in a creative interaction or dialectic. It is possible to conceive of the relationship of this interaction of contraries to the process of organic growth in two alternative yet not mutually exclusive manners. The first of these is ontological and is in line with Kathleen Raine's view that the symbolism of myth-making poetry is essentially qualitative, or

concerned with various states of being.<sup>101</sup> Both being and non-being are by themselves static conditions, but through their mutual interpenetration, becoming or change is made possible. All becoming, whether creative or destructive, constitutes a loss of one form of existence in order to assume another, and non-being is thus an essential element even of life and growth.

Alternatively, it is possible to conceive of the "texture" which constitutes the matrix of the organism of nature in terms of a "lattice" like that of the crystal of a transistor. Corresponding to the "holes" in the crystal lattice which make possible the movement of electrical charges are non-being, decay in time, death and matter conceived of as inchoate potentiality. These "gaps" in the being of the natural organism not only provide "elbow room" for activity and growth, but also make possible the process of metamorphosis, which is a dynamic interchange of being among the various entities through the agency of non-being or "shadow."

Non-being, even when in time it assumes the negative form of destruction and decay, or when in the context of matter it becomes a reduction to formless and inert "dust," is thus not to be feared as an absolute negation. Decay

and death in the continuing organic processes of nature are relative matters. In the ever-present dialectic of being and non-being in the womb-tomb of nature, they are qualified into a phase or agency, which in fact subserves the essentially positive function of rendering change possible. The process of becoming thus involves ambivalences beyond its cyclical succession of creation and destruction. These further paradoxes lie in the fact that non-being is an essential element of the positive phase of becoming, while the preponderance of "shade" in decay and death constitute the creation of a potentiality for new being. Moreover, from the dialectic of light and darkness, there can emerge texture not as process but as static or "spatial" form. This constitutes a third mode of existence which partakes of the stability which pertains to being and non-being. It also embraces the respective qualities of both states, while transcending either.

Ralph J Mills, Jr. sees "Metamorphosis" as only one of several stages in Dame Edith's symbolic descent into the nether regions in quest of a supernatural wisdom.<sup>102</sup> Mills suggests that the climax of the poet's spiritual journey, the moment when the dark powers of negation are faced in all of their horror and transcended, comes only in "Gold Coast

Customs." While there is assuredly some truth in this view, it does represent a certain oversimplification. In order to understand properly the significance of both "Metamorphosis" and "Gold Coast Customs" as stages in Edith Sitwell's imaginative development, it is necessary to distinguish clearly and exactly what spiritual problems remain to be solved after she has completed the former poem. The matter can best be summed up by saying that "Metamorphosis" presents us with Sitwell's final solution to the cruxes arising from man's relationship to the natural world of time and matter. The problem of physical decay and death in time, of man's fleshly imprisonment in the incarcerating tomb of nature, is indeed raised frequently and passionately in Dame Edith's later poetry. However, Sitwell's resolution of the spiritual and emotional crisis created by the threat of old age and death continues to be formulated in essentially the same terms as it was in "Metamorphosis."

In rising above the angst and despair stemming from her vision of man's imprisonment and destruction by time and matter, Sitwell has taken a major step in transcending her personal spiritual entrapment in the materialism of the contemporary age. However, although she has in large part risen beyond that philosophy herself, she has still to cope

with the society which it has created. Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis," with their clear distinction between natural man as fleshly and as a sacramental being, indeed take a further step towards the solution of this problem. This contrast parallels and powerfully reinforces Sitwell's earlier antithesis of a spiritually valid culture which arises directly from and reflects the divine energy of the cosmos, and the notion of the human world as a state of sterile isolation from the universal organism. However, this opposition which Dame Edith draws between a true and false civilization is not a resolution of the problems posed by a spiritually decadent modern culture. What remains to be dealt with in "Gold Coast Customs" is the problem of the poet's relationship with her fellow men in an age in which materialism has rotted the human soul. How can the poet as a spiritually sensitive individual cope and interact with a society whose existence is dominated upon the one hand by the dead inflexibility of the rhythm imposed by its machines, and upon the other by a frenzied sensual self-indulgence? How can she even survive as an artist in a world of stupidity and vulgarity, a world which, as she tells us in Poetry and Criticism (1925), greets a vital new poetry with either indifference or outrage?<sup>104</sup>



In the early satiric poetry culminating in Facade,<sup>3</sup> the problem of the artist's relationship to contemporary society is conceived of largely in terms of the opposition of a spiritually and aesthetically refined artist to a philistine world. However, an opposition which in large part reduces the rebel to a servo-mechanism of the world which he attacks is as much a defence and a surrender as it is a transcendence. From the point of view of the historical degeneration of the human spirit, which was promulgated in the Elegy... and "Metamorphosis," Sitwell the satirist is at once a victim and an anachronism. Endowed with powers of vision and creation suitable to the pastoral Golden Age, she finds herself in a period of besotted or self-satisfied materialism. She has neither the dullness of soul to exist happily in an endless round of acquisition and self-gratification, nor a cultural milieu compatible with her gifts. She is doomed to exist in a continual state of irritation and frustration, longing hopelessly for a lost Eden of the past and lashing out at a degenerate present. She is thus condemned to exile from society at large and to spiritual imprisonment. This situation finally becomes intolerable when the poet realizes that the egocentric acquisitiveness of her age is not simply a matter of spiritual

moribundity, but is rather a vicious and destructive evil. She is then forced to find a means of rising spiritually above her milieu, of achieving a perspective from which she can in turn foresee the regeneration of the race.

## CHAPTER IV

## BLACK ORACLE: THEME AND MOTIF

## IN EDITH SITWELL'S "GOLD COAST CUSTOMS"

Even for an audience predisposed to accept difficult poetry, a reading of Edith Sitwell's "Gold Coast Customs" is apt to end in frustration if not downright annoyance.<sup>1</sup> Sitwell's poem is, however, well worth the effort required for its understanding. This is true not only because of its inherent virtues as a complex and powerful work of art, but also because of the light which it casts upon both its author's poetic career and upon the forces which shaped early modern poetry in general.<sup>2</sup> As Ralph J. Mills Jr. has suggested, "Gold Coast Customs" marks a critical and central stage in Sitwell's spiritual and artistic development,<sup>3</sup> a career which is in turn typical of the modern poet in many important ways. Like her contemporaries Eliot and Pound, Sitwell moved artistically from a satiric attack upon a sterile and dissociated culture to an openly prophetic and apocalyptic poetry. As was the case with both Eliot and Pound, this artistic development grew from an intense personal crisis of value, which was triggered by Dame Edith's

30,<sup>6</sup> years of dislocation which on economic, political, social, and cultural levels alike begin the painful transition from the hollow buoyancy of the Twenties to the decade of upheavals leading up to the Second World War. "Gold Coast Customs" not only displays an acute sensitivity to the critical nature of the contemporary situation, but also provides a penetrating diagnosis of its root causes and inevitable results. Historically speaking, Dame Edith's vision in "Gold Coast Customs" is Janus-faced. As an exploration of the reasons why "the bottom of the world has fallen out,"<sup>7</sup> Sitwell's poem belongs to the Twenties, to the literature of malaise which arose from a gnawing sense of the ultimate emptiness of modern civilization. The dangerous instability which marked many areas of life during the Twenties is attributed in "Gold Coast Customs" to a spiritual deadness and cultural dissociation, a decadence which is in turn traced by Sitwell to a metaphysical and moral vacuum at the centre of modern life. However, just as Dame Edith is able to see in the manic and shaky economic and social life of the Twenties the basic preconditions of the Great Depression and the Second World War, so the spiritual crisis described in "Gold Coast Customs" only begins with the death of positive value in the Twenties.

What Sitwell describes poetically as the "appalling dumb agony of '...the rat-eaten bones/Of a fashionable god that lived not/Ever, but still has bones to rot.'" <sup>8</sup> has released from any moral control dark forces of evil and destruction in man's nature. The result is a nightmare orgy of depravity and cruelty which threatens not only civilization, but even the continued existence of humanity itself. The abominations described in "Gold Coast Customs" are clearly prophetic of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

Sitwell's diagnosis of the crisis of value which precipitated the evils which she describes in "Gold Coast Customs" is essentially the same as the vision of contemporary life which underlies Facade <sub>5</sub> and other satiric pieces which the poet published during the Twenties. For Dame Edith, the basic causes of the disintegration of value in the modern world are the materialism which predominates both as a philosophical outlook and a way of life, and its corollary, the ubiquitous mechanization imposed by the demands of industry, commerce and technology. <sup>9</sup> Like Facade, <sub>5</sub> "Gold Coast Customs" reflects Sitwell's belief that the materialism and mechanism of the contemporary West have affected not only the external routine of human existence, but also have penetrated into the deepest recesses of the

human psyche, fundamentally altering man's inner spiritual life. In both Elegy on Dead Fashion (1926) and "Metamorphosis" (1928), Sitwell expresses the belief that man was originally created "the bastard of beasts and of gods,"<sup>10</sup> a sacramental being who had "no body distinct from his soul."<sup>11</sup> As such, man existed in a state of organic spiritual communion with both God and nature, external creation like humanity itself being suffused with the immanent Divinity. In this pristine condition, man's sensory perceptions constituted an apocalyptic insight into a nature which symbolically manifested its Creator, while his outward activity was the outgrowth of the spiritual vitality within him.

Because of its absorption in the pursuit of material goods and sensual gratification, the modern world has "fallen" from man's original semi-divine stature, and from a spiritual community with God and nature. Humanity in general has experienced "a dulling and a retrogression" of the spirit, and now exists "with the half-sentience of the vegetable world - a sentience that is so intensely concerned with the material world...that it is like the sentience of the blind."<sup>12</sup> The mechanization of the modern world has also contributed to the degeneration which has blinded the

human spirit. The rhythms of modern man's "highly mechanized universe"<sup>13</sup> paradoxically join an iron-clad regularity with an unprecedented speed and violence. This parody of marriage of energy and order in an organic cosmos is reflected in the syncopated rhythms and highly modulated sound-patterns of "Gold Coast Customs," which in this regard represents a direct continuation of the technical experimentation of the Facade poems. By allowing "no time or space in which to dream,"<sup>14</sup> such rhythms have on the one hand benumbed and imprisoned the human spirit, and on the other have broken down its epistemological processes to the point at which the object-world seems chaotic and absurd. Moreover, mechanical activity, in which "form is superimposed as a logical idea,"<sup>15</sup> constitutes a negation of the living and significant order of an action which is organically expressive of an inward and spiritual energy.

The destruction by materialism and mechanism of the spiritual basis of man's once sacramental perceptions and activities is treated in terms particularly relevant to "Gold Coast Customs" in Sitwell's brief essay "Modern Values."<sup>16</sup> In this piece, which was published a year before the initial appearance of "Gold Coast Customs," the poet contrasts the value-system created by the artist with

that prevailing in contemporary society. As opposed to the poet, who "creates real values, real 'desirabilities,' working in a spiritual world, and bringing his values from spiritual sources," the two basic motivations of modern man are a mechanistic obsession with speed and the materialistic engrossment with the accumulation of money. Not only has mechanical speed become an end in itself, divorced from any practical purpose, but it also "means the elimination of most of the senses." For man as a sacramental being in a sacramental universe "the five senses [are] the chief inlets of Soul,"<sup>17</sup> and their deadening by mechanical speed has accordingly robbed life of spiritual value and significance. The emptiness and self-enclosed circularity of an activity which has been abstracted from either physical or spiritual reality is beautifully epitomized by Sitwell in the image of a racing car madly chasing its own exhaust in an attempt to set new speed records. The frenzied accumulation of vast fortunes has similarly ceased to correspond even to material needs: "Money has no relation to life at present; it has no relation to anything real; it has no true relation to the things which it buys." The amassing and squandering of great fortunes is not, however, merely soul-destroying and ultimately absurd. It is also



part and parcel of a gross immorality which has vicious social consequences. In a world without positive value, wealth is "allowed not only to cover, but to glorify, any kind of mortal sin." The blatant wickedness of the rich is moreover compounded by their wasteful dissipation of money in such a way that "no one who really needs it benefits by it."

The ideas concerning speed and money which are expounded in "Modern Values" are fundamental to Sitwell's attack upon contemporary society in "Gold Coast Customs." In Dame Edith's poem the all-encompassing materialism of the modern world, and the amorphous insensate deadness to which it has reduced the human spirit, are rendered by the image of a ubiquitous, clinging mud, a symbol whose grotesque effectiveness is heightened by its associations with excrement and organic decay. Because modern man's psyche has reduced itself to "eyeless mud,"<sup>18</sup> to the "formlessness...of matter which has chosen to be part of the slime and mud,"<sup>19</sup> he is no longer capable of either true apocalyptic perception, or of the activity in which vitality of soul is expressed outwardly in a spiritually significant form. In "Gold Coast Customs," we have distorted, hollow parodies of these sacramental activities in the form of a gross sensuality,

and of the "feverish, intertwining, seething movement" of "a vain seeking for excitement."<sup>20</sup> As is suggested by their primary association in Sitwell's poem with the lives of a dissolute plutocracy, these grotesque phantoms of true human perception and creation are seen by Dame Edith as a direct outgrowth of the frantic and purblind "getting and spending" which she castigates in "Modern Values." The frenzied yet empty dissipation of the rich is also associated through the speed, rhythm and sound-patterns of Sitwell's verses with the frantic pace and violent rhythms of the mechanized activity of an industrial society:

Where flaps degraded  
The black and sated  
Slack macerated  
And antiquated  
Beckoning Negress  
Nun of the shade,  
And the rickety houses  
Rock and rot,  
Lady Bamburgher airs  
That foul plague-spot  
Her romantic heart.<sup>21</sup>

As is the case in "Modern Values," the lives of the wealthy are characterized in "Gold Coast Customs" not simply as empty shadows of a spiritually authentic human existence. The rich are also heartless and depraved, squandering in frivolity and vice the vast fortunes which they have ground from the destitute. The reason why the death of value in

the modern world has led beyond a paroxysm of empty activity to a positive evil is to be found in Edith Sitwell's basic notions concerning the human spirit. Both Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis" indicate that Sitwell subscribes to the Platonic idea of the soul as a spiritual "eye" or power of visionary insight. The essence of man's higher life, from which arises his ability both to love and to act creatively, is a dynamic process of spiritual perception, a "growth of consciousness"<sup>22</sup> in which his mind in the act of cognition comes to reflect the burgeoning vitality of a divinely-inspired cosmic organism. In terms of the theory of good and evil which was earlier suggested by Sitwell in her closet-drama "The Madness of Saul," this perceptual process combines both inspiration and illumination, the stimulation of the mind by an incarnate spiritual energy being controlled and channelled creatively by an order of values revealed through visionary insight.

If the evolution and development of man's soul is based upon a growth of spiritual awareness which both inspires and guides his conduct, then the loss of such a "second sight" must inevitably result in the degeneration or atavism of the psyche to a lower or more primitive level, in which both the ability to give of self and to act

creatively are lost or inverted. Modern materialism is really the soul's deliberately willed surrender for the sake of brute physical pleasure of its divinely-inspired visionary capacities. In the process, the mind's energy is divorced from the controlling order of value provided by illumination. It then becomes the ungoverned will of carnal passion and appetite, a blind desire which reduces man to the level of the beasts. In "Gold Coast Customs" the supposedly civilized European has sunk in his willed spiritual blindness through the "slum-ignorance, and the blackness and superstition of the African swamp"<sup>23</sup> to a level at which "man is part ravenous beast of prey, part worm, part ape, or is but the worm turned vertebrate."<sup>24</sup> The two images of the African cannibal and of the carnivorous animal, both of which pervade "Gold Coast Customs," suggest a devouring and destructive carnality which stands in spiritual opposition to man's unique capacities for creation and love.

Along with these positive human capabilities, modern man has lost with his spiritual vision the faculty of moral self-restraint. In terms of the Aristotelian psychology which seems to have provided a basic frame of reference for many of the symbols and metaphors of "Gold Coast Customs,"<sup>25</sup> the human psyche has been reduced from rational contemplation

and self-control to its appetitive and nutritive functions. These blind drives, however, unlike those of plants and animals, have no inherent principle of order and control. To employ the categories of the Freudian psychoanalysis which was obviously another important influence upon "Gold Coast Customs," the Superego has atrophied to the point at which the Id is completely free to gratify its primitive infantile wishes.<sup>26</sup> The conduct of Lady Bamburgher, the wealthy socialite who is the "heroine" of Sitwell's poem, is on one level unabashed wish-fulfilment. Her parties, which recall the cannibalistic orgies and the fertility rites of "savage" Africa, are on one level the enactment in obscene rituals of infantile fantasies. These involve a grotesque mixture of primal fixations centering upon destructiveness, hunger, excretion, and lust:

The Worm's mask hid  
Her eyeless mud,  
Her shapeless love,  
The plot to escape  
From the God-ordained shape

And her soul, the cannibal  
Amazon's mart,  
Where in squealing light  
And clotted black night  
On the monkey-skin black and white striped dust they  
Cackle and bray to the murdered day.<sup>27</sup>

As the metaphor of cannibalism suggests, man's untrammelled

lower appetites are blindly and uncompromisingly self-centred. In moral terms they produce a ruthless self-seeking which is prepared to sacrifice anything to attain its ends. Instead of turning outward in love toward a world of subjects whose integrity is affirmed in an "I-thou" relationship,<sup>28</sup> the rich in "Gold Coast Customs" are motivated by drives which treat even human beings as "its," mere objects to be grasped and exploited as instruments of self-gratification. The "cannibalistic cruelty"<sup>29</sup> resulting from such egotism is compounded in Lady Bambergher and her circle by a sadism which takes a positive pleasure in torture and destruction. As Sitwell herself states in commenting upon "Gold Coast Customs," "the spiritual dead-in-life cry, in our time...[calls] for a sacrifice - that of the starved."<sup>30</sup> In this sadistic ritual libido, the positive affirmation of life and love has been inverted to become thanatos, the suicidal and destructive death-wish of a morbid psyche which is expressed in the immolation of the helpless and the innocent. In this connection, the sadism of Lady Bambergher is a perversion not merely of the spiritual or specifically human forms of love, but also of the appetites which in the lower forms subserve the ends of life. Her activities are against nature as well as against morality,

a fact which is suggested by the imagery of putrefaction and disease which permeates "Gold Coast Customs." Lady Bamburgher is really the sadistic femme fatale of the Romantic agony,<sup>31</sup> and her atavism functions as a symbol of the savagery which is the peculiar disease of cultural decadence.

The immorality and degeneracy of the rich is thus directly responsible for the gross injustices and cruelties perpetrated by a social and economic order in which the destitute are savagely exploited and reduced to the depths of misery and degradation. In a series of notes upon her own poetry which she published during the Thirties,<sup>32</sup> Sitwell discusses the symbolic structure which she employs in "Gold Coast Customs" to highlight the organic relationship between the private vices of the plutocracy and the social enormities of deprivation and exploitation. These discussions reflect one of the fundamental principles of the "grammar of symbols" which in "Gold Coast Customs," as in T.S. Eliot's "Waste Land," gives meaning to an apparently chaotic succession of images.<sup>33</sup> This "syntactical" principle is the arrangement of Sitwell's symbols into several inter-related series of parodies. These concatenations are each made up of a succession of caricatures, in some cases

growing progressively more distorted and empty, of a spiritually inspired and ordered ideal of human conduct:

"Gold Coast Customs" is about the present spiritual state of the world, materialism, the besotted, darkened pleasures of the rich and their cannibalistic cruelty to the destitute poor. It is built on three tiers - the negro swamp, which is the spiritual state, the physical slum of starvation, and its mockery and mirror, the foul moral slum of the heartless rich.<sup>34</sup>

These three layers of symbolism are interwoven for the purposes of comparison and contrast by a poetic adaptation of the two film techniques of "flashback" and "montage."<sup>35</sup>

The notion of a primitive African savagery, which Dame Edith takes care to emphasize is not intended as a racial slur,<sup>36</sup> is the basis in "Gold Coast Customs" of a complex symbolism which is used to embody a nexus of ideas derived from Freud, Frazer, Darwin, and Marx. On the level of the basic psychological drives posited by Freud, the cannibalistic African becomes, as has been suggested, symbolic of a sadism which is expressive of a debased and inverted sexuality. Thus, in some explanatory notes to "Gold Coast Customs," Sitwell includes a description of a man-hating African Amazon who destroyed even her own male children.<sup>37</sup> This embodiment of an inverted feminine libido appears in Sitwell's poem itself as a "double" superimposed by montage



upon the wanton and cruel Lady Bamburgher:

And the Amazon queen  
 With a bone-black face  
 Wears a mask with an ape-skin beard; she grinds  
 Her male child's bones in a mortar, binds  
 Him for food, and the people buy.<sup>38</sup>

In a passage from Hegel's Philosophy of History which Sitwell includes in the same notes,<sup>39</sup> the African is seen as representing a rudimentary stage of human development which is closer to animal nature than to the civilized European. The moral and spiritual faculties which render civilization possible by acting as a restraint upon bodily or natural appetite have not yet emerged in the primitive African:

The Negroes indulge that perfect contempt for humanity which in its bearing on Justice and Morality is the fundamental characteristic of the race. They have, moreover, no knowledge of the immortality of the soul,... Tyranny is regarded as no wrong, and cannibalism is looked upon as quite customary and proper. Among us instinct deters from it...But...to the sensual Negro, human flesh is but an object of sense --

This passage, with its suggestion that culture and morality constitute an overlay upon a stratum of savage instinctual appetite, agrees with Freud's theory of the development of the human personality through the repression by the Superego of the "primitive" drives of the Id. When interpreted in such evolutionary terms, Hegel's ideas are also in accord

with the belief, encouraged by the anthropological researches of Frazer, "that the primitive savage was still deeply ingrained in modern man, and posed a serious threat to civilization itself."<sup>40</sup> This notion of a "little lower layer" of vestigial savagery in Western man in turn suggests the social interpretation of Darwinian biology by T.H. Huxley.<sup>41</sup> Thus, just as civilized man has arisen by a gradual moral and spiritual evolution from the primitive state, a process which is repeated in the psychic growth of each individual, so the human race itself is paradoxically the product of evolution in the natural world, with its merciless struggle for physical survival. As Sitwell suggests through the imagery of savage African wildlife which permeates "Gold Coast Customs," the Negro represents not simply primitive or infantile human behavior, but also the "Undeveloped spirit involved/In the conditions of nature."<sup>42</sup> These "conditions of nature" are the ruthless self-aggrandizement of each individual or species in the struggle for survival, the gratification of the necessarily overpowering instinctual appetites governing nutrition and reproduction, and the merciless destruction of competitors and prey.

The symbolism of the "negro swamp" is employed in

"Gold Coast Customs" to highlight both the personal depravity and the social sins of the rich:

We see everything reduced to the primal mud - the 'Rich man Judas, brother Cain,' and the epitome of his civilization, Lady Bamburgher, are at one with the slum-ignorance and the blackness and superstition of the African swamp. The beating of their fevered hearts and pulses is no more than the beating of the drums that heralded the Customs, as they were called in Ashantee...when, at the death of any rich or important person, slaves and poor persons were killed so that the bones of the dead might be washed by human blood. So, the spiritual dead-in-life cry, in our time, for a sacrifice - that of the starved.<sup>43</sup>

On the level of personal behavior, the "African swamp" represents, as we have seen, the moral and spiritual degeneration of a materialistic plutocracy to an unrestrained bestiality. This ruthless and often perverted indulgence in regressive instinct and egocentric appetite is expressed socially in what Marx terms the "class war," which for Sitwell is simply the struggle for survival in nature raised to the level of a deliberately planned war of social attrition. The class struggle is expressed economically in the "cannibalistic cruelty" of the wealthy, whose acquisitiveness and waste are in part weapons deliberately employed for the purpose of exercising a sadistic tyranny through the deprivation and exploitation of the poor:

their desperation is as degrading and soul-destroying as the frantic depravity of the rich. The destitute, like the wealthy, have sunk beyond bestiality into the horribly dead "thingness" of the subject which has surrendered itself to dead matter to the point at which it is essentially an uncomprehending, inanimate object. The "slum-ignorance" of rich and poor in the last analysis constitute a "mockery and mirror" of one another. The original 1929 version of "Gold Coast Customs" accordingly ends with the poet in a state of total despair over the degradation and spiritual lifelessness of her society:

The mud has at least its skulls to roll;  
 But here as I walk, no voices call,  
 Only the stones and the bones that fall;  
 But yet if only one soul would whine,  
 Rat-like from the lowest mud, I should know  
 That somewhere in God's vast love it would shine:  
 But even the rat-whine has guttered low.<sup>46</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that although Sitwell partly accepts the Marxian diagnosis of the economic and social ills of the contemporary world, she does not share the apocalyptic faith in a revolutionary regeneration arising inevitably from within the class struggle. When in 1930 she adds a new and more optimistic conclusion to "Gold Coast Customs," she sees man's salvation as being brought about through a divine Judgement and Redemption. Thus, although

Jack Lindsay is correct in seeing "Gold Coast Customs" as a poem of Hegelian dialectic,<sup>47</sup> it must be remembered that the interaction of opposites in the poem ultimately occurs on a spiritual rather than on a material plane.

In order to fully understand Sitwell's complex resolution of the spiritual and moral problems posed by the abominations which she perceives in contemporary society, it is necessary to examine both the genres and the poetic stances or "roles" which she employs in "Gold Coast Customs."<sup>48</sup> As an exposure and condemnation of the vicious degeneracy of its era, "Gold Coast Customs" is a sort of heightened Juvenalian satire. As such, it represents a culmination of the first period of Dame Edith's poetic development in which her dominant role is that of ironist and satirist. The governing motifs of such early satiric works as Facade<sub>5</sub> recur in "Gold Coast Customs." However, they appear in such a form that the nightmare of depravity and spiritual emptiness which was half-concealed by Sitwell's earlier mask of "terrible gaiety" is now brought into the foreground. Like Facade<sub>5</sub>, "Gold Coast Customs" presents us with a world of "surfaces" whose tattered flimsiness reveals the ontological and epistemological void at the centre of a civilization which denies the Spirit substantiating creation. "Gold Coast

Customs" also follows the Facade poems in suggesting the unreality of the modern world by associating it with the stage. Thus, by means of its blatant theatricality,<sup>49</sup> "Gold Coast Customs" underlines the empty artificiality of the society which the poet is castigating. Similarly through the flattening and distortion of her human actors, Sitwell raises to the level of horror the caricaturing of humanity which she observed in the comedy of the music-hall and the harlequinade.<sup>50</sup>

Besides its most obvious function as an instrument of condemnation, the irony and satire of Sitwell's early poetry also serves the purpose of acting as a spiritual shield for a sensibility which finds itself inextricably involved in the contemporary crisis of values, and which is struggling to gain as much detachment and perspective as possible.<sup>51</sup> Insofar as it is a reflex action, a negative recoil from a situation with which the poet cannot fully cope, the satire of Sitwell's early poetry is paradoxically a "servo-mechanism" to that situation. The heightening of the satire of "Gold Coast Customs" to the point of terror and revulsion is thus ironically as much a surrender to the contemporary crisis as it is a transcendence of it. Both Sitwell's own statements concerning "Gold Coast Customs"

and the poem itself provide abundant evidence that the spiritual emptiness and depravity with which Dame Edith is dealing provoked an almost catastrophic upheaval in her inner life, and it is this crux which in part determines the mood and tone of her satire. Accordingly, in order to preserve her spiritual and moral equilibrium, it was necessary for Sitwell to achieve a new artistic stance in which her agonized sense of the spiritual and moral death of her world was counterbalanced by a value system and a vision of history which transcended the immediate situation. As Ralph Mills suggests, the poet begins to find her spiritual rallying point in the poetic stance of a "judge and Jeremiah."<sup>52</sup> As "Gold Coast Customs" unfolds, this new role eventually expands into that of a "prophet of God," who combines the spiritual perspectives of the Old Testament prophets with that of the Evangelist John. On this new level of perception, satire is incorporated into prophetic condemnation and revelation delivered from a transcendent spiritual perspective.

The new poetic role which Sitwell adopts in "Gold Coast Customs" accompanies her first and full self-conscious use of a new form, the apocalyptic divine comedy in the Romantic tradition of Blake's prophetic books and Shelley's Prometheus

Unbound. Like Blake, Sitwell copes with the spectacle of a society dominated by selfishness, cruelty and oppression, and with the tensions created by an acute sense of historical crisis, by placing contemporary problems in the context of Salvation History.<sup>53</sup> In terms of the providential plan which is unfolded in the Biblical cycle of Eden, Fall, Redemption and Parousia, the present age is not only fallen but also redeemed, and thus even in its negative aspects can mysteriously foreshadow the Apocalypse.<sup>54</sup>

The basis of the Biblical vision of history which provides the ultimate solution to the spiritual crisis of "Gold Coast Customs" has already been laid by Dame Edith in Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis." Both of these poems are constructed around the opposition of a "fallen" modern world and a primitive pastoral "Eden" of moral innocence and a spiritually inspired vitality and insight. In "Gold Coast Customs" this lost paradise is again briefly evoked, but only poignantly and nostalgically as a beautiful ideal which has been irretrievably lost:

How far is our innocent paradise,  
The blue-striped sand,  
Bull-bellowing band  
Of waves, and the great gold suns made wise  
By the dead days and the horizons grand.<sup>55</sup>

Just as Blake's "Songs of Experience" are ironically



qualified by their opposite number, so in "Gold Coast Customs" the "innocent paradise" with which human history began stands in sharp pejorative opposition to the frenzied carnality and spiritual blindness of the "African swamp." However, as is the case with Blake, Sitwell's irony also cuts in the opposite direction. This is so because neither the thesis nor the antithesis of her spiritual dialectic of innocence and fallen experience is by itself ultimately adequate. When juxtaposed with the evils into which humanity has fallen, the Romantic primitivism of the poet's Eden of an undifferentiated unity of God, man and nature is seen to be as fragile and evanescent as the innocence of Christabel or the happiness of Shelley's sensitive plant. What is needed is a higher synthesis of the fallen and unfallen states which will transcend either.

Sitwell's vision of regeneration is thus achieved in "Gold Coast Customs" not through the spiritual escapism of a simple attempt to return to Eden, but rather by the poet confronting and then transcending the enormities of her world. This transcendence is attained through Dame Edith's acceptance of the Christian vision of redemption, in which the suffering and death of Christ at the hands of a fallen world paradoxically leads to His resurrection and to the

rebirth of creation. The "dialectic" of man's "knowledge" or lived experience of the antinomies of good and evil is through Christ's redemptive sacrifice mysteriously incorporated into a higher synthesis, in which evil both subserves and foreshadows the ends of divine providence. Dame Edith's recognition of this mystery begins with her identification of the victimized poor with the crucified Christ, and of the "cannibal rich" with Cain and Judas:

Each Rag-and-Bone  
Is propped up tall  
(Lest in death it fall)  
.....  
The arms of one are stretched out wide....  
How long, since our Christ was crucified?

Rich man Judas,  
Brother Cain,  
The rich men are your worms that gain  
The air through seething from your brain;<sup>57</sup>

The most obvious function of Sitwell's identification of the rich with Cain and Judas is to highlight the fallen condition of humanity, which in the modern era has assumed the proportions of an "abomination of desolation." The poet's spiritual and moral awareness of this monstrous evil reproduces analogically the supreme suffering by which Christ took upon Himself the sins of the world. Sitwell's use of the figure of Cain in connection with the transgressions of the rich suggests the most terrible of the crimes which she must

suffer in spirit. This is the outright murder of the poor by economic attrition, an offence which will call down divine judgement as surely as did the slaying of Abel. Dame Edith's use of the first fratricide in connection with the economic mass-murder perpetrated by the rich implies that their conduct also constitutes a violation of a divinely-ordained ideal of human brotherhood. The notion of a universal fraternity is of course central to the teachings of Christ, a fact which Sitwell drives home by equating the oppression of the poor with His betrayal and crucifixion. In re-enacting the part of Cain, the rich are ultimately betraying the spiritual source of the brotherhood preached by Christ, the all-embracing love of humanity which led Him to suffer for the sake of fallen man. In this way, as Dame Edith suggests, the wealthy are repeating the sin of Judas.

The symbolism of Christ, Cain and Judas relates in "Gold Coast Customs" not merely to the violation of an ideal spiritual community between man and man. It also refers to the destruction of the bond between human society and nature, a scission which, as we have seen, constitutes one of the central themes of Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis." The "murdered God" Who haunts "Gold Coast Customs" is on

one level the "world-soul" of the Romantics, the immanent Divinity Whose universal presence and vitalizing spiritual energy renders creation a symbolic and sacramental organism. The presence of this Divinity in either man or nature is of course denied by the materialistic and mechanistic bias of contemporary society. This negation and betrayal of the God Whose universal immanence renders His creation a living spiritual mystery is suggested by Sitwell's allusions in "Gold Coast Customs" to certain lurid rites alleged to have been practised in Nineteenth Century Africa, ceremonies whose materialistic orgies of sexual licence and human sacrifice constitute obscene travesties of the primitive cults celebrating the sacred mysteries of the fertility of nature.

Modern man's self-willed isolation from the sacramental organism of nature is also suggested by Sitwell's use of sun and light imagery in "Gold Coast Customs." As God's first creation and as an immemorial symbol of His eternal essence,<sup>59</sup> light is a singularly appropriate image to suggest the creative omnipresence of the Divinity in both man and nature. In particular, it calls to mind the all-embracing love of a God Who makes His sun shine equally on the just and on the unjust.<sup>60</sup> This universal dispensation of grace

through the economy of nature is denied as much by the empty materialism and blind mechanism of contemporary society as by its economic injustice and its heartless depravity. With a sinister irony appropriate to such a world of spiritual darkness, the light and sun imagery of "Gold Coast Customs" is employed in a grotesque manner which highlights modern society's spiritual blindness and moral depravity. As Sitwell tells us, the "true and guiltless light" has been replaced in "Gold Coast Customs" by the spiritual emptiness and unreality of a light which is "a high ventriloquist sound (so high none knows whence it comes) - the octave of the black clotted night."<sup>61</sup> Together with the grotesque associations which are attached to the sun-image in "Gold Coast Customs", this synaesthetic transformation of light into a grotesque phantom of its true, divinely-appointed nature suggests once again that Sitwell regards modern society as an antitype of the divinely appointed order of nature. An ironic point of reference is provided in this regard by the Book of Genesis, in which the creation of light initiates the cosmogenetic process.<sup>62</sup> When placed in this context, Sitwell's use of light imagery in "Gold Coast Customs" suggests that a society which is dominated by a destructive and suicidal

thanatos, and in which atavism and spiritual decay are reducing the human soul to an amorphous deadness, reverses God's original work of creation.

Sitwell's use of light and sun symbolism in "Gold Coast Customs" also recalls the world of T.S. Eliot's early poetry, in which the God Who is denied by modern man reappears in a sinister and even terrible form.<sup>63</sup> Such imagery, with its ironic intimations of judgement and condemnation, is reinforced by Dame Edith's identification of London with the reprobate cities of the Bible, which in the context of Salvation History stand as types of the Fall in opposition to both the lost garden paradise of man's original innocence, and to the New Jerusalem of the Redeemed. The connection of London with the wicked cities of the Bible is made explicitly in "Gold Coast Customs" through an association of the metropolis with Gomorrah, and implicitly through the obvious connection of the wanton and sadistic Lady Bamburgher with Babylon, the Great Whore of the Apocalypse.<sup>64</sup> Both Gomorrah and the Great Whore suggest the depravity of a society which not only transgresses God's moral commandments, but also sacrifices innocent victims to its cruel whim. By standing in opposition to both God's moral law and to His New Covenant of love, the modern world is calling down upon

itself divine wrath and retribution. Towards the end of "Gold Coast Customs," we have a prophecy of the destruction of London by fire, a burning which suggests not only the war and the revolution which will inevitably stem from the oppression and injustice of contemporary society, but also the divine judgement passed by God upon Gomorrah and upon Babylon, the Great Whore.

It must be remembered, however, that the judgement of Babylon is an essential step in God's final purification of a depraved world. This in turn suggests how, in the organic continuity of Biblical history, the Fall with its sin and reprobation paradoxically becomes a foreshadowing or even an instrument of redemption. Evil is the occasion of Salvation History, in which it is enveloped and even employed in the service of good through the agency of God's infinite grace and providential wisdom. The knowledge of good and evil which results from the Fall is ultimately seen by Sitwell as a dialectical tension which produces the movement of Salvation History, the apparent triumph of sin calling into action the forces of redemption which will bring about the Parousia. This divine reversal of the course of human history is reflected in the ambiguity of Dame Edith's symbols of depravity, an ambivalence which is partly conveyed

by means of the device of a "typological" parody. For example, Lady Bambergher as the Old Eve and Great Whore suggests as her antitypes Mary, Christ the New Adam and the New Jerusalem which St. John compares to a bride clothed in readiness for her husband.<sup>65</sup> The destruction of London by divine fire is also ambiguous, implying both the condemnation of a depraved society and a purgatorial purification which paves the way for a new creation:

But the fires of God shall wash the mud  
Till the skin drums rolling  
The slum cries sprawling  
And crawling  
Are calling  
'Burn thou me!'<sup>66</sup>

God's providential employment of evil in the service of redemption centres in Salvation History around the Passion and Resurrection of Christ. Just as the death of the innocent and apparently helpless Savior at the hands of a fallen world becomes mysteriously the agency of the redemption of that world, so Christ's re-crucifixion in the poor will help to bring about the Parousia. The agony of the destitute, in partaking of the Redemptive Passion of the Savior, becomes not only the occasion, but also the vehicle of redemptive grace. The ordeal of the poor is, in other words, a martyrdom and as such both prophesizes and helps to forward the time when a triumphant Son of God will finally expunge



evil and elevate man to the spiritual fraternity in grace which is the New Jerusalem. Modern society is undergoing a baptism by fire, suffering and dying with Christ in order to share in the spiritual fruits of His Resurrection at the time of the Second Coming:

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.<sup>67</sup>

A society divided between a degenerate rich and a victimized poor will be redeemed in terms of a distributive justice which will in turn be based upon the spiritual fraternity of mankind in caritas.

In the climactic ending of "Gold Coast Customs," Edith Sitwell indicates her own inextricable involvement in the spiritual death and regeneration of her world by identifying herself with the suffering yet triumphant Christ. This dramatic gesture confirms Dame Edith's assertions that "Gold Coast Customs" marked a profound crisis in her inner life, which had been induced by a deep personal involvement in the agony of modern civilization:

I am told that the young gentlemen in overalls call me "poet of escape"; but I do not know any Bolshevik poem which 'escapes' less than... ["Gold Coast Customs"]. The

experiencing and writing of this poem were  
the most anguished experience of my life  
of the mind.<sup>68</sup>

The direct personal involvement of Edith Sitwell with the situation treated in "Gold Coast Customs" produces another "tier" of significance within the poem: the moral and spiritual sensibility of the artist as an evaluating and organizing center of consciousness within and above the action which she is describing.<sup>69</sup> As its kaleidoscopic structure suggests, "Gold Coast Customs" is on one level a poetic dramatization of a lived experience, an immediate evocation from within of a spiritual movement in the very process of its evolution. This movement may be seen as originating on a humanistic and emotional plane with Sitwell's affective regard for her fellow human beings. This solicitude in its turn involves the poet as concerned social being, whose sense of morality and justice is outraged and tormented by the wickedness of the rich and the suffering of the poor. On the level of personal feeling, Dame Edith is revealed in "Gold Coast Customs" as a warm and tender feminine soul, whose capacity to relate in both fraternal and sexual love has been paralyzed partly by a suffering which she cannot alleviate, and partly by the spectacle of a dissolute society's inversion of womanly eros<sup>70</sup> into cruelty and lust:<sup>71</sup>

When the sun of dawn looks down on the shrunken  
 Heads, drums of skin, and the dead men drunken,  
 I only know one half of my heart  
 Lies in that terrible coffin of stone,  
 My body that stalks through the slum alone.  
 And that half of my heart  
 That is in your breast  
 You gave for meat  
 In the sailor's street  
 To the rat that had only my bones to eat.<sup>72</sup>

For this painted Plague-cart's  
 Heart, for this  
 Slime of the Worm that paints her kiss  
 And the dead men's bones round her throat and wrist,  
 The half of my heart that lay in your breast  
 Has fallen away  
 To rot and bray  
 With the painted mud through the eyeless day.<sup>73</sup>

However, Sitwell's sacramental vision of man's nature renders her human and social concerns inseparable from her consideration of the spiritual forces at work in her society, and her role of outraged humanist is from the outset contiguous with that of a prophetic "judge and Jeremiah." Both of these stances reflect a painful ambiguity which is inherent in the poet's position in relation to her subject. Sitwell is inextricably involved in the evils of her society even if only as an innocent observer and sympathetic sufferer. Her position of moral and spiritual superiority to the rich indeed makes possible her intimately related roles of outraged Juvenalian satirist and condemning prophet. This detachment is, however, the product of an essentially

negative reflex which in the last analysis represents an imprisonment in the situation by which it is determined and conditioned. The poet's entrapment is reflected upon the humanistic plane in an emotional paralysis arising equally from sympathetic agony and from despondency. On the prophetic level, it takes the form of a despairing condemnation and jeremiad. The ending of the initial 1929 version of "Gold Coast Customs" combines total hopelessness from a human and social perspective with a prophetic lamentation over a world which has sunk beneath the possibility of salvation:

But yet if only one soul would whine,  
 Rat -like from the lowest mud, I should know  
 That somewhere in God's vast love it would shine:  
 But even the rat-whine has guttered low.<sup>74</sup>

However, just as in society at large the Fall is in the final analysis simply a prelude to Redemption and Apocalypse, so Sitwell's emotional and spiritual agony constitutes a radical baptism by fire, in which she suffers and dies in spirit with the Redeemer so as to be re-born with Him in a personal conversion to the Christian principles of faith, hope and charity. In the new 1930 ending of "Gold Coast Customs," the poet is identified with the forces of redemption which are incarnated by Christ. In the second conclusion, the poet's voice is no longer that of a satiric

impulse which has collapsed into despair, or even that of God's wrath and condemnation. Dame Edith is now the mouth-piece of God's redemptive love. In achieving the fullness of her prophetic role, Sitwell's human feelings towards her fellow men are revived and transformed through the medium of grace. Her womanly eros or relatedness has become a divinely inspired caritas.

As Ralph J. Mills Jr. suggests,<sup>75</sup> Edith Sitwell in "Gold Coast Customs" has successfully completed the hero-quest as it is described by Joseph Campbell.<sup>76</sup> From the point of view of the poet's spiritual development, "Gold Coast Customs" can be seen as encapsulating the archetypal journey in which the initiate descends into a terrible underworld, passes through a purifying and transforming ordeal, and finally becomes the vehicle of a divine wisdom and power. On a visionary plane, Dame Edith has attained the apocalyptic perspective of her later poetry, in which the evils and sufferings of a fallen world are transcended and healed by the redemptive power of God's grace. As a necessary preparation for this prophetic role, Dame Edith has, in creating the two figures of Lady Bamburgher and Sally, projected and ultimately excised from her psyche two negative "doubles" or "shadows."<sup>77</sup> These two figures

represent not the poet's own capacity for sin, but rather her inability to cope with evil and suffering. In successfully confronting them, Sitwell manages to overcome the paralyzing emotions of impotent anger, fruitless pity and hopeless despair which constitute the negative side of the feminine capacity for eros or relatedness. Both psychologically and spiritually, Dame Edith emerges from her crisis as a full woman, whose all-embracing ability to relate and to affirm renders her both microcosmos and micro-Christus.<sup>78</sup> Her nurturing love and pity, her imaginative fecundity, and, finally, her psychic comprehension and transcendence of all of the contraries of human experience have brought her to the fullness of vision which characterizes her mature poetry. In this latterwork, Dame Edith in her roles of wise old woman and earth-mother<sup>79</sup> will mirror upon the level of spiritual vision and artistic creation the fertility of the all-embracing matrix of a divinely inspired universe.

CHAPTER V

ALIENATION AND ATONEMENT

IN THE EARLY POETRY OF EDITH SITWELL

Because of the lack of sufficiently detailed criticisms of the key works in Sitwell's early poetry, and because of the need to establish an adequate context for a discussion of the themes of alienation and atonement in a poetry which constitutes an organically unified "intensive manifold"<sup>1</sup> of meaning, it has been necessary to engage in a detailed discussion of the imaginative development in Dame Edith's early poetry. It is now possible to show that the motifs of alienation and atonement are recurring and central themes in the poet's developmental phase. On the one hand, they are basic to the substantiating and encompassing matrix of vision which is in the process of being articulated in the early poetry. On the other, it is possible to comprehend in a discussion of the subjects of alienation and atonement all of the major developments which, in the first period of Sitwell's career, take place within that larger and essentially static imaginative framework. Because the themes of alienation and atonement are so

central to Sitwell's early poetry, and therefore comprehend many of its aspects, the following survey will aim for as much comprehensiveness as is possible.

We may begin with a broad and relatively general discussion of the motifs of alienation and atonement in terms of the imaginative matrix within which the individual themes and poems of Sitwell's early work are contained. The theme of atonement in the early poetry is one extremely important aspect of the Romantic organicist vision which constitutes the imaginative foundation of Dame Edith's art. More specifically, her notion of atonement centers around the organic community through the omnipresent immanence of the Divinity of four planes of being: God, cosmic nature, society and the human individual. Thus, the visionary love poems from The Mother... present the union of two human individuals in the "society" of love in terms of man's relationship to the larger community of the universe. This cosmic community, in which all beings are bound together by a divinely inspired eros, is in turn based upon the sacramental union of God with His creation. Similarly, the pastoral Golden Age of Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis" presents us with a vision of a human civilization which is the organic expression of the spiritual community of man and nature.



Sitwell's notion of atonement may be described in terms of a "Chinese box" of organic enclosures, in which each of the series of entities constituted by the cosmos, society and the individual reflects and expresses the larger being which encompasses it, the universe itself of course subsisting within the omnipresent embrace of the immanent Divinity. In employing such a "spatial" articulation of the "intensive manifold" of reality in order to elucidate the full connotations which Sitwell would attach to the word "atonement," it should be remembered that the term always implies a radical identity rather than an analogy among the train of entities to which it applies. This organic unity of Sitwell's "chain of being"<sup>2</sup> ultimately means that its least member incorporates and expresses those above it as completely as the greatest encompasses all of the others.

Just as the idea of atonement in Sitwell's early poetry must be viewed in terms of the context provided by the organic community of God, the universe, society and the individual, so the notion of alienation involves the disruption of that community. "The Drunkard" and "The Madness of Saul" resemble Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" in having as their basic theme the alienation of the individual

from God, nature and the human community by a sin violating the web of divinely inspired eros which binds together the universe. By in effect denying the basis of the cosmic community, the transgressor casts himself out of the universal matrix into a terrible alienation from both external reality and his own true, or sacramental, self. The same basic notion of alienation applies to both "Gold Coast Customs" and to the early satiric poetry. In "Gold Coast Customs" and Facade,<sup>5</sup> the poet as a spiritually sensitive individual is alienated from a society whose materialistic premises have in turn cut it off from God and nature. Similarly, in the three long poems which deal with the theme of time, the isolation of the poet herself from God by a materialistic perspective alienates her from cosmic nature. The universe is regarded as an enveloping enormity which is separate from the conscious individual, and by which he is imprisoned and destroyed.

All of the various forms of alienation are of course peculiar to man as a perceiving, feeling and willing subject, paradoxically stemming in the last analysis from a perversion of his unique psychic powers. As we have seen in connection with "The Madness of Saul," the union of the human subject with God, the cosmos and his fellow men is achieved by means

of a fusion of a conscious logos or visionary illumination with an unconscious eros or affective energy. The individual is made lovingly aware of his oneness with other beings in the Spirit, and wills to affirm them in what Martin Buber would term an 'I-thou' relationship.<sup>3</sup> Alienation occurs when eros and logos cease to function in creative union. Logos degenerates into a purblind materialism or into a metaphysical nightmare of determinism or absurdity. Eros becomes a blind sexual appetite, a fixation with matter which is at the same time a short-circuiting of the love-energy back to the subject, and an inversion of what should be a creative power into one which is destructive and death-dealing. These perversions of eros and logos, whether they take the form of lust, of a mindless surrender to the materialism and mechanism of an industrialized and commercialized society, or, finally, of metaphysical nightmares which make the universe seem a prison and a tomb for the mortal individual, equally constitute denials of the divinely inspired love which is the basis of the cosmic community. As such, they condemn the society or the individual which they possess to a sterile and self-destructive isolation.

Alienation, or the spiritual exile of man from the universal community of love, is for Sitwell at the same time

a state of entrapment. Both in visionary and in concrete terms, a perverted eros and logos turn the spiritual home which is created by the love-relationship into a prison. On the personal level, the free self-giving of love stands in opposition to lust, which in both "The Mother" and "The Madness of Saul," is depicted as an imprisoning infatuation. True love involves not only the free gift of self to another, but also the cherishing and affirmation of the integrity of a second independent being. In "Gold Coast Customs" Sitwell suggests that lust imprisons the object of desire by reducing it to a mere instrument to be exploited at pleasure for the sake of self-gratification.

The materialistic vision of the modern era involves too what Blake terms "mind-forg'd manacles."<sup>4</sup> Materialism creates a society in which the spirit is held in bondage by a façade or wall of physical appearance and by the rigid and narrow routine of a mechanical speed and rhythm. As we have seen in connection with the Facade poems, this prison is ironically also a protection from the abyss of nothingness. In its own way, this gulf of absurdity constitutes as agonizing an entrapment for a sensitive and intelligent being as the determinism or fate with which it is associated in Sitwell's early poetry. However, at the

same time as it erects a flimsy barrier between man and the ultimate entrapment of the absurd, the creation of a purely material culture which is doomed to crumble into dust reflects the prison which time and matter becomes when viewed from a purely carnal perspective. Basic to the structure of Facade<sup>5</sup> is thus the idea of a Chinese box of multiple imprisonments which stand in antithesis to the series of organic enclosures which constitutes the cosmic love community.

Since the cosmic community in love is the source of both physical and spiritual life, alienation for Sitwell is ultimately a state of death. The individual and the civilization who are cut off from the spiritual sources of vitality are doomed on a physical level to crumble into "dust," on the psychological plane to a terrible despair over aging and the grave, and on the metaphysical and moral to the death of meaning and value in absurdity. The alienated are condemned first to a spectral existence as negations of true being and ultimately to annihilation. That the prison of alienation is also a tomb is suggested by the momento mori imagery which, as W.B. Yeats shrewdly noted, is pervasive in Sitwell's early poetry.<sup>5</sup> It is also less directly implied by Sitwell's frequent use of an

infernal setting. Edith Sitwell's Hell is a state of alienation from the God Who is the source of the vitality with which the very existence of created beings is bound up. Her apparently comic Inferno thus ultimately possesses its full Dantesque and Miltonic connotations as a place of bondage and death for the spirit. The very real grimness of the conceit of identifying the modern world with Hell is in the last analysis only emphasized by the "terrible gaiety" with which it is treated.

Another recurring motif which is associated with the theme of alienation in Sitwell's early poetry is the isolation, suffering and death of an innocent victim of evil or of a sterile and vicious social order. In being rejected and exploited, the victim is on the one hand denied the community of love, and on the other is tempted to despair or to deny love himself. The alienation of a pharmakos-figure<sup>6</sup> is connected in Sitwell's early poetry with the denial and betrayal of the love which creates the cosmic community. The themes of the violation of the cosmic eros and of the pharmakos are epitomized in "Gold Coast Customs" in the Biblical figures of Cain the murderer, Judas the betrayer and Christ the innocent victim, figures which are also implicit in "The Mother" and "The Madness of Saul."

The theme of the alienation of the innocent victim takes a number of forms in Sitwell's early poetry. In "The Drunkard" there is the isolation and imprisonment of the wife who is tortured and murdered by her sadistic husband; in "The Mother" the terrible sense of betrayal, rejection, isolation and guilt which is symbolized by the narrator's state of living death in the grave. Another aspect of the alienation of the pharmakos is suggested in "The Mother" by the grotesque vision of the old woman's own soul exacting a terrible vengeance by tormenting her son in Hell. This is the inversion of the victim's love into a denial which alienates him as effectively as his betrayer is spiritually isolated by his crime. The denial of love by the suffering pharmakos appears even more clearly in the curse and in the prayers for cosmic disaster which are delivered by Atarah in "The Madness of Saul."

In Facade, the three time poems and "Gold Coast Customs," it is the artist herself who is the suffering victim. In the early satiric poems, Dame Edith is subjected to the spiritual pain of being simultaneously isolated from her fellow men and imprisoned by the society which they have created. Her role of ironist and satirist is as much an attempt to mask the agony of her alienation as it is a

weapon, and in her own way the poet is as much a pharmakos as is Atarah or the murdered mother. The motif of Dame Edith as innocent and suffering victim appears even more clearly in the time poems in which, although Dame Edith remains essentially innocent of the vices and follies of her contemporaries, she is tortured by the metaphysical nightmares induced by their materialism. Alienated from a universe, which, in her vision of the entrapment of the individual in time and matter, seems a prison, she only gradually overcomes her painful despair and achieves a true community with the nature around her. The alienation of the poet as victim is also a prominent feature of "Gold Coast Customs," in which it is closely connected with her sympathetic identification with the destitute. The way in which both the sensitive artist and the poor are in their own way equally the innocent victims of the heartless rich is emphasized in "Gold Coast Customs" by their common identification with the crucified Christ.

The idea of the alienated victim is intimately associated in Sitwell's early poetry with the recurring figure of the suffering female whose womanly eros is denied or betrayed, and who is condemned to a tormented and sterile isolation. The murdered wife in "The Drunkard," the speaker



of "The Mother," Atarah and Amasa in "The Madness of Saul," the alienated, imprisoned and tormented artist of Facade,<sup>5</sup> the time poems and "Gold Coast Customs," and the prostitute Sally in the latter work are really all symbolic manifestations of the same thematic manifold. This is in part subjective. All of the suffering females in Sitwell's early poetry are to a greater or lesser degree "objective correlatives" of her own psychological and spiritual struggle to rise beyond the alienation of a sensitive individual in a fallen world, and to achieve the atonement arising from an ultimate spiritual affirmation. The complex idea which Sitwell embodies in her female victims is also metaphysical. The betrayal or denial of the loving and nurturing woman stands for the rejection of the spiritual community of love which is the cosmic matrix.

After having viewed the themes of alienation and atonement in the early poetry of Edith Sitwell in relatively general terms and in the context of the poet's larger visionary system, it is now possible to turn to the nexus of specific developments which take place in the individual poems. In the light of our more general discussion, it will be seen that these can be fruitfully viewed as a series of escapes from simultaneous exile and imprisonment of

alienation to the spiritual home provided by the universal community of divinely inspired love. This movement from alienation to atonement is closely bound up with the poetic roles<sup>7</sup> which Edith Sitwell assumes during the developmental phase of her career, and with the literary forms which she employs.

The earliest of Sitwell's poems that are relevant to the matter of alienation are "The Drunkard," "The Mother" and "The Madness of Saul." In these dramatic pieces, Dame Edith's artistic role is that of the anonymous poet. Spiritually speaking, this role can be seen as corresponding to a sensitive soul's initial perception of the forces of evil in a fallen world, an awareness which is still too new to have allowed the creation of a positive stance by way of reaction. Through the medium of the characters of her poems, Sitwell is still essentially in the process of objectifying and of exploring her awareness of and response to evil. It is true that in the visionary love poems in The Mother..., Sitwell has already formulated the basis of her vision of atonement. This affirmative insight is however not used by Dame Edith either to overcome her own alienation from a fallen world, or to envision the redemptive atonement of the victims of the powers of evil. With regard

to both of these problems, Sitwell's vision of a universal love-community is for the meantime allowed to stand in simple opposition to the disruption and the isolation brought about through the agency of evil. The cosmic symbolism of "The Drunkard" and "The Madness of Saul," while effectively underlining the alienation of their characters, does not suggest any means by which they may be atoned with the universal community of love. Similarly, Dame Edith as anonymous poet is still in the process of exploring the terrible knowledge of good and evil, not having yet incorporated the former into a spiritual viewpoint from which to deal with the latter. She stands in alienation from a fallen world without yet being able to move effectively towards her own atonement.

The difficulties inherent in Dame Edith's first poetic stance may explain her rapid assumption of her second role, that of the ironist and satirist.<sup>8</sup> This development makes it possible for the poet to adopt a definite if largely negative attitude towards a degenerate society, an attitude which in turn allows her to use the contrast between the knowledge of good and evil for some more effective purpose than simply to underline the tragedy of the Fall. The role of ironist and satirist gives Sitwell a certain measure of

detachment from her milieu, and at the same time permits her to attack rather than merely observe its perversion of the divinely appointed order of creation. Dame Edith's assault is carried out by expressing through the satiric device of parody or "anti-statement" the contrast between human society and the cosmic organism.

Despite the very real effectiveness of this satiric sally, it does not constitute a full solution to the poet's spiritual problems. Dame Edith's ironic detachment from modern society is also her alienation from the human community. Moreover, merely to attack contemporary evils without effectively transcending them is to exist in a servo-mechanistic relationship with them which in effect constitutes a state of spiritual imprisonment. The satiric contrast of a materialistic and mechanistic society with a divinely inspired nature is of little spiritual help to the poet herself unless she is more firmly united with the latter than is suggested by her tentative and indirect exploration in Facade<sup>5</sup> of the spiritual powers of her creative unconscious. Moreover, a simple satiric juxtaposition provides no basis for a vision of the eventual atonement with God and with the cosmic organism of a society alienated and imprisoned by its own materialistic philosophy. It is of course true that

Sitwell's other role in Facade,<sup>5</sup> that of the lyric rebel who is also the disguised prophet and the radical innocent, promises a more effective visionary stance from which to attack the problems of alienation. However, this new apocalyptic perspective only emerges in a fully developed form after a long and difficult process of spiritual growth.

In the three time poems, Dame Edith simultaneously establishes the basis for her own spiritual escape from the personal exile and imprisonment which she manifests in the satiric poems, and prepares for a vision of the atonement of modern civilization with God and nature. Both of these ends are accomplished by excising from her spiritual outlook the materialism with which she herself has been infected. In moving from the vision of time and matter as a prison and a tomb for man's body and spirit to a loving surrender of her individual being to the organic processes of nature, Dame Edith has anchored herself firmly in the universal love-community. Her personal move from cosmic alienation to cosmic atonement means that, because she is now identified with an entity which encompasses human society, she can no longer be imprisoned in the sterility of her milieu. The poet has by her cosmic atonement prepared herself to assume the transcendent perspective of a

divine wisdom, from which she can in faith, hope and charity unite herself with fallen man in envisioning his eventual atonement with his Creator.

The process of atonement which is begun in the time poems is completed in "Gold Coast Customs." The poet's initial role in this piece is, as Ralph J. Mills, Jr. maintains, that of "judge and Jeremiah."<sup>9</sup> This role, in heightening the ironic and satiric stance which Sitwell assumed in Facade, underlines the spiritual imprisonment and exile consequent upon the social alienation which the poet manifested in her satiric work. The very intensity of Sitwell's anger and disgust at a society which in its blind materialism and frantic mechanism has rejected and betrayed the universal love-community constitute at once a fixation and a paralysis. The poet's spiritual imprisonment by the milieu which she attacks is made all the more binding by the intense pity which fetters her to a suffering which she cannot in any way alleviate. Dame Edith's escape from this state of hopeless exile and entrapment is effected by a shift in her spiritual point of view, in which by seeing the contemporary situation in the context of Biblical history, she is able to assume the transcendental spiritual perspective of the prophet of God. From this height, she

is able to see an eventual redemptive reunion of society with God's moral law, and with the sacramental cosmic energy which will make the plenitude of nature itself available to serve man's physical and spiritual wants. The atonement of society with God and the universe will in turn pave the way for the healing of the divisions into which the savage pursuit of wealth and self-gratification has divided mankind. In achieving this vision of the return of society to an organic love-community mirroring that of nature, the poet is released from the exile and entrapment which were induced equally by her sympathy and by her indignation.

Before leaving the subject of alienation and atonement in the early poetry of Edith Sitwell, it is necessary to discuss several of its more important thematic and symbolic ramifications. The first of these is the imaginative pre-occupation of Edith Sitwell with the opposition and fusion of contraries. This particular mode of imaginative vision, which is as clear an indication as any of the Romantic roots of Edith Sitwell's poetry,<sup>10</sup> has been treated in considerable detail by James Brophy in his book Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore only necessary to sketch briefly the way in which the theme of alienation, involving as it does the notion of opposition, is intimately bound up

in Sitwell's early poetry with her perception of experience in terms of the clash of contraries. Similarly, it can be shown that Dame Edith's vision of atonement involves a reconciliation of opposites through their incorporation into a larger organic totality.

Of all of the antinomies which appear in Sitwell's early poetry, perhaps the most central are those of life and death in nature, and those of good and evil in the human world. These two pairs of opposites, whose dialectic is in large part responsible for the conflicting spiritual forces of affirmation and negation within the poet's own psyche, can be best understood in terms of the spiritual poles of Fall and Redemption. In the primeval Eden of instinctual inspiration treated in Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis," in which spirit and matter, the conscious and the unconscious, morality and desire still exist in a state of undifferentiated unity, the opposition of life and death in the world of nature is not yet apparent to man. However, with the splitting of his consciousness from his instinct comes a "fall" in which the individual is alienated from time and matter, which he sees as acting in opposition to his own isolated mortality. This fall of man into a cosmic alienation leads to the negative vision



love-community. Such spiritual and moral alienation is in turn responsible for the betrayal and denial which are manifested in the tragedy of Saul and in the enormities which are described in "Gold Coast Customs." As the latter poem implies, the proliferation of egocentric desire in the materialistic modern era has created a social and economic death-machine. Not only does such a civilization act in opposition to God and the sacramental world organism, but is also fragmented internally by class-struggle and war. These clashes in turn alienate its more sensitive members. In the contemporary era, the clash of opposites in a fallen world has thus reached its maximum complexity and intensity. However, as Sitwell implies in "Gold Coast Customs," the antithesis of good and evil is in the last analysis not merely a sign of the Fall. It is also the basis of the dialectical movement of Salvation History in which it leads towards the Parousia. This creative interaction of good and evil in turn grows out of the atonement of the two contraries in the sacrifice of Christ, in which human depravity is paradoxically made the vehicle of the redemptive atonement of man with God.

The importance of the notions of Fall and Redemption in connection with the motif of the clash and reconciliation

of opposites provides one indication of the way in which Biblical typology constitutes an imaginative "archetype" which governs Edith Sitwell's expression of the themes of alienation and atonement. The "cycle" of Biblical history, with its succession of Creation, Fall, Prophecy, Redemption and Apocalypse, appears fully and explicitly in "Gold Coast Customs," and it is implicit in the themes and symbols of others of the early poems which have been discussed, including "The Mother" and "The Madness of Saul." In Sitwell's early poetry we have also a full and ingenious use of the time-honored principle of analogy,<sup>12</sup> in which, because all earthly events are seen as connected in both time and eternity to the divine plan of Salvation History, the overall pattern, the characters or the events of Biblical history are applied to other historical periods or areas of experience. Two examples of this procedure are the identification in "Gold Coast Customs" of the wealthy of contemporary London with Cain and Judas, and the envisioning in "The Mother" of the parent-child relationship in terms of a return to Eden.

Edith Sitwell's use of Biblical typology in connection with the themes of alienation and atonement in her early poetry must be viewed in the context of the syncretic fusion

of the Judaeo-Christian tradition with an organicist Romanticism which was mentioned in the earlier discussion of "The Madness of Saul." This synthesis means that the rhythm of Biblical history, whether it is applied to the spiritual history of the individual or of the race, is viewed by Sitwell in terms of a teleos or process of organic development. Thus in "The Mother," Elegy on Dead Fashion, "Metamorphosis" and "Gold Coast Customs," Edith Sitwell would appear to follow Blake in regarding innocence as a spiritual womb, the fall from which is both an inevitable and, in the long run, beneficial step in the normal course of man's spiritual growth.<sup>13</sup> Sitwell's subscription to the notion of a "fortunate" fall is suggested by the fact that, whether in connection with the life of the individual or of the race, Eden is seen as something irretrievably lost, which is moreover regarded with the soft and essentially regressive emotion of a hopeless nostalgia. The way in which the poet regards Eden in the present reflects what it was in the past: an ephemeral stage in man's spiritual development whose essentially passive emotions corresponded to an infantile security. Such protectedness was indeed the result of a state of atonement, of an organic love-community of the individual with God and nature. However,

this community represents an embryonic condition in which the oppositions inherent in human experience have simply not yet developed.

The Fall takes place when the human spirit is born from the embryonic condition of primordial oneness which pertains in Eden into the knowledge or lived experience of the manifold contrarities of human existence. Thus The Sleeping Beauty suggests how each individual must, in the normal course of his spiritual growth, fall from the visionary ecstasy in which he is united with a beneficent and protective "parental" universe. Through a process of spiritual growth which is both intimately related and analogous to physical puberty, the individual becomes aware of his isolated individuality in opposition to an indifferent or hostile object-world. He thus comes to the knowledge of the opposition of life and death in a fallen nature and of his own bondage to the latter. The fall of the individual into a sin such as lust, or of the race into spiritual blindness and moral depravity, follows an analogous pattern of an expansion of spiritual knowledge through alienation and apparent negation. Both personal sin and the degeneration of the race involve a dissociation from the matrix of a divinely inspired universe or love-community, a disjunction

by which man becomes a "shadow" who exists in a state of simultaneous alienation from God, from nature and from his own true self.

However, in the economy of divine providence, the apparent spiritual death of the Fall is really a developmental stage in an organically unified process of spiritual growth. As such it contains within itself the seeds of a rebirth to a higher life. The perspective of Salvation History allows us to view the fallen world as existing in a state of tension between the power of negation which is evil and the redemptive potential of grace. The generative function of this tension with regard to man's spiritual growth is illustrated clearly in "Gold Coast Customs." In this poem spiritual forces of betrayal and denial represented by Cain and Judas are seen not simply as existing along with and countervailing the atoning presence of divine love which is incarnated in the figure of Christ. They are also paradoxically working in a positive fashion by activating through a dialectical tension the processes of Salvation. Although it is ultimately to be condemned and excised at the time of the Last Judgement, evil in the meantime is as much an essential element in the organic teleos of Salvation History as are the negative elements of non-being, decay and death in

the generative matrix of nature, whose cycle of death and rebirth is of course analogous to the rhythm of Biblical time. In both cases, the dialectic of opposites becomes the medium and the motivating force of a process of organic development, from which there unfolds an atoning and life-giving matrix of salvation.

To approach the matter of salvation from a different perspective, the atonement of the individual with a sacramental cosmos through the organic processes of nature, and of the race with God through the movement of Biblical history, are both brought about by means of a sacrificial embrace of a fallen world in love.<sup>14</sup> The archetype of this act of atonement is of course the Passion of Christ for the sake of a depraved humanity, an act which must be repeated by each human individual in his search for illumination, reconciliation and redemption. By a surrender of self which repeats the Passion, man grows to spiritual maturity through his assimilation to a transcendent organic process, whether this be the "texture" of nature or the teleos of Salvation History. His psyche rises beyond the effects of the Fall by his identification with an encompassing matrix in which all of the negative aspects of human existence are subsumed, and in which its divisions and oppositions are healed.

This paradigmatic act is twice repeated on a spiritual or imaginative level by Sitwell herself. The first time is in "Metamorphosis" when she gives herself to the organic cycles and to the metamorphic process in the world of nature. The second is in "Gold Coast Customs," when she suffers and dies in spirit with Christ in observing the evil and oppression of her world, and is then resurrected to a prophetic vision in which her spiritual outlook is assimilated to the Biblical cycle of Redemption, Judgement and Apocalypse. On all of its various levels, the early poetry of Edith Sitwell may thus be seen as a divine comedy, in which the alienation resulting from the Fall leads organically to a new atonement brought about by redemption. Although this redeemed condition is analogous to the undifferentiated unity which prevailed in Eden, it represents a higher spiritual state. This is so because it is based on a fusion of dichotomies of which the spiritual subject is fully aware, and which can only be held together in the context of an encompassing organic matrix in which they are allowed full scope to interact creatively. The passive receptivity of infancy has thus through the agency of the Fall been replaced by the fullness of vision which characterizes maturity, and by creative spiritual exertion which is necessary to cope with the contrarities of existence.

There is one further imaginative pattern in the poetry of Edith Sitwell which is not only particularly relevant to the themes of alienation and atonement, but which is also interesting in that it involves qualities which are shared with at least two other woman poets. In a recent article concerning the poetry of Sylvia Plath,<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Perloff makes an interesting attempt to relate the work of that artist to the period which Northrop Frye has termed "the age of sensibility."<sup>16</sup> Perloff maintains that Plath belongs in the same tradition of "oracular" writing as the Pre-Romantic poets, a tradition whose two most characteristic moods are an objectless fear, or angst, and an objectless pity which takes the form of an "imaginative animism." In Plath's later poetry, angst is expressed in a vision of the reduction of human beings to "things, objects, machines."<sup>17</sup> This grim vision is, however, offset by the poet's animism, through which man's "'thingness' can be transcended either in the joy or in the suffering that results when man identifies imaginatively with the life of animals, of plants, or of inanimate objects."<sup>18</sup> This same imaginative pattern is also prominent in the powerful work of the Canadian poet Margaret Atwood. Its further appearance in the radical animating and de-animating imagery of the early poetry of



Edith Sitwell is therefore significant in possibly suggesting one characteristic way in which the feminine psyche might react to the intense crisis of modern experience.

However, it must be kept in mind that neither the pity nor the fear which are manifested in the early poetry of Edith Sitwell are "objectless" in the sense of being purely subjective moods unrelated to a well-defined view of external reality. The reduction of human beings to "things, objects, machines" in the early satiric poetry and in "Gold Coast Customs" is an expression of the poet's sense of the alienation of modern man from the organic rhythms of a spiritually inspired cosmos, and his imprisonment in dead matter and a mechanical routine. The significance of the imagery in which contemporary man's "thingness" is stressed is underlined by the "pathetic fallacy" in which the organic nature in his immediate vicinity is reduced to the same level of mechanism and dead artifice. Similarly the animistic tendency of Sitwell's imagination is an expression of her sense of man's organic community with nature in the substantiating ground of the immanent Divinity. Her "curiously intense awareness"<sup>19</sup> of nature, her imaginative sympathy with its creatures and its processes, and the way in which these are anthropomorphized in her radical conceits, are ultimately

expressions of her vision of the possibility of man's atonement with the cosmos. Thus, even Sitwell's early poetry has moved beyond sensibility to vision, from a Pre-Romantic" emotional subjectivism to the imaginative structuring of all experience in terms of the vision of Fall and Redemption which informs the works of the great Romantics.

A clear indication of the organic unity of Edith Sitwell's poetry is the continuity between her early work and the mature poetry which she published from 1940 onwards. Despite the very real evidences of a sudden metamorphic development by which the poet after seven years of virtual silence suddenly emerges as a mature artist, there is probably not one important theme or symbol in the later poetry which has not been anticipated in the earlier verse. Because of this continuity of detail, and because both early and mature poetry are encompassed in an essentially static matrix of vision, the first part of this study has been partly designed to establish by accretion a background which will allow the later poetry to be approached from the point of view of certain overriding imaginative patterns. These configurations illustrate the continuing interplay of alienation and atonement in Sitwell's later poetry. The fundamental importance of this dialectic in Sitwell's

mature vision will be illustrated in a concluding discussion of her "Three Poems of the Atomic Age," pieces which are at once typical of her later poetry and yet also express one of the most intense crises of her spiritual career.

## CHAPTER VI

## METAPHYSICAL MEDIUM AND METAPHYSICAL MESSAGE

Both as artist and as a public personality, Dame Edith Sitwell was from the outset of her career a provocative and controversial figure, and this naturally led to a divergence of opinion concerning her and her work. It was apparently not easy to be neutral towards the Sibylline yet impish figure who neither in her art nor in her life was afraid to be "an unpopular electric eel in a pool of catfish."<sup>1</sup> Now that the poet has been dead for several years, it should be possible to overcome the relatively superficial difficulty of penetrating the legend and the masks to the great poet who undoubtedly lay behind them. However, a serious and unbiased approach to Sitwell's poetry only takes one to the threshold of the real difficulties. Most of the poetry published from 1940 onwards is less immediately perplexing than some of the early pieces, but it is by no means without critical thorns. What often seems a greater directness and simplicity in Sitwell's mature work is largely attributable to the deceptive ease born of technical and intellectual accomplishment. The complexities lurking beneath

the surface of her later poetry are well illustrated by a lack of critical consensus concerning two intimately related and important matters. These are the extent to which the final phase of her art offers a resolution of her earlier spiritual difficulties, and its relationship if any to the metaphysical tradition which has contributed so much to modern poetry.

Sitwell's supposed departure from the canons of modern metaphysical taste appears to lie behind a sharp attack by Julian Symons in which the poet is accused of using shopworn Victorian tropes, of practising "the evasive rhetoric of her much-admired Swinburne," and of lacking "memorable and exact images" relating to "reality."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, even sympathetic and otherwise sensitive critics of Dame Edith's poetry have failed to notice a significant metaphysical element in her later work. Thus, Derek Stanford in his suggestive essay "Dame Edith Sitwell and the Transatlantic Muse," correctly associates the poet's work with the organicist aesthetic of Romanticism, but only in opposition to a "classical" ideal of poetry as "something possessed of irony, paradox, wit, elegance, and imaginative logic - as a form of art which contains contrarities within a firm structure."<sup>3</sup>

Stanford's essay appeared after Joseph E. Duncan's

excellent if brief treatment of Sitwell in The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry.<sup>4</sup> Duncan mentions Dame Edith's "long affinity with the metaphysicals and the seventeenth century,"<sup>5</sup> and praises her for adapting "the metaphysical style to the poetic scrutiny of modern warfare more distinctively and successfully than any other poet."<sup>6</sup> He notes that "A number of the poems prompted by the Second World War and the atomic bomb combine at explosive tensions the searching analogies, wit and complexity of metaphysical poetry."<sup>7</sup> He also touches upon the occurrence in the later poetry of irony, paradox, conceit, antithesis and word-play. Although Duncan's study raises a number of important points, it is too abbreviated to permit a full treatment of either Sitwell's use of metaphysical technique, or of its implications for her mature vision.

Both Duncan and James Brophy, whose Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order has offered some penetrating comments on the later poetry, attempt to link Sitwell's metaphysical technique with her spiritual concerns. Brophy notes the role of the metaphysical conceit in the poet's evolution of a vision of discordia concors in which suffering is accepted and transcended.<sup>8</sup> Duncan speaks of Dame Edith's mature work being "infused with the desire to bring together

in meaningful patterns all the varied life of the universe,"<sup>9</sup> and he correlates this endeavor with the attempt of Burton and Browne to maintain the old "correspondences and sacred symbols linking God, the universe, and man."<sup>10</sup> He notes also that Sitwell's mythopoeia forms the basis of a visionary synthesis which enables the poet "to write about the desolation of modern life and the devastation of modern war with a penetrating sensitivity and a mature complexity, but yet with a broadening vision of a universe in which divine love holds all things together in a natural kinship."<sup>11</sup>

As cogent as Brophy's and Duncan's statements are, they do not jibe with the opinions expressed in other studies of Sitwell's later poetry. An underplaying of the element of spiritual tension and conflict in the mature work is, for example, noticeable in Ralph J. Mills, Jr.'s recent analysis of the later poetry in his Edith Sitwell (1966):

While Dame Edith most certainly recognizes evil as it erupts constantly in human desires and actions, she seldom insists on original sin, human guilt and damnation as ultimate threats to man....She sees in all things now the signs of renewal, indeed, at moments, of the Day of Resurrection.<sup>12</sup>

While perfectly valid as a summation of Sitwell's ultimate spiritual position, such statements unless carefully qualified lead to a lopsided evaluation of the later poetry. In

the first place, they do insufficient justice to Dame Edith's agonized lamentations over the horrors of modern war, the ruin of society by flagrant economic injustice, the erosiveness of time, and the destructive savagery of lust.<sup>13</sup> Not only do such misgivings recur continually throughout the later poetry, but in many individual pieces they are unrelieved by even the faintest consolation. Moreover, the poet's nightmare vision of evil, suffering, conflict, and contradiction is for both theological and metaphysical reasons basic to her world picture. As her continuing extensive use of Biblical typology in her later poetry suggests, Sitwell tends to conceive of every completed movement of time, from the diurnal cycle to the span of human history, in terms of the pattern of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Apocalypse. She is particularly aware of the fallen condition of the present order, with its interrelated consequences of sin, tribulation and death in the human world, and savage discord, suffering and apparent futility in nature. In this regard, Sitwell apparently sees the Darwinian struggle for survival in nature as mirroring the terrible knowledge of good and evil in which man has become involved as a consequence of the Fall:



'And in the day, the empire of hatred and of hunger,  
 Even the Dog pities us! "I would be destitute as Man,  
 So cast from me my faithfulness, my one possession.  
 All day, my throat must multiply its thunder  
 To the triple violence of Cerberus  
 To proclaim your misery and mine! Why should the  
 Beast and Reptile  
 Be imprisoned in their small empire of aggression--  
 The claw, fang, sting, the twining, the embrace?"  
 Has Man no more than this? Does not the lover say  
 to lover:  
 "Is that your kiss?

It is more cold than the python, the shining one,  
 the viper;  
 Its venom is perfidy, outshining all the stars."<sup>14</sup>

Besides her emphasis upon the fallen nature of reality, the poet's organicist romanticism, with its vision of a universe animated and inspired down to its most insignificant entity by an immanent Godhead,<sup>15</sup> paradoxically preserves much of the "otherworldliness" of the Platonism from which such a cosmology was originally in large part formulated.<sup>16</sup> As our previous analyses of "The Madness of Saul" and "Gold Coast Customs" have suggested, Dame Edith's poetry shares with such Platonist poems as Vaughan's "Retreat" and Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode the view that the incarnation of spirit into matter is a species of fall, in which the soul is not merely conditioned, but also disoriented and corrupted. In the process of dissipating itself as "life-force" through the many, the one is subject to a steady attrition of purity and power, and this results in the

corporeal and spiritual disintegration which periodically afflicts both man and nature.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, as W.B. Yeats emphasizes, the incarnation of the "world-soul" is marked by the appearance of contradictory, warring polarities, whose clashes add immeasurably to the turmoil and suffering in our world.<sup>18</sup> The lament of the lovers in Sitwell's lyric "At Cockcrow" suggests that, as is the case in "The Madness of Saul," the moral antinomies of good and evil are among the various conflicts and contradictions originating in the primary antithesis of spirit and matter:

As I lay in my love's low bed  
That is the primal clay  
From which the night and day arise,  
My love said, 'It is day.

The red glare on the window-panes  
Is from the rising sun....  
Fear not it is the Judgement Day  
Or Blood from the Crucified's Veins.<sup>19</sup>

Under such unfavorable conditions, only two spiritual alternatives are really available. The first is to engage in a spiritual and imaginative struggle with the immediate realities of a fallen world, to strive for a vision of transcendence in which the polarities of experience will be reconciled and in which its negative aspects will be subsumed. The second is to look forward to an ultimate Judgment and Apocalypse through which everything which is out

As one would expect of an artist so intensely concerned with conflict in a divided world, the metaphysical properties of paradox and ambiguity play a considerable role in Dame Edith's later poetry. Ambivalence and incongruity particularly characterize her treatment of the long-standing problems which were first raised in the early poetry and which then reappear extensively in the later work. These spectres of a fallen and divided world are the perversion of erotic love to a destructive lust, the ravages of time, and the mischief wrought by the economic injustices which divide contemporary society.

The first of these themes involves what may be called the paradox of fallen love. As a manifestation of the creative presence of a beneficent Godhead within the natural order, love between the sexes is in Sitwell's later poetry normatively a species of grace, which is spiritually as well as physically life-giving:<sup>21</sup>

But the youth of the world, the lovers, said,  
 'It is Spring!  
 And we who were black with the winter's shade, and old,  
 See the emeralds are awake upon the branches  
 And grasses, bird-blood leaps within our veins  
 And is changed to emeralds like the sap in the grasses.  
 The beast-philosopher hiding in the orchards,  
 Who had grown silent from the world's long cold,  
 Will tell us the secret of how Spring began  
 In the young world before the Fall of Man.  
 For you are the young spring earth  
 And I, O Love, your dark and lowering heaven.'<sup>22</sup>

However, commencing in Dame Edith's early poetry, there is a tragic awareness that in a fallen world passion is an ambiguous phenomenon and that a perverted love can violate and true love be victimized. The spiritual energy of the life-force can be corrupted through its association with matter into a headlong, ravening violence, and thus lapse from a power of atonement to one of the conflicting forces which tear a fallen world. In "The Mother," such lust is depicted as utterly selfish, oblivious to any other human tie, and ultimately murderous. As the poet suggests in "The Madness of Saul," such inverted passion tears the web of divinely inspired love which guarantees community and stability in both the human and the cosmic orders. As transgressor against man and God alike, the profligate is really a Cain and a Judas, while the betrayed lover shares in the agony of the crucified Christ. The motifs of carnivorous lust and violated love, of Christ, Cain and Judas recur in "Gold Coast Customs," where they are associated with an economic system which corrupts the bodies and souls of rich and destitute alike. Thus, in Sitwell's early poetry, we already have a vision of sexual love as partaking of the paradoxically ambiguous knowledge of good and evil which arises from the Fall. In a fallen world, libido can all too easily

be perverted into thanatos, and a divinely initiated desire become the occasion of a sin which violates God's first commandment of love.

The paradoxes surrounding love in Sitwell's early work continue to be prominent in her later poetry, and several new cruxes are added to them. In "Green Flows the River of Lethe-O," a life-force which should be both physically and spiritually creative has blazed up into the self-consuming "fever" of a "raging red desire."<sup>23</sup> As an inversion of a divinely inspired love, the "fire, annihilation, burning"<sup>24</sup> of lust ironically calls down God's anger, passion becoming one with the conflagrations of Judgement and damnation. Sitwell's apocalyptic condemnation of a concupiscence which has paradoxically become the opposite of its original God-ordained nature is elaborated in "At Cockcrow"; an ironic aubade in which the light of dawn becomes the fires of Judgement and the blood of the crucified Christ, a crowing cock that which proclaimed Peter's denial, the lovers' kiss "the brand of Cain," and the wages of their sin the "thirty pence" paid to Judas.<sup>25</sup>

There is an equally dramatic emphasis in Sitwell's mature poetry on the way in which love is either victimized by the violence, injustice and chaos which prevail in the

modern world or, even worse, is transformed into a twisted reflection of the spiritual sickness of contemporary society. In "Poor Young Simpleton," passion has become simply another violent manifestation of the "hatred, and greed-plague, and fear"<sup>26</sup> which dominate the modern world:

For the season of red pyromaniacs, the dog-days  
Are here, and now even the sun of a kiss  
Sets a city on fire,.....<sup>27</sup>

An even more startling twist is given to the relationship between the sexes in "Serenade: Any Man to Any Woman" in which love becomes an expression of the death-wish which is annihilating Europe through war:<sup>28</sup>

Then die with me and be my love:  
The grave shall be your shady grove  
And in your pleasaunce rivers flow  
(To ripen this new Paradise)  
From a more universal Flood  
Than Noah knew: but yours is blood.<sup>29</sup>

Passion is changed into something which contradicts and violates its own essential nature by time as well as by the evils of the modern world. As is the case in The Sleeping Beauty, Elegy on Dead Fashion and "Metamorphosis," time is seen in many of the later poems as destroying the beauty and the vitality which are the basis of sexual desire, torturing the old and the dead through the memory of lost love, and insinuating fears of age and death into the joys of youth. In the context of time, the life-giving inspiration

of love thus ends in a sterile and tormenting morbidity. Not only is this itself an important motif in Sitwell's later poetry, but it involves the still more important paradox of the ultimate identity of life and death in the cycles of nature, a crux which continues to appear in the later work in much the same form in which it was formulated in the "time" poems. Mortal man, corporeally bound to the wheel of a fallen physical world, seems doomed to decay and ultimate extinction. He is born only to perish, and his very energy and growth drive him towards the grave. In her many lamentations over the onset of old age and the physical dissolution which overtakes all creatures, Sitwell often inspires a "metaphysical shudder" by sharp juxtapositions which underline the oneness of life and love with death in the world of time:<sup>30</sup>

Another old man said,  
 'I was a great gold-sinewed King, I had a lion's mane  
 Like the raging Sun...but now I am alone-  
 And my love, that white lady, is but a thin white bone.  
 I live in my perpendicular grey house,  
 Then in my horizontal house, a foolish bed  
 For one whose blood like Alexander roamed  
 Conquering the countries of the heart.'<sup>31</sup>

As these lines suggest, what is true of physical existence applies equally to spiritual and psychological matters. Each new life brings with it a repetition of the Fall, the innocent joy of youth giving way to either the bitter wisdom

of age or to a dessicated and sorrowful depravity. Moreover, as Sitwell has already stressed at particular length in Elegy on Dead Fashion, civilizations as well as individuals can become moribund, lapsing from sacramental unity with God and nature to a sterile and degraded materialism.

Despite its terrible consequences, the paradox of a time in which life and death are one contains the elements of its own solution. If age consumes vitality and innocence becomes wizened experience, death equally puts an end to decay and provides the basis of new life for both body and soul. One of the central themes of the later poetry is the way in which God's creative regard for His world inspires both generation and regeneration from the very evil and the dissolution wrought by time:

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,...<sup>32</sup>

From the negative paradox of time Dame Edith thus formulates a positive, in which death is the gateway to rebirth and nature is as much a womb as a tomb. The tragedy of the Fall in time is taken up into a divine comedy in which linear decay is subsumed in the eternity of an endless cyclical renewal of innocence and vigor.



Even the universal destruction wrought by time pales in Sitwell's later poetry by comparison with the evils of a society which wilfully negates the whole of the divinely appointed order of creation. In this connection, a sharp contrast is once again drawn in the mature work between a perverted modern civilization and an ideal pastoral society which reflects and embraces a larger cosmic community. In a country setting, man is in communion with nature, and his activities remain in harmony with its God-ordained rhythms. He thereby participates in the fraternity and fruitfulness of a sacramental organism in which all beings are suffused and bound together by divine love. Under such conditions, instinctive activity ripens into an oracular wisdom which consciously affirms the brotherhood of men with God, with nature and with one another.

If the country is in Sitwell's later poetry a sort of Eden, then the modern megapolis is, as in "Gold Coast Customs," associated in the mature work with the Biblical cities which typify a human society wilfully cutting itself off from God and lapsing into iniquity. Sitwell's ideas in the mature work concerning modern urban and industrial society in large part represent a continuation of notions formulated in the early poetry. In this regard, Dame Edith remains in agreement

with Ezra Pound that economic abuse is basic to the evils of contemporary society. Sitwell also shares Pound's conviction that our vicious fiscal arrangements reflect a more fundamental spiritual derangement.<sup>33</sup> Modern man, through his egocentric unwillingness to open himself in an "I-thou"<sup>34</sup> relationship to the spirit which pervades his brother men and nature, amputates himself from the cosmic community and withers into an "island" of "hatred, and greed-plague, and fear."<sup>35</sup> The economic consequence of such spiritual suicide is a self-centred, miserly materialism obsessed with the accumulation of money regardless of social, moral or spiritual consequences. Wealth inevitably becomes concentrated in the hands of a few, whose hoarding of their useless profusion inflicts misery and degradation upon the deprived majority. Under the dispensation of economic inequality and injustice, the fraternal love which characterized human society in the pastoral state is replaced by the divorce of the rich and the poor into "separate nations."<sup>36</sup> The relationship between the two groups becomes that of Cain to Abel, or of Judas to Christ. The social and economic divisions which have arisen within society are projected in the revolutionary violence and the war which render it a microcosmic reflection of a universe torn asunder by warring polarities:

And the sound of the heart is changed to the  
 noise of revolutions-  
 The hammer of Chaos destroying and rebuilding  
 Small wingless hopes and fears in the light of the Sun.  
 Who dreamed when Nature should be heightened to a fever-  
 The ebullition of her juices and humours-  
 The war of creed and creed, of starved and starver....<sup>37</sup>

Modern man's inability to relate not only vitiates the social organism but also depraves his relationship to God's grace and to the sacramental nature through which it manifests itself. The true wisdom based upon reverential love is replaced by the perverted logos of a detached rationalism<sup>38</sup> which ravages nature as much to satisfy its obscene curiosity as to sate its lust for wealth and power:

And the more murderous brain  
 Of Man, still redder Nero that conceived the death  
 Of his mother Earth, and tore  
 Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived.<sup>39</sup>

This vivisecting intellectuality, which is a fitting concomitant of the divisive egocentricity which has fragmented society, finds a peculiarly appropriate expression in the splitting of the atom. The destructive cleavage of the "Primal Matter"<sup>40</sup> in the atomic bomb reflects in all of its fundamental murderousness modern man's dissection of the universal organism.<sup>41</sup>

The terrible futility which characterizes the attempt to play God with nature also stigmatizes the endeavors of "cold idealist,"<sup>42</sup> who conceive of life in purely physical

of physical riches. All life is sacramental, and an obsession with a purely material opulence therefore destroys both body and soul. As Sitwell emphasizes through her continual contrast of the gold of commerce with the gold of divinely transmuted matter, true "wealth" resides in the bounteous outpouring of God's grace throughout creation. In isolating himself from this source of vitality and renewal, the hoarder is trapped in a barren materialism which delivers him both in flesh and in spirit to the "dust":

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  
the dust, by a trap-door falling.  
Do the enormous rays of that Sun now warm his blood,  
the appalling  
Empty gulf of his veins - or fertilise  
His flesh, that continent of dryness?...Yellow, cold  
And crumbling as his gold...  
He sits in this desert where no sound of wave shall come,  
And Time's sands are of gold, filling his ears  
and eyes....<sup>46</sup>

The hell of Dives begins on this earth in a "leprosy" of bodily and spiritual decay which, in spite of his riches, unites him in suffering with his starved brother Lazarus.

Another paradox which applies to rich and poor alike is the regression of modern man from his apparently "advanced" state of civilization to the level of the savage and the beast. The materialism of greed and the materialism of want

have equally cast aside the moral and spiritual values and restraints which raise man above the animal. This motif is already prominent in "Gold Coast Customs" in which the cold-heartedness and dissipation of the plutocrat Lady Bamburgher are described both in terms of the cannibal orgies of "darkest Africa," and of animal life in its more primitive, vicious and degraded forms. Similarly, in "The Song of the Cold," the rich man who devours his brother in his appetite for gain is given "the talons of the Lion."<sup>47</sup> In the bestial ferocity of their avarice, the wealthy bear an ironic resemblance to their victims, who have been driven by deprivation and resentment to the feral hunger of the man-eating tiger. Just as the thumbs of the workless hands of the poor have been atavistically replaced by the claws of the animal, so their capacities for creation and love have degenerated into the "pruriency" and the "age-old wisdom and aptness" of the ape.<sup>48</sup>

The self-seeking materialistic appetite which marks both the perpetrators and the victims of the contemporary economic system is no greater a denial of the spiritual basis of nature and of society than are the schemes of modern man's sterile rationality. Like the avarice of the rich, these are paradoxically self-defeating. The more modern man

attempts to arrogate to himself the status of God, the more he proliferates evil and destruction and lessens his real stature.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the harnessing of the basic energies of the universe in the service of war confers an enormous power, but it is one which destroys man and nature, victor and victim without discrimination. Similarly, the endeavor of the "cold idealists" of a purely materialistic socialism to heal society by replacing Christ by Lazarus, the proletarian "hero of death and the mud" represents merely the deification of the "terrible ideal of useless Suffering." Their attempts to bring out an "earthly resurrection of Man" by moving Lazarus from his "tomb of mud" to a "new tomb of useless gold" result, as we have seen, simply in further degradation.<sup>50</sup> Ultimately man the would-be divinity is not even a tragic Faust, but rather a dirty and vicious insect:

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....<sup>51</sup>

It has been mentioned that the treatment of evil and discord in Sitwell's later poetry derives much of its ironic and paradoxical impact from its contrast with an ideal condition of regeneration and atonement which, because of the immanence of a beneficent Godhead, is always at least potentially

juxtaposed with the Fall. Dame Edith's ambiguous outlook on creation as manifesting the knowledge of both good and evil is underlined in her mature work by her ambivalent use of certain of her symbols of grace, and also by her employment of images which constitute parodic shadows of these sacramental "signs." However, as Jack Lindsay points out, the simple and essentially negative awareness of a contrast of good and evil is neither spiritually nor artistically adequate. What is ultimately needed is a "transvaluation of values," a higher paradox in which contraries are wedded and the evil and tragedy of a fallen world are taken up into redemption. In her quest for such a synthesis it is only natural that Sitwell should continue to turn to Christianity, which both in its orthodox Catholic<sup>52</sup> and recondite visionary forms has been artistically a most influential purveyor of solutions to the spiritual dilemmas with which the poet was tormented. Following her bent for syncretism, Sitwell attempts in her mature work to synthesize these two great aspects of the Christian tradition, successfully combining Catholic Christology and sacramental theology with more esoteric and perhaps heterodox beliefs.<sup>53</sup>

Dame Edith's ultimate perspective on the matters of salvation and atonement is summed up in her vision of Christ

as a sacramental agent who "effects what He signifies."

In Christ as reconciler and redeemer the paradoxes of the Fall are taken up into the knotty yet consoling mysteries which surround salvation. In this connection, the term "mystery" is best defined as a supraparadox, in which antithetical elements are subsumed in a transcendental unity. Perhaps the greatest of these supraparadoxical mysteries is Christ's double nature, by virtue of which He becomes for Sitwell the one incarnation who transcends contradiction and has the sustained spiritual power to overcome the effects of the Fall. Because Christ fuses without ultimate conflict spirit and matter, humanity and Godhead, time and eternity, He is able through the further mystery of His Passion to miraculously transform evil, suffering and death into their opposites of redemption, grace, resurrection, and everlasting life. The Cross paradoxically becomes the Tree of Life, through which is achieved a universal transcendence of the evils and contrarieties stemming from that other tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The crucified Savior at the same time dispenses His grace to all creatures and takes up their sins, suffering and conflicts into His Passion:



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.... 54

As these lines suggest, not only does the agony of innocent victims achieve redemptive value and significance through their fraternity in martyrdom with Christ, but all except the most hardened of transgressors are incorporated through God's forgiveness into the brotherhood of divine charity. In drawing together and sanctifying all creatures, the mystery of Christ's regenerative Passion transforms pain into joy, evil into goodness, death into life, and conflict into a mystical body of love:

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.

For now the unborn God in the human heart  
 Knows for a moment all sublimities....  
 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.... 55

The redemptive life which pours from Christ's wounds is applied to creation in two distinct manners. In the first place, the Savior acts from within the natural order as an immanent world-spirit, who through a life-giving self-sacrifice

of His divine purity, unity and power regularly if fleetingly brings about physical rebirth, atonement and redemption in the nexus of interlocking cycles of nature.<sup>56</sup> The rhythmic recurrence of grace in creation not only periodically overcomes evil, but also, in its "eternal return,"<sup>57</sup> raises life in time to partake of eternity. The Christ of the life-cycle, Who paradoxically shapes Himself to a fallen world in order to save it, is for Sitwell one with the dying and reviving fertility-gods of pagan antiquity. This syncretism appears in the poet's identification of the Son of God with the sun of nature:<sup>58</sup>

...Christ Who forgives us - He with the bright Hair  
 - The Sun Whose Body was spilt on our fields to  
 bring us to harvest.<sup>59</sup>

The universal presence of Christ within creation is represented in the later poetry by the light which fructifies nature<sup>60</sup> and by the "universal language of the Bread."<sup>61</sup> The latter is at the same time the ordinary "daily bread" provided for man's corporeal hunger, and the body of Christ which nurtures his soul.

The sacramental light and the eucharistic bread which are Christ not only foster and restore body and spirit throughout the entire universe. They also provide the whole of the cosmos with an earnest of rebirth and eternity, and

unite it in a brotherly agape or love-feast. This sacred rite of communion, which cements God to each of His creatures and binds together all created beings, is enough to erase the evils and divisions which occur in the normal course of nature:

For when the first founts and deep waterways  
Of the young light flow down and lie like peace  
Upon the upturned faces of the blind  
From life, it comes to bless  
Eternity in its poor mortal dress  
Shining upon young lovers and old lechers  
Rising from their beds, and laying gold  
Alike in the unhopeful path of beggars  
And in the darkness of the miser's heart.  
The crooked has a shadow light made straight,  
The shallow places gain their strength again -  
And desert hearts, waste heavens, the barren height  
Forget that they are cold.  
The man-made chasms between man and man  
Of creeds and tongues are fill'd, the guiltless light  
Remakes all men and things in holiness.<sup>62</sup>

There are, however, times in the later poetry when Sitwell sees the contemporary world as having passed beyond the help of such "natural" redemption. In "Dirge for the New Sunrise" and The Shadow of Cain, the divisions and the explosive iniquities which find appropriate expression in the murderous fission of the "Primal Matter" produces in the atomic bomb a demonic antitype of the sun which destroys both the divine solar fertility and its offspring the eucharistic wheat:

...But there came a roar as if the Sun and Earth  
 had come together -  
 The Sun descending and the Earth ascending  
 To take its place above...the Primal Matter  
 Was broken, the womb from which all life began.  
 Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose  
 in memory of Man.<sup>63</sup>

Even though the atomic bomb appears to have negated Christ  
 as He is manifested in a sacramental world order, man is  
 not bereft of comfort. Even this ultimate effect of the  
 Fall is encompassed by the mystery of God's infinite power  
 and infinite love. Taken together, these two aspects of  
 the divine infinity mean that the more God's purpose is  
 countered by evil, the more it is asserted. The very ex-  
 tremity of the crisis thus brings with it the hope that  
 the slain Christ of the life-force will be resurrected as  
 the terrible and glorious Savior of the Apocalypse, Who  
 will erase evil, disunity, suffering and death for once  
 and for all. Man has rejected God's Self-sacrifice through  
 a beneficent nature, and His love now takes the sterner  
 form of relentless justice. The Shadow of Cain concludes  
 with a prophecy of a judgement in which Dives will be  
 placed under the same condemnation as Cain, Sodom and Judas.  
 With the final excision of the forces of denial, the "torn  
 and parti-coloured garments of Christ"<sup>64</sup> which they have  
 strewn behind them will be rewoven into the spotless and

seamless robe of the redeemed people of God. Through the mystery of God's infinite love for His creation, the utter depravity of the world will finally bring about its transformation into "a new heaven and a new earth".<sup>65</sup>

And yet - who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?  
He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in  
the terrible Rain.<sup>66</sup>

God's boundless regard for a degenerate and divided world is thus the ultimate paradox in which all others will ultimately be subsumed. In order to save His creation, Christ first takes on its likeness, and finally remakes it in His own image.

The negative paradoxes in Sitwell's later poetry, with their representation of the fallen world as a terrible or distorted antitype of a divinely appointed ideal, generate considerable thematic irony. The apocalyptic, tragic and condemnatory irony of the later poetry differs in quality and intent from its more humorous counterpart in some of the earlier pieces in the same way in which the "playful grotesque" which Ruskin notices in Gothic ornament is distinguished from its "terrible grotesque".<sup>67</sup>

And in Famine Street the sellers cry  
'What will you buy?  
A dress for the Bride?'  
(But all the moulds of generation died  
Beneath that Ray.)

'Or a winding-sheet?'  
(Outworn....The Dead have nothing left to hide.)<sup>68</sup>

In this chilling description of the sterilizing effects of atomic radiation, thematic irony becomes dramatic irony through the characteristically metaphysical device of casting discourse in the form of a debate. This "arguing out" of poetic issues, in suggesting that the themes which the poet is treating are immediate, unresolved questions in which she is in the process of solving through a spiritual dialectic in her own mind, acts in opposition to her irony, which of course implies a transcendent perspective upon her themes. The result is a complex poetic tone which replicates the tension in her imagination between Fall and Redemption, between the clash of contraries and their ultimate reconciliation.

Sitwell's thematic use of irony in the later poetry is accomplished by such forms of metaphysical "wit" as antithesis, juxtaposition, hyperbole, punning and conceit. In Donne, Herbert and Marvell, the play of imaginative intelligence is as often serious as it is humorous, and Dame Edith in her mature poetry is also "witty" in a solemn and sometimes terrifying manner. In "Dirge for the New Sunrise," Sitwell's agonized lament over the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the poet utilizes a number of "conceited" expressions. These include a pun

which sums up and underlines the demonic sterility of the reason which has split the "Primal Matter":

Of Man, still redder Nero that conceived the death  
Of his mother Earth, and tore  
Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived.<sup>69</sup>

The implied antithesis between creation through union and destruction through division neatly epitomizes the principle underlying Sitwell's thematic use of all of her various forms of wit. In the preface to the Collected Poems of 1961, she speaks of aspiring to a language with an "infinite power of germination."<sup>70</sup> The biological terminology which the poet employs reflects her conception of poetic speech as a language whose spiritually inspired vitality renders it a microcosmic reflection of a universe suffused with divine life.<sup>71</sup> The paradox, conflict and contradiction which because of the Fall tear this macrocosmic organism are replicated in Sitwell's antithesis, and in her ironic conceits and juxtapositions. They are also reflected in her use of the grotesque, with its incongruous union of manifest opposites. However, the world is not only divided by the Fall, but also bound together in redemption by God's love into a living sacramental whole with powers of rebirth and growth on both the physical and the spiritual planes. This living unity of the universe is manifested in a network

of arcane "correspondences" between apparently unrelated phenomena, in the generative interactions of all of the various realms of creation, and in the possession by all levels of being not merely of life, but of the same psychic capacities as man.

All of these signs of a universe whose vitality is a sacramental manifestation of regenerative grace find poetic expression in a romantic modification of metaphysical wit which can be termed "genetic word and symbol play." The nature of such wit is well described by Coleridge's definition of the secondary imagination as a power which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates"<sup>72</sup> the phenomenal world in order to mould it into a vital unity. Such a poetic imagination of course replicates the activity of the immanent Divinity as a life-giving and redemptive power. The radical visionary rearrangement of the phenomenal in order to mirror the regenerative immanence of the Spirit appears in Sitwell's couching of her vision of correspondence in "overlapping metaphors" like "the ass-furred night."<sup>73</sup> In these conceits, apparently dissimilar realms of being are linked together so as to suggest the sacramental organism of divine grace by which all creatures are affirmed and sustained. The same bold re-ordering of the empirical also characterizes



the poet's enunciation of her belief that everything shares man's apparently unique mode of existence. In particular, we have a large number of remarkable anthromorphizing metaphors. These suggest that the world of nature reflects not only an order of moral and spiritual values, but also the loving regard of a personal God, Who is consciously working to assure the physical and spiritual well-being of all of His creatures:

But the Sun  
 - That great gold simpleton - laughed like a boy,  
 And kissed the old woman's cheek and blessed  
   her clay.  
 The great Sun laughed, and dancing over Chaos,  
 Shouts to the dust 'O mortal Lover! Think what  
   wonders  
 May be born of our love - what golden heroes!'<sup>74</sup>

The generative intercommunication among the various realms of creation is also mirrored in Sitwell's genetic word and image play. Her kaleidoscopic combination of leaps and repetitions provides a poetic correlative to the creative interactions within the universe both by referring the reader back to patterns of relationship with which he has already been made familiar, and by generating fresh significance for him through a further nexus of associations:

My tears were Orion's splendour with sextuple  
   suns and the million  
 Flowers in the fields of the heaven, where  
   solar systems are setting -

The rocks of great diamonds in the midst of  
 the clear wave  
 By May dews and early light ripened, more  
 diamonds begetting.<sup>75</sup>

Ultimately, Sitwell's poetic ideal of an "infinite power of germination" would imply that the wit of each poem, and even of individual figures of speech, should evoke the whole organic complex of possible meanings in language and in nature. It should replicate the divinely inspired unity and vitality of the universe, mirroring on an imaginative plane the physical and spiritual life and growth which the creative presence of the immanent Godhead inspires.

The wit of Dame Edith's later poetry is thus apocalyptic, mirroring a world in which harmony and redemption exist in a state of tension against evil and the clash of contraries. This balance of spiritual opposites, tilting one way or another in individual poems but maintained in the mature work as a whole, is manifested in Sitwell's two antithetical yet complementary uses of the metaphysical conceit. The first of these mirrors in its incongruous hyperboles, antitheses and juxtapositions, and in its almost psychotic derangement of normal experience, the paradoxes, contradictions and conflicts upon which a fallen world is crucified:

For as I flew, I saw upon the earth  
 One limbless, eyeless, as before his birth,-  
 And torn by all the nails upon Christ's Cross:  
 He bore the Stigmata of the sins of the whole world.

And from the little span  
 Of his heart fell the blood - the sea of Galilee,  
 Whereon Christ walked...that ghost of Abel  
     whispers o'er the world:  
 'Brother, I come.  
 I have no eyes  
 But my all-seeing wounds; and I am dumb,  
 But yet from all the open mouths of the world's  
     wounds I rise:  
 I come to testify.'<sup>76</sup>

Reflecting the way in which the consequences of the Fall are  
 offset by regeneration and atonement, such "conceits of  
 crisis" in Sitwell's later poetry are balanced by "conceits  
 of synthesis." The latter produce in terms of broad span  
 of their imaginative associations, and in the richness of  
 their poetic suggestiveness, the unity and fertile inter-  
 connection of a universe woven together by God's love:

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 armour like a King's,...<sup>77</sup>

Edith Sitwell's employment of the conceit in the service  
 of her bifocal vision of fall and redemption illustrates

as clearly as does any aspect of her later poetry the way in which she has borrowed from the Seventeenth and Twentieth Century metaphysicals what is congruous with her own imaginative ordering of experience. If, as James Brophy has suggested, her later work must be regarded as an organic whole,<sup>78</sup> then this greater poetic entity is indeed a "well-wrought urn," in which the conflicts and contradictions of existence are held together in a state of balanced tension. In the arduous task of giving this expanded form to her vision of a world of "complex multiplicity,"<sup>79</sup> Sitwell's borrowings from the metaphysical tradition have contributed immensely to her poetic success.

The preceding discussion of the mature poetry of Edith Sitwell has attempted a brief listing and description of its negative and positive themes in order to indicate their imaginative counterpoise. This can best be summarized by saying that the positive vision of Dame Edith's later poetry is one of redemption, a notion which is inseparable from that of a fall. Now that the balance of fall and redemption in the mature work has been indicated, it is necessary to proceed to further matters in order to do full justice to the later poetry and its themes of alienation and atonement. The first of these topics is the predominant element of

Sitwell's later work: the sacramental cosmic organism which provides a redemptive matrix of atonement for all created beings. The second subject is the ramifications of the synthesis by which the effects of the Fall are subsumed in the larger divine plan of salvation. This latter concern will be discussed by means of a detailed explication of its most elaborate poetic expression in Sitwell's later work, the "Three Poems of the Atomic Age."

## CHAPTER VII

## THE WEDDED ORDERS

One of the distinguishing marks of genuine poetic power is the ability to fuse into a coherent order a wide assortment of elements which, to the analytic temperament, would appear disparate and even mutually contradictory. Such synthetic intelligence is the hallmark especially of those poets who can be termed myth- or, with equal appropriateness, cosmos-makers. The cosmos-makers are artists, like Dante, Spenser or Blake, who feel the need to evolve in their poetry what Edith Sitwell has termed "a philosophy of life as complete and rounded as any world could be."<sup>1</sup> To encompass such an end, the myth-making poet must have considerable architectonic ability. He must be able to construct a matrix which will do some justice to the sheer range and complexity of human experience, while at the same time subsuming its "infinite variety" within an illuminating context and order. Cosmos-building poetry is accordingly characterized by the articulation of a grammar of images and ideas which can be both elaborate and highly ingenious.

That the cosmos-making tendency is a prominent feature

of modern English literature is attested by such literary creations as Joyce's Ulysses and Yeats' A Vision, and also by the popularity of encyclopedic and systematizing authors like Frazer, Campbell and Jung. The myth-building proclivity of the early Twentieth Century can be partly attributed to the decay of a formal religious faith, and partly to the lack of a commonly accepted "world-picture" of the sort which, during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, provided poet and audience alike with a far-ranging and relatively coherent synthesis of man's knowledge. Human nature abhors a spiritual vacuum, and the poet has increasingly felt the need to construct a viable system of values and beliefs for his own benefit and for that of others. As T.S. Eliot emphasizes, if the contemporary man of education and sensitivity is not to be confronted with utter chaos, he must make an effort to organize his complex and variegated experiences,<sup>2</sup> and also to impose some sort of order on the "immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."<sup>3</sup>

That Sitwell shows Eliot's concern with synthesizing a comprehensive poetic and spiritual system from the disorder of the modern world is apparent in the following remarks from her introduction to her anthology The Pleasures of Poetry:

It is exactly [in] this power of reducing multitude into unity of effect, that we see the difference between the genius of Wordsworth and the disordered talent (if we may call it talent) of certain poets today who, occupied, ostensibly, with the welfare of mankind, distract us with little broken, flat miniature mirrors or distortions of a thousand different worlds, all completely separate (though brought together in one poem), and not co-ordinated.<sup>4</sup>

The need which Dame Edith felt for an art which would order and unify the widest possible range of experience also appears in her early praise of the Russian ballet for expressing through movement a "complete and rounded" "philosophy of life," and again in her much later remark that Shakespeare's plays present us with "the differences in nature, in matter, in light, in darkness, in movement, that we find in the universe."<sup>5</sup>

It is therefore not surprising that Sitwell's own mature poems should be distinguished for both their encyclopedic scope and their architectural accomplishment. W.B. Yeats perceived with characteristic acumen that even Sitwell's early verse forms a closely woven fabric, from which single pieces cannot properly be detached,<sup>6</sup> and her later work is even more tightly knit. Northrop Frye has justly termed these pieces miniature epics,<sup>7</sup> but we must not forget that the individual poems are also panels in a



much more expansive tapestry. This greater poetic entity is an epic hymn or divine comedy which, as Professor Brophy has recently demonstrated,<sup>8</sup> arises from the binding together of the later poems by the incremental repetition of concepts, symbols, epithets, expressions and even groups of several lines. These recurring elements, which are interwoven through the later poetry with the greatest cunning, emerge on careful reading as a comprehensive spiritual system which is accompanied by a corresponding grammar of images. Each individual poem is attached to a cosmic framework, thereby gaining immensely in resonance and luminosity.

The poetic universe which substantiates and encompasses the later poetry incorporates an amazing wealth of material. Dame Edith tells us that she read "For many years...with the fury of a cannibal hunting heads, with the reverence of a pilgrim approaching Mecca upon his knees,"<sup>9</sup> and her later poetry certainly supports such a claim. A list of only a fraction of the sources which have been tapped by the poet would include Greek religion, myth and philosophy, Biblical typology, Eighteenth Century physico-theology, the philosophy of Lorenz Oken,<sup>10</sup> Romantic and French Symbolist poetry, Nineteenth Century evolutionary thought, and the researches of the Cambridge anthropologists. Even more

remarkable than this far-ranging eclecticism is that fact that such apparently heterogeneous materials have been consolidated in the later poetry by means of two ordering principles which would themselves appear to be quite incompatible. These are the cosmological aristocracy discussed by A.O. Lovejoy in his classic book The Great Chain of Being, and the cosmic democracy associated with the organicist metaphysics and liberal politics so prominent in the Romantic movement. Sitwell's successful reconciliation of these two orders contributes in no small part to the organization of her later poetry, and is itself one of the most noteworthy instances of her synthetic virtuosity.

By both upbringing and temperament, Edith Sitwell was a confirmed aristocrat. One of her remarks concerning eccentricity is instructive in showing that she accorded equal recognition to the prerogatives both of birth and of genius:

Eccentricity is not, as dull people would have us believe, a form of madness. It is often a kind of innocent pride, and the man of genius and the aristocrat are frequently regarded as eccentrics because genius and aristocrat are entirely unafraid of and uninfluenced by the opinions and vagaries of the crowd.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, along with her patrician outlook, the poet possessed an intense compassion for the destitute, the war-torn and

the outcast. Her poetry also displays a Wordsworthian faith that wisdom and dignity are possible even for the humblest of persons:

Flying over the happy fields, the Simpleton  
Feeling the warm gold ripen, sat by the wayside  
- His broad face having an animal nature (the  
beast of burden  
Who has turned prophet, the beast in our earth  
unconscious),  
A simple creature, happy as butterflies,  
Or as the dancing star that has risen from Chaos.<sup>12</sup>

Edith Sitwell's aristocratic proclivity is thus deeply qualified by what can be described as a romantic democracy, a stance which appears quite clearly in her assumption in the later poetry of the persona of a bucolic old woman.<sup>13</sup> Although she found mass vulgarity and mob-politics both thoroughly repugnant, she preserved with beautiful purity the ancient Christian sense of the value and equality of all men in the sight of God.

Corresponding to these seemingly contradictory traits in Sitwell's complex personality is the almost equal emphasis given in her later poetry to the two systems of cosmic aristocracy and cosmic democracy. Her interest in a fusion of the two orders is already implicit in her definition of two opposite yet complementary forms of beauty in "Experiment in Poetry" (1929):

The older beauty, the beauty of the Old Masters, is in the beauty of species and of mass...the new beauty is highly individualized and separate. The modern artist is not concerned with things in the mass, he is passionately interested in the fulfilling of the destinies of the single individuals that make up the mass - whether these individuals are men, or leaves, or waves of the sea. The great quality of the old masters in all the arts is force,...used in the scientific sense of the term - the binding together of the molecules of the world. That is partly what made their sense of design so tremendous. The great quality of the modern masters is an explosive energy - the separating up of the molecules - exploring the possibilities of the atom....The aim of the modernist poets ...is to reconcile this necessity of exploring the possibilities of the atom, with the necessity for logical design and form.<sup>14</sup>

The historical basis of the distinction which is drawn in this passage suggests that in her literary criticism Sitwell, like Eliot, Pound and Yeats, is extending the realm of esthetics to include the framing of a theory concerning the spiritual and cultural evolution of Western civilization. In the light of what occurs in the later poetry, the formulation which begins to emerge in "Experiment in Poetry" can be stated roughly as follows. Corresponding historically to the beauty of the old masters, with its emphasis upon genus and design, is the "mathematically"<sup>15</sup> articulated universe of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which includes as one of its major ordering principles the "great chain of being."<sup>16</sup> This cosmic order, which retained its

hold over the European imagination well into the Eighteenth Century, comprises a static, hierarchical arrangement of all species of created beings into a rigid and immutable scale of status, value, perfection and power.<sup>17</sup> Corresponding to the modern beauty of "explosive energy" and individualism, is a new and almost diametrically opposite cosmology, the emergence of which was undoubtedly given considerable impetus by the onset of a passion for social change and of a radical egalitarianism in the era of the French Revolution. Seen through the eyes of a hylozoist visionary like Sitwell, the key element in the new Romantic metaphysic would be the belief that the entire universe, down to its most insignificant aspect, is inspired by a divine life or energy. The essential factor in the new world picture is consequently no longer order, but rather the "explosive energy" of a change and development arising from organic vitality. This same organicist tendency also leads to a feeling, evident for example in Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" or in the succession of metamorphic images in Shelley's "The Cloud," that because all beings partake equally of the world-soul, they are not only alike in value and significance, but are also ultimately one and ontologically interchangeable in the ground of a spiritually unified

cosmos. Formulated in the above terms, the notion that a fundamental shift in Western metaphysics accompanied the onset of Romanticism represents an over-simplification of complex patterns of cultural evolution, but it would nevertheless do considerable credit to Sitwell's grasp of literary and cultural history.

Evidence of Edith Sitwell's belief that in at least the "outward structure" of poetry, there occurred a reversal in an organicist direction after the Augustan age, is provided by some remarks in Aspects of Modern Poetry (1934):

In the Augustan Age, the outward structure of poetry was the result of logic alone....Poetry was therefore, in that age, as far as outward structure was concerned, the sister of architecture...now she appears like the sister of horticulture, each poem growing according to the laws of its own nature, but in a line which is more the irregular though entirely natural shape of a tree or a flowering plant....<sup>18</sup>

Sitwell's attitude towards the metaphysical counterpart of such a radical change in poetic form appears in some comments upon the Preface to Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass.<sup>19</sup>

Dame Edith begins by stating that "All great poets of the last two centuries [i.e. from the Pre-Romantic period onwards] have...produced a theory about poetry which is dangerous to lesser poets, and to poets of a different nature." She then proceeds to characterize as "highly valuable" Whitman's statement that the poet must be "open'd

[to] the eternity which gives similitude to all periods and locations and processes, and animate and inanimate forms, and which is the bond of time." However, although Sitwell is in agreement with Whitman's assumption of the radical equivalence and unity of all phenomena in a substantiating "eternity," it should be noted that she regards as potentially "dangerous" his corollary of the necessity of the poet's immersion or even submersion in the "general run" and "to-day." Dame Edith's reservation suggests that she feels a pressing need for differentiation and degree, a desire which appears explicitly in her quotation in A Poet's Notebook<sup>20</sup> of Blake's famous dictum that in art as in life the "great and golden rule" is an emphasis upon "bounding line," without which life itself would disappear into chaos.

Thus, just as Dame Edith's definition of two opposing kinds of beauty in "Experiment in Poetry" suggests two contrasting "world pictures," so her desire in that essay for their reconciliation implies more than the need for an art which can combine attention to individuality in its subject matter with "logical design" in its form. Underlying this esthetic problem are deeper spiritual concerns which are suggested by the polarity in "Experiment in Poetry" between individuality and "explosive energy" on the one hand, and

overall design and binding force on the other. These problems can be approached through the reflection that if one were called upon to judge the respective merits of cosmic aristocracy and cosmic democracy, one could say that in the strength of each lies the great potential weakness of the other. As opposed to the ossified metaphysical caste-system into which the older order could degenerate, there are inherent in the Romantic cosmology two polar dangers. On the one hand, there is the risk that vital energy will dissolve the world into a chaos of unconnected and conflicting atoms. On the other, as Sitwell's comments upon Whitman imply, there is the opposite peril of the collapse of a radically interconnected reality into an undifferentiated unity. This would once again produce a form of chaos, or at least preclude any system. Thus, Sitwell feels the need for an order which will avoid a dead rigidity, while at the same time warding off either anarchy or ontological collapse. Dame Edith lays the heaviest stress upon the potentiality of cosmic democracy for disorder, an issue which she discusses in artistic terms in her "Lecture on Poetry since 1920":

The poems [i.e. of the Twenties] appeared strange, because there were in them occasional deep plunges into the subconscious soul, and because, to quote a remark of the scientist Poincaré..."the accident



of a rhyme calls forth a system from the shadow"...I would say, not only a system, but sometimes a planetary system. There are very great dangers...inherent in works which explore the unconscious mind. We detach the atoms of our world in order to examine them. "Goethe," said that derided great writer, Emerson, "had a power to unite the detached atoms again by their own law." And again, "The Greeks said that Alexander went as far as Chaos; Goethe went, only the other day, as far; one step farther he hazarded and brought himself straight back." Not every plunge into the unconscious has this power, this certainty, this ultimate safety.<sup>21</sup>

This passage, which, from its context, is obviously meant to refer primarily to Dame Edith's own Facade,<sup>5</sup> places in both a historical and a psychological context the modern esthetic of individualism and energy which was mentioned in "Experiment in Poetry." The endeavor of the Sitwells and other poets of the post-World War I era to escape the sterile vacuity of Twentieth Century mechanism, materialism and conventionality, is, as we have suggested in our discussion of Facade,<sup>5</sup> regarded by Dame Edith as a continuation of the metaphysical quest of the Romantic imagination, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" the "dead...Steam-engine" of the Newtonian universe in its attempt to reveal an underlying noumenal reality which is both living and spiritual. In order for the modern poet to effect his own spiritual "breakthrough," it is necessary for him to plunge

into his unconscious mind, releasing disruptive psychic energies which dissolve an artificially ordered world back into its individual elements. However, for Dame Edith, as for Coleridge and Goethe, such a dissolution into primal chaos is only the prelude to a "recreation," involving the emergence of a "planetary system" of ideas and images. For Sitwell, this poetic regeneration is obviously to be accomplished by the conscious realization of an archetypal "cosmos" which has been buried in the "shadow" of the unconscious mind. Thus, the chaotic energy of the "Babel" of words and images in Facade<sup>3</sup> is seen by Dame Edith as a necessary preparation for the more self-possessed order of her later poetry, in which imaginative energy is encompassed in an overall dispensation.

However, the great danger for both Romantic and modern poetry is that the stage of disintegration by the energies of the unconscious will never be transcended. Sitwell is certainly an organicist thinker, with vitality and growth as the fundamental categories of both her esthetic and her metaphysic, but she stresses that the organism is a cosmos, "the irrational spirit contained in a structure of the purest and most logical form."<sup>22</sup> The chaos of an uncontrolled energy is no more truly alive than the atomized deadness of

the "dust" of modern materialism. In the three analogous structures of the individual work of art, the poet's overall imaginative system, and the universe as a whole, there is need for a principle of organization beyond the cosmic democracy of Romanticism, which by itself borders too closely upon chaos. The theme of a reconciliation of energy and order on a universal scale is of particular importance in Sitwell's later poetry:

The Golden Ones of heaven have us in care-  
 With planetary wisdom, changeless laws,  
 Ripening our lives and ruling hearts and rhythms,  
 Immortal hungers in the veins and heart<sup>23</sup>

The fusion of cosmic democracy and cosmic aristocracy in the later poetry of Edith Sitwell may be approached from a slightly different perspective. This is the need for the modern artist to transcend poetically his milieu by the creation of an order which will give an organic unity and a meaningful system to the elements within his work, while at the same time respecting their individual integrity. In "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," Sitwell quotes a comment by Sergei Eisenstein that jazz, with its "orchestra where each player is on his own, straining to break up this inorganic whole of many units by taking an independent course - but bound together in an ensemble...by the iron necessity of a common rhythm," constitutes an art form reflecting the

sensibility and structure of our age.<sup>24</sup> Some of the poems in Sitwell's own Facade<sup>5</sup> obviously represent a deliberate attempt to create just such an artistic mirror of the artificial, mechanical and externally ordered agglomeration of the contemporary milieu. However, Dame Edith also felt the need for an esthetic structure which would transcend and counteract that of a society in which the anarchy resulting from total alienation of the individual is prevented only by an "iron necessity." On the one hand, this superior poetic organization must, unlike the mechanistic tyranny of a mass industrial society, allow free reign to the intense concentration on the "atom" which Cocteau sees as characterizing modern art; a concentration which renders even the "slightest object" an "idol," which reveals to us a "divine essence."<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, if the existence and development of the individual entity is to possess such spiritual meaning, and particularly to have the universal significance which is essential to the apocalyptic, archetypal symbolism of Sitwell's later poetry, then it must be incorporated into a poetic cosmos of ideas and images which will synthesize at the same time as it organizes. Otherwise, the work of art will lack meaning and coherence, and simply mirror the chaos latent beneath the ironclad order of the

machine age. A superimposition of cosmic aristocracy upon cosmological democracy, would, if successful, provide an artistic order in which a complex and delicate balance of an organic unity, a respect for the integrity and significance of the "atom," and an illuminating contextual order could be maintained. Thus, Sitwell's supplementation in her mature work of the cosmic democracy of the Romantics with the hierarchical metaphysic of an earlier age, can be seen as primarily an attempt to provide a stable matrix into which her celebration of the holiness of each individual being can be comfortably fitted.

Allowing to artistocracy its ancient pride of place, we will begin our consideration of Edith Sitwell's wedded orders with a discussion of her "great chain of being." Because of the poet's grammatical use of imagery, in which a heavy emphasis is placed upon a relatively limited number of constantly recurring symbols, her elaboration of her scale is deliberately selective and exemplary rather than expansive. However, within the limits of her self-imposed economy, the poet does manage to construct a metaphysical ladder which stretches from the earth to the heavens, and includes representatives from at least the major orders of being.

The gradation of existence in Sitwell's later poetry is Aristotelian, being particularly indebted to the hierarchy of living forms postulated in the De Anima. The use of an Aristotelian schema by a visionary romantic might appear incongruous, but on reflection it becomes evident that it is really a part of Dame Edith's synthetic strategy of appropriating for her poetry the best of any two worlds which she encounters. With considerable justice, it would seem that she regarded the Stagirite as the father of the rational analysis and classification of reality which, since the birth of modern science, has come increasingly to hold sway in Western civilization. Beyond her undoubted recognition of the need for the modern poet to come to some sort of terms with this dominance, Sitwell's allusions to the discoveries of Linnaeus, Harvey and Darwin<sup>26</sup> show that she had considerable respect for at least the biological sciences. Moreover, her reservations concerning Whitman suggest that she feels that the organicist vision of reality, if pushed to its ultimate conclusion of a total equation of everything with everything else, has the fatal disadvantage of collapsing reality into an undifferentiated "blob," an outcome which renders the articulation of a poetic structure difficult if not impossible. The divisions of the analyst thus have

their esthetic usefulness, the real danger to be guarded against being the vivisection of reality which results from regarding such categories as water-tight compartments.

Dame Edith accordingly felt free to attempt in her later poetry a grand reconciliation of the scientific with the visionary, the analytic with the synthetic, and the systematic with the organic.

The first major division of being in Sitwell's poetry is the separation of the living and the inanimate which is involved in Aristotle's basic definition of the psyche.<sup>27</sup> Before the advent of the analytical habit, a clear distinction was of course not always made in this connection. Rather, there was a strong tendency on the part of primitive man to endow everything not merely with life, but with human life is particular. Although this primordial animating impulse is one of the most striking features of Sitwell's later verse, she does for poetic purposes also recognize the great distinction between that which is obviously alive and that which is not.

Perhaps the most prominent of the images which fall into the second category is the earth, Dame Edith's symbol of the material world as a great womb-tomb and universal mother which contains, though only in potentia germs of all

living beings. The generation of discrete entities from the inchoate telluric fertility is brought about by the hierogamy of the earth-mother with the shaping, vitalizing energy of a divine logos, which in Sitwell takes the form of the immanent world-spirit of the Romantics. In accordance with the most venerable mythological traditions, this fructifying power is represented in Dame Edith's later poetry by the sun and the rain. The penetration of the soil by the seminal waters and procreative light brings about its miraculous efflorescence in an ascending scale of spiritually inspired and significant incarnations of the Godhead.

This cosmic transformation of amorphous matter is appropriately related by Sitwell to the occult discipline of alchemy, upon which were based hopes for the redemption of the natural world as well as of pecuniary gain.<sup>28</sup> Through the agency of the immanent Godhead, there is accomplished a sacramental transmutation of the earth, the apocalyptic "signature" of which appears literally on the inanimate level and metaphorically on the higher planes of being in the splendor of gems and gold. Chemically incorruptible gold is of course a traditional symbol of a redeemed and spiritualized matter which has been raised from time into eternity, while the precious stones seem to have attracted Sitwell's



notice because in their crystalline matrix they possess an intricate formal structure, thus exemplifying the principle of design which is imposed by the Spirit upon the physical world. This elementary order is, however, so rigidly inert as to preclude either motion or growth:

...the mineral consciousness  
That is deep blankness inside an invisible  
And rigid box - defined, divisible<sup>29</sup>

The next highest rung of Sitwell's ladder of being is the plant world, the most primitive level of life whose simple functions were classified by Aristotle under the heading of the nutritive psyche. Although limited to assimilation and reproduction, the nutritive "soul" was regarded by Aristotle as the basis of all higher manifestations of life, and this notion undoubtedly appealed to Sitwell's romantic proclivity to identify the rudimentary with the fundamental. This tendency acted in conjunction with another form of primitivism, the interest in archaic religious observances, to produce a heavy symbolic stress upon the vegetable kingdom in Dame Edith's later work. Like others of her generation, the poet relied heavily for her knowledge of primitive myth and ritual upon the work of Sir James Frazer and his followers, and these writers all stressed the overwhelming importance in ancient and aboriginal observances of the life-cycles of vegetation.<sup>30</sup>

Despite her heavy emphasis upon the plant kingdom, Dame Edith's choice of specific symbols is quite selective. The images which she employs most frequently are ones which have traditional religious connotations, and which consequently convey clearly her sense of the sacramental nature of life. Thus, one of the prominent symbols in her mature work is the grain, which in its burial and subsequent "rebirth" provided both the pagan Mysteries of Classical antiquity and Christianity with an emblem of an immanent Godhead who, by His passion and resurrection, revivifies all creation and enables men to rise with Him from the grave to eternal life.<sup>31</sup> Intimately linked with the wheat-symbol in Sitwell's later poetry is that of a eucharistic bread, the partaking of which in an agape or love-feast provides man with an earnest of eternity, and also unites him with both God and nature through communion with the cosmic ground of the world-soul:

The universal language of the Bread-  
 (O Thou who art 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.'<sup>32</sup>

Another of Sitwell's favorite plant-images is the blossoming or fruit-bearing tree. Besides recalling one of the most common forms of the life-spirit in primitive fertility cults,<sup>33</sup> this symbol will suggest to readers of Yeats the Cabalistic image of the Tree of Life,<sup>34</sup> which like alchemical transmutation symbolizes a process of redemptive transfiguration of the material world. The Tree of Life, which is an image of the entire cosmos, has its roots in matter and its crown in heaven. Starting from the fallen physical world at its base, incarnate souls flow as "sap" up its trunk, becoming progressively more etherialized as they rise. Finally, they reappear as birds, flowers or fruit which figure forth a perfected cosmic synthesis of spirit and matter, of time and eternity.<sup>35</sup> The reading of this arcane significance into Dame Edith's trees is confirmed by her employment of another powerfully evocative plant-image, the rose.<sup>36</sup> The great vision of redemption through a marriage of heaven and earth which is embodied in the Tree of Life appears quite explicitly in the poet's use of the rose as a symbol of Christ, the incarnate God Who has brought all creation to a new birth:

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 of Christ, Who is the ultimate Fire  
 Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man....<sup>37</sup>

Moving another step up the Aristotelian ladder, we reach the sensitive psyche of the animal, in which nutritive and reproductive capabilities are accompanied by those for sensation, desire and locomotion. The dynamism which accordingly characterizes the animal kingdom is identified by Sitwell with the creative energy of the divine solar rays:

For is not the blood, - the divine, the animal heat  
 That is not fire, - derived from the solar ray?  
 And does not the Beast surpass all elements  
 In power, through the heat and wisdom of the blood  
 Creating other Beasts - the Lion a Lion, the Bull  
     a Bull,  
 The Bear a Bear - some like great stars in the rough  
 And uncreated dark - or unshaped universe  
 With manes of fire and a raging sun for heart.<sup>38</sup>

In these lines we again see Dame Edith's preference for images which possess well-established sacramental connotations. The lion, the bull and the bear, because of their strength and vitality, were all enshrined in various primitive cults as sacred animals incorporating the mana of the life-force.<sup>39</sup> A similar mystique was woven in pre-historic Greece around the bee,<sup>40</sup> another animal image which Sitwell employs with great effectiveness. As Jane Ellen Harrison informs us, the bee was endowed with magical significance

because of her seemingly miraculous gift of making honey, which when fermented became, like the wine of Dionysus, a sacred intoxicant conferring the gift of prophecy. In accordance with this ancient usage, honey, like "the animal heat" is identified by Sitwell with the divine solar energy.<sup>41</sup> However, not only is the bee capable of distilling from nature the golden fire of the life-spirit, but in the honeycomb and the hive, she harnesses this power in the service of a consummate organization. By virtue of her masterly reconciliation of energy and order, the bee becomes for Dame Edith a special priestess of the cosmic ritual in which the shaping vitality of the immanent divinity creatively moulds higher forms from the earth.

Rising above the animal world, we come at last to man, the crown of earthly creation. Traditionally, man has been assigned the strategic if paradoxical position of the link in the great chain of being between the spiritual and the material.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, he is joined through his physical body to the fallen lower order of nature, and is consequently subjected both to animal impulses and to decay and death in time. Dame Edith's frequently agonized awareness of our involvement in nature was obviously heightened by evolutionary theory, with its derivation of "the great

brow of Socrates" from the "wrinkled mask of Pithecanthropus Erectus."<sup>43</sup> However, the poet's acceptance of evolution did not obstruct her triumphant assertion of the age-old faith that man is not merely animal or "Hard diamond," but also "infinite sun."<sup>44</sup> Created by divine miracle, redeemed by Christ's sacrifice, and nourished by the sacramental bread, humanity in spite of its depravity and degradation belongs ultimately to the realm of grace.<sup>45</sup> Not only is man illuminated and blessed by the "holy light" of the immanent Godhead, but he is also endowed with independent spiritual powers of vision, creation and love. Even in the heat of youth, he is capable through sexual passion of an apocalyptic awareness of the sacramental nature of the world, the beneficence of God and the holiness of all being. Through erotic and brotherly love, he can cleave to his fellows and thereby forge both a familial and a social order. Moreover, as the "Elegy for Dylan Thomas" reminds us, a few particularly gifted individuals are capable of the cosmic affirmation of art. Thus, Dame Edith's ultimate vision of human nature lies beyond that of a flawed if magnificent paradox. In the last analysis, the suffering and defilement arising from man's natural existence are transcended through their suffusion with grace:

And the sun does not care if I live in holiness  
 To him, my mortal dress  
 Is sacred, part of the earth, a lump of the world  
 With my splendours, ores, impurities, and harvest,  
 Over which shines my heart, that ripening sun.<sup>46</sup>

Even given the added burden of the depravity of the brutal,  
 sterile materialism of modern society, man's suffering can  
 become a redemptive passion, beyond which lies the trans-  
 figuration of spiritual "ripeness" in this life, and phy-  
 sical and spiritual renewal in the cycles of eternal return  
 inspired by the life-force:

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.<sup>47</sup>

Aristotle stresses that the ultimate good of man is only to  
 be achieved through the exercise of his rational nature, with  
 its power to regulate his desires in the service of higher  
 ethical and intellectual ends. However, as the spiritual  
 child of the Romantics, Sitwell would definitely regard  
 reason as "the bound or outward circumference of Energy"<sup>48</sup>  
 rather than its absolute master. Accordingly, her symbol  
 of the essential nature of man is the heart rather than the  
 head, and she sees his highest fruition as being attained

as much through instinct and action as through contemplation. Her Romantic inclinations also lead her to depart from Aristotle in finding the ideal environment for human fulfilment not in the polis<sup>49</sup> but rather in a pastoral setting in which the chief activities are procreation, cultivation of the soil and fireside musing. The typical inhabitants of Sitwell's country world are accordingly young lovers, husbandmen and mothers, and oracular old men and women. All of these persons instinctively follow their own divinely inspired impulses and the sacred rhythms of nature. However naive or sentimental all of this may sound in the abstract, one of Sitwell's greatest poetic achievements is her ability to infuse simple rustic figures and their humble occupations with an aura of sacramental significance. In this way, she manages to evoke in all of its poignant loveliness the passionate and visionary innocence which characterizes man's vernal condition in the earthly paradise:

The sapphire dew's sing like a star; bird-breasted dew  
Lies like a bird and flies  
In the singing wood and is blown by the bright air  
Upon your wood-wild April-soft long hair  
That seems the rising of spring constellations-  
Aldebaran, Procyon, Sirius  
And Cygnus who gave you all his bright swan-plumage.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to the hierarchy of living psyche, there is in



Aristotle's cosmos the ascending scale of celestial spheres located beyond the moon. The astronomical bodies attached to these spheres are composed with varying degrees of purity of the "imperishable substance aither,"<sup>51</sup> which, unlike the terrestrial elements, possesses a capacity for an eternal and divinely inspired circular motion. In ascribing an elevated metaphysical status to the inhabitants of heaven and to their movements, Aristotle was only conforming to the ancient tendency to attribute divine meaning to the skies, a cherished belief which was not really shaken until the advent of the Newtonian universe. Although Edith Sitwell incorporates a good deal of modern science into her poetic system, her deepest instinct is to recreate the spiritually significant world-order in vogue before the Seventeenth Century, and she accordingly revives for her symbolic purposes the belief in the occult meaning and influence of the stars. In the cosmology which the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had derived largely from Aristotle,<sup>52</sup> this notion was bound up with the idea that beyond the moon, creation was, if not in its original unfallen condition, at least free from earthly dross and mutability. Not only were the sun and stars purer and more ethereal than any terrestrial substance, but, as Milton suggests in "At a Solemn Music,"

their motions conformed to the perfect harmony which God had originally intended for creation. However, despite the gulf which existed between the heavens and the sublunary world, the universe as a whole was still bound together by a series of magical influences and analogies. This meant that the stars both reflected and influenced the destinies of individuals and of nations.

All of these beliefs are reflected in Sitwell's use of celestial symbolism. For her, the sun and stars are composed of a divine fire. The sun in particular is, as Plato says, a visible analogue of the good,<sup>53</sup> which for Sitwell means a fount of God's power and love in a form creatively immanent in nature and perceptible to the senses. Thus, not only does the poet share Blake's visionary perception of the sun as an apocalypse,<sup>54</sup> but she also regards it as "the first lover of the world" and "the father of all things."<sup>55</sup> The celestial bodies are, however, not merely the source of that fructifying, fiery love without which "warmth in the inward parts of the earth would freeze."<sup>56</sup> In endlessly recurring, regular cycles, they also become symbols of the great fusion of energy and order, of time and eternity which marks the activity of the Godhead within creation. Moreover, the heavenly bodies are sacramental

agents which "effect what they signify." Through the rhythms of the seasonal and diurnal cycles, they benevolently regulate all earthly life:

O sons of men, the firmament's beloved,  
The Golden Ones of heaven have us in care-  
With planetary wisdom, changeless laws,  
Ripening our lives and ruling hearts and rhythms,<sup>57</sup>

Although it is possible to trace a well-articulated ladder of being in Edith Sitwell's later poetry, her scale of created forms is not a rigid and static hierarchy whose divisions and gradations are absolute. Rather, her central emphasis upon organic cohesion and vitality leads to a universe which is characterized by a radical unity on the one hand, and by fluidity and change on the other. In particular, as was the case in "Metamorphosis," the activity of the life-force is seen in the later poetry as inspiring growth and development. This involves a movement up the ladder of being in which, to borrow Aristotle's terminology, the potential of matter for higher form is gradually actualized:

The ray and perfume of the Sun is white:  
But when these intermingle as in love  
With earth-bound things, the dream begins to move,

And colour that sleeps as in a dreamless cloud  
Deep in the mineral trance within that shroud  
Then to a fluid changes, grows  
Deep in the stem and leaves of the dark rose.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, growth for Sitwell implies not only the concept of the development within each level of being of its own innate capacities, as when "all Plant-systems and formations" reach their consummation in the flower;<sup>59</sup> but also the notion that the plant is embryonic in the gem, the animal in the plant, and man within the animal. Each of these earthly orders also incorporates the celestial sphere, which in its turn embodies and expresses the divine. Moreover, just as each form possesses the potentiality of evolving into those above it, so the more developed levels of being incorporate into a higher synthesis the lives of those below them. The various orders of Dame Edith's chain of being thus include and mirror both one another and the Godhead. Of far greater importance than such correspondences, however, is the continual process of upward growth by which the immanent Godhead creates ever more perfect images of Himself in a succession of ascending forms. It is this notion which enables Sitwell to assimilate Darwinian evolution to her spiritual system:

For does not the dust of the common world hold  
the dark seed  
Of a humble plant that grows  
Beyond its morning wisdom - changed, one side, to gold,  
And, on one side, to beast-  
From which grows Pithecanthropus Erectus.  
What is Man  
But a hybrid between beast and plant and god?<sup>60</sup>

It should be stressed that in Dame Edith's view the developmental process is reversible, and in her later poetry we have atavism as well as evolution. This spiritual tragedy is attributable to the fallen nature of creation, the three most destructive effects of which are a contemporary society torn by economic injustice and war, the perversion of erotic love to a devouring lust, and the ravages of time. All of these evils are alike in producing a physical and spiritual degeneration which the poet represents as a catastrophic descent down the scale of being. The way in which this decay negates the creative ascent of the life-spirit is underlined in Dame Edith's poetry both by her ambivalent and ironic use of certain of her symbols of the sacred fertility, and also by a system of images which constitute demonic antitypes of these sacramental signs. Thus, she opposes azoic dust and stone to the fertile earth, the demonic gold of an inhuman commerce to that of God's alchemy, the ape and the tiger to the lion, the skeleton to the heart, and the atomic bomb-blast or the cold to the warmth of the sun. These and other negative images in effect form an inverted ladder of being, which offsets with the evil and sterility of its progressive degeneration the scale of ascent inspired by God's creative love.

As we have said, the negative aspects of existence are for Sitwell in the last analysis subsumed in the positive, and she changes the tragedy of evil, decay and death into a divine comedy of resurrection and redemption through a vision of the eventual transmutation of corruption into new life by the immanent world-spirit. Thus, her two ladders of existence, which in reality correspond to man's paradoxical knowledge of good and evil in a fallen world, are ultimately joined together to form a uroboros whose tail is held firmly in his jaws. The result is a network of interlocking cycles of birth, growth, fruition, decay, death, and rebirth, of which the seasonal round is Dame Edith's main archetype. These revolutions periodically bring about both physical rebirth and a moral and spiritual purification. In bending the "line of Time"<sup>61</sup> back upon itself, they raise temporal existence from the cul-de-sac of straight degeneration to an "eternal return."<sup>62</sup>

Thus, rather than an immutable hierarchy of being, what we really have in Sitwell's later poetry is the driving of matter through a cyclical process of metamorphosis, which involves an endless succession of ascending and descending stages:

Before our Death in Birth, our Birth in Death,  
     ...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.<sup>63</sup>

As the above lines imply, this radical modification of the old static chain of entities in effect creates a bridge between the two systems of cosmic aristocracy and cosmic democracy. Discrete and graded forms certainly exist, but all are compounded of the same two ingredients of spirit and matter, and any given entity will in time be transformed into all the others. Thus, underlying Dame Edith's scale of being is a ground of radical identity and organic inter-connection which reconciles it with the egalitarian metaphysic of Romanticism. The successful poetic fusion of the two orders is particularly evident in the following lines from the "Elegy for Dylan Thomas":

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 planet, or a moon,  
 A flower in the green dark, freed from its stem  
     in earth. <sup>64</sup>

The metaphysical basis of the cosmological democracy, which in the later poetry of Edith Sitwell complements the great chain of being, is clearly enunciated in the two poems "How

Many Heavens..." and "The Bee-Keeper":

'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.'<sup>65</sup>

'This Thunder is the honey of all Beings, and all  
Beings  
Are the honey of this Thunder...O the bright  
immortal Lover,  
That is in thunder and all voices - the beasts' roar -  
Thunder of rising saps - the voice of Man!  
O bright immortal Lover Who is All!'<sup>66</sup>

These passages imply a pantheistic version of two intimately related doctrines which are common in occult speculation, and which sometimes appear together under the heading of "analogy" or "correspondence."<sup>67</sup> The first of these is summed up in the Hermetic principle "as above, so below," and may thus be called "vertical correspondence." This is simply the notion that the physical world is in some manner similar to or in connection with the heavenly, and consequently reflects it or bodies it forth. Thus, for Sitwell the visible or existential blade of grass is really only the "shadow" of an invisible or essential blade within it, which is God. The second sort of correspondence is enunciated poetically in Baudelaire's famous "Correspondences," a piece with which Sitwell would have been familiar. This sort of analogy, which can be called "horizontal," comprises the



belief that between seemingly unrelated aspects of the phenomenal realm, there are esoteric similarities or relationships which are apparent only to the eye of the initiate. Thus, Dame Edith perceives a resemblance not merely between "the beasts' roar" and "the voice of Man," but also between these sounds and the motion of "rising saps." The ground of this mysterious likeness between such apparently disparate phenomena of course lies in their common connection with the "bright immortal Lover Who is All," and this suggests that for Sitwell, vertical and horizontal analogy are organically related. The perception of "horizontal" correspondences between various beings in the material world involves the foundation of such analogies, which is the spiritual presence of the immanent Divinity. Thus, Dame Edith quotes Swedenborg to the effect that through the visionary perception of horizontal correspondences, man can "speak with angels."<sup>68</sup>

The doctrines of vertical and horizontal correspondence were already implicit in two ideas which played a prominent part in the cosmological speculations of the Renaissance.<sup>69</sup> These were the belief that the universe is mystically bound together by a series of analogies between its various domains, and the conception of the chain of being as a series of

mirror images of supernal reality which become progressively clearer and more luminous as one rises towards God. As long as such analogies do not become identities, it is still possible to maintain a truly hierarchical universe. However, with the advent of the Romantic belief in a world organically knitted together by a omnipresent spirit, correspondence tends to become merely the outward visible sign of an underlying noumenal identity:

'The past and present are as one-  
 Accordant and discordant, youth and age,  
 And death and birth. For out of one came all-  
 From all comes one.'<sup>70</sup>

Such a radical identification of all phenomena inevitably implies the equality of cosmological democracy. In this setting of metaphysical parity, vertical correspondence becomes the belief that all beings, from the most exalted to the most degraded and insignificant, are alike sacramental symbols which both reveal and conceal the "white radiance of Eternity."<sup>71</sup> Horizontal correspondence comes to mean a radical equivalence of all beings, in the context of which the useful and even necessary distinctions which rational analysis reads into the world of space, time and matter, such as man and nature, animal, vegetable and mineral, animate and inanimate, and past, present and future, are ultimately subsumed in an overriding unity. On the deepest

level, everything is equivalent to everything else, and the poet's scope for making connections is limited only by his sense of decorum or his inventiveness:

Beside the yellow foam that sings of Lydian airs  
and of the lyre-  
And vines taut as the lyre, the earth seems of  
sardonyx  
Where the hot juices fall like yellow planets-  
earth striped like the lynx.<sup>72</sup>

The integrating world-soul which makes such esoteric conceits metaphysically valid is for Dame Edith not merely a bloodlessly abstract cosmic "ground." Nor is it only an impersonal and unconscious if dynamic "life-force." Ultimately, the ontological basis of the universe is the all-embracing beneficent regard of the personal God of Judaeo-Christian tradition:

For the sun is the first lover of the world,  
Blessing all humble creatures, all life-giving,<sup>73</sup>

Sitwell's great faith in the origin of all life and being in God's vitalizing love for His creation has further implications for the poet's cosmological democracy. In the first place, it leads her to Blake's position that "Everything that lives is Holy."<sup>74</sup> However, the whole of the cosmos is not merely sacred, but is also the object of the concern of a personal Divinity, and the sun which symbolizes His presence is accordingly an "eye of God." As a beloved expression

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of His Own nature, every being has equal dignity and value in His sight, and is equally the recipient of His compassion and care. Thus, as Coleridge's Ancient Mariner learns to his cost, because God "made and loveth all,"<sup>75</sup> it is incumbent upon us to do the like. It is by his transgression of the law of universal love which is imposed by the sacredness of man and nature in the eyes of God that the plutocrat, the chief ravager of modern society, incurs the guilt of Cain and of Judas.

Not only are all beings worthy and demanding of love, but, because they are instinct with divine life, they are also capable of actively responding to it and of returning it. Even the lowly worm who presides over the dissolution of the dead is engaged in a labor of love:

The Worm said, 'I am small, my redness is from Adam.  
But conquerors tall  
Come to my embrace as I were Venus. I  
Am the paramour in the last bed of love, and mine,  
the kiss  
That gives Eternity.'<sup>76</sup>

Thus, for Dame Edith, the sacred foundation of cosmological democracy in caritas ultimately implies a universal fraternity in the spirit, and this makes creation as a whole analogous to the community of Christian believers. This "cosmic church" involves not only the "nobler love of Man for his brother Man,"<sup>77</sup> but also the mutual affirmation between God

and all of His creatures, and the love of created beings one for another. Love is the life-blood of Sitwell's organic cosmos, and all activities within it ultimately amount to a nexus of "I-Thou" relationships.<sup>78</sup> The young lovers who appear so frequently in the later poetry are accordingly archetypal symbols of a universal relatedness which embraces even manifest contraries.

Presiding over and summing up in His mystical nature the cosmic ritual of an all-inclusive and all-reconciling love is Christ, the human and suffering and therefore eminently personal Divinity:

...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  
bring us harvest.<sup>79</sup>

As this passage implies, Dame Edith's vision of the immanence of God in the physical world ultimately causes her to fuse the two orders of nature and grace, and thus to identify the Biblical Christ of redemption, judgement and Apocalypse with the dying and reviving sun-gods and vegetation-spirits of ancient paganism. For Dame Edith, Incarnation and Passion are thus identical, as are the dispensation of the vital solar energy and the shedding of the redemptive blood of the crucified Savior, Christ is the

Divinity Who, in His self-sacrificing love and humility, is buried in the tomb of the earth like the seed. However, like the grain He is miraculously re-born, and in the end comes to fruition in the sacramental bread which signifies the universal gift of a being and a life which are at once corporeal and spiritual. As Sitwell's symbolic analogy with the Mass implies, the partaking of this Eucharistic "bread of life" is an act of communion by which all beings are united in love. The cosmos is thus the mystical body of Christ, Who stands in His incarnation for the brotherhood of God and creation, and, in His bestowal of a universal life which is also love, for the fraternity of all creatures. Moreover, as the high priest of cosmological democracy, Christ also takes up into Himself the sin, suffering and death of all creatures, giving consolation and forgiveness on the spiritual level and rebirth on the physical. He is thus the presiding Genius not only of the Final Judgement and Apocalypse which will lead to the permanent foundation of a "new heaven, and a new earth,"<sup>80</sup> but also of the cycles of death and life in which all beings can in the meantime find a "natural" redemption and resurrection:

But high upon the wall  
 The Rose where the Wounds of Christ are red  
 Cries to the Light  
 .....

....From my little span  
 I cry of 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 smel is Crist, clepid the plantynge of the  
 Rose in Jerico.'<sup>81</sup>

The mystical equality and fraternity which underlie the hierarchical arrangement of entities in Sitwell's later poetry are emphasized by two closely related and continually recurring poetic devices, which may be termed the "overlapping metaphor" and the "image of synthesis." The "overlapping metaphor," which should be understood to comprehend a variety of poetic connections, is a conceit by which creatures or properties belonging to one level of the chain of being are associated with another. Such visionary figures occur with considerable frequency in Dame Edith's mature work. Among the most prominent are linkages of the celestial sphere with man, animal and plant, of the vegetable world with that of the beasts, and of gems and gold with the various higher orders. Such conceits are often sculpted with the utmost virtuosity:

...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 armour like a King's<sup>82</sup>

In their triple employment of gold, these lines also exemplify Sitwell's use of the image of synthesis. This is a symbol which, by its continual reappearance in connection with virtually every area of experience treated by the poet, suggests like the overlapping metaphor the ultimate equivalence of all types and levels of being. Among the most important of such symbols are clusters of recurring images centering around the sun, light, heat, fire, gold, rain, and the seasonal cycle.

Both the overlapping metaphor and the image of synthesis are intended by Sitwell to weave together with as many threads as possible the world-pictures of cosmic aristocracy and cosmic democracy, so that in the end they will come to be perceived simply as aspects of a single poetic organism. The reconciliation of these two orders in a higher unity stands both as a type and as a foundation of the multifaceted process of synthesis by which Sitwell succeeds in framing a coherent universe from the wealth of impressions accumulated



in her rich and far-ranging sensibility. Such architectonic capacity is certainly one of Sitwell's claims to a more prominent place in the modern literary tradition than she has yet been generally accorded.

CHAPTER VIII  
ALIENATION AND ATONEMENT  
IN THE LATER POETRY OF EDITH SITWELL

It has been the purpose of the two preceding chapters to suggest that the central critical point which is necessary for an understanding of the later poetry of Edith Sitwell is the poet's achievement of a subtle and delicate balance of two major imaginative elements. These are a continuing process of spiritual and imaginative dialectic and a static, all-embracing matrix of vision, in terms of which all of the poet's metaphysical and moral problems are ultimately resolved. The encompassing and atoning nature of this matrix has been approached through its fusion of the two metaphysical systems of cosmic democracy and cosmic aristocracy because that is its most prominent facet in Dame Edith's later poetry, and illustrates as well as any the way in which all contradictions, oppositions and conflicts are at once contained within its system and resolved into its unity. A realization of the balance and fusion in the later poetry of imaginative process and imaginative system is an essential preliminary to a treatment

of any of its major themes, including those of alienation and atonement. Conversely a discussion of alienation and atonement in the mature work is perhaps the best way to approach and to elucidate the poetic structure arising from Sitwell's union of spiritual dialectic and visionary cosmos.

In accordance with the imaginative unity-in-duality of Sitwell's later poetry, the themes of alienation and atonement can be regarded simultaneously from two perspectives. The first of these may be variously termed "existentialist," immanent or dynamic; alienation and atonement being regarded from the viewpoint of a sensitive spirit faced with certain immediate spiritual problems, and passing from the crises which they engender to a resolution of those crises. It will be seen from Chapter VII of the present study that this view of alienation and atonement in terms of process involves essentially the same themes, motifs and symbols which were discussed in connection with the early poetry in Chapter V. The most prominent among these in the mature work are the clash and the reconciliation of opposites, and the shattering and reintegration of the cosmic love-community.

The second perspective upon the themes of alienation and atonement, in which it is viewed in terms of a stable matrix of vision, can be called "essentialist," transcendental

or static. This approach involves an examination of the themes of alienation and atonement in the context of what Joseph Frank would term the "spatial form" of Sitwell's later poetry.<sup>1</sup> This form is teleological, controlling the development both of individual works and of the later poetry as a whole, but emerging for the reader and perhaps even for the poet herself only as an "aftersight" gained in retrospect. It is within this structure, which may be termed the "matrix of reconciliation," that the process of alienation and atonement occurs, and it is in the marriage of contraries which is represented by the matrix that the process ultimately ends in self-transcendence.

The matrix of reconciliation, the static spiritual and imaginative vision which gives the later poetry of Edith Sitwell its high degree of unity and coherence, has in its turn two aspects, which may be termed a "spatial" and a "temporal." The spatial facet of the matrix of reconciliation is the divinely inspired cosmic organism which was discussed in Chapter VII. In the ground of the ultimate ontological unity which this universal organism provides, all antinomies and even differences are subsumed, while through its sacramental vitality both spiritual and physical degeneration are overcome in the process of metamorphosis and in

the organic cycles of death and rebirth. This cosmos of course functions as a matrix of generation and regeneration because it is a sacramental entity, which incarnates the Divinity within itself. However, as a sacrament, the spatial matrix of reconciliation also constitutes a sign pointing beyond the divine immanence in nature towards a higher order of revelation, providence and grace.<sup>2</sup> To put the matter in a slightly different fashion, nature in the later poetry of Edith Sitwell is a sacramental symbol of Christ, Who in turn stands at the centre of Salvation History. From the "temporal" perspective of the total spiritual history of the universe from the Creation to the Apocalypse, present cosmic order is simply one phase of a larger spiritual process. It is, moreover, towards the final consummation of Salvation History that both the cycles of rebirth and the reconciling order of the universal organism point as symbolic assurances. The rhythm of Salvation History thus constitutes the ultimate "temporal" form taken by the matrix of reconciliation.

The interaction in the later poetry of alienation and atonement as process, and the two forms assumed by the matrix of reconciliation, is most clearly and fully illustrated by the three poems which were written by Sitwell

in reaction to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,<sup>3</sup> and which were grouped together in her Collected Poems as "Three Poems of the Atomic Age." These pieces are worthy of a separate and detailed consideration both by virtue of their complexity and power, and also because they illustrate the poetic dramatization and resolution of what was the most acute crisis of Dame Edith's later years. It is in these pieces that the themes of alienation and atonement in the later poetry of Edith Sitwell reach their greatest complexity and their highest pitch of intensity.<sup>4</sup>

"Dirge for the New Sunrise," the first of the "Three Poems of the Atomic Age," appeared in 1947. The poem, with its highly dramatic imagery and tone, represents Sitwell's initial "shock" reaction to what she obviously considers to be the greatest enormity of human history. In terms of the continuing process of spiritual dialectic which occurs in Dame Edith's later poetry, the "Dirge..." is a poem which on all of its several levels of meaning illustrates the movement of alienation. In this connection, the high degree of continuity between the mature and the developmental periods of Dame Edith's art is well illustrated by the recurrence in the "Dirge..." of many of the themes discussed in connection with the alienation-atonement process in the

early work. The most important of these motifs is the violation and fragmentation of the cosmic love community. This disruption is attributed by Sitwell to the scientific rationalism which is an offshoot of a materialistic and mechanistic world-view. A spiritually inspired wisdom or logos, in which intelligence operates in conjunction with a reverential love, has been replaced by a rationalism<sup>5</sup> which, although seemingly cold and detached, is in fact the expression of the thanatos into which the love-impulse of a cosmically alienated psyche has been perverted. This demonic shadow of a true spiritual wisdom regards nature merely as an object to be exploited for the sake of the satisfaction of its pride, prurient curiosity, and destructiveness.<sup>6</sup>

And the more murderous brain  
Of Man, still redder Nero that conceived the death  
Of his mother Earth, and tore  
Her womb, to know the place where he was conceived.<sup>7</sup>

Modern man's perverted attitude towards nature results in a cumulative fission of the cosmic organism, in which the separation of the human mind from the object-world finds expression in a murderous dissection. This destructive process culminates in man's discovery of how to split the atom. The scientist's callous rape of nature, ending as it does with the destructive cleavage of the basis of the very

being of creation, illustrates dramatically how the alienation of an egocentric intellect from the universe has shattered the cosmic love-community.

In its Romantic opposition of head and heart, of an egoistic, destructive intellect and a creative and affirmative love-instinct, the "Dirge..." bears a very close thematic resemblance to Hawthorne's Ethan Brand. Sitwell also follows Hawthorne in regarding a destructive experimentation with God's creatures as the expression of a Luciferian or Faustian pride,<sup>8</sup> which sins against a universal, divinely ordained love-community. Modern man's offense against nature is therefore also a sin against the Creator. To put the matter in a different fashion, because the universe is sacramental, man by his betrayal and denial of the cosmic love-community has at the same time cut himself off from God. This cleavage is stressed with particular poignancy by Sitwell's evocation of humanity's original state of intimate communion with a Divinity Who was immediately present in both man himself and in nature:<sup>9</sup>

There was a morning when the holy Light  
Was young, the beautiful First Creature came  
To our water-springs, and thought us without blame.  
Our hearts seemed safe in our breasts and sang to  
the Light-  
The marrow in the bone  
We dreamed was safe...the blood in the veins, the  
sap in the tree  
Were springs of Deity.<sup>10</sup>



Modern man's denial and betrayal of the immanent God and of the sacramental cosmos is expressed in a particularly dramatic fashion in his destructive cleavage of the atom. In this connection, Dame Edith's consistent employment of light as a symbol of the omnipresent Divinity suggests that she would make a broader identification of the incarnate Godhead with what Einsteinian physics terms "energy."<sup>11</sup> Such an identification would mean that the atomic nucleus, in which protons and neutrons are held together by a binding force, is an elemental and archetypal form of the primal marriage of spirit and matter in the universe. The microcosmic nature of the atom as the most basic manifestation of God's vitalizing and ordering presence in the physical is suggested by its function as a "building block," from which larger constellations of order are evolved. To split the atom therefore is to shatter the primal union of spirit and matter which substantiates creation, perverting the former into a destructive and dissociative force, and returning the latter to its original state of chaos. As the havoc which is wrought by an atomic explosion vividly illustrates, this destructive dissociation of spirit and matter demolishes the macrocosmic organism at its very foundation. The atomic bomb thus represents a parodic

reversal of God's original act of creation. The full significance of this fact lies in Sitwell's belief in a continuing creation of cosmos out of chaos. Until the splitting of the atom, the original cosmogenesis has been unceasingly repeated in the physical and spiritual renewal inspired by God's immanence in the universe. Now the atomic bomb has apparently negated God's presence in His creation, thus threatening a catastrophic return to the primal chaos.

The splitting of the atom thus represents for Sitwell what is perhaps the ultimate possible sin. The enormity of the crime is reflected in part in the bitterness of the poet's repudiation and condemnation of the society by which it has been perpetrated:

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.<sup>12</sup>

Sitwell has returned temporarily to the same role of "judge and Jeremiah"<sup>13</sup> that she assumed in "Gold Coast Customs." With it are renewed her old spiritual problems of exile from the human community and of an imprisonment in a paralyzing pity and horror. The poet's terrible despair over the destruction which man has unleashed upon himself and

upon the sacramental cosmic organism in effect alienates her almost as much from God's redemptive grace as it does from a sinful humanity:

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.<sup>14</sup>

In a situation which has totally inverted the divine dispensation, Dame Edith's very warmth and spiritual sensitivity become temptations to nihilism. The threat to the larger faith which joins the poet to God and the cosmos means paradoxically that, in her agonized reaction to the sins of modern man, she is in danger of merely replicating his alienation. As the lines which have just been quoted suggest, Dame Edith is precariously balanced in the "Dirge..." between the spiritual denial of a total despair and her tenuous belief in the redemptive value of the suffering which she and a war-torn world share with the crucified Christ.<sup>15</sup>

The way in which Dame Edith has been driven almost to despair by the "chain reaction" of alienation centering upon the misuse of the primal forces of the universe is reflected in the poet's employment of Biblical typology in the "Dirge...." This consists primarily in a symbolic antithesis of Creation and Crucifixion. The meaning which

Sitwell attaches to the idea of creation is implied in her reference to the light which is her symbol of the immanence of the Divinity as "the beautiful First Creature." This description suggests that creation is the archetype of the Self-giving of God which establishes the cosmic love-community. By way of contrast, crucifixion is associated primarily in the "Dirge..." not with a restoration of that community by a further act of divine self-sacrifice, but rather with its disruption by evil. Thus, Sitwell's reference in the crucifixion scene which opens the "Dirge..." to Ixion, who treacherously murdered Deioneus and then attempted to seduce Hera,<sup>16</sup> suggests the crimes of modern man against his brother man and his mother nature.<sup>17</sup> The allusion connects the poet, albeit as a hapless victim rather than an accomplice, with the moral "filth" of the "Ant-men" who have ravished the universe in order to find the ultimate means of destroying their fellows. The poet's reference to the "Thief upon the Cross" possesses a complex ambiguity. Used as it is in conjunction with the figure of Ixion, it would seem to be intended to call to mind first of all the thief who denied Christ. Its main reference would thus be to modern man's blind and ruthless materialism, which leads him like Judas to deny and betray his Savior.

However, there is obviously also an allusion to St. Dismas. This paradoxical figure, who by his own admission was justly punished for his crimes and yet nonetheless accepted his Savior,<sup>18</sup> beautifully epitomizes the tension between the forces of good and evil, fall and redemption, alienation and atonement, which has reached a crisis point with the dropping of the atomic bomb.<sup>19</sup> Like the opposed motifs of Creation and Passion, St. Dismas represents the knowledge of good and evil which resulted from the Fall. These spiritual opposites at present pose an irreconcilable antithesis, in which the poet's awareness of God's benevolence only intensifies her agony over human evil. This painful clash of antinomies in Sitwell's spiritual perspective is graphically rendered by the image of a physical crucifixion.

As a type of Christ, the suffering poet of "Dirge for the New Sunrise" takes upon herself the agony and outrage inflicted upon the universe and upon her fellow men by the explosion of the atomic bomb. Her suffering is in this sense microcosmic, having as its objective counterpart the overthrow of what we have termed the spatial matrix of reconciliation:

And the ray from that heat came soundless,  
 shook the sky,  
 As if in search of food, and squeezed the stems  
 Of all that grows on 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...<sup>20</sup>

A full understanding of this passage depends upon an awareness of the way in which the atomic bomb inverts the divine creativity which originally established the cosmic organism, and which maintains and renews it by the omnipresence of its vitalizing energy. Dame Edith's central symbol of God's life-giving creativity is the solar "light-process."<sup>21</sup> As the title of "Dirge for the New Sunrise" implies, the atomic bomb, in which the elemental energies of the cosmos are subverted in the service of human evil, functions as a demonic anti-sun.<sup>22</sup> The universal destruction which is wrought by modern man's demonic sun negates the action of God's creative and redemptive beneficence. As we saw in Chapter VII, this universal love unites all of the various levels of being into a cosmic democracy which theologically speaking is a universal church or spiritual fraternity in grace. In the passage quoted above, the anti-sun created by human depravity acts in diametric opposition to God's omnipresent grace by enveloping in ruin all of the various

levels of the "chain of being." In opposition to the outpouring of God's plenitude to all beings alike through the "light-process," the true sun, along with the human, animal and vegetable worlds, is sucked dry of vitality by the radiation of the bomb. Such universal ruin, which constitutes a sort of "brotherhood" in the suffering and death inflicted by human evil, reverses the creative and joyous mutual affirmation of all beings in the fraternity of divine grace. This hideous travesty of the cosmic Church is suggested with particular power through the image of the heap of human victims, in which the "living blind" and "seeing Dead" lie together "As if in love." This same image, with its horrible inversion of the functions of life and death, further implies the collapse in a ruined universe of the cyclical processes of physical and spiritual rebirth.

In "Dirge for the New Sunrise" the fragmentation by human evil of the cosmic love-community which culminates in the splitting of the atom seems to Dame Edith to have utterly destroyed the spatial matrix of reconciliation. In The Shadow of Cain, a much longer poem which appeared in the same year as the "Dirge....," the poet strives to attain some spiritual perspective upon the atomic bomb. Dame Edith achieves this end by placing the holocaust in the

context of a historical process of alienation and atonement. This historical movement, whose central motif is the appearance and reconciliation of contraries, comes in the course of Sitwell's poem to be seen as the teleological unfolding by means of a spiritual dialectic of the transcendent temporal matrix of Salvation History.<sup>23</sup> In particular, the triumphant ending of The Shadow of Cain, in which the Parousia is seen as bringing about the excision of evil and the restoration of the human community, places the historical action which has been outlined in the course of the poem in a new transcendent perspective. The "chain reaction" of fissions of the cosmic love community which culminated in the dropping of the atomic bomb is finally seen as an integral and even necessary part of the encompassing, divinely ordained pattern of Fall and Redemption.

The historical process of alienation and atonement which is described in The Shadow of Cain begins with "some primeval disaster in the heart of Man,"<sup>24</sup> a phrase which we may take as a reference to the Fall. This disaster, which is rendered by Sitwell through the geological symbolism of the "great oscillations/Of temperature"<sup>25</sup> which produced the ice ages, apparently involves the splitting off of the human intellect from unconscious instinct. As is the case in the



"Dirge....," this disjunction results in the opposition of the mind to both God and the universe. In its sterile isolation the mind becomes a power of negation and destruction, a satanic force whose opposition to being itself is rendered symbolically by Sitwell through an imagery of intense cold. Like Blake's Urizen, the demonic human intellect expresses itself by a dissection of the cosmic love-organism into dead abstraction.<sup>26</sup> This process is rendered ironically by Sitwell as a grotesque parody of God's creation of the universe ex nihilo:

But the Cold is the highest mathematical Idea...  
 the Cold is Zero-  
 The Nothing from which arose  
 All Being and all variation....It is the sound  
 too high for our hearing, the Point that flows

Till it becomes the line of Time...an endless  
 positing  
 Of Nothing, or the Ideal that tries to burgeon  
 Into Reality through multiplying. Then Time froze  
 To immobility and changed to Space.<sup>27</sup>

The perversion of the human mind into a force which acts in opposition to the creative powers of God as they are expressed in His sacramental universe is in turn reflected in the fragmentation of the human race into warring racial, national and economic groups.<sup>28</sup>



The Earth had cloven in two in that primal disaster.  
 But when the glacial period began  
 There was still some method of communication  
 Between Man and his brother Man.  
 Although their speech  
 Was alien, each from each  
 As the Bird's from the Tiger's, born from the  
 needs of our opposing famines.<sup>29</sup>

This polarized humanity ominously ends its historical pilgrimage through the glacial epoch at "the city built before the Flood by our brother Cain."<sup>30</sup> Sitwell's reference to the problems of human communication implies that this city may be equated with the Tower of Babel.<sup>31</sup> In this connection, it symbolizes the Faustian hubris which leads the scientific intellect to parody God's creativity by "building monstrous shapes out of the deadened dust."<sup>32</sup> As the Biblical account of Babel suggests, this ironically self-defeating enterprise merely results in a further fragmentation of the human community. Through its association with Cain, the city constructed by man's fallen intellect also suggests how the spiritual effects of the Fall are expressed in man's murderous violation of the integrity of his brothers.

The Fall of man is also expressed existentially in his spiritual bondage through physical existence to the three primal realities of food, struggle and death:

There was great lightning  
 In flashes coming to us over the floor:  
 The Whiteness of the Bread-  
 The Whiteness of the Dead-  
 The Whiteness of the Claw-<sup>33</sup>

As a manifestation of the disruptive knowledge of evil which results from the Fall, man's indissoluble bondage to the basic realities of physical existence reduces human society to the level of the murderously competitive struggle for survival in brute nature. However, the Fall brings with it the knowledge of good as well as of evil. Material creation is ultimately the sacramental embodiment of God's Self-giving in love for the sake of His creatures, and the three primal realities of birth, struggle and death are therefore avatars of God's creative energies.<sup>34</sup> In meta-physical terms they are the vital forces which bring about the processes of birth and growth in the cosmic organism. In terms of Biblical typology such restrictive "natural laws" form an analogue to the Old Covenant. However, just as the negative and restrictive code of moral law only finds its fulfilment in the new dispensation of love, so the laws of nature are in the last analysis manifestations of the divine self-sacrifice which brings about rebirth within the spatial matrix of reconciliation. The basic realities of physical existence are transfigured by Christ, Who transubstantiates bread into a divine gift of God's Own Self which establishes a church or love-community among all creatures. By means of this sacrificial act, Christ makes

death the gateway to eternal life, and reconciles in His Own nature and in His cosmic Church, all of the conflicts which mark fallen man's existence. The city of Cain thus implies, even if only by way of antithesis, both the love-community of the spatial matrix of reconciliation and, by way of analogy, the spiritual fraternity of man in the New Jerusalem:

And everywhere  
 The great voice of the Sun in sap and bud  
 Fed from the heart of Being, the panic Power  
 The sacred Fury, shouts of Eternity  
 To the blind eyes, the heat in the winged seed,  
 the fire in the blood.

And through the works of Death,  
 The dust's aridity, is heard the sound  
 Of mounting saps like monstrous bull-voices  
 of unseen fearful mimes:  
 And the great rolling world-wide thunders  
 of that drumming underground

Proclaim our Christ, and roar 'Let there be harvest!  
 Let there be no more Poor-  
 For the Son of God is sowed in every furrow!'<sup>35</sup>

The redemption of man through the reunion of the human psyche with the cosmic love-community, and through a healing of the economic divisions which have split society into warring classes, now seems immanent. However, the alienation of man from the universe and from his fellow man is too profound to be overcome by the sacramental application of grace through the spatial matrix of reconciliation. At

the very instant when salvation seems possible, the warring polarities stemming from the Fall find an expression in the use of atomic fission<sup>36</sup> as the ultimate weapon in the wars which reflect the racial, national and economic divisions of mankind. The result is a holocaust in which the spatial matrix of reconciliation is destroyed and in which the sacramental presence of God in creation is nullified by a scientific materialism which has perverted the sacral energies of the cosmos into brute physical force:

...there came a roar as if the Sun and Earth  
 had come together-  
 The Sun descending and the Earth ascending  
 To take its place above...the Primal Matter  
 Was broken, the womb from which all life began.  
 Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust  
 arose in memory of Man.  
 .....  
 The violence of torrents, cataracts, maelstroms, rains  
 That went before the Flood-  
 These covered the earth from the freshets of our  
 brothers' veins;  
  
 And with them, the forked lightnings of the gold  
 From the split mountains,  
 Blasting their rivals, the young foolish wheat-ears  
 Amid those terrible rains.<sup>37</sup>

The complex spiritual significance which the atomic bomb possesses for Dame Edith is elucidated in the above lines by the poet's continued use of Biblical typology. The destruction of the spatial matrix suggests a reversal of Creation by the powers of human evil.<sup>38</sup> Such an allusion

implies the essential negativity of man's isolated intellect, which renders its hubris automatically self-defeating. It suggests also the enormity of the crime which man has committed against both the universe and its Creator. However, as is the case with Milton's Satan the automatically self-defeating sin of offending Omnipotence becomes ironically its own punishment.<sup>39</sup> That man himself has effected God's just judgement upon his wickedness is implied by the association of the atomic catastrophe with the Flood. However, it is important to recognize that the connotations of this allusion to the Flood are not purely negative. Rather the Flood of spilt human blood recalls Christ's redemptive sacrifice and therefore prefigures the Last Judgement. This foreshadowing suggests that the ultimate efficacy of Christ's sacrifice will appear only in the Parousia, an event which His re-crucifixion in the atrocity of atomic war will serve to hasten.

Thus, the temporal matrix of atonement is now beginning to emerge in The Shadow of Cain as God's ultimate plan for the salvation of fallen man. In the context of the temporal matrix, the clash of opposites which resulted from the Fall is beginning, as was the case in "Gold Coast Customs," to reveal itself as a dialectic in which the conflict of the

thesis of grace and the antithesis of human depravity is in the process of evolving the larger synthesis of Salvation History.<sup>40</sup> Within the temporal matrix, evil is thus harnessed in order to serve the purpose of good, and the process of alienation therefore paves the way for an ultimate atonement. It is into this spiritual context that Dame Edith introduces the Biblical figures of Lazarus and Dives, who represent the struggling classes of poor and rich into which the economic injustices of modern society have polarized the human community.<sup>41</sup> On one level, these figures are part of the "chain reaction" of fission which has culminated in the atomic bomb:

The gulf that was torn across the world seemed  
as if the beds of all the Oceans  
Were emptied....

.....  
And in that hollow lay the body of our brother  
Lazarus, upheaved from the world's tomb.<sup>42</sup>

Both Lazarus and Dives are equally infected with the "leprosy" of the materialism<sup>43</sup> which has destroyed the cosmic love-community in negating the sacramental vitality of man and nature. Lazarus is hailed by the proponents of a narrowly economic socialism as the "new Light/Of the World."<sup>44</sup> However, as was suggested in Chapter VI, the "cold idealism" of such political theorists is an expression of the same sterile, materialistic intellectuality which



has precipitated the crisis of the modern world in the first place. The "cold idealists" can indeed transfer Lazarus from the "tomb of mud" which represents the physical sufferings of poverty, but only to a "new tomb of useless gold"<sup>45</sup> which symbolizes the total death of spirit suffered by Dives the "successful" materialist. Wherever he lies, Lazarus as an expression of the alienation of modern society from the divine sources of physical and spiritual vitality, is merely a "hero of death and the mud,"<sup>46</sup> an expression of the living death which overtakes body and soul alike in the prison and the tomb of matter. As such, Lazarus stands in symbolic antithesis to Christ, the "Hero of Life" Who was "born in a stable"<sup>47</sup> so that He might sacramentally transubstantiate matter and redeem a fallen world. Whether it is made of mud or of gold, the grave in which Lazarus lies stands in opposition to the tomb of Christ, which symbolizes the divine sacrifice which offers redemption and resurrection to all beings.<sup>48</sup>

The antithesis which Sitwell draws between Christ and Lazarus, and the powerlessness of the materialism which is represented by the latter to cure either the physical or the spiritual ills of modern society, is suggested in a scene in which the physically and morally deformed are

brought to the "new Light/Of the World" in order to be healed. The inability of Lazarus even to answer his petitioners underlines the impotence of the materialistic socialism which he represents. The fundamental opposition of such a political philosophy to the divinely appointed scheme of Salvation History is highlighted by Sitwell's complex development of the symbol of the tomb of Lazarus, which, as we have seen, stands in parodic opposition to that of Christ. The grave of Lazarus is associated with the fissures in the cosmic love-community which have been revealed or created by the atomic bomb. It is also connected with the Dead Sea, by the shores of which stood Sodom and Gomorrah,<sup>49</sup> and which is therefore for Sitwell a type of human evil and of divine judgement. In the context of the events which Sitwell is discussing, the Dead Sea implies the sin and punishment implicit in atomic war. The Dead Sea thus stands in opposition to the Sea of Galilee which is so intimately associated in the New Testament with the redemptive ministry of Christ:

And to that hollow sea  
The civilization of the Maimed, and, too,  
Life's lepers, came  
As once to Christ near the Sea of Galilee.<sup>50</sup>

With the failure of the hope represented by Lazarus, a devastated world is left in such desperate straits that it can

only turn to Dives, the chief author of its catastrophe. The figure of Dives has several levels of significance. On the social and economic planes, he stands for both the heartless rich whose avaricious accumulation and hoarding of wealth have starved the poor, and the ruthless commercialism which has helped to divide humanity into mutually antagonistic groups. Philosophically speaking, Dives represents in the crassest form the materialism which has denied and betrayed the sacramental cosmos, doomed man to a state of physical and spiritual death-in-life, and lead to the catastrophe of atomic war. The paradoxically self-destructive nature of the materialism which is symbolized by Dives is suggested both by the fact that he is a leper, and by his recipe for the salvation of the modern world:

He did not look at us.  
 He said 'What was spilt still surges like the Flood.  
 But Gold shall be the Blood  
 Of the world....Brute gold condensed to the primal  
 essence  
 Has the texture, smell, warmth, colour of Blood.  
 We must take

A quintessence of the disease for remedy.<sup>51</sup>

The moral and spiritual status of Dives' philosophy is underlined by his grotesque parody of the alchemical symbolism which is employed elsewhere by Sitwell to suggest the vitalizing and redemptive transformation of matter by

the incarnate Divinity. For the true elixir vitae, which is the spiritual energy of the immanent Godhead Who is Christ, Dives proposes to substitute brute matter. He is thus the Anti-Christ, a fact which is underlined in his accusation by "an unborn wheat-ear."<sup>52</sup> The symbol of the wheat-ear implies not only the physical fertility of nature which ministers to man's bodily needs, but also the eucharistic bread of the cosmic fraternity of grace which nurtures the human spirit. Both have been destroyed by Dives, who has thus at the same time murdered his fellow men by condemning them to starvation, and betrayed the Christ Who was present in the spatial matrix of reconciliation. Dives is therefore at the same time both Cain and Judas:

...we cry

To Dives: 'You are the shadow of Cain.  
Your shade is the primal Hunger.'  
'I lie under what condemnation?'  
'The same as Adam, the same as Cain, the same  
as Sodom, the same as Judas.'<sup>53</sup>

Together the two figures of Lazarus and Dives suggest in a complex symbolic fashion the alienation of the human psyche from the cosmic love-fraternity. They also imply the further shattering of the human and universal communities by the warring polarities generated by the original fission of man's mind from the universe. However, Lazarus and Dives are not

merely types of the Fall of man, with its opposition of human evil to the divinely ordained love-community, and with its shattering of creation into "warring particles, destroying and self-destructive."<sup>54</sup> Lazarus and Dives at the same time imply the dialectic of good and evil which is moving Salvation History towards the Apocalypse, a creative interaction which arises from Christ's transcendental marriage of opposites in His Incarnation and Passion. Although the poor do not in themselves represent a force which is capable of saving society, their sufferings are spiritually effective in that they participate in Christ's redemptive and atoning sacrifice, thereby furthering the work of grace.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, as innocent victims their agony is efficacious in hastening the day in which God's outraged justice will finally pass judgement upon a depraved world. Similarly in opposing God's will and thereby calling for retribution, the very evil which is represented by Dives is advancing the dialectical movement of Salvation History towards the Parousia:

And the fires of your Hell shall not be quenched  
by the rain  
From those torn and parti-coloured garments of Christ,  
those rags  
That once were Men. Each wound, each stripe,  
Cries out more loudly than the voice of Cain-  
Saying "Am I my brother's keeper?" Think!  
When the last clamour of the Bought and Sold

The agony of Gold  
 Is hushed....When the last Judas-kiss  
 Has died upon the cheek of the Starved Man Christ,  
     those ashes that were men  
 Will rise again  
 To be our Fires upon the Judgement Day!<sup>56</sup>

With the final excision from human society of the forces of division, negation and denial which are represented by Dives, men will be reunited in the New Jerusalem into a renewed spiritual fraternity in grace, which in turn mirrors the love-community of a regenerated universe. The alienation of man from the rest of creation, and from his brothers, thus becomes in the temporal matrix of Salvation History the agency for a new state of atonement which permanently supersedes the lost spatial matrix of reconciliation. The emergence of a new state of unity from the very disruption of God's original creation is both symbolized and effected by Christ, Whose resurrection from death is a sign of the fact that His Passion has subsumed the antinomies of the Fall into a transcendental matrix of salvation. Temporally, this matrix takes the form of Biblical history in which man's very evil hastens the Parousia:

And yet - who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?  
 He walks again on the Seas of Blood, He comes in  
     the terrible Rain.<sup>57</sup>

The resolution of the crisis posed for Sitwell by the dropping of the atomic bomb does not, however, end with her

vision of a future state of atonement in the New Jerusalem. In the last of her "Three Poems of the Atomic Age," "The Canticle of the Rose" (1948), the temporal matrix of reconciliation, by a reversal of the visionary process of foreshadowing which is made possible by its teleological unity, becomes a guarantee of the continuance of the spatial matrix. In looking forward in time to the ultimate manifestation of God's omnipotent goodness in the final regeneration of a fallen world, Christ's redemptive sacrifice becomes a sign of a transcendent divine power which will restore a ravaged creation in the present. The sacrifice whose future implications reveal God as all-powerful and all-loving thus becomes its own guarantee of efficaciousness in the present. Christ's archetypal sacrifice not only has been, but will continue to be, repeated in the sacrament of God's Self-giving to His creation so that it may be unceasingly restored.

In "The Canticle of the Rose" Sitwell thus incorporates the process of alienation and atonement into a visionary framework which includes both the spatial and the temporal matrices of reconciliation. This intricate synthesis is expressed through the complex central symbol of Sitwell's poem, the rose.<sup>58</sup> The ultimate significance of the rose in which all of its other meanings are subsumed, is that it is a symbol of Christ:<sup>59</sup>

The Rose upon the wall  
 Cries - 'I am the voice of Fire:  
 And in me grows  
 The pomegranate splendour of Death, the ruby,  
     garnet, almandine  
 Dews: Christ's Wounds in me shine.<sup>60</sup>

The rose as Christ crucified suggests Dame Edith's twofold temporal perspective upon the salvation of a fallen world. The way in which the Parousia is superimposed upon the present as a guarantee of the immediacy of God's grace is implied in the concluding lines of "The Canticle of the Rose":

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 of 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 smel is Christ, clepid the plantygne of the  
     Rose in Jerico.'<sup>61</sup>

Because the Passion has effected the work of redemption which finds its conclusion in the consummation of Salvation History, the rose as Christ crucified prefigures the "ultimate Fire" of judgement and Apocalypse. In this conflagration, the fallen world with its evil will be consumed to make way for a "new heaven and a new earth."<sup>62</sup> This foreshadowing in the Passion of God's final recreation of the world stands as a sign that, insofar as it constitutes a



recrucifixion of Christ, the terrible fire of the atomic bomb does not represent for its innocent victims merely a meaningless and useless suffering. Rather, it constitutes an incorporation into the redemptive agony of the Savior. This suffering brings about a conquest of evil which in God's good time will be realized in the Parousia. Thus, the reconciliation effected by the temporal matrix of Salvation History in part occurs here and now through a baptism by fire in which man becomes one with Christ in His death and resurrection.<sup>63</sup> In this way, the victims of atomic war both participate in and partake of the work of redemption.

However, as the final three lines of "The Canticle of the Rose" imply, Christ's sacrifice is immediate in another sense. These lines suggest that not only do the present upheavals in human history ultimately prefigure and prepare for the Apocalypse, but that the renewal of the world at that time stands as a symbolic guarantee that in the meantime God's grace will persist in the form of a sacramental universe. The Christ Who was "reddere on Rode than the Rose in the rayne," and Who is "clepid the plantynge of the Rose in Jerico" suggests the immanent Son of God Whom Sitwell identifies with the sun of nature and with the

dying and reviving gods of pagan naturalism. As we have seen in Chapter VII, the Passion of this Christ, which is identical with His Incarnation, is God's loving outpouring of Himself for all of His creatures. His Self-sacrifice atones all beings in a cosmic love-community and brings about the rebirth of both body and soul in the cycles of time. Thus, Sitwell ultimately comes to the belief that the spatial matrix of reconciliation cannot be destroyed by human evil because it is guaranteed by the enduring and indestructible love of an infinite and omnipotent Divinity.

Through its identification with Christ, the rose-symbol in "The Canticle of the Rose" is thus central to the complex imaginative nexus in which the temporal matrix of reconciliation is seen as containing and guaranteeing the maintenance of the spatial. Within these two "frameworks" is in turn subsumed the alienation-atonement process, the movement which involves the clash and reconciliation of contraries, and the shattering and reintegration of the cosmic love-community. In this connection, the rose is employed by Dame Edith as a symbol of the reconciliation of warring opposites by which the alienation-atonement process transcends itself and is incorporated into the matrices of reconciliation:

My stem rises bright:  
 Organic water polarised to the dark  
 Earth-centre, and to Light.'<sup>64</sup>

As Chapter VII has indicated, the union of the solar energy with the earth is symbolic in Dame Edith's later poetry of the primal marriage of spirit and matter which produces the sacramental world-organism. The rose therefore stands for that most basic and universal fusion of opposites, which is brought about by the Self-giving of God in love to the material world. In terms of the imaginative framework which is implicit in "The Canticle of the Rose" this archetypal reconciliation possesses a complex significance. In the first place, it stands in direct opposition to the radical dissociation and destruction which is represented by the splitting of the atom. Secondly, it links the rose-symbol with the Incarnation of a Christ Who, by His fusion of the divine and the human, both signifies and effects the reconciliation of opposites on a cosmic scale. In terms of the spatial matrix of reconciliation which is founded in Christ's marriage of spirit and matter in His mysterious double nature, the rose of the Incarnation is at the same time a symbol of God's sacramental Self-giving to His creation. The rose plant is, therefore, as the association of its flower with Christ's wounds implies, the "cross" of

God's eucharistic Self-sacrifice for the sake of all beings. The life-giving nature of this sacrifice is suggested by the fact that the rose as cross is also the Tree of Life. As was suggested in Chapter VII, the latter image is employed by Sitwell as a symbol for the growth process which the marriage of spirit and matter inspires within the cosmic organism:

I rise upon my stem,  
The flower, the whole Plant-being, produced by Light  
With all Plant-systems and formations....As in Fire  
All elements dissolve, so in one bright  
Ineffable essence all Plant-being dissolves to  
make the Flower.<sup>65</sup>

Sitwell's rose-bush has in this passage the same symbolic meaning as the chestnut tree in W.B. Yeats' "Among School Children," which is also a "Tree of Life" image.<sup>66</sup> Both are cosmic symbols, being used to suggest how, from the dialectic of spirit and matter in the temporal processes of organic growth in the universe, there arises a static "spatial" matrix of reconciliation. Both Sitwell and Yeats, the former by suggesting that "all Plant-systems and formations" are dissolved to form the flower, and the latter by asking rhetorically whether the chestnut tree is "the leaf, the blossom or the bole,"<sup>67</sup> imply that the spatial matrix ultimately subsumes within its organic unity not only all possible oppositions, but even the empirical distinctions

between apparently separate entities.

The connection of the reconciliation of opposites in an organic universe with the Cross and the Tree of Life suggests that this atonement stands in "The Canticle of the Rose" as a sign of the possibility of man's transcendence of the terrible knowledge of good and evil. It has already been indicated that for Sitwell evil originates with the alienation of the human psyche from the cosmic love-community. The treatment of modern man's fall and redemption in "The Canticle of the Rose" accordingly centers upon the second major aspect of the alienation-atonement process: the shattering of the universal fraternity arising from man's isolation, and the subsequent reintegration of that fellowship by grace. Thus, it is clearly intimated in "The Canticle of the Rose" that the dropping of the atomic bomb reflects and is closely bound up with man's severance from the cosmic organism:

There was a woman combing her long hair  
 To the rhythm of the river flowing....  
 She sang 'All things will end-  
 Like the sound of Time in my veins growing:  
 The hump on the dwarf, the mountain on the plain,  
 The fixed red of the rose and the rainbow's red,  
 The fires of the heart, the wandering planet's pain-  
 All loss, all gain-  
 Yet will the world remain!'

The song died in the Ray....Where is she now?  
 Dissolved and gone-<sup>68</sup>

The meaning of this passage centers in the complex resonance of Sitwell's recurring symbol of the female pharmakos,<sup>69</sup> a figure whom the poet here employs so as to connote simultaneously man, the cosmic organism and the ideal of a harmonious relationship between the two. Dame Edith's previous use of the pharmakos image suggests that the woman herself is to be identified with the "world" which she celebrates in her song. She thus stands for a spatial matrix of reconciliation which embraces and unites in a love-community such apparent opposites as dwarf and mountain, the terrestrial rose and the celestial rainbow. As the woman's song implies, it is only within the context of this matrix that the conditioned, time-bound entity can find meaning or fulfilment, transcending its mortality by giving itself to an enduring cosmic structure, and finding its significance and completion in embracing its polar opposite in love. This need for the spatial matrix of reconciliation is of course particularly acute in man, who alone among all beings is fully conscious of his creaturely limitations.

If we think in spiritual terms which are opposite to those of the woman's song, we can see how man's alienation from the cosmic love-community has lead to atomic war. Once he has been split from the universal matrix which alone

offers hope of transcending the finite creature's limitations, man falls prey to a deep existential despair over his conditioned status.<sup>70</sup> In his realization that he is doomed to absurdity and annihilation, he becomes possessed by an intense death-wish. This takes the form not only of a desire for self-destruction, but also of a wish for a universal holocaust by which the alienated individual can be revenged upon the world for his existence. The result, as is suggested by the double significance of the woman-victim as a symbol of humanity and of the cosmos, is man's denial and betrayal of both nature and of his fellow men. The fragmentation of human society by greed, and the violence which men practise upon their brothers, are thus ultimately a reflection and an expression of modern man's alienation from a larger cosmic community:

...Buyers and sellers cry  
 'Speak not the name of Light-  
 Her name is Madness now....Though we are black  
 beneath her kiss  
 As if she were the Sun, her name is Night:  
 She has condemned us, and decreed that Man must die.'<sup>71</sup>

In these lines, modern man's alienation from the universe, and the atrocities which he has perpetrated against his brothers, are associated and highlighted by means of two intimately related ironies, which accompany the dropping of the atomic bomb. The first of these is that a rejected

and exploited cosmic love-community, which is here symbolized by the light-process, has in the bomb become the instrument of its own vengeance.<sup>72</sup> It has, moreover, been made so by its very oppressor, who employs its elemental energies as the agency of his own destruction. The second major irony is that the denial of the brotherhood of man by a crass materialism, reflecting as it does an alienation from the cosmic sources of being, culminates in a catastrophe which destroys the oppressor along with his victim. In emphasizing the ultimate consequences of man's twofold scission from the universe and from his fellows, the two ironies just mentioned underline the way in which the atomic bomb represents the climax of the process of alienation stemming from modern man's denial of God and of a sacramental nature. The end result of his rejection is a monstrous evil which stands in the extremest possible antithesis to good:

'Then buy' said the Fate arisen from Hell-  
 That thing of rags and patches-  
 'A box of matches!  
 For the machine that generated warmth  
 Beneath your breast is dead....You need a fire  
 To warm what lies upon your bone....  
 Not all the ashes of your brother Men  
 Will kindle that again-  
 Not all the world's incendiaries!  
 Who buys - Who buys-?  
 Come, give me pence to lay upon my staring  
 lidless eyes!' <sup>73</sup>



in which man's alienation from the cosmic love-organism ends in a state of absurd nothingness which negates the plenitude of the Divinity, the sacramental vitality of the cosmic organism, and man's own true sacramental nature.

However, "The Canticle of the Rose" is ultimately a divine comedy rather than a spiritual tragedy. As is the case in Canto XXXIV of Dante's Inferno, the final avatar of the powers of evil represents a peripeteia at which the forces of redemption are suddenly manifested. The description of the Fate is followed immediately in Sitwell's poem by the concluding lines already discussed, in which the flower functions as a symbol of a Godhead Whose continued immanence in a threatened universe is guaranteed by His ultimate transcendence. The crucifixion of the God by the forces of negation which seem to have destroyed the spatial matrix of reconciliation is in reality the vehicle of an infinitely potent divine self-sacrifice by which the continuance of that sacramental structure is secured. Through the paradoxically mysterious operation of God's plan of salvation, the bomb is thus not simply the ultimate manifestation of man's alienation from God and the universe, and of the destructive chain-reaction of scission which that alienation has produced. It is also a sign of man's eventual

atonement with both the universal organism and with his Creator.<sup>76</sup> The terrible fireball of the atomic blast is also the mystical rose of redemption and atonement, which on the level represented by the spatial matrix is a symbol of a cosmic love-community which has been restored by God's infinite and omnipotent grace.<sup>77</sup>

The vision with which "The Canticle of the Rose" concludes suggests not only the atonement of an erring humanity with God and nature. It also signals the relief of the intensely painful spiritual plight in which the dropping of the atomic bomb has involved Dame Edith herself. In this regard, the "Three Poems of the Atomic Age" reiterates Sitwell's spiritual evolution from the state of painful alienation in which she began "Gold Coast Customs," to the emergence of the complex vision of atonement which is articulated in the mature poetry. Under the moral and spiritual shock administered by the atomic bomb, the poet reverts in "Dirge for the New Sunrise" to the poetic role of "judge and Jeremiah" with which "Gold Coast Customs" opened. This role indicates her temporary personal immersion in the process of alienation which is rending to pieces a fallen world. Dame Edith is once again paralyzed by pity, horror and indignation over the crimes of man against his brothers,

atrocities which, moreover, seem to have destroyed the spatial matrix of atonement upon which the tempered optimism of her later poetry is for the most part based. Sitwell is thus in effect alienated by the atomic bomb not merely from the human community, but also from the divinely inspired world-organism.

In The Shadow of Cain, Dame Edith begins to place the crisis which has been created by the atomic bomb in spiritual perspective. The poet's imaginative release from the impotent agony of "Dirge for the New Sunrise" culminates in The Shadow of Cain in her role of apocalyptic prophet who bears witness to the consummation of the temporal matrix of atonement. Sitwell thus concludes The Shadow of Cain at a point in her movement back towards the fullness of her mature vision which is identical with that at which she began the long poetic silence in which her later poetry was incubated.

Finally in "The Canticle of the Rose" Sitwell gains through her vision of the Apocalypse a renewed faith in the continuance of the spatial matrix of atonement. She thus returns to the vision which characterizes by far the greater part of her later poetry. Dame Edith's state of spiritual death-in-life in "Dirge for the New Sunrise," which arose from her effective isolation from God, man and

nature, has finally been resolved in an all-embracing visionary atonement. In this renewed oneness with the sources of spiritual vitality, Dame Edith as a divinely inspired seer and prophet proclaims the matrices of atonement and their author, the Redeemer. By virtue of this spiritually comprehensive artistic role, Sitwell functions as both a microcosmus and a micro-Christus,<sup>78</sup> becoming one in soul with God and with His sacramental creation, and incarnating them poetically in her apocalyptic art. As a mouthpiece of God's dispensation for His creatures, with its twofold plan of salvation, Sitwell transcends her alienation from the depravity of her contemporaries. Through the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity which belong to the prophet of salvation, Sitwell comes to an atonement with her brother men in proclaiming to them the good news of God's infinite love. It is in this state of union and communion in caritas with Creator, creation and her fellow men that Sitwell ends what may have been the most painful crisis of the whole of her spiritual career.

# FOOTNOTES

## INTRODUCTION

<sup>1</sup>Edith Sitwell, Taken Care Of (London: Hutchinson, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Edith Sitwell in "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," London Mercury, 31 (March 1935), 448.

<sup>3</sup>For a study which particularly suggests the importance of these two themes, see Jack Lindsay, "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," Life and Letters, 64 (January 1950), 39-52.

<sup>4</sup>"Drowned Suns," Daily Mirror, no. 2928, March 13, 1913, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 253.

<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth Salter, The Last Years of a Rebel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 52-54.

<sup>7</sup>Ralph J. Mills Jr., "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Chicago Review, 14 (Spring 1961), 53.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 53-57.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>10</sup>James Brophy, Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 23-26.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup>See T.E. Hulme, "The Philosophy of Intensive Manifolds," in Speculations, ed. Herbert Read, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1936), pp. 173-214.

<sup>13</sup>See Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in The Widening Gyre (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 3-62.

<sup>14</sup>Cited by Ralph J. Mills Jr., *op. cit.*, p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>For Sitwell's own recognition of this imagistic "conceit," see Edith Sitwell, The Outcasts (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup>Edith Sitwell, The Wooden Pegasus, p. 110. This version has been revised from the original.

<sup>6</sup>For a very similar symbolic use of Helen, see W.B. Yeats' "Leda and the Swan."

<sup>7</sup>For the use of light, darkness and "shadow" symbolism in the poetry of Edith Sitwell, see James Brophy, op. cit..

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion of the Phoenix image, see Brophy, op. cit., p. 101.

<sup>9</sup>Edith Sitwell, The Wooden Pegasus, p. 115-116.

<sup>10</sup>The drunkard is somewhat analagous in his spiritual state and his vision to Blake's "Spectres." See Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), pp. 73, 127, 209-210.

<sup>11</sup>Edith Sitwell, The Wooden Pegasus, p. 116

<sup>12</sup>Dilys Power, "Edith Sitwell," Life and Letters, 6 (March 1931), 179.

<sup>13</sup>Singleton, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>14</sup>Edith Sitwell, ed. Wheels: An Anthology of Verse (Oxford: Blackwell, 1916), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, Robert Graves, The White Goddess (New York: Creative Age Press, 1948), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup>Frye, op. cit., pp. 126-127 and 266.

<sup>20</sup>Edith Sitwell, Wheels... (1916), p. 46.

<sup>21</sup>For a detailed explanation of the principles of such a theology, see F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1961) and Yeats's Iconography (London: Gollancz, 1960).

22Edith Sitwell, Wheels... (1916), p. 47.

23Ibid., p. 48.

24Frye, op. cit., pp. 232-234 and 242.

25A careful examination of the Bible and of several concordances has failed to reveal the source, if any, of this story.

26For a brief summary of Murray's theories, see F.M. Cornford, The Origin of Attic Comedy (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 14-15.

27Singleton, op. cit., p. 44.

28Ibid., p. 45.

29Edith Sitwell, Clowns' Houses (Oxford: Blackwell, 1918), p. 29.

30The term is Ezra Pound's. See Donald Davie, Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 193.

31Edith Sitwell, Clowns' Houses, p. 30.

32Ibid., p. 29.

33Genesis 1: 3-4.

34This idea is of course suggested most clearly in "Ode to the West Wind."

35Edith Sitwell, Clowns' Houses, p. 31.

36Ibid., p. 36.

37Ibid., p. 34.

38For a useful discussion of a parallel use of fire and light imagery in William Blake's The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, see Frye, op. cit., pp. 194-201.

39Edith Sitwell, Clowns' Houses, p. 36.

40Ibid., p. 33.

41Ibid., p. 35

42Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>43</sup>Edith and Osbert Sitwell, Twentieth Century Harlequinade (Oxford: Blackwell, 1916), p. 14.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup>W.H. Auden, The Enchafed Flood (New York: Random House, 1950), pp. 3-39.

<sup>46</sup>Edith Sitwell, Twentieth Century Harlequinade, pp. 14-15.

<sup>47</sup>C.M. Bowra, Edith Sitwell (Monaco: Lyrebird Press, 1947), p. 23.

<sup>48</sup>Edith Sitwell, Twentieth Century Harlequinade, p. 13.

<sup>49</sup>Brophy, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 107-109.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.

<sup>52</sup>Edith Sitwell, Twentieth Century Harlequinade, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup>T.S. Eliot, "Mr. Eliot's Sunday Morning Service," 1.1.

<sup>54</sup>For a discussion of "Clowns' Houses" as typical of Sitwell's early satiric vision, see Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-39.

<sup>55</sup>Edith Sitwell, Twentieth Century Harlequinade, p. 11.

<sup>56</sup>Frye, *op. cit.*, pp 48-49.

<sup>57</sup>Edith Sitwell, Twentieth Century Harlequinade, p. 11.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>61</sup>Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), p. 16.

<sup>62</sup>Singleton, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>63</sup>Pope, "An Essay on Criticism," 1. 365.



## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>Edith Sitwell, Taken Care Of (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p. 122. For the complex bibliography of Facade, see Richard Fifoot, A Bibliography of Edith, Osbert<sup>5</sup> and Sacha Verell Sitwell (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), pp. 22-25, 26, 38-39, 62, 65-66, 71, 73. All quotations are uniform with the versions in Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961). This edition will hereafter be referred to as Collected Poems.

<sup>2</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 270-281.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 272-273.

<sup>5</sup>See Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969) and Arthur Rimbaud, letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871.

<sup>6</sup>Jack Lindsay, "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," Life and Letters, 64 (January 1950), 39-52, and "The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell" in A Celebration for Edith Sitwell, ed. Jose Garcia Villa (New York: New Directions, 1948), pp. 44-53.

<sup>7</sup>Jack Lindsay, "The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell," p. 45.

<sup>8</sup>Jack Lindsay, "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," pp. 43-44.

<sup>9</sup>Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>These passages from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell are quoted by Edith Sitwell in Bucolic Comedies (London: Duckworth, 1923), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Edith Sitwell, The Collected Poems of Edith Sitwell (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. v. and "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," Life and Letters, 39 (November 1943), 83.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism (London: Hogarth, 1925), p. 18.

<sup>13</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Some Notes on the Making of a Poem," Orpheus, I (1948), 70-71.

- <sup>14</sup>Edith Sitwell, Bucolic Comedies, p. 7.
- <sup>15</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xx.
- <sup>16</sup>See W.H. Gardner, Gerard Manley Hopkins (London: Martin, Secker and Warburg, 1948), I, pp. 14 and 25.
- <sup>17</sup>Edith Sitwell, Aspects of Modern Poetry (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 102.
- <sup>18</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xvii.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xviii.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xix.
- <sup>21</sup>Edith Sitwell, Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet (London: Parsons, 1920), pp. 18-19.
- <sup>22</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xxxi.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xix.
- <sup>24</sup>See T.E. Hulme, Speculations, ed. Herbert Read, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1936), pp. 173-214.
- <sup>25</sup>Edith Sitwell, Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet, p. 19.
- <sup>26</sup>Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media, pp. 41-47.
- <sup>27</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," p. 79.
- <sup>28</sup>Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism, p. 18.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>30</sup>See Hugh Kenner, Dublin's Joyce (London: Chatto and Windus, 1955), pp. 19-21.
- <sup>31</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xlv.
- <sup>32</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry" in Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature (London: Milford, 1929), pp. 82-83.
- <sup>33</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Modern Values," The Spectator, 141 (22 December 1928), 951.

- 34 Edith Sitwell, Aspects of Modern Poetry, pp. 9-50.
- 35 Ibid., p. 11.
- 36 Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xv.
- 37 Jack Lindsay, "The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell," p. 46.
- 38 Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry," pp. 95-96.
- 39 See James Brophy, Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 95-120.
- 40 Ibid., p. 119.
- 41 See W.H. Auden, The Enchafed Flood (New York: Random House, 1950), passim.
- 42 Paul Tillich, The Courage To Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).
- 43 For Sitwell's use of puppet and clown symbols, see Ralph J. Mills Jr., Edith Sitwell (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1966), pp. 13-14.
- 44 Ibid., p. 14.
- 45 Edith Sitwell, Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet, p. 13.
- 46 Ralph J. Mills Jr., Edith Sitwell, p. 14.
- 47 See Edith Sitwell, Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet, pp. 7-8.
- 48 Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xviii.
- 49 Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry," p. 76.
- 50 Edith Sitwell, "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," p. 77.
- 51 Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), pp. 39-45.
- 52 Jack Lindsay, "The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell," p. 47.

<sup>53</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," pp. 79-80.

<sup>54</sup>Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, XIII.

<sup>55</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 156.

<sup>56</sup>For an extended treatment of Edith Sitwell's poetic vision in terms of the synthesis of contrasting elements, see James Brophy, Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order.

### CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>Jack Lindsay, "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," Life and Letters, 64 (January 1950), 49.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph J. Mills Jr., "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Chicago Review, 14 (Spring 1961), 47.

<sup>3</sup>See R.L. Megroz, The Three Sitwells (London: Richards, 1927), pp. 109-110.

<sup>4</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 304-305. For an interesting analysis of the associative dream structure of "Metamorphosis" in terms of the baroque, see David Harrington, "The 'Metamorphosis' of Edith Sitwell," Criticism, IX, no. 1 (Winter 1967), 80-91.

<sup>5</sup>James Strachey, ed., The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), IV-V, pp. 277-488.

<sup>6</sup>Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIII.

<sup>7</sup>James Brophy, Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 3-4.

<sup>8</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>9</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 248.

<sup>10</sup>Lindsay, loc. cit..

<sup>11</sup>Megroz, op. cit., p. 131.

<sup>12</sup>See Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature" in The Widening Gyre (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 3-62.

- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 14 Megroz, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- 15 Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. 49.
- 16 Edith Sitwell, The Sleeping Beauty (London: Duckworth, 1924), p. 7. All quotations are uniform with this edition.
- 17 F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1961), pp. 211-216 and 242-243.
- 18 Edith Sitwell, The Sleeping Beauty, pp. 7-8.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 20 Frye, Fearful Symmetry, pp. 232-233.
- 21 William Blake, The Book of Thel, ll. 114-124.
- 22 Edith Sitwell, The Sleeping Beauty, p. 7.
- 23 Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 74.
- 24 Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (London: Oxford University Press, 1951).
- 25 Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 49.
- 26 T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), p. 80.
- 27 Edith Sitwell, The Sleeping Beauty, p. 40.
- 28 Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 235.
- 29 Edith Sitwell, The Sleeping Beauty, p. 40.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

- 36 Ibid., p. 46.  
 37 Ibid., p. 41.  
 38 Ibid., p. 41.  
 39 Ibid., p. 42.  
 40 Ibid., p. 54.  
 41 Ibid., p. 60.  
 42 Ibid., p. 58.  
 43 Ibid., p. 58.  
 44 Ibid., p. 56.  
 45 Ibid., p. 17.  
 46 Ibid., p. 82.  
 47 Ibid., p. 26.  
 48 Ibid., p. 26.

49 For Sitwell's use of film technique in "Gold Coast Customs," see John Lehmann, Edith Sitwell (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. 21 and Geoffrey Singleton, Edith Sitwell: the Hymn to Life (London: Fortune Press, 1960), pp. 70-71.

50 Robert Graves, The White Goddess (New York: Creative Age Press, 1948), p. 52.

51 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies (London: Duckworth, 1927), p. 20. All references to Elegy on Dead Fashion are uniform with the text in this edition.

52 Dilys Powell, Descent from Parnassus (London: Cresset, 1934), p. 114.

53 The original title of Elegy on Dead Fashion was "Fashionable Intelligence, 1843."

54 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, pp. 7-8.

55 Ibid., p. 11.

56 Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English Poets, ed. G.B. Hill (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1968), p. 20.

- 57 Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus (London: Chapman and Hall, n.d.), pp. 165-238.
- 58 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, p. 20.
- 59 Ibid., p. 26.
- 60 Frye, Fearful Symmetry, pp. 251-254. In Blake, Los performs the tasks of Prometheus through the medium of another figure, Orc.
- 61 Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in Geoffrey Keynes, ed., Poetry and Prose of William Blake (London: Nonesuch, 1961), p. 182.
- 62 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, p. 27.
- 63 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, title of Chapter XIII.
- 64 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, pp. 19-20.
- 65 Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956), pp. 258-259.
- 66 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, p. 18.
- 67 Ibid., p. 19.
- 68 Keats, Hyperion, ll. 190-243.
- 69 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, p. 20.
- 70 Ibid., pp. 28-29.
- 71 Mills, op. cit., pp. 45-46.
- 72 Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, pp. 23-24.
- 73 Ibid., p. 31.
- 74 Ibid., p. 27.
- 75 Ibid., p. 31.
- 76 Ibid., p. 19.
- 77 Ibid., p. 27.
- 78 Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>79</sup>For an article-length study of "Metamorphosis," see Harrington, op. cit.. Harrington's study concentrates upon the technical aspects rather than the thematic of "Metamorphosis."

<sup>80</sup>Singleton, op. cit., pp. 64-65.

<sup>81</sup>Edith Sitwell, Rustic Elegies, p. 26.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>83</sup>Powell, op. cit., p. 116.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>85</sup>Edith Sitwell, Gold Coast Customs (London: Duckworth, 1929), p. 45. All references to "Metamorphosis" are uniform with this edition in which "Metamorphosis" was republished along with "Gold Coast Customs." All subsequent references in this set of footnotes to Gold Coast Customs are to the volume of that title.

<sup>86</sup>Keats, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles."

<sup>87</sup>Edith Sitwell, Gold Coast Customs, p. 59.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., pp. 53-54.

<sup>91</sup>Brophy, op. cit., pp. 95-120.

<sup>92</sup>Edith Sitwell, Gold Coast Customs, pp. 53-55.

<sup>93</sup>Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

<sup>94</sup>Spenser, "An Hymne in Honour of Love," ll. 57-98.

<sup>95</sup>Edith Sitwell, Gold Coast Customs, p. 59.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., pp. 59-60.

<sup>99</sup>Brophy, op. cit., pp. 98-100.



<sup>100</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, op. cit., p. 63.

<sup>101</sup>See Kathleen Raine, "Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn," Sewanee Review, 77, no. 1 (Winter 1969), 121, and "Thomas Taylor, Plato and the English Romantic Movement," Sewanee Review, 76, no. 2 (Spring 1968), 252.

<sup>102</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>104</sup>Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism, pp. 6-13.

#### CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>For some useful previous studies of "Gold Coast Customs" see C.M. Bowra, Edith Sitwell (Monaco: Lyrebird Press, 1947), pp. 25-29; Jack Lindsay, "The Latest Poetry of Edith Sitwell" in A Celebration for Edith Sitwell, ed. Jose Garcia Villa (New York: New Directions, 1948), p. 48; John Lehmann, Edith Sitwell (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), pp. 21-23; Jack Lindsay, "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," Life and Letters, 64 (January 1950), 49-50; Henry W. Wells, "'Gold Coast Customs' Reconsidered," College English, 13 (April 1952), 361-368; Geoffrey Singleton, Edith Sitwell: the Hymn to Life (London: Fortune Press, 1960), pp. 67-74; and Ralph J. Mills Jr., "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Chicago Review, 14 (Spring 1961), 46-53.

<sup>2</sup>Wells, op. cit., pp. 362-363.

<sup>3</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>For the best assessment of the place of "Gold Coast Customs" in Edith Sitwell's imaginative development, see Mills, op. cit.. For Sitwell's sensitive appreciation of the "Waste Land" and Pound's "Hell" Cantos, see Edith Sitwell, Aspects of Modern Poetry (London: Duckworth, 1934), pp. 125-138 and 213-214.

<sup>5</sup>Wells, op. cit., p. 363.

<sup>6</sup>See Richard Fifoot, A Bibliography of Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), pp. 35 and 37-40.

<sup>7</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. xxxv. All of the following references to a "Collected Poems" refer to this volume.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. xxxvi.

<sup>9</sup>Mills, op. cit., pp. 47-48.

<sup>10</sup>Edith Sitwell, Bucolic Comedies (London: Duckworth, 1923), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>13</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xvii.

<sup>14</sup>Edith Sitwell, Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature (London: Milford, 1929), p. 76.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>16</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Modern Values," The Spectator, 141 (December 22, 1928), 950-951. All of the quotations in the following paragraph, unless otherwise noted, are from this essay.

<sup>17</sup>Edith Sitwell, Bucolic Comedies, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 250.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. xxxix.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. xxxv.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 240-241.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. xxxi.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. xxxvi.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. xxxvi.

<sup>25</sup>One of the governing principles of the radical mythopoeic imagery in both Sitwell's earlier and later poetry is a metaphysical play with the "Aristotelian" categories of human, animal, vegetable, and mineral.

<sup>26</sup>See Calvin S. Hall, A Primer of Freudian Psychology (New York: World Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 22-35.

<sup>27</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, pp. 241-242.

<sup>28</sup>See Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner, 1937).

29 Edith Sitwell, "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," London Mercury, 31 (March 1935), 453.

30 Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xxxvi.

31 See Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (London: Oxford University Press, 1951), and Northrop Frye Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), p. 227.

32 See footnote 29.

33 See Lehmann, op. cit., p. 21.

34 Edith Sitwell, "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," p. 453.

35 Lehmann, op. cit., p. 21 and Singleton, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

36 Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 426.

37 Ibid., pp. 426-427.

38 Ibid., p. 242.

39 Ibid., pp. 425-426.

40 John B. Vickery, "The Golden Bough and Modern Poetry," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 15 (March 1957), 272.

41 See, for example, T.H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics" in "Evolution and Ethics" and Other Essays (New York: Appleton, 1902).

42 Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 243.

43 Ibid., p. xxxvi.

44 Ibid., p. 249.

45 Ibid., p. 247.

46 Ibid., p. 252.

47 Jack Lindsay, "The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell," p. 48.

48 This discussion is based on Mills, op. cit..

49 Ibid., p. 49.

<sup>50</sup> See Edith Sitwell, Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet (London: Parsons, 1920), pp. 7-9.

<sup>51</sup> Mills, op. cit., pp. 35-41.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., pp. 52-53.

<sup>53</sup> See Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947).

<sup>54</sup> See Nathan Scott, The Broken Centre (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 119-144.

<sup>55</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 243.

<sup>56</sup> Frye, Fearful Symmetry, p. 237.

<sup>57</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 248.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 22: 36-41 and 25: 40.

<sup>59</sup> See the later poem "The Canticle of the Rose," in which Sitwell quotes the opening lines of Milton's Paradise Lost.

<sup>60</sup> Matthew 5: 45.

<sup>61</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xxxvi.

<sup>62</sup> Genesis 1: 2-5.

<sup>63</sup> See "Gerontion," ll. 48 and 66-70 and "Waste Land" ll. 331-385.

<sup>64</sup> Revelation to John :17.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 21:2.

<sup>66</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 252.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 252-253.

<sup>68</sup> Edith Sitwell, "Some Notes on My Own Poetry," p. 454.

<sup>69</sup> Mills, op. cit., pp. 49 and 50-52.

<sup>70</sup> See C.G. Jung, Aion, trans. R.F.C. Hull in The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Bollingen Series XX, ed. Read, Fordham and Adler (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), vol. 9, part II, pp. 14-15.

<sup>71</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>72</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 239.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 252.

<sup>75</sup>Mills, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

<sup>76</sup>Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1956).

<sup>77</sup>Jung, op. cit., pp. 8-10.

<sup>78</sup>See A.S.P. Woodhouse, "Nature and Grace in the 'Faerie Queene'," ELH, 16 (September 1949), 194-228.  
See Mills, op. cit., p. 59.

<sup>79</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 52.

#### CHAPTER V

<sup>1</sup>See T.E. Hulme, Speculations, ed. Herbert Read, 2nd ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., Ltd., 1936), pp. 173-214.

<sup>2</sup>See A.O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

<sup>3</sup>Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner's, 1937).

<sup>4</sup>William Blake, "London," l. 8.

<sup>5</sup>W.B. Yeats, ed., The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. xix.

<sup>6</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 41-42.

<sup>7</sup>In the discussion of Sitwell's poetic roles in the following paragraphs, I am for the most part following Ralph J. Mills Jr., "The Poetic Roles of Edith Sitwell," Chicago Review, 14 (Spring 1961), 33-64.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., pp. 35-44.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of this motif in Romantic poetry see Rene Wellek, "Romanticism Re-examined," in Northrop Frye, ed., Romanticism Reconsidered (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 107-133.

<sup>11</sup>Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968).

<sup>12</sup>See Erich Auerbach, Mimesis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 194-195.

<sup>13</sup>Northrop Frye, Fearful Symmetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 235-237.

<sup>14</sup>See D.G. Jones, Butterfly on Rock (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 111-184.

<sup>15</sup>Marjorie Perloff, "Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," Journal of Modern Literature, 1, no. 1 (1970), 57-74.

<sup>16</sup>Northrop Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," in Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), pp. 130-137.

<sup>17</sup>Perloff, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

## CHAPTER VI

<sup>1</sup>Timothy Green, "'I am an Electric Eel in a Pool of Catfish'," Life, 54 (January 4, 1963), 60-62.

<sup>2</sup>Julian Symons, "Miss Edith Sitwell have and had and heard," London Magazine, 4 (November 1964), 62.

<sup>3</sup>The Month, 210 (July 1960), 14.

<sup>4</sup>(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), pp. 193-196.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>8</sup>James Brophy, Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 125. See also pp. 120-121 and 150-151.

<sup>9</sup>Duncan, op. cit., p. 193.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 195-196. For another critical treatment of Sitwell's poetry stressing the fundamental importance of antithesis and conflict to her mature vision, see Geoffrey Singleton, Edith Sitwell: the Hymn to Life (London: Fortune Press, 1962), pp. 86-87.

<sup>12</sup>Ralph J. Mills Jr., Edith Sitwell (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1966), p. 33.

<sup>13</sup>For a more balanced treatment of this matter, see John Lehmann, Edith Sitwell (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), p. 29.

<sup>14</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 389. All quotations in this chapter are uniform with this edition.

<sup>15</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 34 and C.M. Bowra, Edith Sitwell (Monaco: Lyrebird Press, 1947), pp. 38-39.

<sup>16</sup>See A.O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), pp. 24-35.

<sup>17</sup>See F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1961), pp. 55-62 and 68-70.

<sup>18</sup>See, for example, "Leda and the Swan," "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop."

<sup>19</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 414.

<sup>20</sup>Jack Lindsay, "The Poetry of Edith Sitwell," Life and Letters, 64 (January 1950), 40.

<sup>21</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 38.

<sup>22</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 299.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 367.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 285.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp. 414-415.

- 26 Ibid., p. 281.
- 27 Ibid., p. 281.
- 28 Duncan, op. cit., p. 194 and Bowra, op. cit., p. 33.
- 29 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 276.
- 30 Duncan, op. cit., p. 195.
- 31 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 318.
- 32 Ibid., pp. 382-383.
- 33 For the best discussion of these issues, see Clark Emery, Ideas into Action: A Study of Pound's Cantos (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1958).
- 34 Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribner, 1937).
- 35 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 281.
- 36 Ibid., p. 278.
- 37 Ibid., p. 334.
- 38 See C.G. Jung, Aion, trans. R.F.C. Hull in The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Bollingen Series XX, ed. Read, Fordham and Adler (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), vol. 9, part II, pp. 14-15.
- 39 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 368.
- 40 Ibid., p. 373.
- 41 Duncan, op. cit., p. 195.
- 42 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. xliv.
- 43 Ibid., p. 277.
- 44 Ibid., p. 278.
- 45 Ibid., p. 294.
- 46 Ibid., p. 294.
- 47 Ibid., p. 294.
- 48 Ibid., pp. 277 and 287.



<sup>49</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 40.

<sup>50</sup>For the discussion of the "cold idealists" from which the foregoing quotations were taken, see Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. xliv.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 369.

<sup>52</sup>Dame Edith was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1955.

<sup>53</sup>For some brief discussions on the nature of Edith Sitwell's Christianity, see Mills, op. cit., p. 39, and Bowra, op. cit., pp. 38-39.

<sup>54</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., pp. 272-273.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 309.

<sup>56</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 34.

<sup>57</sup>See Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History: the Myth of the Eternal Return (New York: Harper, 1959).

<sup>58</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>59</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 309.

<sup>60</sup>Bowra, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>61</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 266.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 261.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 373.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>65</sup>Revelation to John 21:1.

<sup>66</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 376.

<sup>67</sup>John Ruskin, The Stones of Venice (New York: John Wiley, 1876), III, pp. 138-182.

<sup>68</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 378.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 368. The italics are mine.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. xlv.

- 71 Singleton, op. cit., pp. 81-86.
- 72 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIII. For a discussion of Sitwell's subscription to Coleridge's organicist aesthetic, see Brophy, op. cit., pp. 22-26.
- 73 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 412.
- 74 Ibid., pp. 337-338.
- 75 Ibid., p. 297.
- 76 Ibid., p. 401. This passage echoes Richard Crashaw's poem "On the Wounds of our Crucified Lord."
- 77 Ibid., p. 392.
- 78 Brophy, op. cit., pp. 57-94.
- 79 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 297.

#### CHAPTER VII

- 1 Edith Sitwell, Children's Tales from the Russian Ballet (London: Parsons, 1920), p. 7.
- 2 See F.O. Matthiessen, The Achievement of T.S. Eliot (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 35.
- 3 T.S. Eliot, "Ulysses, Order and Myth," The Dial, (November 1923), pp. 480-483.
- 4 Edith Sitwell, The Pleasures of Poetry (London: Duckworth, 1930), p. 246.
- 5 Edith Sitwell, A Notebook on William Shakespeare (London: Macmillan, 1948), p. 1.
- 6 See Ralph J. Mills Jr., Edith Sitwell (Grand Rapids: Erdman's, 1966), p. 18.
- 7 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 324.
- 8 James D. Brophy, Edith Sitwell: the Symbolist Order (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 57-94.
- 9 Edith Sitwell, A Poet's Notebook (Boston: Little, Brown, 1950), p. xi.

<sup>10</sup>Margaret Odegard, The Development of the Poetry of Edith Sitwell (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms), Publication No. 17, 334, p. 216.

<sup>11</sup>Edith Sitwell, Taken Care Of (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p. 126.

<sup>12</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 357. All quotations are uniform with the texts in this edition.

<sup>13</sup>Mills, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

<sup>14</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry," in Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature (London: Milford, 1929), p. 83.

<sup>15</sup>E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (London: Macmillan, 1948), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 23-33.

<sup>17</sup>See A.O. Lovejoy, The Great Chain of Being (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936).

<sup>18</sup>Edith Sitwell, Aspects of Modern Poetry (London: Duckworth, 1934), p. 180. In the second part of this quotation, Dame Edith is referring specifically to modern poetry; in an omitted section she characterizes Romantic poetry as the "sister of music" because of its "heightened vowel-sense." However, as Miss Sitwell at a much earlier date quotes Coleridge concerning the difference between an organic and an externally imposed mechanical form, the particular distinction which she draws here between Romantic and modern poetry does not materially affect our argument. See Edith Sitwell, Poetry and Criticism (London: Hogarth, 1925), p. 25.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted by Derek Standford in "Dame Edith Sitwell and the Transatlantic Muse," The Month, 210, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup>Edith Sitwell, A Poet's Notebook, pp. 180-181.

<sup>21</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," Life and Letters, 39 (November 1943), 79-80.

<sup>22</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry," p. 85.

<sup>23</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 264.

<sup>24</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Lecture on Poetry since 1920," p. 77.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>26</sup>See in Sitwell's Collected Poems, "The Two Loves," II. 79-81 and "A Song of the Dust," ll. 21-26.

<sup>27</sup>See F.J.E. Woodbridge, Aristotle's Vision of Nature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 28.

<sup>28</sup>Mills, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>29</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 348.

<sup>30</sup>For the influence of this and other aspects of Frazer's work on Sitwell, see John B Vickory, "The Golden Bough and Modern Poetry," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 15 (March 1957), 271-288.

<sup>31</sup>See Sir James Frazer, The Golden Bough, Part IV, Adonis Attis Osiris (London: Macmillan, 1907), pp. 344-345. Edith Sitwell was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1955, but Christian and specifically Catholic symbolism begins to appear in her work well before that time.

<sup>32</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 266.

<sup>33</sup>See, for example, Attis Adonis Osiris, pp. 339-343.

<sup>34</sup>F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1961), p. 238.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>36</sup>For Sitwell's use of the rose symbol, see Barbara Seward, The Symbolic Rose (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 146-151.

<sup>37</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 378.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>39</sup>See, for example, Jane Ellen Harrison, Themis (Cambridge: The University Press, 1912), pp. 140-152; and Frazer, The Golden Bough, Part V, Vol. 2, Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild (London: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 141-142.

<sup>40</sup>For a discussion of the primitive Greek bee-cults, see Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (Cambridge: The University Press, 1908), pp. 442-443.

<sup>41</sup>See in Sitwell's Collected Poems, "A Sleepy Tune," ll. 48-49.

<sup>42</sup>See Tillyard, op. cit., p. 60.

<sup>43</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 355

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>45</sup>For the importance of the two categories of nature and grace in the Elizabethan world-order, see A.S.P. Woodhouse, "Nature and Grace in the 'Faerie Queene'," ELH, 16 (September 1949), 194-228.

<sup>46</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 262.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>48</sup>William Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Plate 4. The quotations from this work are uniform with D.J. Sloss and J.P.R. Wallis, eds., The Prophetic Writings of William Blake (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926).

<sup>49</sup>See W.D. Ross, Aristotle (New York: Scribners, 1924), p. 237.

<sup>50</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 409.

<sup>51</sup>Aristotle, On the Heavens, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie (London: Heinemann, 1939), p. XIX.

<sup>52</sup>For the Medieval and Renaissance world-picture, see Tillyard, op. cit.. On the nature of the translunar world see Tillyard, pp. 34-35 and 48-56, and Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 72.

<sup>53</sup>Plato, Republic, trans. Paul Shorey (London: Heinemann, 1935), Book VI, 509B.

<sup>54</sup>Blake, A Vision of the Last Judgement, Rossetti Manuscript, p. 95. This passage is quoted by Sitwell in A Poet's Notebook, pp. 153-154.

<sup>55</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 261 and p. 263.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 264.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 348-349.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 377.

- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 418-419.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 370.
- <sup>62</sup> For Sitwell's recreation of this and other aspects of the vision of archaic man, see Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History: the Myth of the Eternal Return (New York: Harper, 1959).
- <sup>63</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 422
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 422.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 306.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 337.
- <sup>67</sup> See, for example, Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature (London: Heinemann, 1899), pp. 31-32 and 34. Symons' comments on "vertical" correspondence in Nerval are quoted by Sitwell in connection with her discussion of Yeats in Aspects of Modern Poetry, p. 77.
- <sup>68</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. xix.
- <sup>69</sup> See Tillyard, op. cit., p. 77; Spenser, "An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie," ll. 22-105; and Milton, Paradise Lost, V, 469-477.
- <sup>70</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 405.
- <sup>71</sup> Shelley, Adonais, l. 463.
- <sup>72</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 379.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 261.
- <sup>74</sup> Blake, The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, Plate 25.
- <sup>75</sup> Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," l. 617
- <sup>76</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 391
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 258.
- <sup>78</sup> Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York: Scribners, 1937).
- <sup>79</sup> Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 309.
- <sup>80</sup> Revelation to John, 21:1.

<sup>81</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 378.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., p. 392.

#### CHAPTER VIII

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," in The Widening Gyre (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 3-62.

<sup>2</sup>See A.S.P. Woodhouse, "Nature and Grace in the 'Faerie Queene'," ELH, 16 (September 1949), 194-228. Sitwell would of course emphasize the organic connection between the realms of nature and grace more heavily than their distinction.

<sup>3</sup>For Sitwell's own discussion of the "Three Poems of the Atomic Age," see Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. xlii-xlv.

<sup>4</sup>For some previous significant studies of "Three Poems of the Atomic Age," see Jack Lindsay, "The Latest Poems of Edith Sitwell" in Jose Garcia Villa, ed., A Celebration for Edith Sitwell (New York: New Directions, 1948), pp. 44-53; Joseph Duncan, The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1959), pp. 193-196; Geoffrey Singleton, Edith Sitwell: the Hymn to Life (London: Fortune Press, 1960), pp. 101-120; Keith D Cuffel, "The Shadow of Cain: Themes in Dame Edith Sitwell's Later Poetry," The Personalist, 44, no. 4 (Autumn 1965), 517-526; and Sister Mary Callistus Sandt, Critique of Dame Edith Sitwell's Three Poems of the Atomic Age (New York: Pageant Press, 1962). Sister Callistus approaches the three poems under discussion from the point of view of the Christian context of Salvation History, but her results do not duplicate those of this study in any major respect.

<sup>5</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>For a discussion of the implications of the Nero-image in the following passage, see Singleton, op. cit., pp. 112-113.

<sup>7</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 368. All quotations from the "Three Poems of the Atomic Age" are uniform with the versions in these editions.

<sup>8</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

- 10 Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, pp. 368-369.
- 11 Singleton, op. cit., p. 103.
- 12 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 369.
- 13 Ralph J. Mills Jr., Edith Sitwell (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1966), p. 33.
- 14 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 368.
- 15 Sandt, op. cit., p. 50.
- 16 Sir Paul Harvey, ed. The Oxford Companion to English Literature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 405.
- 17 For the Faustian implications of the Ixion image, see Sandt, op. cit., p. 5.
- 18 Luke, 23: 39-43.
- 19 Sandt, op. cit., p. 8.
- 20 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 368.
- 21 Donald Davie, Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 193.
- 22 Singleton, op. cit., p. 110; Cuffel, op. cit., p. 521 and Sandt, op. cit., p. 6.
- 23 Lindsay, op. cit., p. 50.
- 24 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 370.
- 25 Ibid., p. 370.
- 26 William Blake, Jerusalem, plate 10. Blake's lines about the "Abstract objecting power" may have directly inspired Sitwell in The Shadow of Cain.
- 27 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 370.
- 28 Sandt, op. cit., pp. 20-21.
- 29 Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 371.
- 30 Ibid., p. 371.
- 31 Genesis, 11: 1-9.



<sup>32</sup>Edith Sitwell, "Experiment in Poetry" in Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature (London: Milford, 1929), p. 76.

<sup>33</sup>Edith Sitwell, Collected Poems, p. 372.

<sup>34</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>35</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 372.

<sup>36</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>37</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 373.

<sup>38</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 32.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 8

<sup>40</sup>Duncan, op. cit., p. 195; Cuffel, op. cit., p. 525 and Lindsay, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

<sup>41</sup>Lindsay, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>42</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 373.

<sup>43</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 36.

<sup>44</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. xliv.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. xliv.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. xliv.

<sup>48</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>49</sup>Genesis, 18: 16-19 and 29.

<sup>50</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 375.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 375.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. xlii.

<sup>55</sup>Sandt., op. cit., p. 46.

<sup>56</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 376.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

<sup>58</sup>For the traditional background of the rose-symbol, see Singleton, op. cit., pp. 116-117.

<sup>59</sup>For a further identification of the rose-symbol with Mary, see Sandt, op. cit., p. 52.

<sup>60</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 377.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 378.

<sup>62</sup>Revelation to John, 21:1.

<sup>63</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>64</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 377.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 377.

<sup>66</sup>See F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition (London: Gollancz, 1961), p. 238.

<sup>67</sup>W.B. Yeats, "Among School Children," l. 62.

<sup>68</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., pp. 377-378.

<sup>69</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 41.

<sup>70</sup>Paul Tillich, The Courage to Be (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

<sup>71</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 377.

<sup>72</sup>Donald Davie, Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 193.

<sup>73</sup>Edith Sitwell, op. cit., p. 378.

<sup>74</sup>The Epistle of the Blessed Apostle Paul to the Romans, 6: 23.

<sup>75</sup>St. Augustine, Enchiridion, trans. Bernard M. Peebles in The Writings of Saint Augustine (New York: CIMA Publishing Co., 1947), IV, pp. 376-380.

<sup>76</sup>Singleton, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>77</sup>Sandt, op. cit., p. 50.

<sup>78</sup>For a fuller definition of these terms, see Woodhouse, op. cit..

<sup>79</sup>Singleton, op. cit., p. 101.

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