

Edith Sitwell: avant-garde poet, English genius

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‘The Sitwells belong to the history of publicity rather than of poetry’, famously pronounced F. R. Leavis in *New Bearings in English Poetry* (1932). Greene believes this ‘toxic wisecrack’ by Leavis had an overlong shelf life and ensured ‘that the one British woman of her time who briefly enjoyed status as a major poet was not merely pushed back into the second rank, but dismissed by many as a fraud’ (p. 237). Greene’s biography, with its subtitle, ‘*avant-garde poet, English genius*’, flags a challenge to Leavis’s verdict. For a start, he separates out the three siblings, giving Edith (1887–1964) a book of her own, then daringly asserts that at the height of her fame she was ‘the best British-born poet’ of her day (p. 320). Although much is known about the Sitwells and their milieu from John Pearson’s close study, *Façade: Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell* (1978), and about Edith in particular from her autobiography, *Taken Care Of: an Autobiography* (1965), and from the anthology *Edith Sitwell: Fire of the Mind*, edited by Elizabeth Salter and Allanah Harper (1976), Greene explains why we need a biography *now* in his prologue (p. 8). One reason is the wealth of material that has become available since Victoria Glendinning’s biography of 30 years ago (1981) and since the *Selected Letters* (1997) that Greene himself edited. Additionally, since she is a writer ‘who matters’ the very strangeness of Sitwell’s life and character warrant documentation rather than derision. Contingently, Greene aims to enhance readers’ engagement with her poetry by tracing its evolution. Nevertheless, in determining to accentuate Edith’s genius, Greene is up against longstanding mythology about her eccentric appearance and personality. Reviews with titles such as ‘Epistles of a great English eccentric’ or ‘Withering heights’ (1), continue to pick on her clothes and caustic wit, which might only add to the appeal if she were a male public figure. ‘Edith Sitwell in her own words’, the section that prefaces the book, displays such Wildesque quips as, ‘I am fundamentally kind, if you discount my conversation, which is very often not’ or ‘All the Pipsqueakery [hostile critics] are after me in full squeak’, inviting us to laugh *with* rather than *at* Edith. Indeed, while presenting a kaleidoscope of perspectives on his subject, Greene’s gently persuasive counsel for her defence is surely crucial to the success of a biography.

Since any life-story consists in a mixture of events that can be checked for accuracy and varying degrees and kinds of unfathomability, the biographer necessarily combines authenticity with speculation. Greene's credentials as an authoritative recorder of Sitwell's life permeate the book from start to finish. It is the work of several decades in which Greene visited all the places that Edith and members of her family inhabited or visited. The acknowledgements reveal the numerous individuals, including key members of the family, who provided interviews and papers, and the useful family tree at the front sets up a factual framework for the ensuing narrative. The chapters chronicle Edith's life, from her parents' background, through the five decades of her publishing career, to her death from heart failure. Consequently, tales of quarrels, reconciliations, battles with health and poverty thread through the chapters and provide stimulating narrative coherence. The pleasure of speculation is afforded as Greene treads a path that both validates and undermines human testimony, including Edith's. For example, referring to her well-circulated protest against the 'hell' of her childhood (2), Edith later stated that she was an unreliable witness of her own life. Greene painstakingly recounts how Edith's curvature of her long spine was treated by the medical profession but defends her parents and the doctors against charges that the corrective iron straitjacket, what she called her 'bastille', was maliciously prescribed. While implying that Edith's complaints exaggerated her childhood suffering, Greene revives the reader's sympathy by details of her parents' arranged and unhappy marriage that endorse Edith's sense of rejection by them, and by alluding to the back problems that plagued her all through her life.

The fact that Edith felt an outsider in her own family and left it at the age of 17 maintains our warmth towards the protagonist, while the book offers fascinating social history about aristocratic life in the early 20th century. Chapter two, 'A sense of place', describes, with the vividness of an eye-witness, how Edith spent much of her adolescence in London and at the family seat, Renishaw Hall in Derbyshire, with annual journeys to the continent. Belvoir House in Scarborough was another Sitwell family home for decades. The miseries and falls of a mighty titled family only add to the biography's appeal; inherited wealth did not protect the family from ill health, emotional turbulence or debt. Lady Ida Denison and Sir George Sitwell embodied a transition from Victorian to modern cultures while undergoing a human drama of difficult relationships. Lady Ida's depression, drinking and gambling, the attendant pawning of possessions and her humiliating imprisonment form the backdrop to Edith's fortunes, rendering their world at once remote and recognizable: the three strange siblings simply found strength in each other when their parents proved unreliable. Corroborating Edith's autobiography, Greene outlines how she did not conform to the femininity expected by her parents yet, as a girl, was cheated of legacies from an aunt and her father, while her brothers squandered their inheritances. The history of her education at home is instructive. We learn the curriculum for a girl educated at home at the turn of the century (pp. 32–3). However, her father's belief, echoing the dominant discourses of medicine at the time, that study made women unfeminine meant that Edith did not go to university. Instead, she left home for London where she met writers, painters and musicians, becoming increasingly serious about modern art.

The story of the eponymous subject is also the tale of a generation and, as Louis Menand comments, a biography deals with who controls the narrative about a person.(3) Greene frequently offers counter-perspectives to received versions, levelling the playfield between figures with grand reputations and those with diminished profiles. He broadens Edith's much trumpeted eccentricity to a brand that is peculiarly English and peculiar to an artist; he places her among a cast of larger-than-life figures whose personal relationships were synchronous with their professional lives and intrinsic to their creativity. Like her, all the characters come across as both sinned against and sinning in their loves and losses, fluctuating reputations, sensitivities to critical reception, financial pressures and heavy drinking. However, Greene privileges Edith with the voices of her many admirers that show up the mistreatment by her family, by men and by the critics. Sitwell had an inside view of the domestic life of Robert Graves and his wife and we have his unusual view of her, spending time on the sofa hemming handkerchiefs. The mutual regard between Sitwell and T. S. Eliot waxed and waned along with their friendship. Edith professed to love *The Waste Land* (p. 173), which she read while Eliot was recovering from mental collapse, and defended him against charges of ill-treating his wife (p. 125), but when Edith and Osbert refused Vivienne's appeal for help, relations cooled between the

Sitwells and Eliots. They were reunited later but Edith was appalled at Tom's second marriage and denounced the *Four Quartets* that she had earlier adored. Personal and professional interests were also in conflict in her relationship with D. H. Lawrence, whom Edith and Osbert eventually met in Florence. Edith was convinced that the unflattering portrait of Clifford Chatterley was subsequently based on Osbert and denigrated Lawrence's book ever afterwards. Similarly, Greene explores existing anecdotes about the personal and professional kinship between Edith and Virginia Woolf (pp. 134–5). He prints a rarely cited and lengthy extract from Woolf's diary (pp. 187–8) that is one of the most compassionate and perceptive observations of Edith, crystallising what is told in fragments all through the biography.

Greene's depiction of Edith's governess, Helen Rootham, who became a literary mentor and friend (pp. 42–3), treads the line between unfixing other versions and fixing a new one. One view is that Edith could not accept her former governess as an equal, though Greene indicates that Helen's musical talent encouraged Edith's fine ear. Helen also accompanied Edith to Paris in 1904 to save her from the finishing off process expected of a girl with her social status. They set up home in 22 Pembridge Mansions, in a house that became a famous meeting place for writers and artists throughout the 1920s. Greene's meticulous description transports us to the block of flats and its immediate neighborhood so we can imagine the room in which Edith started to write and host the 'at homes' that are part of the history of literary modernism. Later, Greene particularises the souring of relations between Edith and her governess-turned-friend (p. 142) and then Edith's care of Helen as she fell ill and died in 1938. His judgement that Helen was really very difficult allows our sympathy for Edith to remain intact.

Ultimately, the nature of Edith and Helen's relationship is educated guesswork and, unlike the historian, the biographer need have no qualms about embracing enigmas. The big mystery is Edith's life-long attraction to the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew and recourse to his recently available letters is one distinguishing mark of this biography: 'a reading of Tchelitchew's immense correspondence with Edith reveals him as extravagant, visionary, superstitious, cruel and selfish' (p. 191). Greene's conclusion, that Edith, although colluding in his hold over her, was a victim of Tchelitchew's unpredictable personality and uncertain mental health, keeps us on her side in the tempestuous relationship. At the same time, Greene even-handedly suggests that Tchelitchew was part of a neglected group of neo-romantic artists that drew inspiration from classical, Renaissance, symbolist and surrealist movements and deserves his own biography. Do we need to know whether or not Edith had sex with Tchelitchew or with any other man or woman if we are considering her genius as a poet? Greene returns to this question sporadically and intensively in the chapter 'Her loves'. He treats all verdicts, including Edith's, with caution but his allusion to her attraction to other bisexuals such as Alvaro de Guevara and Siegfried Sassoon is something of a non sequitur. If there is no proof that she was a lesbian (p. 213), do we need to consider whether she might have been? Perhaps the importance is in having some unsolved mysteries so that we leave each chapter and the book with something to ponder.

As for 'avant-garde poet', Greene claims Edith as 'a pugilist for the modern movement in the arts' (p. 167). In tracing the evolution of her poetry, however, Greene disagrees that she moved from a phase of satire, associated with *Façade* (1922), to vision, associated with 'Still falls the rain' (1940), but that comedy and tragedy entwined is the mark of all her writing. He also unsettles the polarity between her pre-war linguistic innovation and post-war social engagement with close readings of works like 'The dancers', a fine but little known First World War poem (p. 108), stressing that the Sitwells viewed war as an imposition by the older generation. Edith wrote to Sassoon in sympathy with his public anti-war protest (p. 122) and, with Sassoon, edited Wilfred Owen's poems. From 1926, Sassoon became one of her main fans and a critic to whom she looked for feedback for the next four decades (p. 185). During the 1920s she was in demand as a speaker and could fill a room. In the chapter 'Too fantastic and fat-heads' Greene evaluates all accounts of the making and rendering of *Façade*, moderating sensationalism without minimizing the historical importance of the first performance that was succeeded by many more in the following decades. She was in the company of groundbreakers who were attacked in the provocative *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), edited by Laura Riding and Robert Graves. Unlike some of her contemporaries, however, Edith associated a fight against traditionalism with a fight against injustice and believed she had always written about it (p. 175). If not already converted, Greene's carefully contextualised reading of 'Gold coast customs' (pp. 199–200), *A Song of the Cold*

(pp. 319–20), and ‘His blood colours my cheek’, ‘one of the best of her old age’ (pp. 414–16) would send a reader to her poems. Edith’s compassion for the less privileged is traced back to a childhood friend in Scarborough who was poor and beaten by his mother. Additionally, she and her brothers spent more time with the servants than with their parents and, according to Osbert, one nurse, Eliza Davis, had a special affection for Edith. Edith emerges as a pacifist and at the height of her reputation was in demand as a spokesperson for causes such as the campaigns against Apartheid and for Nuclear Disarmament.

We are on side with Edith against the literary critics who severely damaged her reputation. In the chapter ‘Let the devils have it’, Greene concedes where they have a point, but also exposes the malice in Geoffrey Grigson and Leavis, tempering their hostility to her *Aspects of Modern Poetry* (1934) and other works with words of praise by others. Greene has a sympathetic insight into the special challenges of being a woman poet, about which Edith wrote considerably and controversially. He believes the performative elements in her poems are partly negotiations with iconographies of the feminised poetess (p. 128). She championed her contemporary Charlotte Mew (p. 134) and later the Americans Gertrude Stein, H. D. and Marianne Moore. She would seem to have much in common with the avant-garde Stein whom she met in Paris via an editor of *Vogue* magazine, but there were rivalries over Tchelitchev who was initially Stein’s protégé.

How is Edith Sitwell a genius? Her knowledge and talents were extraordinary and she always got people talking. She knew several languages, was an authority on art, music and ballet, claiming that Stravinsky’s work inspired her rhythms. She formed a short-lived Anglo-French society, consisting of many great figures and that gave recitals with Sitwell and Arnold Bennett as a class double act. Although they had several fallings out and reconciliations, Bennett maintained that Sitwell was a genius (p. 140). Edwin Muir was an advocate and critic of her work and as editor of *The New Age* had her poetry published in the magazine. Another friend and admirer was Graham Greene (p. 16) whom Edith believed completely understood her poetry. She was ‘one of her century’s great letter writers’ (p. 199) and her only novel *I Live under a Black Sun* (1937, repr. 2007), was considered the work of a genius by the writer Wilfrid Gibson (p. 261) and a masterpiece by others. Her historical portrait *Victoria of England* (1936) was a best-seller and her first study of Elizabeth I (1946) sold 19,000 copies in three weeks, while her anthologies and critical works always made waves. There is still living memory on which to draw about the later decades of Edith’s life that have been eclipsed in the academic and popular worlds by the excitement of the 1920s. The chapters on her work during and after the Second World War illuminate the brightness of her reputation and output in the 1940s and 1950s (p. 322). Greene’s full discussion of such poems as ‘Lullaby’ and ‘Serenade: any man for any woman’ testify to their neglect in canons of Second World War poetry (pp. 273–6). The biography begins with the air raid on Sheffield in 1940 that left a deep mark on Edith’s imagination and inspired the poem ‘Still falls the rain’ that is unequivocally acclaimed. There was a special edition of *Horizon* magazine in 1947. Her engagement with the American literary tradition as well as contemporary American poets, notably Robert Lowell, was allegedly greater than any British-born poet of her generation (p. 311). Greene reads the Whitmanesque multi-syllabled lines in ‘Heart and mind’ from *Green song and other poems* (1944). Her visit, with Osbert, to New York on the Queen Elizabeth liner in 1948 was a triumph and included a rendition of *Façade*. She impressed the major cultural figure Lincoln Kirstein who believed she had star power. She made several more trips to the United States, including a three-month lecture tour that included ten weeks in Hollywood when she met Marilyn Monroe. They would seem poles apart yet connected through some mutual recognition of their common psychological wounds. Sitwell edited an anthology, *An American Genius* (1951). Her new *Collected Poems* (1955) was accompanied by numerous accolades in America and Britain. There was a mixed reception to her bumper anthology, *The Atlantic Book of British and American Poetry* published in 1958 in the United States and the following year in Great Britain. She was awarded Honorary Degrees from the universities of Leeds (1947), Durham (1947) and Oxford (1951) and an OBE in 1954.

In summary, while necessarily nurturing the reader’s appetite for human interest, the biography is part social history, part literary history and part *Künstlerroman*. Greene maintains a fine balance between the oddness and ordinariness of an artist’s life and temperament. At times, Edith stands out head and shoulders for the longevity of her career, the quantity and range of her output and extreme mix of strength and vulnerability.

She fought to promote modern art, to be herself and to protect her friends when necessary. She comes across as someone whom those close to her, such as Natasha Spender, perceived as quiet (p. 240) and Winfred Bryher found worth sponsoring (p. 280). This book puts the record straight with material that has been overlooked, either as a result of lazy scholarship or in favour of popular gossip, or only recently made accessible. In dissecting the records about one life, the biographer at once exposes how records that present themselves as authentic history are skewed by selection, subjectivity and faulty memory. At the same time, the inevitability of gaps in all attempts to construct a life permit the pleasure of imaginative play and speculative recreation.

Notes

1. Epistles of a great English Eccentric', by Philip Zeiger, *Daily Telegraph* (1 March 1997) and 'Withering Heights', by Miranda Seymour, *Sunday Times* (9 March 1997), reviews of *Selected Letters of Edith Sitwell*, ed. Richard Greene (London, 2007).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Edith Sitwell to Geoffrey Singleton, 11 July 1955, *Edith Sitwell: Selected Letters*, ed. John Lehmann and Derek Parker (London, 1970) pp. 198–200.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Louis Menand, 2007. 'Lives of others: the biography business', *The New Yorker*, 6 August 2007 < http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/08/06/070806crbo_books_menand [2]> [accessed 4 December, 2012].[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/27/edith-sitwell-english-genius-richard-greene-review> [3]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8344918/Edith-Sitwell-Avant-Garde-Poet-English-Genius-by-Richard-Greene-review.html> [4]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/edith-sitwell-avant-garde-poet-english-genius-by-richard-greene-7545594.html> [5]

Quill and Quire

<http://www.quillandquire.com/reviews/review.cfm> [6]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/415489.article> [7]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/node/18175321> [8]

Literary Review

<http://www.economist.com/node/18175321> [8]

London Review of Books

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n20/rosemary-hill/no-false-modesty> [9]

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[2] http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2007/08/06/070806crbo_books_menand

[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/27/edith-sitwell-english-genius-richard-greene-review>

[4] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/8344918/Edith-Sitwell-Avant-Garde-Poet-English-Genius-by-Richard-Greene-review.html>

[5] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/edith-sitwell-avant-garde-poet-english-genius-by-richard-greene-7545594.html>

[6] http://www.quillandquire.com/reviews/review.cfm?review_id=7309

[7] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/415489.article>

[8] <http://www.economist.com/node/18175321>

[9] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v33/n20/rosemary-hill/no-false-modesty>