

Noël Coward and the Sitwells: enmity, celebrity, popularity

Faye Hammill

University of Strathclyde

In 1923, the year of the first public performance of Edith Sitwell and William Walton's Façade, Noël Coward satirized the Sitwell siblings in his sketch "The Swiss Family Whittlebot." The result was an enduring feud between Coward and the Sitwells that shaped their celebrity personae and inflected responses to their work in the periodical press. They confronted each other across a class divide, and also across the perceived barrier between difficult modernism and accessible popular entertainment. Yet, in spite of these oppositional stances, certain convergences in their styles of writing and performance suggest a possible appeal to a shared audience. The interconnectedness of Coward's work with Edith Sitwell's, in particular, can be discerned on the level of literary style, influences, and parodic strategies.

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I am feeling miserably disappointed.... Osbert...tells me it is impossible for me to do *Façade* at Oxford. He says...that after *London Calling* I cannot risk it, as probably little Coward's supporters (being far in excess of intelligent people in number) would flock to the performance to insult me, and that it would be too undignified to expose oneself to it.

—Edith Sitwell to Harold Acton (1923)

In her letter to Acton, Edith Sitwell betrays her anxiety about popular entertainment and the threat it poses to the dignity of high art. The letter was written in the year that she and her brother Osbert began their bitter feud with Noël Coward as a result of his send-up of them in his revue *London Calling!* The conflict would endure until 1962 when they eventually became friends. It played out on a personal level, as recorded in diary entries and letters, and it also inflected responses to their work in the wider literary community and in the periodical press. The Sitwells and Coward were placed—and explicitly placed themselves—on opposite sides of a series of binaries: modernist/popular; aristocratic/middle-class; eccentric/mainstream; difficult/accessible. Yet certain adjectives, including “witty” and “brittle,” were often applied to both Coward and the Sitwells, provoking conflicts of definition while also suggesting a possible appeal to a shared audience. Indeed, the interconnectedness of Coward and Edith Sitwell, in particular, can be productively explored on the level of literary style, influences, and parodic strategies.

In the chapter on “Eccentricity” in her 1965 memoir, *Taken Care Of*, Edith Sitwell writes: “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...of the crowd” (126). Sitwell’s own “personal eccentricity,” as Deborah Tyler-Bennett notes in *Edith Sitwell: The Forgotten Modernist* (1996), “itself forms a type of aesthetic strategy” (12). Through her modes of self-fashioning, including her autobiographical texts and her broadcasts and recordings commenting on her own poetry, Sitwell sought to control the meanings of her work and to inscribe herself into the historical narrative of high modernism.

Coward was equally forthright, and not much more modest, in his own position-taking in the cultural field. In 1962, he wrote to Arnold Wesker: “I, who have earned my living all my life by my creative talents, cannot ever agree with your rather high-flown contempt for ‘commercial art’.... There is nothing disgraceful or contemptible in writing a successful play which a vast number of people are eager and willing to buy tickets for.” On the other hand, he added, there is “no guarantee that your avant-garde painters and sculptors and musicians and playwrights are so tremendously necessary to culture as they naturally think they are” (To Wesker 241). The opposition between Coward’s respect for popular success and the Sitwells’ disdain for mass audiences was publicly affirmed through the episode of Coward’s response to *Façade*.

Façade and the Whittlebots

Façade, Edith Sitwell’s collaboration with the composer William Walton, evolved considerably in terms of text, score, and manner of performance over the period from its earliest private presentation in 1922, until the 1950s. Coward encountered it at the public premiere in June 1923 at the Aeolian Hall in London. On this occasion, Sitwell recited her poems through a special megaphone (called a ‘Sengerphone’) that protruded through a hole in a decorated front-cloth. Behind this, a small ensemble played Walton’s music. The event caused a sensation, though as Pearson notes, the supposed riot described in the Sitwells’ accounts was invented retrospectively in order to construct the 1923 *Façade* as an iconoclastic moment in the history of modernist performance (183-84). The reviews were a mixture of the indignant, the baffled, and the cautiously admiring.

One of the most dismissive responses was by “Mr London” (Hannen Swaffer), gossip columnist in the *Daily Graphic*: “A friend of mine who was there tells me that, when he laughed, as Edith Sitwell recited drivel through a megaphone, a woman turned round and said, “How can I study a new art if you laugh?”...Edwin Evans sat through a series of meaningless, rhythmless, childish words called “Ass Face,” but Noël Coward was strong enough to walk out” (“Mr London”).¹ The contemptuous laughter of the friend of “Mr London” has nothing in common with the appreciative laughter that *Façade*’s witty

surprises might justly evoke. Rather than responding directly to *Façade*, the columnist uses it as an occasion to enter a debate about the value of experimental art. He sets up Coward as representative of popular performance, as against the supposedly elite art of the Sitwells.

Coward's secretary, Cole Lesley, comments: "Noël always told me that he did *not* walk out of *Façade*. 'I wouldn't have missed a minute of it for anything in the world' were, I am afraid, the words he used." According to Lesley, the only reason Coward was at the Aeolian Hall at all was that he had lately bumped into Osbert Sitwell, a recent acquaintance, who had commented sarcastically: "I hear you're doing a review [sic]. What *fun!*," and had suggested that he might attend the premiere of *Façade* "to get some ideas" (qtd. in Pearson 185).² This didn't turn out quite as Osbert had intended, because Coward immediately sent up the Sitwells as the "Swiss family Whittlebot" in *London Calling!*, which was co-authored with Ronald Jeans and produced by André Charlotand opened in September 1923.

The "Whittlebot" sketch represents three siblings, Hernia, Gob, and Sago, dressed colorfully and "with self-conscious nonchalance in unusual clothes." The stage directions also note: "Their musical instruments are rather queer in shape" (Coward, "Swiss" 77). Indeed, the characters and their equipment seem to embody the bizarre shapes, colors, and sounds of abstract art, while the three poems Hernia recites are pastiche free verse. The sketch lampoons modernist experimentation in all its forms. Hernia's first poem had already been published by Coward the previous year, in his collection of satires *A Withered Nosegay*, but the second is more directly connected to the Sitwells' collaborative work. Hernia announces: "I will now recite my tone poem 'Passion' to which special music has been set by my brother Gob on the Conphuticon" ("Swiss" 79). The third piece is entitled "The Lower Classes." When she reaches the lines: "Melody semi-spheroidal / In all its innate rotundity / Rhubarb for purposes unknown" (80), the whole family is pushed off into the wings as the stage manager signs to the orchestra to begin the next number.³ In enacting this rejection of the Sitwells as entertainers, Coward demonstrates his own much greater popular appeal. "The Swiss Family Whittlebot," watched as part of *London Calling!*, itself reproduces the conflict between high and commercial art.

The Sitwells were deeply offended. Edith was particularly hurt, and it was Osbert who took up arms on her behalf. (Their brother Sacheverell seems to have taken little part in the feud.) In the first volume of Coward's autobiography, *Present Indicative* (1937), he wrote of his "intense surprise" at receiving "a cross letter from Osbert Sitwell; in fact, so angry was it, that I first of all imagined it to be a joke" (*Autobiography* 117). Coward's surprise is understandable, since in the sketch itself, he had presented his characters as unfazed by mockery. Hernia says: "People have jeered at us, often when walking in the street they have thrown fruit and vegetables at us, but it is all colour and humour. We see humour in everything" ("Swiss" 78).

Evidently Coward had overestimated the Sitwells' ability to see the funny side. Their biographer, John Pearson, explains Osbert's reaction as largely one of frustration, since he "had been all set to face the artistic scandal of *Façade* and to perform his usual act of ridiculing his reactionary opponents." Instead, "the Sitwells and modern poetry were being ridiculed themselves.... An actor from the London suburbs and the lower middle classes had taken on *their* role of mockery" (186). They and Coward, then, were no longer positioned on opposite sides of an unbridgeable cultural divide, but were competing on the same ground.

The Sitwells' excessive and very public resentment amused Sewell Stokes, author of *Pilloried!* (1928), a book of satirical sketches of celebrities. In the chapter "Two or Three Sitwells," he refers obliquely to the *London Calling!* affair, and remarks: "a trio more sensitive to criticism I have never encountered...they are so painfully in earnest about themselves" (180).⁴ Yet it was not that the Sitwells wished to escape public notice. Rather, they aimed to shock audiences. "Ironically," notes Pearson, "the fuss stirred up by *London Calling!* was the nearest [Osbert] got to the artistic *scandale* he had been counting on after that June's production of *Façade*" (188).

The growing fame of the Whittlebots must inevitably have raised the public profile of the Sitwells. As Sheridan Morley records, Coward was invited to read Hernia's verse on the radio, and: "Later Miss Whittlebot herself began to make regular appearances in the gossip columns, to which Noël would feed such information as 'Hernia is busy preparing for publication her new books, *Gilded Sluts* and *Garbage*. She breakfasts on onions and Vichy water.'" (85) Another of Coward's gossip paragraphs says that Hernia "turns her attention to Christmas card greetings," and composes one called "Caprice de Noël," which "has all the elusive 'something' of a genuine Whittlebot" (quoted in Tickner ix). The independent life of Hernia, circulating in popular culture as a kind of grotesque double for Edith Sitwell, is a fascinating celebrity projection. The notion of a "genuine Whittlebot" is of course self-referential, referring to Hernia's status as Coward's fictional creation, literally a "Caprice de Noël." But it also points to Coward's perception of Sitwell as inauthentic, particularly in her staging of her own personality and her disavowal of any desire for popular success.

The Sitwells' anger, then, did not prevent Coward from continuing to make capital from the Whittlebots. In 1925, he published a volume of parodic verse, *Chelsea Buns*, attributed to Hernia Whittlebot, with a Cubist portrait of the supposed author as frontispiece.⁵ Coward's poems, as Marsha Bryant notes, "lampoon both [Sitwell's] sound play and her racial tropes" (255), as well as imitating her use of rhetorical questions and surreal imagery. In a recent conference paper, Laura Richardson compared Sitwell's poems with those from *Chelsea Buns*, demonstrating the difficulty of distinguishing between original and parody by testing the audience with unattributed poems. This was an exercise Coward successfully tried on his own friends. Yet despite the skill of his imitation, on closer inspection, a mood of

silliness always distinguishes his texts from the originals. For instance, “The Wind’s Bastinado,” from the 1922 *Façade* volume, uses a repeating rhyme sound on a series of increasingly obscure words: “Macaroon,” “Picaroon,” “galloon,” “cocoon,” and “patacoon” (49). The poem—like most of Sitwell’s work—has an intricate verbal patterning that produces startling effects. “Misericordia,” from *Chelsea Buns*, tips over into foolishness by adding truly random items like “spoon,” “Lorna Doone,” and also the racial slur “coon.”

Chelsea Buns includes a Foreword by Noël Coward as “editor,” and an introduction, written in deliberately unconvincing French and signed “Gaspard Pustonin.” These breathless texts are suggestive of the mutual celebration practiced among the members of a small European avant-garde. The Foreword imitates Edith Sitwell’s unexpected images and obscure words: “Nothing is spared the flail of her titulative satire. The carcaphanous charm of Harlequin and Columbine evaporate like withered potpourri before the oncoming hurricane of her merciless pen” (Whittlebot 133-134). *Chelsea Buns*, then, shows Coward refusing either to be intimidated by modernism or to take it seriously. The volume is good parody because it can be enjoyed without diminishing the original—some of “Hernia’s” poems are highly entertaining, yet Sitwell’s emerge from the comparison as far more compelling.

Convergences and influences

Coward’s facility in imitating, and distorting, Edith Sitwell’s style results partly from his own mastery of certain kinds of rhyme, rhythm, and humor, and partly from shared influences. While Coward and the Sitwells’ hostile readings of one another’s work might suggest a total dissimilarity in their aesthetics and interests, the Sitwells’ anxious attempts to privilege their own writing betray a fear of Coward as a potential competitor. To begin with, the sheer comedy of their work forms a basic link. Coward is of course known as a writer and performer of social comedies and humorous lyrics, but the Sitwells, too, worked in comic genres. Early audiences may have missed the humor and frivolity of their work: in *Taken Care Of*, Edith rather wearily entitled the chapter on *Façade* “The audience is meant to Laugh” (122). But some reviewers were sensitive to the comic dimensions of the Sitwells’ work. A 1923 review of Osbert’s poetry in *Vogue* remarked that the Sitwells “have made poetry amusing, which it has hardly been for a couple of centuries” (“Turning Over”). A *Daily Mail* reviewer said of the premiere of *Façade*: “Mr Walton’s...musical invention is as original and witty as Miss Sitwell’s poetry and fits the rhythm of the spoken line as though music and words were cast in one mould” (Lloyd 45).

The word “witty” was often applied to Coward as well as the Sitwells, but the siblings resented this. In 1936, Osbert wrote in the broadsheet *Sunday Referee*: “Mr Coward, with his frisky tea-shop dialogues, has gained among the nitwits a certain reputation for wit—but who in England is really witty, whether

rude or civil?" ("Mustard"). Yet, Osbert here uses the wordplay, double entendre, and polished style of insult that were typical of Coward's own style, and that had gained him his reputation for wit. Edith likewise contested current usage of "wit," and in the process disavowed the similarity between her work and Coward's which that usage implied. In 1930 she wrote to the novelist John Collier: "the word 'wit' has been debased from meaning Swift to meaning that wretched buffoon Noël Coward" (Greene 210). The two definitions she appeals to can be seen in one of the entries for "wit" in the OED: "That quality of speech or writing which consists in the apt association of thought and expression, calculated to surprise and delight by its unexpectedness ([with] particular applications in 17th and 18th century criticism ...); later always with reference to the utterance of brilliant or sparkling things in an amusing way" ("wit"). The first part of this definition neatly describes the best of Edith Sitwell's poetry. The last part certainly applies to Coward, and this is the mode of "wit" that his antagonist disparages.

In *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), William Empson comments on Pope's frequent use of "wit" in the "Essay on Criticism" (1711): "Pope continually plays off different kinds of people so as to make himself look better than either, and in the same way the smart flat little word *wit* seems meant to make Pope himself look something more important" (84). This is exactly the move Edith Sitwell makes when she plays off the type of straightforwardly funny, intensely contemporary wit that she is associating with Coward against what she describes as her own "virtuoso exercises in technique of an extreme difficulty" (*Taken Care* 123). In the chapter on "Vulgarity" in *Taken Care Of*, she comments: "The waiting, watching chroniclers discover as well new words for the enchantment of our smartness: 'shy-making' and 'bogus' ...—a particularly trying substitute for wit" (159). Sitwell attempts to relegate popular, modern writers such as Coward to the category of the merely fashionable, associating them with journalism ("chroniclers") rather than art. But in the case of Coward, this is difficult for her to carry off, because of the uncomfortable closeness of some of his work to her own and her brothers'. Indeed, this is evident in the lexicon of their critical reception: in addition to "witty," the terms "sophisticated" and "brittle" recur with particular frequency in reviews of both Coward's work and the Sitwells'.⁶

At the 1923 public premiere, Walton and Sitwell's *Façade* was advertised as a "New and Original Musical Entertainment." As Debora van Durme notes, Sitwell, in using this phrase, "teases her audience into comparing and contrasting the cycle with musical creations belonging to the other side of the so-called 'Great Divide,' the more so because *Façade* contains plentiful allusions to past and contemporary forms of popular music and musical performance." Like Coward's musical revues, *Façade* was made up of a series of "numbers," and combined speech, song, music, and visual display. In both *Façade* and the revues, the different numbers were in different styles, and they drew, variously, on vaudeville, ballads, and popular dance tunes, as well as figures and musical motifs from Victorian and Edwardian music-hall and operetta.⁷ All the Sitwells were appreciative of "light" forms of art and music and did not necessarily

seek to separate them from “high” art—Sacheverell’s essay “La Vie Parisienne” (1937), for instance, points out affinities between Mozart’s comic operas and Offenbach’s operettas (41).⁸ Similarly, Coward wrote in the introduction to his *Essential Songbook*: “I was born into a generation that still took light music seriously. The lyrics and melodies of Gilbert and Sullivan were hummed and strummed into my consciousness at an early age” (9).

Victorian operettas are certainly precursors for Coward’s lyrics, but also for some of Sitwell’s poems, such as the “Hornpipe” number in *Façade*:

Queen Victoria sitting shocked upon the rocking horse
Of a wave said to the Laureate, ‘This minx of course
Is as sharp as any lynx and blacker-deeper than the drinks and quite as
Hot as any hottentot, without remorse! (Walton and Sitwell 10)

In his article on *Façade*, Tim Barringer says of this number, “the overall effect is not so far from a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song” (134). This may lead us to the perception that it would not be so ludicrous to compare “Hornpipe” with, for instance, Coward’s early ‘thirties revue song, “Mad Dogs and Englishmen”:

It’s such a surprise for the Eastern eyes to see,
That though the English are effete,
They’re quite impervious to heat.
When the white man rides ev’ry native hides in glee,
Because the simple creatures hope he
Will impale his solar topee on a tree. (Coward, *Essential* 113-115)

High-speed tongue-twisters, internal rhyming, and a mixture of exotic and domestic imagery are common to both pieces.

Coward’s song was first performed in 1931 and then used in his 1932 revue *Words and Music*. This show was much admired for its verbal ingenuity, though Coward remarked that “it was too clever by half. It contained too much satire and too little glamour to attract the masses” (*Autobiography* 280). Rather like some of the Sitwells’ work, one might speculate. In other shows, Coward seems to have got the balance between these elements exactly right, ensuring audience appeal across a broad class or intellectual spectrum. Rebecca Cameron notes that the revue *This Year of Grace* (1928) was both commercially successful and also “very well received by a wide range of critics, several of whom praised him for his

ability to infuse spectacle with keen social satire” (83). *This Year of Grace*, she adds, was admired by both Virginia Woolf and Arnold Bennett, writers whose tastes rarely coincided.

Figures from pantomime or *commedia dell'arte* also appeared in the work of both Coward and the Sitwells. “Parisian Pierrot,” performed by Gertrude Lawrence, was one of the most successful musical numbers in *London Calling!*, and Coward has poems in his 1915 notebook entitled “Pierrot and Pierrette” and “Columbine and Harlequin” (Day 20). “Pantaloon” is mentioned in his song “Poor Little Rich Girl.” As Lloyd notes, Pierrot and harlequin figures were also prominent in decadent and modernist work, notably in Wilde and Beardsley, and also in Schoenberg’s *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912), which directly influenced *Façade* (33). In the work of the Sitwells, the influence of *commedia dell'arte* is particularly prominent in Edith and Osbert’s joint volume, *Twentieth Century Harlequinade and Other Poems* (1916), and in Edith’s collection *Clowns’ Houses* (1918). For their father’s castle in Italy, Osbert and Sacheverell commissioned frescos depicting *commedia dell'arte* characters (Pearson 157). Christopher Reed points out that, since pierrots evoke notions of masquerade and cross-dressing, “associations of youthful gender-bending adhered to the Sitwells’ frequent use of *commedia dell'arte* figures, which became a kind of signature for the famous siblings” (“Design” 388).

Reed’s observation directs us towards camp as another area of convergence between Coward’s aesthetic and the Sitwells’. Although it is possible to read their overt antagonism, and underlying affinities, in terms of sexuality,⁹ it would be more productive to consider the formal aspects of camp and to relate them to their writing and performance. Camp style is designed to provoke a sophisticated, amoral form of laughter, and it does this through artifice and frivolity. As Susan Sontag writes: “The Camp sensibility is one that is alive to a double sense in which some things can be taken. But this is not the familiar split-level construction of literal meaning, on the one hand, and a symbolic meaning, on the other. It is the difference, rather, between the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure artifice” (57).

Like Sitwell’s poetry, Noël Coward’s writing was, above all, artificial. Artificiality should not be confused with inauthenticity in this context. Inauthenticity provided the grounds for Coward’s critique of the Sitwells in the “Whittlebot” sketch and *Chelsea Buns*, but it is artificiality that, on another level, unites his aesthetic with theirs. All the most attractive characters in Coward’s plays are enormously theatrical—in *Hay Fever* (1925), for instance, the self-dramatizing Bliss family are described by a visitor as “artificial to the point of lunacy” (319)—yet it is they, and not their dull, straightforward visitors, who claim all the audience’s interest and sympathy. Surface polish, rather than emotional depth, is the basis of the appeal of Coward’s dramas and lyrics, just as “the Sitwells gloried in being all surface” (Barringer 128).

Façade borrows freely from high and popular culture; it is reminiscent as much of Lewis Carroll as of T.S. Eliot, as much of operetta as of Schoenberg.¹⁰ Barringer suggests that *Façade*, “formed by a unique

coming together of the literary, musical and visual, of the aristocratic and the popular, the parochial and the cosmopolitan ... simultaneously embraces, engages, dissembles and pokes fun at the full range of modernisms across the arts” (145). As I have argued elsewhere, in Coward’s plays, reviews, and verse, there is likewise a surprising range of moods and modes (*Sophistication* 113-118). In his work, the blasé co-exists with the romantic, the parodic with the serious, and the fragmented patter of the contemporary drawing room with nostalgic musical rhythms.

Since Noël Coward and the Sitwells are usually kept in different departments of literary and performance history, the parallels between them are rarely noted. As far as I can discover, Deborah Tyler-Bennett is the only critic who has pointed out similarities. She says of *Façade*: “In taking figures connected with masquerade, ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms, and decadence, Sitwell creates a type of ‘modernist’ cavalcade, which bears much similarity to Coward’s theatrical reviews.” She adds: “The carnivalesque [element]... means that the work salutes its own theatricality, again making it the poetic equivalent of a Coward revue. Sitwell thus reveals...her own ‘talent to amuse’” (46). Coward was explicitly hostile to modernism, while Sitwell embraced it. Yet this opposition becomes largely irrelevant when their work is read in conjunction. The comparison demonstrates that a challenging, formally experimental artwork such as *Façade* and a popular entertainment such as, for instance, *Words and Music* or *This Year of Grace* may draw on identical precursors, use the same techniques, and appeal in similar ways to an audience.

A contest of popularities

In her work on responses to modernism in the American popular press, Karen Leick argues that:

examining the ways popular audiences understood modernism rather than the ways modernists understood popular culture reveals that there was an increasingly intimate exchange between literary modernism and mainstream culture in this period and that, in part because of the rise of celebrity culture, modernist writers and texts were better known and, indeed, more popular than has been acknowledged. (126)

Taking Leick’s comment as my starting point, in this section I consider “smart” magazines as a site of encounter between Coward and the Sitwells, and between modernism and mainstream entertainment. All three of the Sitwells, as well as Coward, often contributed to, and were photographed for and discussed in the Condé Nast magazines *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. Of course, many celebrities appeared in these magazines, but these authors received particularly sustained attention, and sometimes in comparable

terms. One reason for this, I would suggest, is that their mixing of high and low, modernity and nostalgia, replicates the tendencies of the magazines themselves. *Vogue* in London and *Vanity Fair* in New York acted, during the 1920s at least, as showcases for modernism, and yet both might be classed as middlebrow magazines, on the basis of their combination of art and commerce, their eclectic mix of high and popular culture, and their emphasis on social aspiration and self-fashioning (Hammill, *Sophistication* 154-63). As Martha Banta remarks: “the 1920s made forays into the un-standard language of a vigorous popular culture. *Vanity Fair* caught on quickly to its possibilities” and began to pay attention to “the lively gravitas of vaudeville, movies, musical comedies, and the literary arts” (59).

A second reason for the appeal that the Sitwell family and Noël Coward possessed, for *Vogue* in particular, is identified by Christopher Reed. He says that, under the editorship of the maverick Dorothy Todd between 1922 and 1926: “almost every page of the arts and culture coverage in British *Vogue* during the 1920s is queer—intriguingly, delightfully, powerfully queer.” Reed intends “queer” both “in its broadest sense, to indicate an attitude that delights in destabilizing institutionally sanctioned hierarchies” and also “in its newer and narrower sense, to indicate identities constructed around nonnormative conceptions of gender and sexuality,” as exemplified by “*Vogue*’s enthusiasm for androgynous eroticism in this period” (“Design” 378). The Sitwells and Coward may be understood as “queer” in both senses; therefore, their unconventional, often camp self-presentation, and the disruptive and shocking dimensions of their work, probably increased their appeal to the fashionable magazines of the twenties.

Vogue launched the Sitwells photographically in 1924 with pictures by Maurice Beck and Helen MacGregor, who became in effect the Bloomsbury photographers (see Pepper, “Portrait” 29). Cecil Beaton later photographed all the Sitwells for *Vogue*,¹¹ and their houses were also showcased in illustrated features.¹² The visual coverage of Coward and his work in the Condé Nast magazines included pictures of actors in costume for his plays, together with portraits of Coward himself, ranging from a cartoon feature, “The Noël Coward Paper Doll” (Alajov) to atmospheric, elegant photographs by Edward Steichen.¹³ Tobia Bezzola comments: “Steichen sought the truth of his own time in the realms of fashion, by taking its formal caprices seriously” (190). This comment has a certain resonance in relation to the literary aesthetic of both Coward and the Sitwells. All of them, then, were the kind of figures the smart magazines appreciated—highly stylish in both visual and verbal terms, and therefore susceptible to glamorization on the one hand, and caricature on the other.

In 1929, *Vanity Fair* published Beaton’s celebrated portrait of the heads of the Sitwells, arranged on the floor, with each facing the back of another’s head. This picture, in fact, demonstrates the way in which they and Coward became entwined in media imagery, since it seems to be cited by Angus McBean, in one of his numerous photographs of Coward’s plays. The image (see Pepper, *Angus* 53) was published in *The*

Sketch in January 1939 and used on the poster for the 1938 British production of Coward's *Design for Living*. It shows the heads of the three stars, looking towards one another and smiling, so that they produce an amused commentary on the Sitwells' stern triple portrait.

And yet, were the Sitwells and Beaton being so stern? Presented on its own—as it was, for instance, in the 2008 *Vanity Fair Portraits* exhibition—the Beaton picture appears rather austere, even though its composition is droll. Considered in its original publication context in the magazine, it participates in the Sitwells' own witty masquerade through the caption printed underneath:

The Sitwells, three porcelain exquisites, proceeding in unison with an almost persuasive concentration from one to another baroque posture, like the syllables in a charade that make no sense separately but may gather some meaning when assembled: Osbert is memorable for his superb *Triple Fugue* [...]; Edith for her bizarre and brittle poems in *Sleeping Beauty*; and Sacheverell for his brilliant studies of southern and German baroque art. Perhaps they are gravely mad; perhaps they are fabulous comedians; certainly they would resent any accusation of usefulness. But the wonderful and really heartening part of it all is that they always keep perfectly straight faces, so that no one can ever afford to laugh; nor can you and I. (Amory and Bradlee 171)

Everything in this description—the reference to elusive meaning, the mention of the bizarre and the brilliant, and the suggestion of madness—constructs these writers as avant-garde. Their rejection of usefulness works to distance them from the realm of the middlebrow, with its emphasis on self-improvement, and its continuation of the Victorian emphasis on sincerity, authenticity and realism. And yet, the caption suggests that the Sitwells might simply be comedians, performing in a charade. And this, once again, permits a connection to a comedian like Coward, who—though he could never be categorized as avant-garde—likewise privileged the brittle and beautiful, and whose stage art rarely had a useful or morally improving purpose¹⁴ and was in no sense “realist.”

Written texts by or about these authors also appeared in the Condé Nast glossies. Coward's contributions to *Vanity Fair* included, for instance, “Memoirs of Court Favourites” (1921), a set of mock biographies of royal mistresses.¹⁵ In the 1930s, he became, as Robin Derrick and Robin Muir remark, “*Vogue*'s ‘Wonder Boy of English Literature’” (72). All three of the Sitwells contributed to Dorothy Todd's *Vogue*: Edith's essays were on Austen, George Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and women's poetry,¹⁶ while Osbert wrote about the Royal Wedding in 1923 and the Empire Exhibition in 1924. In 1922, *Vanity Fair* ran an essay on the Sitwells by Aldous Huxley, “The Modern Spirit and a Family Party,” in which he argued that they represented “the new synthesis that will reassemble, in an artistic whole, the shattered

values of our postwar world.” This, he adds, “will surely be a comic synthesis.”¹⁷ Most significantly, *Vogue* ran one of the most appreciative reviews of the 1923 performance of *Façade*, as well as a distinctly unamused review of *London Calling!*

The *Façade* review, by Charles Kenyon (signing himself Gerald Cumberland), was illustrated with Frank Dobson’s design for the front-cloth.¹⁸ Kenyon wrote: “To this hour I am by no means certain what some of her poems mean, but if I do not understand their beauty, I divine it, and for that reason, am all the more attracted, drawn, seduced” (Cumberland 36). This anticipates T.S. Eliot’s much-cited pronouncement that genuine poetry can sometimes “communicate before it is understood,” and in general terms, Kenyon’s review aligns Sitwell with the tendencies of what was already beginning to be called modernism. He associates her with radical newness—“Miss Sitwell, then, has discovered and tried a new method of interpretation”—and with eccentricity: “Her bizarre work demands a bizarre setting, a bizarre delivery.” He also writes of her “deliberately sought artificiality” (36).

Vogue’s wholehearted admiration of *Façade* seemed to entail a rejection of Coward’s skit. An unsigned theatre column, commenting on the Whittlebot sketch, complained that Coward and his collaborators had not “studied with sufficient care the methods of that scintillating trinity, Edith, Osbert, and Sacheverell Sitwell, whose poems are sharp as icicles, jagged as tinfoil, unexpected as flamingos in Bond Street or pearls in a dinner oyster. The attempted imitations are soft and silly, not to say sentimental” (“Seen on”). The strong affiliation of Dorothy Todd’s *Vogue* with modernism is evident here, in the embrace of the Sitwells’ “sharp” style and the rejection of the sentimentality that modernists tried so hard to disavow. Yet the castigation of *London Calling!* does not fit with the playful tone and openness to parody that more usually characterized the Condé Nast magazines, nor does it fit with their broader admiration of Coward’s work and of his personal style. It was only in the most intensely modernist moment of its history that *Vogue* took sides in the Sitwell-Coward feud.

Reconciliation

One way of reading the feud is in terms of class and snobbery. Coward and the Sitwell brothers were all part of “the international set,” a loose grouping of prominent society and artistic figures, who met one another frequently in recreational locations such as the French Riviera and also on transatlantic liners. The ocean liner was a key site of leisured sociability where the rules of on-shore society were somewhat suspended; it facilitated cross-class encounter and upward mobility. So it is not surprising that liners provided the setting for many plays, stories, and musicals from this era, including some of Coward’s own work, as well as Osbert and Sacheverell’s play *All at Sea* (1927). Pearson remarks that the play burlesqued “successful actors who, like Coward, had the temerity to cut a dash within polite society,” and

was “intent on putting these pretentious *parvenus* quite firmly in their places” (200). Unfortunately, he adds, it was “an infantile and boring piece of nonsense” (242).

In the “Explanatory Preface” for his 1931 *Collected Sketches and Lyrics* (in which the Whittlebot script is included), Coward offers another possible reading of the feud—as a mode of publicity: “Some acrimonious letters were exchanged between Osbert Sitwell and myself, which we both enjoyed writing and reading, and... we cut each other ostentatiously on every possible occasion and subjected many of our hostesses to a delighted inconvenience” (x). While Coward’s relationship with Edith Sitwell took shape almost entirely through the medium of writing (letters, published comments), his competition with Osbert played out on a social level, in the elite spaces of transatlantic high society. After three years, Coward decided to try to end hostilities. In a 1926 letter, he belittles the feud by using the language of a playground fight, yet still insists he was the victor:

Oh dear, I’ve made it up with Osbert Sitwell and it’s all very funny—I wrote him a note saying that as we were both in a Foreign Country we ought to put an end to the Feud, then he came round and suggested quite pleasantly that I should apologise to Edith in all the papers! I gave him an old-fashioned look and explained gently that he was very silly indeed, which he seemed to understand perfectly and we parted very amicably. It really was becoming a bore because he wasn’t being asked anywhere, poor dear, owing to my popularity being the greater! So that’s that. (“To Violet Coward” 130)

That wasn’t really that: Coward wrote a letter of apology to Edith, but the reply, dated 6 December 1926, was notably terse: “Dear Mr. Coward, I accept your apology. Yours sincerely, Edith Sitwell” (Sitwell, “To Noël Coward”). The feud was clearly not over. When Coward sought to reprint *Chelsea Buns* in 1932, Sitwell had her lawyer write to his publisher (Greene 169-170). In his diary, Coward mentions two further reconciliations with Osbert, in 1947 and 1956, but even on the second occasion, he was still referring to the need to resolve “the age-old feud” (318).¹⁹

Coward’s remark, in the 1926 letter, about “my popularity being the greater” is intriguing. Social “popularity” here shades into notions of popularity with audiences, and raises questions relating to the success and appeal of his work and that of his antagonists. Despite, or perhaps because of their conflict, Coward and the Sitwells could not be kept in separate cultural categories: their reputations became interrelated, their social circles overlapped, and they received exposure in the same media venues. Over the course of several decades, the apparent opposition between them became even less clear, as patterns of literary celebrity and cultural capital shifted, and as the work of both altered also. The Sitwells had

initially been satirized for their obscurantism, not only by Coward but also by, for instance, J.C. Squire in his 1924 story “The Man Who Wrote Free Verse.”

In 1926, Edith Sitwell wrote a defense of difficult literature, *Poetry and Criticism* (1926), but by 1934 she was already accusing the second generation of modernist writers of a pointless “surface difficulty,” which misleadingly “gives the average person the impression that the poems conceal great depths” (*Aspects* 231). Difficulty, as Leonard Diepeveen has argued in *The Difficulties of Modernism* (2003), is a reading practice rather than an aesthetic property of a literary text, since challenging writing is often rendered familiar and “explicable” by later generations of readers, critics and publishers.²⁰ This process affected Sitwell, to the extent that, for example, sections of *Facade* began to be included in anthologies of poetry for children, in an odd reprise of initial responses to the piece which accused it of being childish nonsense.²¹ The full score and text of the twenty-one number *Façade Entertainment* was published in 1951; the choice of this version of the title emphasizes its affinities with musical and variety theatre. The publication was followed by a second Decca recording in 1953,²² and the work at last went into large-scale circulation. The broader context to this was that a more popular-minded art audience had become familiar with the repertoire of what had been avant-garde, so that Sitwell’s modernism was no longer perceived as threatening.²³

Coward’s work, meanwhile, was no longer identified with an intensely modern smartness, and was increasingly marketed through nostalgia for the lost and mythologized 1920s. His plays gradually became staples of provincial repertory theatres rather than featuring regularly on the West End or Broadway stage.²⁴

During this period, the treatment given to Coward and Edith Sitwell as literary celebrities from a former era was quite similar. Coward noted in his diary on 12 November 1956: “Yesterday I spent eight hours solid recording with Maggie Leighton for a highbrow company called Caedmon, who generally put out records of Edith Sitwell, T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, etc” (336). He is still using Sitwell as a marker of the highbrow, though actually, while Caedmon’s discography from this period does include e.e. cummings, Stein, Joyce and so on, it also covers Grimm fairytales, nonsense verse and excerpts from the *Cambridge Treasury of English Prose*. So it looks very much like a middlebrow enterprise of bringing high culture to wide audiences.²⁵

However, the key point is that the work of these authors was now being included in the same series, and their status in British literary culture was more equivalent than it ever had been. Both had once been icons of modernness, in their different ways, and both certainly been able to shock: as in Coward’s scandalous *The Vortex* (1924) with its representation of drug addiction and incestuous desire, and Sitwell’s bizarre poetic and performance techniques. But by the early 1960s, they had become very much part of the

establishment: Edith Sitwell was already a Dame and had some honorary doctorates, Osbert was a Commander of the British Empire, and Coward would shortly be knighted.²⁶

On a personal level, the mutual contempt that the antagonists had formerly felt for one another had evolved, by this period, into admiration. On 29 April 1956, Coward recorded in his diary that he had met Osbert Sitwell at a cocktail party, where they “had a long talk and he couldn’t have been nicer. It seems at long last that the age-old feud will be resolved, with a little effort from me” (318). In relation to Osbert’s sister, the enmity had been more bitter. Their eventual rapprochement originated on a textual level: they began to read and appreciate one another’s work. In 1962, Coward read Edith’s book on Elizabeth I, *The Queens and the Hive*, and described it as “wonderfully readable and, at moments, brilliant” (*Diaries* 514). So he sent her a fan letter and she replied by telegram: “DELIGHTED STOP FRIENDSHIP NEVER TOO LATE.” A warm interchange of letters followed. On 26 September 1962, she wrote to thank him for “your charming ... letter, which pleased and touched me more than I can say.” In a diary entry dated 21 November, Coward records: “On Sunday I went to tea with Edith Sitwell in her flat in Hampstead. I must say I found her completely charming, very amusing and rather touching.... She gave me her new slim volume of poems. I am fairly unrepentant about her poetry. I really think that three-quarters of it is gibberish” (518). He exactly reciprocates Sitwell’s assessment of himself as “charming” and “touching,” though his aversion to the experimental idioms of her poetry persists. He continued to dislike Osbert’s writing, too, referring in 1960 to its “pomposity and intricacy of style” (*Diaries* 153).

For her part, Edith Sitwell expressed a remarkably degree of admiration for the volume of his short stories which Coward gave her:

There are no short stories written in England in our time that I admire more. I think “Aunt Tittie,” for instance, a real masterpiece. I am not a cry-baby but it brings tears to my eyes every time I read it—and I have read it over and over again.... I am sending you my *Notebook* on Shakespeare. The cover is so unspeakably appalling that I nearly faint when I contemplate it. I do not know if it is meant as a portrait of me if I turn blue, or if it is supposed to represent a map.²⁷

It is fitting that “Aunt Tittie” should cement the new bond between them, since it is about music-hall performers, and so speaks to one of their shared interests. But the really interesting point is that it was prose writing that finally brought them together. It was not the primary genre of either, since Coward was principally a dramatist and Sitwell a poet. The territory of prose was perhaps more neutral, and in this area, they wrote with a similar purpose: to appeal to a wide audience, and to make money.²⁸

Coward received just one more letter from Edith Sitwell, which concludes: “I look forward so much to seeing you when we both get back to England. Your ancient friend (ancient God knows), Edith” (Coward, *Letters* 86-87).²⁹ They never did meet again. He recorded on 16 December 1964: “Poor old enemy-friend Edith Sitwell died. I am sad, and glad that I talked to her before I left London” (*Diaries* 584). His autobiography, however, makes no mention of Edith Sitwell, nor does Sitwell’s memoir, completed just before she died and published in 1965, contain any mention of Noël Coward.³⁰

Intriguingly, the style and tone of these 1960s letters and personal writings are convergent: they suggest a closely related sense of humor, a similar vocabulary, and a parallel method of self-mockery. They are both fluent in a social language that, in both oral and written forms, harks back to the “smart” dialogue of the 1920s when both Coward and the Sitwells were at the peak of their youthful fame, and at their most provocative as writers. Perhaps, then, it was not so much irreconcilable differences, but underlying similarities in style and attitude that made their relationship so difficult. The feud, which seemed to place Coward and the Sitwells on opposite sides of a cultural divide, has prevented exploration of their shared literary and performative strategies, as well as of their related innovations in the area of musical entertainment.

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Notes

¹ The “Ass Face” number was dropped from later presentations of *Façade* (Walton and Sitwell 49).

² Pearson cites private information from Lesley. These details are absent from Lesley’s biography.

³ On the sketch, see Bradford et al 96; Lloyd 36-46; Mander and Mitcheson 55-60. These accounts, like all the other secondary sources on Coward and the Sitwells cited in this essay, focus primarily either on Coward or on one of the Sitwells, presenting the feud as an episode in the career of the individual figure they are most concerned with. This discussion is the first to center on the relationship itself.

⁴ The illustrator, Gabriel Atkins, adds another layer of parody in a drawing of the trio holding hands across a small expanse of water. His title, “Hands Across the Sea,” refers to their performance, in 1927, of Osbert and Sacheverell’s play *All at Sea*, described by Osbert as “a satire on current silliness so near to silliness itself that the silly would feel at home with it” (Pearson 242). Strangely enough, Coward later wrote a one-act play entitled “Hands Across the Sea” for his *Tonight at 8.30* (1936).

⁵ Chelsea was the location of Osbert and Sacheverell’s house, site of the first private performance of *Façade*.

⁶ There are many descriptions of these authors as “brittle” or “sophisticated.” Regarding Edith Sitwell, see Cumberland; Snow. Regarding Sacheverell Sitwell, see Gorman; Zabel. Regarding Coward, see Callow; Duncan 225; Farley 88. For discussion of the complex resonances of “sophisticated,” see Hammill.

⁷ On the influence of foxtrot and polka rhythms on Sitwell's work, see Barringer 131; van Durme. See Tyler-Bennett 37 on the influence of music hall and ballad. I am grateful to Tim Barringer for suggesting some of the connections I mention here.

⁸ Compare Sacheverell's *Morning, Noon and Night in London* (1948), a reflection on the music halls of Victorian London.

⁹ One reason for the siblings' furious response to *London Calling!* was that Edith (who never saw the show) believed that Hernia was portrayed as lesbian (Pearson 187). There is no evidence in the text for this, although some of the *Chelsea Buns* poems are more suggestive. Sitwell has occasionally been discussed in terms of queer aesthetics (see Samberger), or associated with drag performance. Barrie Humphries, as "Dame Edna Everage," once announced "I was Dame Edith Sitwell in a previous life" (Greene 434). Terry Castle, in *Noël Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits*, argues that Hall modelled her masculine style on Coward's; in turn, Coward's *Spangled Unicorn* (1932) includes pastiche lesbian poetry, supposedly modeled on Hall's.

¹⁰ Van Durne notes that *Pierrot Lunaire* itself is indebted to German cabaret culture, and that some of Walton and Sitwell's other high modernist sources were similarly influenced by popular culture.

¹¹ One of his portraits of Edith at Renishaw Hall appeared in 1927, as did his image of "Bright Young Things," which included Osbert and Sacheverell (see Derrick and Muir 30, 32). Beaton also photographed Edith for his 1934 "Celebrities in Bed" feature for *Vanity Fair* (Amory and Bradlee 283).

¹² See Reed, "Design" on the coverage of Osbert and Sacheverell's Chelsea house, and their father's Tuscan castle.

¹³ For Steichen's portraits, see *Vanity Fair* (1 November 1932): 34; *Vogue* (15 January 1933): 38.

¹⁴ Except for his patriotic work. His 1931 dramatic pageant *Cavalcade*, his wartime entertainment of troops, and his film *In Which We Serve* (1942) could be construed as uplifting (see Cameron for discussion of *Calvacade*'s conflicted patriotism), whereas the majority of his work resisted moral purpose.

¹⁵ Rpt. in Amory and Bradlee 56-57. Also included in Coward's *A Withered Nosegay* (1922).

¹⁶ On Sitwell's *Vogue* essays about Stein, see Reed, "A Vogue" 58-59.

¹⁷ On Huxley's contributions to *Vanity Fair*, see Banta 120-122; 145-175.

¹⁸ Two further front-cloths were designed for subsequent performances (see Barringer).

¹⁹ The 1956 episode is discussed below. In 1947, they both attended a party at Buckingham Palace; Coward merely noted that he "had a *rapprochement* with Osbert Sitwell" (*Diaries* 96). Osbert then felt obliged to remove all mention of the feud from *Laughter in the Next Room*, the fourth volume of his autobiography, then in preparation (Pearson 393).

²⁰ This idea is elaborated throughout the book. See Diepeveen 2-9 on Squire's satire of the Sitwells.

²¹ In fact, *Façade* draws on children's culture in creative ways. See Bryant; also Tyler-Bennett on Sitwell's use of "fantasy figures...taken from folk and fairy tales, myth, nursery rhyme, puppet theatre" (17).

²² The first was made in 1930 and only included 11 numbers.

²³ At the same time, Sitwell had ceased writing new experimental poetry; her late style was largely nonmodernist. Bryant notes: "The onset of World War II prompted Sitwell to fashion a poetry of worldly *gravitas* rather than playful innovation, marking a second phase of her career. She became a contender for the poet laureateship as well as a cross-Atlantic performing artist who received coverage in the popular press" (1).

²⁴ Whilst I am focusing on British literary culture in this essay, it is important to note that Coward and the Sitwells were all received with particular enthusiasm in the US.

²⁵ On Caedmon, see McNeilly. On the aspirational and democratizing aspects of the middlebrow, see especially: Guillory; Hammill 119-23; Hilliard; Rubin. For a fuller list of references, see <http://www.middlebrow-network.com/Bibliography.aspx>

²⁶ This respect did not translate into canonical status for Coward or Sitwell: neither features regularly or extensively in histories of modern literature, or in university courses.

²⁷ 23 November 1962. Not included in Lehmann and Parker's edition of Sitwell's letters; see Coward, *Letters*, which reproduces the exchange sequentially.

²⁸ Sitwell always said she only wrote prose to make money (Greene 299).

²⁹ 3 March 1963.

³⁰ Coward's autobiography contains only the one mention of Osbert (quoted above).

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