Classic Poetry Series

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

- 20 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell (7 September 1887 - 9 December 1964)

Edith Sitwell was born in Scarborough, Yorkshire, the only daughter of the eccentric Sir George Sitwell, 4th Baronet, of Renishaw Hall; he was an expert on genealogy and landscaping. Her mother was the former Lady Ida Emily Augusta Denison, a daughter of the Earl of Londesborough and a granddaughter of Henry Somerset, 7th Duke of Beaufort. She claimed a descent through female lines from the Plantagenets.

Childhood

Sitwell had two younger brothers, Osbert (1892-1969) and Sacheverell Sitwell (1897-1988) both distinguished authors, well-known literary figures in their own right, and long-term collaborators. Sacheverell married a Canadian woman, Georgia Doble, in 1925 and moved to Weston Hall in Northamptonshire.

Her relationship with her parents was stormy at best, not least because her father made her undertake a "cure" for her supposed spinal deformation--involving locking her into an iron frame. In her later autobiography, she said that her parents had always been strangers to her.

Adulthood

In 1912, 25-year-old Sitwell moved to a small, shabby fourth-floor flat in Pembridge Mansions, Bayswater, which she shared with Helen Rootham (1875-1938), her governess since 1903.

Edith never married. However, it is claimed that in 1927 she fell in love with the homosexual Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew. The relationship with Tchelitchew lasted until 1928; the same year when Helen Rootham underwent operations for cancer, eventually becoming an invalid. In 1932, Rootham and Sitwell moved to Paris, where they lived with Rootham’s younger sister, Evelyn Wiel. Rootham died of spinal cancer in 1938.

Sitwell's mother died in 1937. Sitwell did not attend the funeral because of her displeasure with her parents during her childhood.

During World War II, Sitwell returned from France and retired to Renishaw with her brother Osbert and his lover, David Horner. She wrote under the light of oil lamps when the lights of England were out of service. She knitted clothes for their friends who served in the army. One of the beneficiaries was young Alec Guinness, who received a pair of seaboot stockings.

The poems she wrote during the war brought her back before a public. They

include Street Songs (1942), The Song of the Cold (1945) and The Shadow of Cain (1947), all of which were much praised. Still Falls the Rain, about the London blitz, remains perhaps her best-known poem (it was set to music by Benjamin Britten as Canticle III: Still Falls the Rain).

In 1943, her father died in Switzerland, his wealth depleted. In 1948, a reunion with Tchelitchew, whom she had not seen since before the war, went badly.

In 1948 Sitwell toured the United States with her brothers, reciting her poetry and, notoriously, giving a reading of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene. Her poetry recitals were always occasions; she made recordings of her poems, including two recordings of Façade, the first with Constant Lambert as co-narrator, and the second with Peter Pears.

Later Life and Death

Tchelitchew died in April 1957. Her brother Osbert died of Parkinson's disease, diagnosed in 1950. Sitwell became a Dame Commander (DBE) in 1954. In 1955, Sitwell converted to Roman Catholicism.

Sitwell wrote two books about Queen Elizabeth I of England, Fanfare for Elizabeth (1946) and The Queens and the Hive (1962). She always claimed that she wrote prose simply for money and both these books were extremely successful, as were her English Eccentrics (1933) and Victoria of England (1936).

Around 1957 she was confined to a wheelchair. Her last poetry reading was in 1962. She died of cerebral haemorrhage at St. Thomas’s Hospital on December 9, 1964 at the age of 77.

Sitwell's papers are held at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Works:

Poetry Collections

Clowns' Houses (1918)
Mother and Other Poems (1918)
The Wooden Pegasus (1920)
Façade (1922)
Bucolic Comedies (1923)
The Sleeping Beauty (1924)
Troy Park (1925)
Rustic Elegies (1927)
Gold Coast Customs (1929)
Collected Poems (1930)
Five Variations on a Theme (1933)
Street Songs (1942)
Green Song and Other Poems (1944)
The Song of the Cold (1945)
The Shadow of Cain (1947)
The Canticle of the Rose: Selected Poems 1920-1947 (1949)
Façade, and Other Poems 1920-1935 (1950)
Gardeners and Astronomers: New Poems (1953)
Collected Poems (1954)
The Outcasts (1962)

Other Books

Alexander Pope (1930)
The English Eccentrics (1933)
Aspects of Modern Poetry (1934)
Victoria of England (1936)
I Live under a Black Sun (1937)
A Poet's Notebook (1943)

Fanfare for Elizabeth (1946), a biography of Elizabeth I
The Queens and the Hive (1962), a biography of Elizabeth I
Taken Care Of (1964), autobiography

Answers

I kept my answers small and kept them near;
Big questions bruised my mind but still I let
Small answers be a bullwark to my fear.

The huge abstractions I kept from the light;
Small things I handled and caressed and loved.
I let the stars assume the whole of night.

But the big answers clamoured to be moved Into my life. Their great audacity
Shouted to be acknowledged and believed.

Even when all small answers build up to
Protection of my spirit, still I hear
Big answers striving for their overthrow.

And all the great conclusions coming near.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Aubade

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

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

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

Sounding like an overtone
From some lonely world unknown.

But the creaking empty light
Will never harden into sight,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Bells Of Gray Crystal

Bells of gray crystal
Break on each bough--
The swans' breath will mist all
The cold airs now.
Like tall pagodas
Two people go,
Trail their long codas
Of talk through the snow.
Lonely are these
And lonely and I ....
The clouds, gray Chinese geese
Sleek through the sky.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

By The Lake

ACROSS the flat and the pastel snow
Two people go . . . . 'And do you remember
When last we wandered this shore?' . . . 'Ah no!
For it is cold-hearted December.'
'Dead, the leaves that like asses's ears hung on the trees
When last we wandered and squandered joy here;
Now Midas your husband will listen for these
Whispers--these tears for joy's bier.'
And as they walk, they seem tall pagodas;
And all the ropes let down from the cloud
Ring the hard cold bell-buds upon the trees--codas
Of overtones, ecstasies, grown for love's shroud

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Came the Great Popinjay

CAME the great Popinjay
Smelling his nosegay:
In cages like grots
The birds sang gavottes.
'Herodiade's flea
Was named sweet Amanda,
She danced like a lady
From here to Uganda.
Oh, what a dance was there!
Long-haired, the candle
Salome-like tossed her hair
To a dance tune by Handel.' . . .
Dance they still? Then came
Courtier Death,
Blew out the candle flame
With civet breath.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Clowns' Houses

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;

The busy chatter of the heat
Shrilled like a parakeet;
And shuddering at the noonday light
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:

The cap and bells of Time the Clown
That, jangling, whistled down
Young cherubs hidden in the guise
Of every bird that flies;

And star-bright masks for youth to wear,
Lest any dream that fare
--Bright pilgrim--past our ken, should see
Hints of Reality.

Upon the sharp-set grass, shrill-green,
Tall trees like rattles lean,
And jangle sharp and dissily;
But when night falls they sign

Till Pierrot moon steals slyly in,
His face more white than sin,
Black-masked, and with cool touch lays bare
Each cherry, plum, and pear.

Then underneath the veiled eyes
Of houses, darkness lies--
Tall houses; like a hopeless prayer
They cleave the sly dumb air.

Blind are those houses, paper-thin
Old shadows hid therein,
With sly and crazy movements creep
Like marionettes, and weep.

Tall windows show Infinity;
And, hard reality,

The candles weep and pry and dance
Like lives mocked at by Chance.

The rooms are vast as Sleep within;
When once I ventured in,
Chill Silence, like a surging sea,
Slowly enveloped me.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Eventail

Lovely Semiramis
Closes her slanting eyes:
Dead is she long ago,
From her fan sliding slow
Parrot-bright fire's feathers
Gilded as June weathers,
Plumes like the greenest grass
Twinkle down; as they pass
Through the green glooms in Hell,
Fruits with a tuneful smell--
Grapes like an emerald rain
Where the full moon has lain,
Greengages bright as grass,
Melons as cold as glass
Piled on each gilded booth
Feel their cheeks growing smooth;
Apes in plumed head-dresses
Whence the bright heat hisses,
Nubian faces sly,
Pursing mouth, slanting eye,
Feel the Arabian
Winds floating from that fan:
See how each gilded face
Paler grows, nods apace:
'Oh, the fan's blowing
Cold winds.... It is snowing!'

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Four in the Morning

Cried the navy-blue ghost
Of Mr. Belaker
The allegro Negro cocktail-shaker,
"Why did the cock crow,
Why am I lost,
Down the endless road to Infinity toss'd?
The tropical leaves are whispering white
As water; I race the wind in my flight.
The white lace houses are carried away
By the tide; far out they float and sway.
White is the nursemaid on the parade.
Is she real, as she flirts with me unafraid?
I raced through the leaves as white as water...
Ghostly, flowed over the nursemaid, caught her,
Left her...edging the far-off sand
Is the foam of the sirens' Metropole and Grand;
And along the parade I am blown and lost,
Down the endless road to Infinity toss'd.
The guinea-fowl-plumaged houses sleep...
On one, I saw the lone grass weep,
Where only the whimpering greyhound wind
Chased me, raced me, for what it could find."
And there in the black and furry boughs
How slowly, coldly, old Time grows,
Where the pigeons smelling of gingerbread,
And the spectacled owls so deeply read,
And the sweet ring-doves of curded milk
Watch the Infanta's gown of silk
In the ghost-room tall where the governante
Gesticulates lente and walks andante.
'Madam, Princesses must be obedient;
For a medicine now becomes expedient--
Of five ingredients--a diapente,
Said the governante, fading lente...
In at the window then looked he,
The navy-blue ghost of Mr. Belaker,
The allegro Negro cocktail-shaker--
And his flattened face like the moon saw she--
Rhinoceros-black (a flowing sea!).

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Heart And Mind

SAID the Lion to the Lioness-'When you are amber dust,-
No more a raging fire like the heat of the Sun
(No liking but all lust)-
Remember still the flowering of the amber blood and bone,
The rippling of bright muscles like a sea,
Remember the rose-prickles of bright paws
Though the fire of that sun the heart and the moon-cold bone are one.'

Said the Skeleton lying upon the sands of Time-
'The great gold planet that is the mourning heat of the Sun
Is greater than all gold, more powerful
Than the tawny body of a Lion that fire consumes
Like all that grows or leaps...so is the heart

More powerful than all dust. Once I was Hercules
Or Samson, strong as the pillars of the seas:
But the flames of the heart consumed me, and the mind
Is but a foolish wind.'

Said the Sun to the Moon-'When you are but a lonely white crone,
And I, a dead King in my golden armour somewhere in a dark wood,
Remember only this of our hopeless love
That never till Time is done
Will the fire of the heart and the fire of the mind be one.'

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Interlude

Mid this hot green glowing gloom
A word falls with a raindrop's boom...

Like baskets of ripe fruit in air
The bird-songs seem, suspended where

Those goldfinches--the ripe warm lights
Peck slyly at them--take quick flights.

My feet are feathered like a bird
Among the shadows scarcely heard;

I bring you branches green with dew
And fruits that you may crown anew

Your whirring waspish-gilded hair
Amid this cornucopia--

Until your warm lips bear the stains
And bird-blood leap within your veins.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Poetry

Enobles the heart and the eyes,
and unveils the meaning of all things
upon which the heart and the eyes dwell.
It discovers the secret rays of the universe,
and restores to us forgotten paradises.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Portrait Of A Barmaid

Metallic waves of people jar
Through crackling green toward the bar

Where on the tables chattering-white
The sharp drinks quarrel with the light.

Those coloured muslin blinds the smiles,
Shroud wooden faces in their wiles —

Sometimes they splash like water (you
Yourself reflected in their hue).

The conversation loud and bright
Seems spinal bars of shunting light

In firework-spurting greenery.
O complicate machinery

For building Babel, iron crane
Beneath your hair, that blue-ribbed mane

In noise and murder like the sea
Without its mutability!

Outside the bar where jangling heat
Seems out of tune and off the beat —

A concertina's glycerine
Exudes, and mirrors in the green

Your soul: pure glucose edged with hints
Of tentative and half-soiled tints.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Scotch Rhapsody

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 —
Boring the ptarmigan and grouse for fun —
Boring them worse than a nine-bore gun.
Till the flaxen leaves where the prunes are ripe,
Heard the tartan wind a-droning in the pipe,
And they heard Macpherson say:
'Where do the waves go? What hotels
Hide their bustles and their gay ombrelles?
And would there be room? —

Would there be room?
Would there be room
for
me?

There is a hotel at Ostend
Cold as the wind, without an end,
Haunted by ghostly poor relations
Of Bostonian conversations
(Like bagpipes rotting through the walls.)
And there the pearl-ropes fall like shawls
With a noise like marine waterfalls.
And 'Another little drink wouldn't do us any harm! '
Pierces through the Sabbatical calm.
And that is the place for me!
So do not take a bath in Jordan, Gordon,
On the holy Sabbath, on the peaceful day —
Or you'll never go to heaven, Gordon Macpherson,
And speaking purely as a private person

That is the place
— that is the place
— that is the
place
for
me!

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Solo For Ear-Trumpet

The carriage brushes through the bright
Leaves (violent jets from life to light);
Strong polished speed is plunging, heaves
Between the showers of bright hot leaves
The window-glasses glaze our faces
And jar them to the very basis —
But they could never put a polish
Upon my manners or abolish
My most distinct disinclination
For calling on a rich relation!
In her house — (bulwark built between
The life man lives and visions seen) —
The sunlight hiccups white as chalk,
Grown drunk with emptiness of talk,
And silence hisses like a snake —
Invertebrate and rattling ache….
Then suddenly Eternity
Drowns all the houses like a sea
And down the street the Trump of Doom
Blares madly — shakes the drawing-room
Where raw-edged shadows sting forlorn
As dank dark nettles. Down the horn
Of her ear-trumpet I convey
The news that 'It is Judgment Day!'
'Speak louder: I don't catch, my dear.'
I roared: 'It is the Trump we hear!'
'The What?' 'THE TRUMP!' 'I shall complain!
…. the boy-scouts practising again.'

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

Still Falls the Rain

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

Still falls the Rain
With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat
In the Potter's Field, and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:
Still falls the Rain

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

Still falls the Rain
At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.
Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us---
On Dives and on Lazarus:
Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

Still falls the Rain---
Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side:
He bears in His Heart all wounds,---those of the light that died,
The last faint spark
In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,
The wounds of the baited bear---
The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat
On his helpless flesh... the tears of the hunted hare.

Still falls the Rain---
Then--- O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune---
See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:
It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree

Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart
That holds the fires of the world,---dark-smirched with pain
As Caesar's laurel crown.

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

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

The Dancers: (During A Great Battle, 1916)

The floors are slippery with blood:
The world gyrates too. God is good
That while His wind blows out the light
For those who hourly die for is –
We still can dance each night.

The music has grown numb with death –
But we will suck their dying breath,
The whispered name they breathed to chance,
To swell our music, make it loud
That we may dance, - may dance.

We are the dull blind carrion-fly
That dance and batten. Though God die
Mad from the horror of the light –
The light is mad, too, flecked with blood, -
We dance, we dance, each night.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

The Fan

LOVELY Semiramis
Closes her slanting eyes:
Dead is she long ago.
From her fan, sliding slow,
Parrot-bright fire's feathers,
Gilded as June weathers,
Plumes bright and shrill as grass
Twinkle down; as they pass
Through the green glooms in Hell
Fruits with a tuneful smell,
Grapes like an emerald rain,
Where the full moon has lain,
Greengages bright as grass,
Melons as cold as glass,
Piled on each gilded booth,
Feel their cheeks growing smooth.
Apes in plumed head-dresses
Whence the bright heat hisses,--
Nubian faces, sly
Pursing mouth, slanting eye,
Feel the Arabian
Winds floating from the fan.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

The Lady With The Sewing-Machine

Across the fields as green as spinach,
Cropped as close as Time to Greenwich,

Stands a high house; if at all,
Spring comes like a Paisley shawl —

Patternings meticulous
And youthfully ridiculous.

In each room the yellow sun
Shakes like a canary, run

On run, roulade, and watery trill —
Yellow, meaningless, and shrill.

Face as white as any clock's,
Cased in parsley-dark curled locks —

All day long you sit and sew,
Stitch life down for fear it grow,

Stitch life down for fear we guess
At the hidden ugliness.

Dusty voice that throbs with heat,
Hoping with your steel-thin beat

To put stitches in my mind,
Make it tidy, make it kind,

You shall not: I'll keep it free
Though you turn earth, sky and sea

To a patchwork quilt to keep
Your mind snug and warm in sleep!

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

The Web Of Eros

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 mænad fire of spring on the cold earth;
The myrrh-lit flame that gave both death and birth
To the soul Phoenix; and the star-bright shower
That came to Danaë in her brazen tower...
Within your magic web of hair lies furled
The fire and splendour of the ancient world.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell

When Cold December

WHEN cold December
Froze to grisamber
The jangling bells on the sweet rose-trees--
Then fading slow
And furred is the snow
As the almond's sweet husk--
And smelling like musk.
The snow amygdaline
Under the eglantine
Where the bristling stars shine
Like a gilt porcupine--
The snow confesses
The little Princesses
On their small chioppines
Dance under the orpines.
See the casuistries
Of their slant fluttering eyes--
Gilt as the zodiac
(Dancing Herodiac).
Only the snow slides
Like gilded myrrh--
From the rose-branches--hides
Rose-roots that stir.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell