

Witnessing the Wasteland

Sight, Sound and Response in Edith Sitwell's "Three Poems of the Atomic Age."

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We did not heed the Cloud in the Heavens shaped like
the hand
Of Man But there came a roar as if the Sun and
Earth had come together –
The Sun descending and the Earth ascending
To take its place above the Primal Matter
Was broken, the womb from which all life began.
Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose in
memory of Man. ("The Shadow of Cain" 93-101)

The place where the scientific meets the poetic underwent a transformation when atomic bombs were used against Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. Primed to images of apocalypse and destruction by the 1922 publication of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," poets found themselves in a position where life imitated art. Like their fellow citizens, poets were witness to a scientific revolution—one that began with Rutherford splitting the atom and ended with a more efficient and competent slaughter than anything previously experienced. Lehmann comments that "the war, in the end, found its voices in the work of many poets and novelists; but the peace, the victory, the defeat, the bewilderment in defeat and the heart-breaking disappointment in victory, the apocalyptic manifestation of atomic power—the poets seemed too long to have been too dazed to think of

them" (30). His one exception is Edith Sitwell who confronted the atom bomb in her "Three Poems of the Atomic Age" (Collected Poems 368-378): for Sitwell built a narrative about the bombing—not so much a narrative of events, but of understanding, as she confronted the moral consequences of this new capacity for destruction. Sitwell's "Three Poems" include "Dirge of the New Sunrise," which describes the moment the atomic bomb was dropped upon Hiroshima; "The Canticle of the Rose," which uses the symbolism of a rose growing out of the atomic wasteland as a metaphor for Jesus Christ; and "The Shadow of Cain," which Sitwell describes as being "about the fission of the world into warring particles, destroying and self-destructive" (Collected Poems xlii).

But how did Sitwell approach her role as witness to atomic warfare, and as prophet for the consequences thereof?

How were these roles affected by her cultural beliefs? As a poetic witness, possibly *the* poetic witness of this event in contemporary English poetry, how did Sitwell interpret her experiences as observer, and did her methodology affect her output? In this essay, I will argue that in the contrasting use of the visual and the aural witness, sight and sound represent differing responses to the apocalypse embodied by the atomic bomb. Furthermore, taking these dual witnesses together allows for a unified perspective that is both reactive and contemplative. Sitwell links imagery of the seeing dead to the dead's ability to act as witness, contrasting the comparative innocence of life before the bomb to the collective guilt of life after it. Yet, where sight and visual imagery are characterized by Sitwell as passive responses, sound brings active communication, resurrection, and restoration.

Naturally, Sitwell's attitude to the bomb is embedded in the culture of her time and place—her atomic poems did not arise out of a literary or cultural vacuum. As Stewart notes, "a poem like 'The Shadow of Cain' (1947) shows clearly that it is to a world of feeling largely created by Mr. Eliot that much of this transformation may be due" (17). It is interesting to speculate about Sitwell's response to the atom bomb in

the absence of Eliot's seminal text "The Waste Land," but the double shock of Eliot and nuclear Armageddon allowed Sitwell to explore the effect of the bomb within an existing cultural context. Her chosen feeling was transformative. It had to be. The status quo had been altered beyond repair, and before Sitwell could understand the holocaust at Hiroshima she had to transform the new atomic landscape, to translate it into familiar and meaningful imagery.

Following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a future sudden atomic apocalypse was a possibility that everybody had to face. As Milosz comments, "[b]oth individuals and human societies are constantly discovering new dimensions accessible only to direct experience" (4). The direct experience of the atomic bomb forced Sitwell to fold that experience into the sum of herself, her experiences and beliefs, to provide a moral context for the destruction it had caused. Her primary response to the atomic bomb was to "protest and project herself into the role of the delphic prophetess of doom" (Pearson 382), to become "a modern seer, the interpreter of suffering humanity" (Glendinning 260). According to Mills, Sitwell's role is that "of the prophet, of the poet who has the gift of ultimate truth about man" (63). Braybrooke interprets the poet as symbol as much as the poetry: Sitwell is "ready to be a chalice through which that truth may pour which is the blood of Christ, the wine of universal life" (240). Sitwell's atomic poetry was strongly influenced by her religious beliefs, and while her understanding of humanity's dual capacity for good and evil is reflected in her religious understanding, it is evident also in her use of poetic and scientific allegories.¹ For example, throughout her poetry the image of the sun variously represents Christ, the power of the bomb, and the "Sun of the heart" (Sitwell, *Collected Poems* xlii).

The concept of duality is reflected in the imagery of Sitwell's poems, and has been noted by many of her critics. Ower describes her wit as being "apocalyptic, mirroring a world in which harmony and redemption exist in a state

of tension against evil and the clash of contraries" ("Metaphysical Medium" 266). Braybrooke characterizes her work as a type of melding: the "fusion of expression" (237) between Sitwell's earlier works and the poetry of Dylan Thomas; the "marriage of echoes" (238) of prose and poetry; the unity of "myth and miracle" (240). This tension, the use of paired concepts and fusion of opposites, is a technique Sitwell uses to link events and images

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together in an ordered progression of ideas. The contrast, for example, between the images of destruction and resurrection allow her to connect the two, as if destruction is necessary for resurrection. This can be seen in "Canticle," where the Rose says "I cry of Christ, Who is the ultimate Fire / Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man" (59-60).

This tendency toward duality is reflected not only in Sitwell's poetic imagery, but in her witness methodology and in her approach to prophecy. The "Three Poems of the Atomic Age" act as witness statements to the events of August 1945. That Sitwell was in the United Kingdom at the time does not exclude her as an atomic witness. While she was not physically present in either Nagasaki or Hiroshima during the bombings, or in the immediate aftermath, she was witness to the effect those acts had on the culture and morality of the society in which she lived. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were truly global events that captured the attention of the world as images and testimonials of a new potential for destruction and loss of human life were broadcast worldwide. Widespread social, political and ethical debate in the wake of the bombings was inevitable.

Interestingly, Sitwell's role as atomic witness is both reinforced and transformed by communications from other witnesses. Sitwell recalls her exposure to another witness statement over a month after the first atomic bomb was dropped, when her brother, Sir Osbert Sitwell, pointed out to me a paragraph in *The Times*, a description by an eyewitness of the immediate effect of the atomic bomb upon Hiroshima. That witness saw a totem pole of dust arise to

the sun as a witness against the murder of mankind ... from that moment the poem began (*Collected Poems* xlii).

The poem referred to is "The Shadow of Cain," unquestionably the most complicated of the three "Poems of the Atomic Age," where a geologic history of the Earth is combined with the Biblical story of Lazarus in a rolling pageant of response to the moral questions that the atomic bomb inspires. Like "Canticle," "Cain" incorporates a witness statement from another person into the text, repeating images communicated by those present in the aftermath of the bombings:

And only her red shadow stains the unremembering stone. ("Canticle" 35)

Then to the murdered Sun a totem pole of dust arose in / memory of Man. ("Cain" 100-101)

Sitwell's atomic poems are particularly interesting in that she not only acts as witness, but implicitly distinguishes between the duality of two different types of witness statements. "Dirge for the New Sunrise" is effectively separated from its companion poems by differing methodology; its witness statements are primarily visual: for example, "And watch the phantom Sun in Famine Street" (5). The witness statements from both "Cain" and "Canticle," however,

are primarily aural: for example, “And everywhere / The great voice of the Sun in sap and bud” (“Cain” 78-79).

Initially this may appear a thin distinction. “The Shadow of Cain” has the richer imagery, and a greater reliance on colour—for example “great emerald thunders” (71) and “vermilion Suns” (104). Yet the narrator’s primary interaction within the poem comes via speech and sound. This is because “Cain,” and to a lesser extent “Canticle,” are more concerned with explanation and understanding than “Dirge” which, written first, provides a more immediate and visceral reaction to the effects of the atom bomb than its more considered sisters. The distinction between imagery and methodology is important. The first illustrates a poem, but the second gives it purpose.

The visual element, the sense most closely associated with the act of witnessing, is the predominant characteristic of atomic imagery.

Descriptions of light and explosion, fire and ashes, are combined with the human body to produce the image of the body as ruined wasteland—Hiroshima in miniature—where the dual desecration of moral sense and environmental destruction is played out on a burning tapestry of human flesh. Linked with the ability to see is the presence of light, without which sight is useless. Sitwell’s use of the imagery of light has “a seminal relationship to life” (Brophy 96). As the dominant source of light, Sitwell’s sun is a “power both in the spiritual world and in the spirit” and “a divine power which resolves the discords of life and imparts an order to everything” (Bowra 39). Accompanying the sun’s light is its warmth, which “is sometimes identified with love, human wickedness being the opposite ‘cold in the heart of man’” (Morgan 51). In “Dirge of the New Sunrise” the focus on sight, the ability to see, is the primary method of witness. However, Sitwell

uses the contrast between vision and blindness to maintain ambiguity with respect to the narrator’s identity. On the one hand, the narrator of the poem “watch[es] the phantom Sun in Famine Street” (5) and once “saw the little Antmen as they ran” (26). Here Sitwell implies that her narrator has the ability to see, and therefore can act as a witness of what has been seen. On the other hand, Sitwell undermines the reliability of her narrator’s sight, as all eyes are physically destroyed in her poem: “But no eyes grieved / For none were left for tears” (17-18); “The eyes that saw, the lips that kissed, are gone” (35). Finally, Sitwell claims that “The living blind and seeing Dead together lie” (37). The reader is forced to consider the nature of this blindness, and what it might say about the world in which the poem—and the event itself—takes place. The implication is that the narrator of the poem, retaining the ability to see, is dead, and that the ability of the living



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to act as witnesses of what they have seen is compromised. The willful moral blindness of the living is balanced by the physical blindness of the dead, and the integration of those who will not see with those who cannot leaves the reader with a sighted corpse, a witness capable of seeing only when all other options have been destroyed.

For Sitwell, death can be correlated with knowledge, for none can be as aware of the effects of an atomic holocaust as its victims. The eyes of the victims, blasted as they may be, have first-hand knowledge while those who see from a distance can never truly comprehend the extent of the horror of the atomic wasteland. Alternately, one can argue, as Sitwell does in “Dirge,” that “gone is the heart of Man” (39) and that a collective guilt adheres to “the more murderous brain / Of Man” (7-8) that is so immense that the sinful state that existed before the bomb becomes one of relative innocence. That innocence is itself burned up in the ensuing holocaust. In such a reality, “all is one” and all is dead (16). While the witnessing dead are a central focus of Sitwell’s poetry, her role as an apocalyptic prophet makes this emphasis even more poignant. A fundamental truth of the atomic bombs was their continued existence—the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not events that could be safely left in the past. The bombing of the two Japanese cities threatened two-fold destruction: not only the horrific initial devastation of nuclear Armageddon, but the ongoing environmental effects that turned the ruined cities into a waste land of a different type—contaminated, contaminating, and brutally carcinogenic. The potential existed for a repeat performance, and all that witnessed the destruction of these cities from afar must have wondered if the same fate might ever befall them. Some, like Sitwell, looked further, asking if that destruction might ever be perpetrated by them. It is the function of a prophet to look to the future, and Sitwell was forced to consider the question of guilt. If life before the bomb was one of comparative innocence, and the “murderous brain” is enough

to pronounce a present guilt, then the continued use of that brain to commit repeated devastation on an enormous scale is enough to fundamentally alter the human condition. “[G]one is the heart of Man” (39) Sitwell warns in “Dirge,” describing a society that countenances, that continues to countenance, such apocalyptic actions.

“The Canticle of the Rose” and “The Shadow of Cain” have fewer references

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to sight and/or blindness than “Dirge for the New Sunrise,” despite the fact that both are longer poems. In “Canticle” and “Cain,” the expressions of sight and the invitation to witness are attributed to clearly defined characters or personalities that are often not human observers. In “Canticle,” Fate ascends from Hell to ask for “pence to lay upon my staring lidless eyes” (53) and the Rose upon the wall says “[s]ee how I rise upon my stem, ineffable bright” (57). Here, the Rose symbolizes Christ and the laying of coins upon the eyes of a corpse is reminiscent of a custom practiced so that the corpse can pay Charon to ferry them to the Underworld. The contrast between the dead, staring eyes associated with Fate and the instruction to witness the rise of Christ indicates the resurrection of the ability of humanity to see without and beyond death. In “Cain,” Sitwell mentions that the Sun speaks to “the blind eyes” (82), but the primary reference to vision in this poem is in the “civilization of the Maimed, and, too, Life’s lepers” (131) who “brought the Aeons of Blindness and the Night / Of the World, crying to him, ‘Lazarus, give us sight!’” (134-135). Here, Dives, who “did not look at us” (166), is the ruined personification of self-centredness and greed; he cannot look further than himself. Alternatively, Sitwell describes Lazarus as “the terrible ideal of useless Suffering ... the hero of death and the mud, taking the place in men’s minds

of the Hero of Life Who was born in a stable” (*Collected Stories* xlv).

In contrast to the imagery of sight, the references to voice and sound, and by extension soundlessness and unhearing, are linked with the active, communicative witness and the capacity for dialogue. The primarily visual “Dirge for the New Sunrise” contains but one reference to sound: “And the ray from that heat came soundless,

shook the sky” (31). It is the absence of sound that characterizes this aural landscape, underscoring the primarily visual nature of the poem. In contrast, “Canticle of the Rose” is almost entirely speech, including several instances of the Christ-figure speaking, as well as Fate and other characters. The element of light, previously the vehicle for the visual reaction, is explicitly distanced from witness statements:

‘Speak not the name of Light—

Her name is Madness now ... Though we are black

beneath her kiss,

As if she were the Sun, her name is Night (19-22)

With the Sun figure compromised, light and the ability to see give way to the aural witness. While a person acting as visual witness may see and react, the hearing witness implies the ability to speak as well as hear, and therefore the ability to communicate with others. Sitwell’s emphasis on duality occurs again in the witnessing ability of the poet-narrator. The visual witness, the sighted observer, is prioritized in reaction. The visual witness is also a primarily personal one; it is the immediate and visceral individual response, derived from that sense—sight—which is most often used as the first reaction to the world outside the individual. It is possible, of course, for a visual witness to narrate what has been seen to others, even to other visual witnesses. This discussion,

however, can alter what was originally observed. Others may have seen differently, or seen more, and this can effect the perceived reliability of any eyewitness statements. In contrast, the aural witness is concerned with hearing and reflection. Additionally, the aural witness is primarily public. Speech implies a minimum of two parties, a speaker and a listener, each with their own individual reactions. It is speaking these differences that gives the possibility of comprehension. This combination of the aural and visual in Sitwell's atomic poems implies that one can experience an event by seeing

in a newspaper article in 1945, in 2013 she would have seen images of the totem pole almost as it appeared. As a result, Sitwell relied heavily on others to provide the personal, visceral details; the images that really underscored the horror of the immediate destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is therefore important to note the effect of assimilated witness statements on the distinction between visual and aural methodology. Two of the primary visual images in "Cain" and "Canticle"—the totem pole of dust and the red shadowed stone—are incorporated by Sitwell from other witness statements. These are

will (or might) be, but this capacity is useless if what is seen cannot be shared. It is not enough to see. A prophet, to be a prophet, must speak. Sitwell, as a poet, was accustomed to speech. She was accustomed to aural (and oral) communication—how a poem sounds, how it will be communicated. Like a prophet, Sitwell assumed the existence of a listener: someone who would not only hear her but would respond to what she had to say. This response is key: Sitwell was not working out her own understanding of the apocalyptic atomic bomb for her own amusement, or to prompt an idle, inconsequential debate. Her prophecy was one of duality, of cause and consequence, of damnation and salvation, and her specific understanding of the underlying meaning of that prophecy is most evident in "The Shadow of Cain." While "Cain" does not contain so great a proportion of speech and references to hearing as "Canticle," aurality is nonetheless a large and important part of the poem, and defined allegorical and religious characters often speak to one another. Most interesting in the context of witness methodologies and statements is the following verse:

And everywhere
The great voice of the Sun in sap and
bud
Fed from the heart of Being, the panic
Power,
The sacred Fury, shouts of Eternity
To the blind eyes, the heat in the winged
seed, the fire in
the blood. (78-83)

If the Sun is associated with the human heart and/or the divine, and blindness with death and knowledge, then the power of the divine over death, the ability to resurrect and heal, is in sharp contrast to the lines in "Dirge" where

... the phantom Sun in Famine Street –
The ghost of the heart of Man ... red
Cain

And the more murderous brain (5-7) implies that the "phantom Sun" is incapable of resurrection. If Sitwell is acting as a prophet in this poem, then by her beliefs the "phantom Sun" is a false prophet—one with the ability to see but who is soundless, lacking

A prophet sees what is and what will (or might) be, but this capacity is useless if what is seen cannot be shared.

it, but it is only by communicating with others that the event can be understood. Whether communication occurs with other people such as other witnesses in Sitwell's poem, or with what she perceived as the divine, is almost irrelevant. Understanding is an aural—and an oral—process, born of interacting with another intelligence. Sitwell herself interacted with other witnesses (for example her brother Osbert, when they shared the newspaper article referenced above) to come to an understanding about the atomic apocalypse in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. However, she also interacted with her personal God via prayer, and the ideologies and beliefs surrounding this interaction contributed to her conclusions as well.

Sitwell's own potential as a witness is complicated by a cultural balance between the visual and the aural. She lived in an interesting time—in a world too big and disconnected to see everything, and when the technology available to bridge that distance was just becoming established. The advent of internet and wireless technologies has made image sharing more immediate and far reaching than in the 1940s. While Edith Sitwell heard of the totem pole of dust from witness testimonial

highly visual scenes, but Sitwell did not physically witness the images she describes. She did not see the totem pole of dust with her own eyes; rather it is an image and understanding of the moment of atomic impact that is informed by interactions between other witnesses. Reports given to journalists and newspapermen, eyewitness statements, descriptions of the context of visual images such as photographs are all aural processes. They deal in words and sound instead of pictures and light. Both are necessary. Without the experience of the visual witness, it is impossible to see, and to ultimately understand, the horrific consequences of the decision to make and use the atomic bomb. Similarly, without sharing their experiences, the visual witness is cut off from other perspectives, limiting the understanding of what they have seen. Only when Sitwell integrates the two methodologies can she form an appropriately reactive, contemplative, and informed response.

Sitwell underlines the tension between the immediate reactions of what one sees to the more considered reflections of what one tells (or hears) by using the dual methodologies of other witnesses. This too is the function of a prophet. A prophet sees what is and what

the capacity for communication and thus comprehension. By contrast, the hearing witness in “Cain” is brought to understanding where “through the works of Death, / The dust’s aridity, is heard the sound” (84-85) of the coming, communicative Christ. Sitwell reconciles what she saw in the atom bomb—“the world without love, the world of absolute zero” (Clark, qtd in Sitwell 270)—with her religious beliefs by using the figure of Christ (the Sun and the Rose) as a bridge between what she sees and what she understands.

Ower argues that Sitwell’s “vision of atonement and redemption is based upon a fusion of contraries and an absorption of the bitter consequences of the fall into a high synthesis” (255). She uses “a system of images which constitute demonic parodies of these sacramental signs” (Ower 546), culminating in “The Shadow of Cain,” where the “spiritual state of man and

the physical state of the world, from atomic fission, are welded together” (Karmatz 144).

The duality inherent in her atomic poems, the characteristic melding of opposites, is apparent again in the contrast between heat and cold. At one extreme is absolute zero, the point of all-stop and all-silence.

Cold is the highest mathematical idea
... the

Cold is Zero—

The Nothing from which arose

All Being and all variation.... (Collected Poems 7-10)

Cold fulfills this role not only in a geological and historical sense as the “endless positing/ Of Nothing” (*Collected Poems* 12-13)² but also as the unredeemed state of human nature. Sitwell stated that “Cain” is about “the fission of the world into warring particles...the spiritual migration of these into the desert of the Cold, towards

the final disaster, the first symbol of which fell on Hiroshima” (*Collected Poems* xlii). In her poems, however, she reconciles event with consequence in an act of speech in “Canticle,” as she writes, “I cry of Christ, Who is the Ultimate Fire / Who will burn away the cold in the heart of Man” (59-60). The corruption of the traditional Sun symbol has the potential to blind and freeze and bring about “the crossroads at which man stands, with power over the transformation process for death or life, for a golden age or the supreme murder” (Lindsay, qtd in Sitwell 264). Yet Sitwell here is a witness twice over: not just to the bomb but to her faith; a faith that denies the final victory to corruption. Underlying this capacity for witness and prophecy is a disturbing idea. If Sitwell believed in restoration, in resurrection, it was something that occurred only after the apocalypse. Perhaps the capacity to adequately



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address the reality of an apocalypse comes not from the potential to create it, or the potential to prevent it, but the potential to survive and learn from it. If so, then an apocalypse becomes not only one event among many in the shaping of a new world, but the necessary impetus for that new world, with its new understanding.

Like the other writers of her day,

in Sitwell's three atomic poems differentiate her from other authors. The sharp contrast between seeing and hearing, between immediate reaction and considered reflection, indicates the evolution in witness response to a scientific event. It is this evolution in response that justifies Lehmann's claim of Sitwell's exceptionalism.

One can hardly hold lesser poets

the results of that witnessing into her personal cultural context is an example of the evolution of response that every individual undergoes when faced with the possibility of apocalypse. No one, either in Sitwell's time or the times ahead of her, is capable of a fully formed response to a sudden apocalyptic event. They must experience that event over a period of time. First, they are confronted with the imagery of destruction, which does not exist in a vacuum. In order to understand the apocalypses of their times, people must communicate what they see to others, to engage in discussion and dialogue: it is not enough to see. One must also hear. Only then is it possible, as it was possible for Sitwell, to manage to encompass the enormity of that apocalypse into their own personal understanding of the moral universe about them.

Notes

1 Sitwell converted to Catholicism in 1955, but her poems reflected Catholic influences before this date.

2 Here Sitwell was drawing on the scientific ideas of Charles Lyell and Lorenz Oken (Morrison 608).

The sharp contrast between seeing and hearing, between immediate reaction and considered reflection, indicates the evolution in witness response to a scientific event.

Sitwell accessed the atomic bomb through her experiences of it. She was undoubtedly a biased witness and her interpretations of the events at Hiroshima and Nagasaki were filtered through both the cultural context in which she found herself and her religious convictions. However, the two different witness methodologies

responsible for freezing in the face of nuclear apocalypse—it is hard to reason through such visceral horror—and yet the sheer breadth of Sitwell's response can only reflect her own grappling with the new nuclear order. The immediacy of the first reaction, the communication with and absorption of other witness statements, and the capacity to adapt

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