

7. Sir Beelzebub's Syllabub: Or, Edith Sitwell's Eighteenth Century

William Butler Yeats wrote in 1930 that when he had read Edith Sitwell's *Gold Coast Customs* he felt '...that something absent from all literature for a generation was back again, and in a form rare in the literature of all generations, passion ennobled by intensity, by endurance, by wisdom. We had it in one man once. He lies in St. Patrick's now under the greatest epitaph in history.'¹ Yeats's view of Sitwell was by no means unique. In 1946, Stephen Spender characterized her later work as 'ripe and magnificent.'² In 1949, Katherine Anne Porter found in her work '...the true flowering branch springing fresh from the old, unkillable roots of English poetry, with the range, variety, depth, fearlessness, the passion and elegance of great art.'³ In 1957, Cyril Connolly wrote: 'When we come to compare the collected poems of Dame Edith Sitwell with those of Yeats, or Mr. Eliot or Professor Auden, it will be found that hers have the purest poetical content of them all....'⁴ In 1959, Marianne Moore wrote: 'Great in far greater ways, Dame Edith Sitwell is a virtuoso of rhythm and accent.'⁵ At the time of Sitwell's death in 1964, Denise Levertov remarked: 'Perhaps no one has ever lived who had a more highly developed understanding of the relation in poetry of meaning and aural values.' Allen Tate described her as '...one of the great poets of the 20th century....'⁶

Indeed, through almost half of this century, Edith Sitwell was recognized as one of the finest poets in English. Although her standing has been somewhat diminished by shifts in poetic fashion, she continues to be well represented in the major anthologies and she still has her passionate admirers. I count myself among them.

Edith Sitwell shared with her contemporary T. S. Eliot a fascination with the writers and poets of the eighteenth century. In fact, far more than Eliot's, her imagination was stocked with the literature, art, and architecture of that period and with its personalities and its cultural struggles.⁷ Her *English Eccentrics* (1933), a modern *Anatomy of Melancholy*, describes the oddities of an array of personalities, mostly from the long eighteenth century, who by their strange behavior lived out a gentle protest against deadening forces of conformity and melancholy. Her