Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) occupies a unique place in the history of modern English poetry. Her early poetry - Facade (1922) and Bucolic Comedies (1923) - struck quite an original note in terms of its language, imagery and its 'non-representational' quality. Her self-conscious experimentation with language was, of course, the most obvious object of critical comment for many years. The experimentation was in tune with the Eliotian programme of dislocation, if necessary, of language for the purposes of communicating the 'difficult' and 'complex modern experience' though most critics found Edith Sitwell's language extremely eccentric and 'personal', 'subjective and arbitrary.' Only after her later poetry, particularly that which was written during and after the second world war was published, she emerged as a major voice in English poetry. Professor Sola Pinto, for example, says with reference to Street Songs (1942) and Green Song (1944): "This new poetry of Edith Sitwell was among the notable achievements of European literature in the twentieth century. It had all the fresh brilliance and clear music of her earlier work, combined with a much deeper philosophical outlook and a keener apprehension of the tragedy of humanity in the twentieth century."

When we look at the entire poetry of Edith Sitwell, what strikes us most is the remarkable phenomenon of her 'poetic' development. Like Pinto, most of the critics who
have commented upon her poetry in reviews, articles, monographs and books have noticed the phenomenon which they have tried to explain primarily in terms of her 'vision of life' and her Christian faith - that is, in terms of thematic concern.

The basic assumption behind my approach to the problem of Edith Sitwell's development as a poet is that (a) Stylistics is a more scientific and objective study of any literary text or a set of related literary texts than traditional literary criticism; (b) the poetry of Edith Sitwell which is based on super-normal awareness of language and sensitivity to its concrete physical dimensions demands no other approach but that of Stylistics; and (c) almost all the literary critics who have dealt with Edith Sitwell's poetry, in one way or another, show an obvious awareness of her linguistic deviations, but they have never gone beyond a few impressionistic, sometimes brilliantly intuitive remarks. Hence it was all the more imperative to make a thorough stylistic study of Sitwell's poetry in terms of individual texts and explore the pattern of development in her poetry in pure stylistic terms.

Her poetry belongs to, what Barthes calls, 'intransitive writing' "whose central concern is not to take us 'through' his (writer's) writing to a world beyond it, but to produce writing." She is an author (what Barthes terms as ecrivian) and not a writer (scripteur écrivant) "who writes for an
ulterior purpose in a transitive mode, and who intends us to
move from his writing to the world beyond it. She is a
ecrivian for whom nothing matters but the writing itself,
not as the pure 'form' conceived by an aesthetic of art
for art's sake but, much more radically, as the only area for
the one who writes." What she has produced are not 'readerly
texts' but 'writerly texts'.

Her poetry was the product of her attempt to shape
her sensations and perceptions into language - which
probably was for her the only way of exploring her experience
of the circumambient universe. Sensation, perception and
conception - all these primary modes of structuring one's
universe, could take place, she must have thought, only
through language. This approach is implicit in the early
statements of hers and her close associates (like her brothers)
about her poetry. For instance, she says: "At the time I
began to write, a change in direction, imagery and rhythm
in poetry had become necessary, owing to the rhythmical
flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected
patterns of some of the poetry immediately preceding us." In *Laughter in the Next Room*, Osbert Sitwell has explained
how *Facade* first came to be created: "The idea of *Facade*
first entered our minds as the result of certain technical
experiments at which my sister had recently been working:
experiments in obtaining through the medium of words the rhythms of dance measures such as waltzes, polkas, fox trots. These exercises were often experimental enquiries into the effect on rhythm, on speed, and on colour, of the use of rhymes, assonances, dissonances, placed outwardly, at different places in the line, in most elaborate patterns."12

These remarks clearly indicate that Edith Sitwell's concept of poetry was different from that of her critics of the period who were either baffled by her poetry or repelled by it because they thought it was a mere word jugglery. Many literary critics seem to be aware of her linguistic preoccupations, but as usual they tend to focus their attention more on the thematic concerns of her poetry than on her language. Dr. Bowra, who wrote a fine perceptive book on Edith Sitwell in 1947 in the manner of traditional criticism, was aware of the fact that her vision, at least a part of it, was embedded in her language, though he, not being a stylistician, did not go beyond recognising that her favourite phrases, repetitions etc. as 'guide-posts and landmarks' to help us catch the tone of her poetry. But he clearly indicates the necessity of directing our attention to Edith Sitwell's language and her 'arduous experiment'13 with it.

Therefore, the stylistic approach is the only approach that is valid and consequently profitable in the study of
Edith Sitwell's poetry. The purpose of this approach is to work out the relationship between linguistic items of the given poem which is a linguistic construct and, on the basis of these relationships, build up the structures of signification. One of the strategies in this thesis is to analyse poems from the above point of view, but that is not my only aim. If you take the entire poetry of Edith Sitwell as one entity, it becomes necessary to find out the relationships between one phase and another (each phase being a set of similar relationships), and discover the dialectics of development from one phase to another. Thus my study of Edith Sitwell will be both synchronic and diachronic. The division of her poetry into phases is a strategy of convenience and the phases correspond to (a) the strikingly recognizable changes in her style, and (b) to the intuitive perceptions of the literary criticism on the basis of the poet's so called thematic concerns.

The design of the present dissertation is as follows:

Chapter I comprises a brief survey of the new Stylistic approach and a justification of its need in the context of Edith Sitwell's poetry. There is also an attempt to work out the parameters of my approach and the strategies it demands in the stylistic analysis of her poetry.

In the second chapter, my attempt is to present a critical account of, what may be called, Edith Sitwell's
'intuitive stylistics'. She has spoken sensitively and extensively of her use of language in her poetry in her notes, introductions and letters, and what she has said amounts to a sort of stylistic theory. Her stylistics is of great interest to modern students of stylistics since it does adumbrate the possibilities of the future development of stylistics. At the moment, one cannot go beyond a discretely tentative assessment of the validity of her views.

Chapter 3 comprises a detailed stylistic analysis of Edith Sitwell's three poems - 'Aubade' (1923), 'Dark Song' (1923), and 'Said King Pompey' (1923), which represent broadly the first phase of her creativity. This is followed by a set of generalizations about Edith Sitwell's initial linguistic strategies.

Chapter 4 deals with two major poems - 'Gold Coast Customs' (1929) and 'Metamorphosis' (1930) which belong to her second phase. Since the poems are pretty long ('Gold Coast Customs': 543 lines; 'Metamorphosis': 288 lines), the strategies of analysis would be to look at each of them first as a whole and note down some of their striking features and then follow this up by a detailed analysis of three or four 'chunks', selectively culled from different parts of the poems. Though this is a rather unsatisfactory way of analysis from the point of view of a literary critic, this method of using samples for stylistic analysis is an
acceptable strategy in Stylistics. The analysis is followed by (a) a set of generalizations regarding Edith Sitwell's linguistic strategies during this phase, and (b) some tentative speculations upon the principles of her 'development' after a comparative examination of the poetry of her first phase with that of the second phase.

Chapter 5 deals with three poems - 'Still Falls the Rain' (1942), 'Street Song' (1946), and 'Bagatelle' (1953) - representing the last phase. The stylistic analysis of these poems is followed by (a) a set of generalizations related to them and (b) a further exploration into the nature and of her development and the principles governing it.

The last chapter, 'conclusions', sums up the findings arrived at in Chapter 3, 4 and 5 and takes a fresh critical look at the entire enterprise.

The thesis is, I hope, a significant contribution to the study of Edith Sitwell's poetry from the point of view of the only relevant and productive approach to her poetry - that of Stylistics. Secondly, it is an indirect exploration, I think, into the usefulness and productivity of synchronic-cum-diachronic study of the works of a single poet with a view to locating the stylistic and organizational features and also to discovering the principles of development of the poet in terms of these features. Generally speaking, the
thesis, as a whole, is one of the first substantial attempts at establishing stylistics as a central mode of investigation in literary criticism. I am aware of some of the limitations and uncertainties that inevitably attend on the kind of work that I have undertaken in the absence of suitable models. Stylistics is still a developing science, still in the process of accommodating the complex and dynamic semantic dimensions of poetic language. My attempts at analysis, therefore, have sometimes remained tentative and open-ended without any fixed relational attachment. Probably, this phenomenon is inevitable in the area of literary criticism where there is a continuous impingement of extra-textual meanings clouding our textual perceptions.
Notes


Pinto refers to the main achievements of Wheels which was to offer "an alternative to the naturalism and vague romanticism of the Georgians." He found this alternative mainly in the contributions of the three Sitwells, and especially those of Edith Sitwell. "These contributions," he maintains, "consist of a kind of 'non-representational' poetry with strong affinities to the 'non-representational' art of contemporary painters such as the Cubists and Picasso."


G.S. Fraser, while commenting on Edith Sitwell's critical writings (which he considers as self-justifying) feels a sense of arbitrariness in her use of language. He says: "for her particular vocabulary of 'light' and 'thick' or 'thin' and 'shrill' syllables, or syllables that 'leap' is, however sensitive, very subjective compared to the duller but more methodical vocabulary of scientific student of phonetics."

3 Pinto, p.142.

Pinto discusses how it was difficult to express the effect of complex modern experience on the poet's inner life through his poetry when no traditional technique existed for the purpose. He quotes T.S. Eliot who says: that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive,
more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language to his meaning."

4 Edith Sitwell, "Some Notes on my Poetry", The London Mercury, XXXI, No. 185 (1935), 448-54

Edith Sitwell defends her poetry from the attacks of Dr F.R. Levis and Wyndham Levis who said that she belonged to the "history of Publicity rather than that of Poetry" explains "what is almost most misunderstood poetry of our time."

5 Fraser, p. 285.

Fraser considers "Sitwell's experiments in working out correspondences of sensation and patterns of verbal texture" which are very important for her own development, but says that "they have been too personal, subjective, and sometimes arbitrary". He further says that "her poetry in its very individual sound effects, is, as it were, the medium for her own voice, the expression of her own physique."

6 Pinto, p. 182.

7 Ibid., p. 172.

Pinto considers 'Gold Coast Customs' as a great prophetic work which is 'a tragic vision of the contemporary world' and compares it with 'The Waste Land' and 'Sweeney Agonistes', on the basis of their themes.

8 "The Renewal of Words: Miss Edith Sitwell's Creations", rev. of Green Song and Other Poems, TLS, 2nd September, 1944, p. 428.

While commenting on the use of words in Edith Sitwell's
poetry the TLS reviewer passes an impressionistic and brilliantly intuitive remark: "In Miss Sitwell's poetry familiar words look strange, and tired words become fresh and new."


While commenting on the language used by Edith Sitwell, Durrell says "Her verse of this period is full of the romantic vocabulary of another century...much of it is weak, and much mannered. But what is really new about it is its sense of pattern, and its strange new tone-effects which are mostly achieved by the marriage of unlikely nouns and adjectives."

Durrell (1961, p.184) further says:"Her first collected volume was published in 1930. It was full of fantasies and grotesques, of sharply contrasted verbal effects, but the subject matter was largely childhood reminiscences and nursery forms. In this she showed great technical mastery, though at times the verse-forms seemed rather brittle and deliberately over-embroidered."

Lindsay (1950/1976, p.11) comments on her early poetry: "Two fundamental things happen in Edith Sitwell's early poetry (by which I mean roughly her work upto Gold Coast Customs). Firstly the Word comes alive; and secondly, Rhythm comes alive."

Geoffrey Bullough, *The Trend of Modern Poetry*, London, 1941, p.112, says: "Her interest was rarely in narrative but in the play of sensations and associations, in trains of brilliant words." He further comments on her use of epithets (p.115): "One of Edith Sitwell's favourite devices is the application of the same or similar epithets to different objects in order to give unity of feeling."
Bullough (1941, 117) again says: "In her fox-trots and polkas, rhythm is attained at the expense of meaning. Words exist as combinations of sound and accent; meaning is abolished. It is an exquisite art of sensations."


Hawkes further discusses how Barthes is here clearly drawing to a certain extent on the principles of Russian Formalism. He mentions the distinction made by Jakobson, between the 'referential' and the 'aesthetic' functions of language. The 'referential' function belongs to the 'writer' and the 'aesthetic' to the author. In this sense Edith Sitwell is 'author'. She aims not to take us beyond her writing, but to draw our attention to the activity itself.

10 Ibid., p.114

"Where 'readerly' texts are static, virtually 'read themselves' and thus perpetuate an 'established' view of reality and an 'establishment' scheme of values, frozen in time, yet serving still as an out-of-date model for our world, 'writerly' texts require us to look at the nature of language itself, not 'through' it at a preordained 'real world'." In this sense Edith Sitwell's texts are 'writerly' texts.


12 Ibid., p.15