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**The Day the Music Died: The Reinvention of Poetry as a Spoken Art
in the Works of Amy Lowell and Edith Sitwell**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Amy Lowell and Edith Sitwell are Modernist poets whose work is often omitted from the literary canon. They have both come to be known predominantly for their performances and their eccentric personalities despite the merit of their poetry. This paper attempts to demonstrate that the reason these poets are often remembered for their public personas, and little else, is that both sought to incorporate music into their work and reinvent the notion of poetry as an oral art form through the creation of an abstract poetic voice that I have termed “instrumental voice.”

In order to fully explore the ramifications of Lowell and Sitwell’s decisions to rely so heavily on music, my research consists of a multifocal examination of each poet. My work includes an examination of the personal lives of each poet, an exploration of the theories that each poet had with regards to musicality and poetry, an analysis of the musical techniques they employed and experimented with, and the ways in which these

factors relate to the construction of instrumental voice. In addition to examining the poets' contentions about poetry as a spoken art I have attempted to contextualize my argument with regards to the period in which they were writing by exploring the ways that Lowell and Sitwell diverge from their contemporaries.

As I will explain, the complex nature of instrumental voice and the emphasis on the sound of their poetry necessitated that Lowell and Sitwell read their work to the audience and precluded the possibility that others could read their poetry aloud in a manner that would capture the meaning and specific expression that the poets sought to achieve. After Lowell and Sitwell passed away and were no longer actively promoting their poetry by reading it to the public their popularity faded. This is not a reflection of the quality of their poetry, but demonstrates that their desire to revive poetry as an oral form in the traditional sense of something that would be continually passed on as a communication "from voice to ear" was not successful. Their attempt to create and employ the abstract instrumental voice was never fully understood by their contemporaries or their audience, and in fact contributed to their exclusion from the literary canon.

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Introduction

The tradition of oral poetry began in prehistoric Greece when illiterate singers called “aoidoi” entertained the aristocratic courts with what is now studied as Greek myth.¹ Relying on improvisation, dactylic hexameter, and the repetition of key phrases, the aoidoi would travel from city to city and tell stories in the form of verse (Powell 53-54). These oral poets were later replaced by the less sacred rhapsodes, who memorized the texts and chanted their tales with a greater degree of accuracy and consistency. The connection between reciting poems and singing continued into the Middle Ages, during which time poets were frequently referred to specifically as “the Music” (OED Online). Although the impact was not immediate, the creation of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-1400s marks the beginning of the decline of poetry as an oral art form. While the dramatic poetry of William Shakespeare’s plays flourished during this period, the increasing literacy of the population in England and the continually improving efficiency of the printing press ensured that the recitation or “performance” of poetry by a single speaker would ultimately become less popular. As books became more affordable people began to enjoy stories privately in their own homes and oral storytellers became superfluous. The connection between music and poetry, though never gone, faded into the background as poets chose to give “readings” instead of singing or chanting their work to the audience.

Modernism, a literary movement which sought to reach back and revitalize the past, or “make it new” as Ezra Pound so aptly stated, provided the perfect context for poets to experiment not only with traditional tropes and themes but with ancient forms and styles. The rich history of poetry as an oral form reemerged as modernists reexamined the practices of poets such as Homer and Ovid. Although many modern British and American poets incorporated music into their work both thematically and

¹ The famous Homer, composer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is one example of an aoidoi. The versions of his work that we have today are artificial in that they were written down “when the poet was no longer forced to sing rapidly and had no audience to entertain and so could greatly expand his narrative” (Powell 63). It should be further noted that the word “epic” is derived from the Greek “*epos*” which means “song,” once again linking poetry to music.

structurally,² the renewal of poetry as an oral art form is most clearly present in the poems and performances of Amy Lowell and Edith Sitwell. The extensive incorporation of music into their poetry and their similar contentions about the importance of the sound of the poem stem from their desire to create a variety of “poetic voice” that diverges from those considered by their contemporaries. Though music functions quite differently in Lowell and Sitwell’s work, their mutual desire to blend poetry and music together into a unique form of expression led both women to create the elaborate performances and readings for which they are so well-known. The belief that poetry should be spoken additionally complicated their positions as poets and resulted in a connection between themselves and their work that hinged on their physical appearances before the public. Lowell and Sitwell were successful modernists who accurately captured the erratic social and cultural atmosphere of the period, however the abstract concept of poetic voice which the women sought to create was largely idealistic, and the impossibility of anyone other than the poet properly performing their poetry ensured that after their deaths they would be largely ignored by the literary establishment.

What is Poetic Voice?

The concept of “poetic voice” is one that is complicated by the obscure definition of the term itself. As Lesley Wheeler points out in her book, Voicing American Poetry: Sound and Performance from the 1920s to Present, the “parameters of the term [poetic voice] are fundamentally unclear” and known predominantly through elements of the poem such as tone and sound structure (17).³ The development of this complex notion

² For example, Wallace Stevens’s “The Man with the Blue Guitar” is thematically dependent on music as an art form and in a sense becomes the “tune beyond us” that the people entreat the man with the blue guitar to play for them at the beginning of his poem (Stevens 165). His work is also distinctly linked with Picasso and the cubist movement creating a multi-faceted poem that connects to other art forms as was characteristic of modernism in general, and more specifically of Lowell and Sitwell. Ezra Pound incorporated music structurally into his poetry, for example his “Cantos” are meant to be a modernization of an ancient form – “cantos” coming from the Latin “cantus” meaning “song.” Pound also uses music as a theme in many of his poems, including “Ancient Music” and “Ité,” among others.

³ For instance, one of the most simplistic ways of beginning a discussion of the poetic voice present in a work is the common practice of asking a student to do a “close reading” of a poem and examine the tone of

began during the modernist period when Lowell and Sitwell were writing, and is perhaps best expressed by T.S. Eliot in his essay “The Three Voices of Poetry,” in which he attempts to clarify the various voices that he believes the poet can assume. The first voice that Eliot chooses to focus on is that of the poet talking to himself or to nobody at all, a form that, according to Eliot, is most prominent in lyric poetry. He explains that this voice likely results from the fact that the poet “does not know what he has to say until he has said it; and in an effort to say it he is not concerned with making other people understand anything” (Eliot 17). Based on this description the first voice seems comparable to the stream of consciousness of the poet as he attempts to get his thoughts down and make sense of them.⁴

The second voice that Eliot describes is that of the poet addressing an audience of any size and is most commonly found in dramatic monologue. As Eliot observes in his essay, these first two voices are difficult to distinguish between in that it is nearly impossible to tell when the poet is distinctly talking to himself and when he is addressing an audience. This voice presents further problems when it is examined in the context of Lowell and Sitwell’s work. Although the poets are often literally in front of an audience when they are presenting their poetry there are instances in which it is still possible to view the voice as addressing itself or nobody at all in a way that is characteristic of Eliot’s first voice. This complication is most obvious in Lowell’s adapted Asian forms. For instance, Amy Lowell’s poem “Nuance” consists of these two lines: “Even the iris bends / When a butterfly lights upon it” (Lowell, lines 1-2). In this case it is impossible to tell who the speaker is addressing because the observation made in the poem could be either something that the poet is noticing privately or something she is sharing with an audience.

the speaker, the rhyme scheme, and the use of a distinct beat such as iambic pentameter. Unfortunately this exercise, while useful in many ways, seems to be too broad in that it inevitably leads to an analysis of the poem as a whole rather than focusing on the complexities of the speaker’s voice.

⁴ The relationship between Eliot’s first voice and stream of consciousness makes it a very modernist concept. Although it is not as common in poetry, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf both experiment with the idea of stream of consciousness in their novels, specifically Joyce’s “Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man” and Woolf’s “To the Lighthouse”. The authors often present the reader with long segments that consist solely of the unfiltered “thoughts” of the characters in an attempt to understand the internal thought process that takes place while they are interacting with others or even sitting by themselves.

The third voice, and the most complicated, is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse. This voice is limited by what the poet is able to say as one fictional character addressing another fictional character and these limitations serve to mask the presence of the actual poet. Eliot tells the reader that it is important that the poet does not select one character and use him or her as a mouthpiece when speaking in this voice, but rather gives each character poetic lines that are justified and help develop the action of the work (Eliot 9-10). This voice becomes more complex in the context of Lowell and Sitwell's poetry. Not only is it possible for the women to create fictional characters within their poems, but they themselves can also be viewed as characters or "personas" while they are on the stage in front of the audience. If the audience believes that the women are playing a certain role while they are reading, it is possible to apply Eliot's third voice and assume that the poet is talking through her altered persona, much like a writer who uses a character as a representation of himself within a work of fiction.⁵ The addition of a conventional character in Sitwell or Lowell's poetry makes this voice even more elaborate because the third voice is then applicable to both the character within the poem and the persona of the poet relaying the poem to the audience.

It is important to understand that the three voices that Eliot explicates are not exclusive and frequently exist simultaneously in the same poem: "the voices are most often found together – the first and second [...] in non-dramatic poetry; and together with the third in dramatic poetry" (19). Employing multiple voices in a single work allows the poet to create tension between the various perspectives and helps to establish the paradoxical situation that Eliot describes as ideal for a dramatic poet. "The world of a great poetic dramatist is a world in which the creator is everywhere present, and everywhere hidden" (24). This statement, while somewhat romantic and speculative, helps to characterize one of the major problems that emerged for Lowell and Sitwell. Although the women incorporate elements of Eliot's three voices, their work moves towards the creation of a fourth voice that does not conform to even the experimental

⁵ For instance, in Ernest Hemingway's "Farewell to Arms" Frederic Henry is often seen as a fictional representation of Hemingway because his story is in many ways similar to the author's actual experiences in the war.

poetic voices discussed by their contemporaries. As I will explain in the course of this paper, although their poetry is intended to be read aloud to the audience the poetic voice that the women attempt to create is one that is comparable to a player piano⁶ performing a piece of music; the piano performs without a player and the poem is spoken without a poet. This voice is therefore dependent on the metaphorical absence of the poet. Idealistically, the poet ceases to exist in any form and her voice serves solely as the instrument that interprets the poem for the audience. In the course of his exploration of the topic T.S. Eliot admits that his inquiry into poetic voice is only tentative and there may be more or less than the three voices of poetry he describes. He also suggests that there may be a form that is unique to the “dramatic poet whose dramatic gifts are best exercised outside of the theatre,” a statement which largely fits the performative style employed by Lowell and Sitwell (12). However Eliot is consistently aware of the presence of the poet in some capacity in all of the various voices he explores. The radical notion of removing the poet results in a kind of disembodied voice addressing the audience, a concept that is extremely experimental and impracticable. In order to comprehend the development of this concept and fully understand the impact of the elaborate poetic voice used in their poetry, it is first necessary to examine Amy Lowell and Edith Sitwell as individual poets. In analyzing their personalities and their theories about poetry it is possible to move towards an understanding of how the extensive incorporation of music into their poems resulted in a desire to employ this abstract form of poetic voice that I will refer to as “instrumental voice.”

Women in a Modernist’s World

Though Lowell and Sitwell have many social and personal characteristics in common, the most obvious of these is that both poets are women, a factor which may

⁶ A player piano is a self-playing piano that functions much like a music box. It contains a cylinder called a “piano roll” which is perforated in such a way that when the “track bars” hit a perforation the corresponding note is played on the piano.

explain the degree to which they experimented with music in their poetry. As Sonja Samberger points out in her book Artistic Outlaws: The Modernist Poetics of Edith Sitwell, Amy Lowell, Gertrude Stein, and H.D., modernism was viewed for a long time as “a literary movement that was naturally male” (11). As a result of this gender bias, women had to adapt to a male standard of modernism in order to be accepted as “classics” and thus attain eligibility for being placed in the literary canon. While there were several networks of women writers who supported one another, the competition for notoriety created an atmosphere in which female modernists were much more isolated from their colleagues. It was only by distinguishing themselves in the eyes of the public that women were able to attract attention to their works, and the ways in which the writers went about distinguishing themselves were often unconventional and outrageous in the context of proper society. Marianne Moore was famous for the tri-corner hat and cape that she wore during her readings. H.D. was notorious for her lesbian relationships and her unabashed sexuality. These odd fashion statements and socially inappropriate behavioral patterns became part of each poet’s public image and separated them from the other female writers, and Lowell and Sitwell were no exception. As women, they were pressured to distinguish themselves in the eyes of the public, and they both rose to the occasion. Amy Lowell kept odd hours, writing into the early morning, sleeping through the day and waking at night to throw elaborate dinner parties at Sevenels, her family estate. She entered into a Boston marriage with Ada Dwyer Russell, a former actress, and wore attractive, though outdated, dresses. Lowell’s extraordinarily feminine wardrobe contrasted greatly with her masculine habit of smoking cigars while she read her poetry to the audience, a fact that only increased the public’s interest in her quirks. Edith Sitwell also dressed extravagantly, in her case in Renaissance garb. She separated herself from other women by supporting her male contemporaries and looking down on poetry written by women in general (Samberger 13). Additionally, Sitwell cloistered herself away with her younger brothers and due to her lack of romantic relationships, was often viewed as an asexual figure. These idiosyncrasies contributed to the public perception of Lowell and Sitwell as “personas,” an aspect of their careers which made it

difficult for them to employ instrumental voice in that the audience could not easily forget about the ostentatious women standing before them.

While the poets are remembered clearly for these quirky personalities and distinguished appearances, they are unfortunately remembered for little else. Gertrude Stein's contention is that artists "are of necessity 'outlaws' if they create new ways of composition, and become 'classics' later, [...] when their art is no longer 'new'"; however in the case of Lowell and Sitwell, they became outlaws while they were creating their experimental poetry and seem to have remained outlaws even though their poems are no longer viewed as outstandingly experimental (qtd. in Samberger 18). Although she does not specifically apply it to women, Stein's view of the artist as an outlaw can be viewed as a concept which is more applicable to female modernists in that they had a tendency to be more experimental in their work than their male contemporaries. Samberger tells the reader that "as [women] experimented within the experiment of modernism, and they had to do so if they wanted to be recognized as independent poets, one could even claim that they were more experimental than their male colleagues" (17). This heightened experimentation is beneficial in that it led women to try things in their poetry that men may not have, however it is also detrimental to their work in that it made it more difficult for the contemporary readers to accept their radicalism. Additionally, the experimental nature of their work does not seem to have aided Lowell and Sitwell in maintaining their popularity in a post-modern climate. As Samberger argues in her book, "it may be suspected that especially in the case of the modernists, women poets have been rediscovered and re-published not so much because of their literary work but because of their fascinating ways of life" (14). The incredible degree to which these poets used music in their work often lends a complexity to their poetry that is either overlooked because of its subtlety or viewed as merely a consequence of their strange personalities. In the case of the latter the reader is inclined to ignore the difficult aspects of Lowell and Sitwell's poetry as components that were not intended to be understood by anyone but the poet. The ideas that these women had with regards to poetry as an oral art form are certainly abstract and difficult to understand, however once the reader

comprehends the poets' intentions their poetry becomes even richer and more impressive due to its intricate construction.

Although Lowell and Sitwell are known for their elaborate performances and readings, the question of what led them to perform their work is often engaged in a way that does not fully explore the relationship between their theories about poetry as a spoken form and the consequences of writing poetry intended to be read aloud. The focus of a majority of the criticism about the poets' performances remains the response of the audience to the unique presentation of Lowell and Sitwell's poetry and the ways in which the personas that they developed in the course of these performances detracted from the appreciation of their work. What is often overlooked is that in addition to the undervaluation of their poetry, the predominance of Lowell and Sitwell's personalities makes the creation of the instrumental voice an even greater impossibility as it requires that the poet absent herself from the work, a difficult feat when she is recognized mainly for her unique identity. Lowell and Sitwell are in a paradoxical situation in that the instrumental voice necessitates performance but the performance in front of an audience demands the physical presence of the poet and hinders the concept of instrumental voice. In order to understand this paradox, it is important to first understand the idyllic concept of instrumental voice as it was conceived by the poets. While I believe that Edith Sitwell and Amy Lowell were trying to create the same effect, the methods that they use to do so are quite diverse. Therefore I will examine the performative nature of each poet's work, their theories about poetry as a spoken art, and the ways that they use musicality in their poems on an individual level in order to present a more comprehensive view of instrumental voice.

Lowell and the Path to Performative Poetry

In addition to their gender, both Lowell and Sitwell shared the advantageous position of aristocratic women, financially independent and capable of experimenting with their poetry in a way that those dependent on their writing as a source of income could not. Amy Lowell was the daughter of two very prominent figures, Augustus

Lowell, a man whose family had established themselves in America at its conception and Katherine Bigelow Lawrence, a woman whose family name was equally well-known. “Sevenels,” the famous Lowell house which Amy inherited from her parents, provided the poet with a source of inspiration, a refuge from the eye of the public, and a forum in which she was able to entertain her contemporaries and perform her poetry in her own constructed environment. Her resources also allowed her to travel⁷ and her prestigious brothers, Percival and Abbott Lawrence, exposed her to many different cultural trends⁸ that impacted the style and content of her writing.

Although Lowell wrote some poetry during her teenage years, her first attraction to the art form as an adult and her decision to pursue poetry as a career emerged from the stage performances by Eleonora Duse⁹ during her successful American tours of 1893 and 1896. Lowell truly loved the theatre and performed in several recreational productions. In his biography, Amy Lowell, F. Cudworth Flint notes that “as late as 1919 [Amy] took a leading role in an amateur performance of Wilde’s *Ideal Husband*, performed on a stage set up in the library at Sevenels” (12). Unfortunately Lowell’s concerns about her weight and appearance deterred her from ever seriously considering a career as an actress. One of the most well-known biographers of Lowell, S. Foster Damon, points out that “it was a commonplace remark in Boston that if Amy Lowell had been beautiful, she would have been a great actress” (qtd. in Flint 13). The dramatic quality of the poet’s readings and her ability to take the audience to a space removed from reality, much like the actors in a play, not only supports Damon’s statement, but also explains the course of her career. She writes of Duse’s performance that “[it] revealed me to myself [...] I found out where my true function lay” (qtd. in Flint 13). While this statement

⁷ As Melissa Bradshaw points out in her essay “Remembering Amy Lowell: Embodiment, Obesity, and the Construction of a Person,” Lowell traveled rather extensively after her mother’s death through Egypt, Italy, France, and England (174). Lowell’s ability to travel also benefited her greatly with regards to Imagism as she was traveled to England specifically to learn more about the movement as a “rejuvenating” force for her poetry. She visited London in 1913 after reading poems in the January issue of *Poetry* signed “H.D., *Imagiste*” and subsequently reading about Pound’s discussion of Imagism (Flint 16).

⁸ For instance, Percival Lowell traveled extensively in the Far East after graduating from Harvard University and is thought to have been a major influence on Amy with regards to her adaptations of Asian forms and her translation of Chinese verse.

⁹ Eleonora Duse (1858-1924) was an Italian actress who was born into a family of touring actors. She began performing when she was four years old and began touring with her own company in Europe and America after 1885. She was particularly well known for her roles in Henry Ibsen’s plays (Encyclopædia Britannica).

demonstrates that Lowell believed she would be able to express herself very well through her poetry, she spent almost ten years studying the genre before beginning to publish her own verse. Her efforts demonstrate a kind of thoroughness and a desire to have a full understanding of poetic forms and styles; however Lowell's meticulous process of studying poetry is also indicative of a degree of self doubt with regards to her natural abilities as a poet. Her experimentation with style and her tendency to dabble in each literary movement is sometimes viewed in a negative light. For instance, Flint indicates that Lowell behaves like a novice in that "the poet of major genius does not try to keep up with his times" as she does (45). However her continued experimentation with different types of poetry had the effect of making her body of work a "mirror of her time" and her interest in different artistic genres is what led Lowell to incorporate music into her work (Flint 45). As Flint so accurately points out in his book, Amy Lowell "had a keen sense for whatever was beginning to be noticed, and a genuine interest in it, which usually issued in her own attempt[s] to produce some of it," a characteristic of the poet which is overwhelmingly positive (44-45). Though the style of her work certainly evolves and changes with the cultural atmosphere in which she is writing, Lowell's attraction to poetry through the theatre caused her to realize and emphasize the importance of verse as a spoken form, a revelation that was central to her experimentation with music and serves as a unifying factor throughout her career.

Although it was not uncommon for poets to give readings, to Lowell oral poetry was not simply a means of sharing one's work with the audience; to her is represented the way that poetry is meant to be experienced. In her essay, "Poetry as a Spoken Art," Lowell sets forth the idea that "poetry will come into its Paradise when carefully trained speakers make a business of interpreting it to the world. And poetry needs such interpretation, for I suppose it is only one reader out of a hundred [...] who can possibly get all the beauty out of a poem" (13). This romantic notion of vocally bringing poetry to the world with a group of trained speakers exists solely as an ideal and is never directly pursued. Although she did not attempt to start a training program to create a generation of eloquent readers, it is easy to see that Lowell herself felt that in order for her poetry to be appreciated by her audience she must read it aloud to them, properly conveying her

interpretation and avoiding the mispronunciation of words and improper breaking of sentences that she associates with poor readers. She explains that “it is because we so seldom hear poetry adequately rendered that the art has for so long lapsed in popular favor” (“Poetry as a Spoken Art” 15). Lowell attributes the decline of poetry mainly to the fact that it has ceased to be read aloud properly and uses the context of modernism as a means of reviving oral poetry and returning the art form to its more exalted position. There is a commonplace idea that poetry arose as a communication from voice to ear and Lowell embraces this notion. While this emphasis on sound may seem inconsistent with Amy Lowell’s strong association with Imagism,¹⁰ Lowell’s concern with sound merely broadens the scope of her poetry as multi-faceted work that reaches beyond the conventional boundaries of a poem and extends to other modes of expression. “Miss Lowell emphasized the fact that she was a poet of the ear, which needs time to listen in, and not of the eye only, which can see in the Imagistic moment,” indicating that while she did engage many senses with her poems, she was predominantly concerned with sound (Flint 28-29). This preoccupation with the oral aspect of her poetry and her introduction to contemporary music through her relationship with Carl Engel led Lowell to experiment with the musicality of her work in several ways.

Lowell’s Introduction to Music

Although she had no formal music training, Amy Lowell was introduced to modern European and American compositions between 1908 and 1922 through her relationship with Carl Engel, a French-born pianist whom she met through the actress Madame Abarbanell (Ambrose 45). Her relationship with the musician coincides with the lengthy period of time that Lowell spent studying poetry, a fact that accounts for her incorporation of the musical elements she came to understand through Engel into her

¹⁰ Imagism is a movement that took place during the Modernist era that was characterized by its desire to find clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images (OED Online). Perhaps the most well-known example of an Imagist poem is Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”, which reads, “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough” (Pound 35).

work. The modernist compositions that he shared with her helped Lowell “[develop] a sophisticated, continental taste for contemporary works several decades in advance of their general acceptance by American audiences,” a fact which increased the experimental aspect of her works and may explain the unpreparedness of the audience for Lowell’s own poetry (Ambrose 45-46). The poet’s dependence on certain modern instrumental pieces as inspiration for her writing is both beneficial and detrimental to her work. As I have previously mentioned, throughout Lowell’s experimentation the underlying emphasis on the modern movements in art, literature, music, and general culture make her body of work a chronicle of the social moment. Her themes evolve in sync with the atmosphere in which she is writing, and because her work is so concerned with so many different forms of expression, it reaches beyond the traditional reinvention of Greek myth that is common to the poetry of many of her contemporaries.¹¹ As a result, her writing often hinges on comprehending other abstract works produced during the modernist period that at times make her verse very problematic. Lowell herself admits of “Grotesques” that “no editor could ever understand the poem unless he also understood Stravinsky,” and this requirement is one that few readers were prepared to meet (qtd. in Ambrose 46). While Flint attributes the misunderstanding of Lowell’s work to the fact that she is too eager and consequently writes “beyond the limit that a more careful artist would set for himself [sic],” it seems more likely that Lowell is writing beyond the limit of the audience by expecting her readers to have a broad knowledge of music and art in order to properly interpret her poetry (Flint 25). Although it is quite common for poets to expect the reader to have outside knowledge that will enhance the meaning of the poem through allusion or direct reference, Lowell’s expectations are much more complicated than those of her colleagues. For instance in “The Burial of the Dead,” the first part of Eliot’s famous poem The Waste Land, the poet says “Summer

¹¹ In his “Cantos” Ezra Pound frequently uses classic Greek myth and attempts to “modernize” it in several ways. Some of the most obvious ways that Pound incorporates myth are obscure allusions to myth, his rewriting of well-known myth, and his incorporation of the Gods and Goddesses into the modern context of his poems. For instance, “Canto I” is based on Homer’s Odyssey and is essentially a brief retelling of the epic journey from the perspective of Odysseus. Instead of referring to the abstract modernist works of his contemporaries as Lowell does, Pound relies on ancient myth and references to the past to create his work. In a way Lowell’s poetry is almost more “modern” in that she is applying the “make it new” mindset to contemporary culture.

surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee” (Eliot 51). The reference to the “Starnbergersee” requires that the reader have some knowledge of Germany and recognize that Eliot is referring to “Lake Starnberg,” a large lake located near Munich. This kind of knowledge is something that can be found in an encyclopedia, so even if the reader does not know what Eliot is referring to he is capable of looking it up. Lowell’s reference to Stravinsky requires that the reader has not only listened to the music, but has understood it in a way that is comparable to what she is expressing in her poem. While Starnbergersee is a component of factual knowledge, Stravinsky is a kind of interpretive knowledge that asks the reader to comprehend an abstract piece of music in a way that unlocks the meaning of Lowell’s work. The audience not only needs to handle the experimental techniques that Lowell employs, but they must relate these techniques to other art forms and observe these connections throughout the poem. In addition to the incorporation of music into the content of her poems through allusion to specific compositions, Lowell uses musical techniques in the construction of her poetry.

Musical Elements in Lowell’s Poetry: Cadenced Verse and Polyphonic Prose

All poetry tends to incorporate musical elements such as rhythm, however there are two major experimental movements related to music that Lowell largely established throughout her career. The first is one that Lowell refers to as “cadenced verse,” or more simply her translation of the French phrase “vers libre,” which is more commonly referred to as “free verse.” Conventionally, free verse is defined as poetic writing that disregards traditional rules of verse such as meter and rhyme and instead uses variable rhythms and line lengths (OED Online). Lowell, however, argues that the proper English term is “cadenced verse,” which demonstrates that poetry is based upon cadence rather than meter. She defines “cadence” as:

a rhythmic curve, containing one or more stressed accents, and corresponding roughly to the necessity of breathing. This must also correspond to a depression or slight dropping in the tension of the subject at that point. These curves are

made up of a number of time-units, which, again, although they do not accord perfectly, still do so with extraordinary approximation. Cadenced verse is non-syllabic, and in that sense resembles music far more than the old metrical verse ever did. As music varies the numbers of notes in a bar by splitting them up into smaller time valuations, so cadenced verse may vary the number of its syllables within the duration of its time-units to any extent desired ("Some Musical Analogies" 141).

Lowell's definition of her term demonstrates several things about her poetry and her role as a poet. Primarily, the description of all of the elements that go into creating cadenced verse complicates Lowell's poems. Her attention to variation of words in a way that is comparable to a variation of notes in a musical composition demonstrates that Lowell is in a way "composing" her poems; the form she uses defies the traditional syllabic structure of poetry and is dependent upon time. The variation of "the number of [...] syllables within the duration of [...] time-units" requires that the reader knows what time-units are being utilized and how the words fit into the tempo (141). While musical scores are written in a way that indicates qualities such as how long each note is supposed to be held, which notes are supposed to be stressed, when the tempo changes, and when the volume changes, poetry has no such markers. Lowell's definition of cadence creates certain parallels between a musical score and poetry, but she does not indicate how a reader would be made aware of these connections. For instance, the relation between the tension of the verse and the movement of the "rhythmic curve" corresponds to the idea of crescendos and decrescendos, or changes in volume and intensity in musical pieces, but Lowell seems to imply that the reader would simply have to be intuitively aware of the rhythmic curve to know when the tension increases or decreases in a poem. These technicalities insist that the work be read to the audience by someone competent enough to interpret the intended emphases and pauses throughout the poem, a "trained reader" like those that Lowell describes when talking about her paradisiacal view of poetry. Yet even this does not seem sufficient. The main difficulty with this concept, as I have pointed out, is that notes have a fixed tone and duration and words do not. Although each musician "interprets" the piece that he is playing to a certain extent, the melody, length of notes, and tone of each note is fixed, making music an entity that is more fundamentally stable than poetry. Despite any amount of training or practice, each reader will bring a

certain interpretation to the poem that emerges from the inconsistencies inherent in the human voice. Pronunciation, placement of emphasis through the work, pauses, breaks, and tone varies from person to person; all of these elements are impossible to coordinate between different readers. Authorial intent, a problematic and highly unsolvable dilemma in the literary world, becomes even more complex when examined in the context of poetry as a spoken art. Without some kind of standardized system similar to that used in musical composition, only the poet is able to properly convey the meaning of her poem.

The implication of Lowell's theory is that it becomes necessary for the poet not only to compose each piece, but also to perform the work herself in order to ensure it is received accurately when communicated from "voice to ear." This necessity is not meant to imply that poetry cannot be enjoyed unless the poet reads directly to the audience, but merely that the poem assumes its richest and most valuable form when it is presented in this manner, namely when it is presented using instrumental voice. As Ambrose notes in her essay "Amy Lowell and the Music of her Poetry," "Lowell had explained that the 'printing' of the poem was of no help to the listener: 'I hope that people will soon learn to read it with no more difficulty than a musician knows in reading a musical score'" (Ambrose 53). This comment suggests that there is a kind of translation that takes place when someone reads a poem aloud. A musical score does not realize its full potential until it is expressed through the instruments for which it is written, and Lowell would have the reader believe that a poem does not realize its full potential until it is expressed by the human voice and listened to by an audience that is willing to disregard the physical presence of the poet. For example, one of the most famous poems that Amy Lowell wrote in cadenced verse is "Patterns." The poem itself is a magnificent piece of work and can be appreciated for its content when one reads it. The poem begins:

I walk down the garden paths,
And all the daffodils
Are blowing, and the bright blue squills.
I walk down the patterned garden paths
In my stiff, brocaded gown.
With my powdered hair and jewelled fan,
I too am a rare

Pattern. As I wander down
The garden paths. (Lowell, lines 1-9)

The image of the woman in her stiff gown walking past the blowing, pliable daffodils creates a tension in the poem between the constriction of the narrator and the moveable nature of the plants. The repetition of the word “pattern” in its various forms emphasizes the constructed nature of the garden and alerts the reader to the fact that while the daffodils are blowing and moving, the flowers themselves are confined by the edges of the garden in which they reside. While a reader can detect metaphorical comparisons between the woman in her “stiff, brocaded gown” and the controlled patterns of the garden, there are certain inflections of the voice which can subtly alter the interpretation of the poem. One could place the emphasis on “too” in the phrase “I *too* am a rare / Pattern” highlighting the similarity between the carefully laid out garden and the carefully dressed woman (7-8 emphasis added). Shifting the emphasis to the word “rare,” “I too am a *rare* / Pattern,” and using a mocking inflection could indicate a kind of sarcasm that suggests there is nothing rare about the pattern of the garden or the woman herself (7-8 emphasis added). Using a serious tone to accent the word “rare” could further alter the meaning of the line by implying that society should recognize the individuality of women instead of attempting to view them as a single body defined by gender. This level of interpretation is obviously not unique to Lowell’s poetry, and it is the universality of this concept that upholds Lowell’s point that poetry should in fact be a spoken art. There is a degree of understanding which is lost or absent when poetry is viewed as a non-vocal form, especially when the poet composes her work as carefully as Lowell crafts her cadenced verse.

The second major musical element that Lowell experiments with is “polyphonic prose,” a concept which takes many different forms throughout literary history. Although Lowell credits the French poet Paul Fort for indicating the possibility of polyphonic prose, the idea emerges in the work of several other writers (Thacker 107). The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, first used the term in literary criticism to characterize a certain kind of novelistic property in which multiple consciousnesses arise and combine, but do not merge in a single event. In his essay, “Unrelated Beauty: Amy

Lowell, Polyphonic Prose, and the Imagist City,” Andrew Thacker explains Bakhtin’s polyphonic prose as “an impulse or force within literary language that strives to create an open form in which multiple voices and discourses can mingle and be modified and reinterpreted, but without any overall closure within a unified point of view” (Thacker 105). The multiplicity inherent in this kind of writing immediately made it appealing to Lowell in that it presents an opportunity for the poet to achieve that “orchestral” quality that she was so eager to capture in her poetry. Thacker’s description of multiple voices that “mingle” but do not necessarily form a “unified point of view” can be metaphorically compared to an orchestra in that the instruments harmonize with one another and work together to create an overall effect, but simultaneously maintain their individual parts within the piece of music. As Thacker points out, polyphony additionally allows Lowell to explore “polytopic” and “polychromic” experiences,¹² giving her work a very complex layering and fostering the construction of multi-faceted poetry that transcends thematic and temporal limitations. Lowell not only creates the allusion of multiple voices speaking simultaneously, she creates a situation in which it is possible to consider multiple cultural moments and themes concurrently.

Another important aspect of polyphonic prose is that it is not formatted like poetry but is written in prosaic form. It is only through reading the poem aloud and exposing the “‘beat’ of poetry, its musical quality [...] which differentiates it from prose, and [...] bears in it the stress of emotion without which no true poetry can exist,” that the prose demonstrates itself to be poetry printed on the page in an unconventional structure (“Poetry as a Spoken Art” 10). Given the nature of this form, it is possible to compare it to “poetic prose,”¹³ like that of H.D. in her novel Nights, but the differences between the two clearly illustrate that polyphonic prose is not only a distinct form but a type of poetry despite its prosaic layout. The biggest difference between the two is that while the former is a variation on prose writing that involves lyrical descriptions and the creation of

¹² Thacker indicates that this kind of complexity can be observed most distinctly in Lowell’s “The Bronze Horses” (Thacker 115).

¹³ “Poetic prose” is a form of prose with highly poetical qualities (OED Online). It is often characterized by musicality, lyricism, and extensive use of figurative and descriptive language. H.D. is particularly well-known for her use of this form in her novel “Nights” which explores the relationship between Neil, Renne and Natalia Saunderson and what Natalia’s manuscripts reveal about her apparent suicide.

images throughout the course of the novel, the characters maintain a more dominant presence than they do in the latter and plot remains the driving force behind the action of the work. For instance, in Lowell's polyphonic poem "Spring Day," she takes the reader through the daily routine of the narrator by using poetic descriptions of the places and objects commonly encountered, beginning with the "Bath" and the "Breakfast Table," and moving on to the streets of the city as the narrator ventures outside to take a walk. Thacker argues that "poetry can and should describe the dull and overlooked, but perhaps the ordinary typographical appearance of prose is best suited to this strategy. It is only when read aloud, as Lowell insisted of her polyphonic prose that the full 'poetic qualities' are evident" (109). It would be difficult to prove that all poetry which treats the more mundane aspects of life must be written in prose in order to be successful, but in the case of Lowell it is clear that the structure of "Spring Day" contributes to the perception that the rather ordinary actions of taking a bath and having breakfast are intensely beautiful moments. Polyphonic prose is well suited to describe these aspects of the world because it uses an overlaying set of images to create an overall event or moment in the mind of the reader without the conventional dependence on plot that remains present in poetic prose. Polyphony attempts to create simultaneity within the action of the poem, and though it can be as long as a short story, the work must maintain the vividness and speed of speech that is responsible for the emotional tension of a poem (Samberger 216-217). In Lowell's work, the emphasis on the objects and distinct images overwhelms the reader, providing a multi-sensory presentation of the narrator's day while completely obscuring the underlying character of the speaker.

This effect is very similar to what Lowell is attempting to achieve with instrumental voice in that the focus of the poem becomes the metaphorical "content" of the speaker's day rather than the speaker herself. While the relationships among Neil, Renne and Natalia Saunderson become one of the major themes of H.D.'s novel, the images that Lowell captures such as the "Glass marbles, with amber and blue hearts" that the boys clink together on the sidewalk and the feeling of the walker's feet "tripping, skipping, lagging, dragging, plodding doggedly, or springing up and advancing on firm elastic in-steps" become the focus of her work instead of the characters (Selected Poems

of Amy Lowell 100-101). The lack of a distinct personality in Lowell's poem excludes the possibility of using Eliot's third voice in that the "dramatic voice" requires that the poet addresses the audience through a character or set of characters in a way that is comparable to a play. The effect that Lowell attempts to create is analogous to a sightseeing tour. The poetic voice she employs functions like a tour guide in that it leads the audience through the "Spring Day" and points out the important "sights." At the end of the tour the audience remembers what it has seen and experienced, but forgets about the guide. The multiple voices that are characteristic of polyphonic prose makes this effect more difficult to achieve in that the instrumental voice must be perceived as dividing into various tonal segments that exist concurrently but do not attract individual attention. The voices must blend together like the different vocal parts in a choir.

Lowell's use of cadenced verse and polyphonic prose supports Ambrose's contention that while "music has been used to intensify the meaning of a text [...] Lowell [...] instead uses her poetry to heighten the meaning of the music" (Ambrose 62). The incorporation of rhythm or cadence, and the multi-vocal arrangement created through the use of polyphonic prose, intensifies the emotions present in the poetry and necessitates that it be read aloud by the author in order to ensure that all layers of meaning are explored and properly interpreted. The incorporation of music into the very structure and content of the poem makes Lowell's poetry more intricate and, in turn, alters the concept of poetic voice by creating a music of words that does not involve conventional notes and instruments. While there are instances in which poetry involves music without straying outside of the three vocal types that Eliot describes in his essay, Lowell's work does not fall into this category. In her essay "Some Musical Analogies" Lowell explains that there are two different types of musical poetry. The first she refers to as "unmusical poetry," verse which may use music as an accompaniment but does not contain an "obvious banging lilt" ("Some Musical Analogies" 128). In certain ways Edith Sitwell's Façade is an example of "unmusical poetry" in that it is set to William Walton's composition and uses the music to complement her work but never completely merges with it. The second type of musical poetry that Lowell references is what she calls "singing poetry," or "poetry to be sung." This kind of verse contains musical elements within itself and

cannot turn to outside sources to enhance its quality (128). Lowell's cadenced verse and polyphonic prose are examples of this kind of poetry, in which the poet constructs the highly musical structure so that when the audience hears the poem it becomes a musical entity independent of conventional instrumental accompaniment. As a result of Amy Lowell's beliefs about how poetry should be written and how it should be presented to an audience it was necessary for her to assume the public role that she is known for, reading her work to the audience so that they could better appreciate and comprehend the meaning and intense expressions of emotion.

Unfortunately, Lowell's personality and her stage presence during her performances were in many ways detrimental to her desire to implement instrumental voice. Lowell excludes the possibility of acting when one is reading a poem because she believes that "it is more dangerous to overdo dramatic expression than to underdo it" ("Poetry as a Spoken Art" 16). Given the poet's attention to detail and her adherence to her own standards when writing poetry, it is obvious that in reading her work to the audience, Lowell sought to assume nothing more than the role of an ideal reader that essentially required that she obscure her personality from the audience. In her essay on poetry as an oral art form, Lowell states that "the audience must see nothing with its eyes which detracts from its mental vision. It must be made to imagine so vividly that it forgets the reader in the thing read. The dramatic quality of the piece must be given just in so far as it stimulates imagination, but never so far as to call attention to the reader as an actual personality" (17). Lesbianism, cigars, weight -- all must disappear when Lowell is reading her poetry. Judging by Damon's account of the poet, they did: "On the lecture platform, without scenery, costumes, or even gestures, she could make the public forget her size, and follow the drama solely from her voice" (Flint qtd. Damon 13). This aspect of her reading places Lowell in a very interesting position with regards to which of Eliot's three poetic voices she employs. It is obvious that Lowell is not utilizing the first voice that Eliot talks about, that of the poet talking to herself in order to work out what she wants to say. It is also quite apparent that she is using the second voice in which the poet addresses an audience. What is not clear, is when the third and more complicated dramatic voice is being used and to what extent it overlaps with the second. Lowell's

attempts to use instrumental voice require that the poem is independent of the poet and does not rely on the physical or even the metaphorical presence of a speaker, be it the poet or a character within the poem. As is evident in “Spring Day,” Lowell’s use of dramatic voice is limited by her determination to use instrumental voice and as a result the characters or speakers present in her work are often obscured by other images and sounds in the poem.

Sitwell’s Journey to the Stage

While Edith Sitwell’s interest in poetry as a performance does not seem to have stemmed from any single event, her experiences as a child predisposed her to consider verse a vocal form. Before she learned how to read, Sitwell listened to fairy tales read to her by her nurse, and when she was a little older, her family encouraged her to memorize and recite literature (Post 128). Although reading aloud to a child is by no means a rare occurrence, the Sitwell family went beyond the conventional act of story-telling and would hold readings of poetry, philosophy, and books on political topics, an aspect of Edith’s childhood which relates to the oral tradition of the Greek philosophers and explains her desire to revive the old mode of reciting poetry aloud and accompanying it with music. By the time she was a teenager, “Edith had learned by heart so many poems that she could recite a different one without stopping ‘all the way from England to the Sitwell villa near Florence without repeating herself once’” (qtd. in Post 129). Despite her keen ability to memorize and recite poetry, performing does not seem to have come as naturally to Sitwell as it did to Lowell. Reviewing one of her first public readings at the home of Lady Sibyl Colefax in December of 1917, Aldous Huxley commented that the Sitwells were “respectable but terribly nervous” when they took the stage (qtd. in Post 131). Although Edith was confident about her poetry, she was not comfortable with her ability to read it to an audience, and took vocal lessons to prepare herself for her readings. Her desire to be vocally prepared for her performances demonstrates Sitwell’s awareness of the fact that the way in which the poet recites her work will influence the way in which it is perceived by the audience. Additionally, Sitwell’s vocal exercises are representative

of the kind of “training” that Lowell would like to subject readers to in order to ensure that their renditions of the poems are adequate.

While Lowell’s attraction to poetry as an oral art form seems to have emerged from her love of the theatre, Sitwell’s desire to incorporate music into her work stems from her interest in rhythm and tone and her conception of poetry as a form that relies on sound. It is important to understand that although Sitwell is commonly portrayed as an elaborate performer with a flair for drama, “she made no attempt to assume different roles for the benefit of the public” and in fact, was known for her poor acting skills (Post 130). In November of 1950, for example, Sitwell gave the first of several readings of the part of Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. From the start Sitwell insisted that she was not trying to compete with conventional actresses and that she only sought to “read as a poet,” but in spite of her desire to capture the poetry of her character’s language, “those who have written of Edith Sitwell’s Lady Macbeth have almost unanimously declared it a mistake” (Post 136). John Mason Brown went so far as to say that during Sitwell’s performance “Shakespeare was murdered along with Duncan and Banquo” (136). Her inability to “perform” in the context of drama demonstrates that the idiosyncratic personality for which she is so well-known was genuine and not a persona specifically created for the purposes of performance.

Although Lowell and Sitwell were attracted to poetry as an oral form for different reasons they share similar views about poetry as a spoken art. There are some slight discrepancies between the two poets, but Sitwell essentially attempts to create the same instrumental voice that Lowell idealistically pursues. Despite differences in the style of their work it is obvious that “Sitwell and Lowell [...] share a specific fascination with music and wish to use techniques of music in poetry” (Samberger 220). Sitwell’s work demonstrates an analogous use of musical elements that necessitate that her poems be read aloud. While Lowell tends towards “singing poetry,” Sitwell’s use of instrumental accompaniment characterizes her as a writer who focuses more on what Lowell refers to as “unmusical poetry.” Lowell’s elaborate constructions of cadenced verse and polyphonic prose make her work more complex than Sitwell’s in certain ways, but Sitwell’s use of traditionally musical elements in experimental ways similarly explores

the connections between the two genres. She employs conventional poetic techniques like rhythm in an inventive and often unexpected fashion instead of turning to abstract concepts like those that Lowell adopts. The true complexity of Sitwell's work comes from the use of musical accompaniment as a way of complimenting and adding another layer of meaning to her poetry. Although the most predominant example of music is Sitwell's use of Walton's composition in Façade, it is important to first examine the internal musical elements of her work. The two most prevalent techniques Sitwell utilizes are the experimental application of rhythm, and the use of synesthesia to create a multi-sensory effect.

Rhythm and Synesthesia

Edith Sitwell emphasized rhythm in her poetry in several ways, employing it in conjunction with sounds as a structural device, establishing a certain speed or pace based on the rhythm of the lines, and using it as a kind of onomatopoeia (Samberger 210). The first use of rhythm, as a structural device, is most prevalent in Façade in the form of what Sitwell termed "patterns in sound." For instance in "Clowns' Houses," the pattern of the rhythm complements the content of the poem. It begins:

Beneath the flat and paper sky
The sun, a demon's eye,
Glowed through the air, that mask of glass;
All wand'ring sounds that pass

Seemed out of tune [...]. (Sitwell, lines 1-5)

The first stanza alternates between two sets of rhythm that accentuate the sound of the words in a way that makes rhyme more apparent and establishes fluidity among the vowel and consonant sounds. The first line of the second stanza breaks this pattern and allows Sitwell to create structural discord in the poem which corresponds to the disharmony she describes in the line. The AABB rhyme scheme of the first stanza is

offset by the varied length and rhythm of the lines, making the rhymes more subtle and preventing the “sing song” quality that seems to be inherent in rhyming poetry that breaks at the end of lines or phrases with an equal number of syllables.¹⁴ The correlation between the content of the poetry and the structural breaks in the rhythm of the poem demonstrates one way in which Sitwell utilizes music internally in what Lowell would consider a “singing poetry” manner. For instance, the change in the stressed and unstressed pattern of the line “Seemed out of tune” breaks the rhythm and changes the meter of the poem at the same moment that Sitwell discusses the disharmony of the scene she describes.

The use of rhythm as a structural device is closely linked to Sitwell’s second method of creating a pace or speed based upon the rhythmic construction of the work. Whereas Lowell’s poetry is frequently inspired by a specific work of art or piece of music, Sitwell’s themes are more overarching. For instance, she writes many poems that mirror the steps of certain dances and incorporates the beat of the dance structurally into the rhythm of the poem, a technique that allows her to establish a tempo much like in a musical composition. In her poem “Sylph’s Song – Waltz” Sitwell mimics the steps of a waltz through the syllabic structure of her lines. The poem begins:

Daisy and Lily,
Lazy and Silly,
Walk by the shore of the wan grassy sea. (Sitwell, lines 1-3)

The adherence of the first two lines to the classic triplet beat immediately establishes the feeling of a Waltz that quickens in the third line of the poem with the addition of extra syllables. Although her audience may not be intimately familiar with ballroom dance, the steps are common enough that they would be able to pick up on the beat of the poem and associate it with the Waltz based on general knowledge. Sitwell requires that her audience is familiar with different forms of expression, however, she relies on a more

¹⁴ For instance, in William Blake’s famous poem “The Tyger” the first two lines read “Tyger, Tyger, burning bright / In the forests of the night” (Blake 30). The first two lines, each seven syllables long rhyme in a way that is highly anticipatory.

common awareness than Amy Lowell, making her work slightly more accessible to the public. The rhythm of the Waltz is much less abstract than Stravinsky's music. Despite the use of this broader knowledge, the intricate use of rhythm once again requires that the poetry is read aloud to the audience in order for them to hear the beat that Sitwell so carefully constructs.

The third way that Sitwell uses rhythm also obliges the poet to present her work orally. Samberger explains that rhythm as a form of onomatopoeia has the effect of "stimulating the reader's imagination" through the use of unique combinations of sound that can change the character of the poem based on what they represent (Samberger 210). For instance, in her poem "Green Geese" the rhythm that Sitwell uses in the first two lines slows the pace of the poem in a way that emphasizes the onomatopoeic repetition of the "s" sound:

THE trees were hissing like green geese...

The words they tried to say were these. (Sitwell, lines 1-2).

The prevalence of the "s" in "geese," "words," "say," and "these" mimics the hissing of the trees and allows the audience to hear what is being described through the words of the poem, sparking the imagination of the listener in the way that Samberger describes and establishing the tone of the poem as bucolic and related directly to the sounds of nature. This subtle use of rhythm is not apparent unless the work is read aloud and even then serves as an almost subconscious means of engaging the audience through sound. In many ways this final technique is dependent upon the use of instrumental voice in that the audience must concentrate on the sound of the words alone to hear the unconventional onomatopoeia and cannot afford to be distracted by the presence of the reader.

Aside from her experimental use of rhythm, Sitwell was known for her frequent use of synesthesia, a sensation in which the stimulation of one sense induces the stimulation of another. The use of this technique allows the poet to make subtle connections throughout her poems, creating a kind of fluidity and giving her work the same layered effect that Lowell achieves through her use of polyphony. For instance, in

her poem “I. – Pére Amelot,” one of the poems in Façade, Sitwell begins:

The stars like quaking-grass grow in each gap
Of air (ruined castle wall)...
Pére Amelot in his white nightcap
Peered through...saw nothing at all.

Like statues green from the verdigris
Of the moon, two shadows join
His shade, that under that castle wall sees
The moon like a Roman coin. (Sitwell, lines 1-8)

The image of grass in the first stanza induces a visualization of the color green, which appears later in relation to the statues basked in the “verdigris / Of the moon.” This connection between the first and second stanza through such a subtle detail helps to connect the images of Sitwell’s poem in a way that is similar to that of Lowell’s work. The poet creates stark juxtapositions indirectly through her use of association. For example, though Sitwell does not directly make a contrast between Pére and the night, the description of his “white nightcap” creates a paradoxical image in which the bright color of his cap clashes with the black image that the reader envisions as a result of the word “*nightcap*” (emphasis added). The images of the physical cap and the blackness of the night emerge concurrently as a result of the close association of specific words, an element of the poem that parallels the creation of simultaneous sounds and images in polyphonic prose. Synesthesia also allows Sitwell to evoke certain sounds in her poetry without directly appealing to conventionally auditory stimuli. For instance the phrase “*quaking-grass*” is connected to vibration through the use of the word “quake” and causes the audience to consider sounds traditionally connected to this term like the sounds one would hear during an *earthquake* or the vibration of a loud sound as it echoes throughout a canyon.

Despite this similarity, synesthesia is quite different from polyphony, especially with regards to the use of characters. Sitwell’s work maintains the presence of a fictional figure, Pére Amelot, within the poem, unlike Lowell who obscures the speaker by overwhelming the audience with images and representations of the objects and places

that make up the narrator's "Spring Day." Sitwell surrounds P re with stars and statues, and he is certainly not the focus of this portion of the poem, however he is still present in a way that Lowell's speaker is not. This element of Sitwell's work results in the use of Eliot's third voice because it represents a fictional figure perceiving the sensory details of the poem and relaying them to the audience. In this case, instrumental voice is more difficult to implement in that the poet must remove herself so that the poem is directly communicated to the audience but must also maintain the illusion of P re as an observer who is interpreting his surroundings. As Eliot indicates in his essay, poetic voice is not an exclusive principle that mandates the use of one voice consistently throughout the course of the poem, but the paradox of using instrumental voice, which requires the absence of the poet, while simultaneously using dramatic voice, which is defined by the creation of a character as a speaker, makes it unlikely that these two voices can mutually exist. In order to preserve the poem as an entity that communicates itself to the audience it is necessary for the characters to strike the balance in which the poet is "everywhere present, and everywhere hidden" (Eliot 24). For instance, Sitwell uses P re as a figure in her poem, but he is largely overwhelmed by the other images and sounds that she establishes in the verse such as the green statues and the "moon like a Roman coin." The reader is aware of P re Amelot's presence, but the focus remains remote from his physical being. Although the use of synesthesia and rhythm does not seem as elaborate as Lowell's cadenced verse and polyphonic prose, these musical elements in Sitwell's poems become more complex when they are examined in the context of Faade, a work that is made up of poems containing these musical characteristics, but is simultaneously dependent on the external music of Walton and thus conforms to Lowell's definition of "unmusical poetry".

"Unmusical Poetry": Edith Sitwell's Faade

One of the most striking differences between Sitwell and Lowell's performances is that Edith Sitwell created a unified piece of work that cannot be broken down into individual poems. It is clear that the poems of Faade, which were all read together over

Sir William Walton's musical score, are intended to be heard in conjunction with one another. This connectivity makes Sitwell's performances more dramatic and theatrical since they are intended to be experienced as full length productions in a way that Amy Lowell's are not. The repetition of certain themes, tones, sounds, images and rhythms throughout Sitwell's poems reinforces the idea that "the body of her writing finally must be viewed as one piece, though considerable variation and development are visible within the pattern of the whole" (Mills 64). While Lowell's recitations of her poetry are comparable to a chorus performing several different pieces of music, Sitwell's readings create the effect of an opera, which presents a single body of work. Although there is precedent for the recitation of poetry to music - the French symbolist Albert Giraud's "Pierrot Lunaire" was set to a composition by Arnold Schonberg - Sitwell uses an elaborate set constructed to obscure the reader making her work a more advanced version of this form of presentation. R.L. Mégroz described the set of Façade as follows:

...the audience found itself confronted, not with the poet, a lectern, a table and a carafe, but a strange curtain painted by Mr. Frank Dobson with a design of three primitive archways, and a mask in two of these through the mouth of which stengerphones [...which were kinds of megaphones made by George Senger of compressed grasses] were pointed at the audience. (qtd. in Post 131).

The intention of this set was to literally hide the reader from the audience so that the focus of their attention would be the sound emerging from the painted mouths of the masks, a notion which seeks to remove the poet from the reading and ensure that the poem is a direct communication from "voice to ear" as Sitwell intended it to be. While Lowell relies on the proper rendering of the poem by the reader to obscure the speaker, Sitwell uses the set as a physical means of hiding herself from the audience in the hopes that they will forget her presence if they are unable to see her. The abstract set and Sitwell's odd chanting of her poetry over Walton's striking composition makes her work incredibly experimental and these radical characteristics of her performances led her to be initially rejected by her audience. As Philip Hamburger notes, the negative reception of Façade seems to be "a classic example of the cultural time lag between the creation of

something new and good and the public's acceptance of it" (qtd. in Post). If Sitwell were to read her poetry in a more conventional way, it is unlikely she would have received such criticism. Her experimentation with rhythm is innovative, but it is not so wholly original that the audience would view it with the same incomprehension that they demonstrated when listening to Façade. However Sitwell was not interested in helping the audience understand her work. She had a clear idea of the purpose of the audience and viewed the relationship between poet and audience as "a hierarchical one in which it was the audience's job to process the artist's meaning, no matter how difficult that might be" (Severin 43). Although Lowell similarly expected the audience to grasp the complex meaning of her work, she seems to set the relationship between herself and the listener as one in which the voice of the poet is responsible for properly conveying the emotion and sentiment that is meant to be understood; if the audience does not understand the poem, the reader is at fault. In this way, Sitwell puts more pressure on the audience and expects a great deal from them. While Lowell anticipates that the audience will be able to make abstract connections between her work and other modernist art forms, Sitwell anticipates that they will be able to fully comprehend the meaning of her poem, no matter how complex it is and how intricately it is presented in the context of her performance.

Although conceptually Edith Sitwell sought to employ instrumental voice, the manner in which she composed her poetry made her much less likely to succeed than Amy Lowell. The reliance on external music that is inherent in what Lowell calls "unmusical poetry" prevents the poem from existing as an independent entity. In fact, the sudden crashes of the cymbals and the dramatic movement in Walton's composition is often distracting and seems to be detrimental to what Sitwell would like to achieve. The removal of the poet and the use of instrumental voice are supposed to facilitate an air of intimacy between the audience and the poem by eliminating the distraction of the poet's physical presence. As Lowell explains, "singing poetry" contains within itself all of the musical elements that are necessary for expression and as a result it is possible for the poem to exist free from the influence of the poet. The use of Walton's piece as an accompaniment prevents this kind of intimacy in that it serves as a constant reminder of external forces at work on the poem. The sudden bray of the trumpets or a dramatic

crescendo in the music prevents the audience from devoting all of its attention to what is happening in the poem itself despite the use of an elaborate set concealing the speaker.

Conclusions: Instrumental Voice

While it is clear that both Lowell and Sitwell use Eliot's first and second voices in conjunction with instrumental voice, the extent to which they employ the third type of poetic voice and the ways in which contradicts their desire to absent themselves from their poetry remains questionable. T.S. Eliot explains the third, dramatic voice as that which occurs when the poet creates a dramatic character speaking in verse – when he is not saying what he would say in his own person, but what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character.¹⁵ Sitwell and Lowell's instrumental voice seem antagonistic to this final concept. What Lowell is attempting to create is a poetic voice in which the poet ceases to exist in any form and serves solely as the instrument that interprets the poem for the audience. In an ideal form, Lowell's poetry would be nothing more than the communication of the voice to the ear without the poet as a physical entity. However this concept is one that could only truly exist as an ideal. Even the modern use of recordings is insufficient as a means of creating instrumental voice in that Lowell is so well-known for her personality that it is exceedingly difficult for the reader to forget that it is Lowell reading the work. Sitwell strives to reach a comparable state in which the poet is present only as a disembodied voice that reads the poetry to the audience and is similarly faced with the problem of her odd personality. Even if one were to view her performance on film, the use of an elaborate set in Façade as a means of concealing herself does not stop the audience from

¹⁵ A clear example of this in poetry is Lewis Carroll's poem "Father William." The work is essentially a conversation between a young man and an old man called Father William and as a result of this Carroll must use dialog that adequately represents the characters that are speaking. For instance Carroll, who was only in his thirties when he wrote Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the work in which the poem appears, is able to say "In my youth" because he speaking through a character much older than himself.

imaging Sitwell behind the mouthpiece, and as a result, the poem cannot be viewed as separate from herself.

While the poetic voice that Sitwell and Lowell try to create is representative of oral poetry in its purest form, the impossibility of completely removing the poet from her work makes this impossible to achieve. The performative aspect of their poetry, which was necessary as a result of the musical qualities imbedded in their work, led the audience to focus on the personas of Lowell and Sitwell in a way that further complicated their desire to serve as disembodied voices speaking from behind the veil of their words. Instrumental voice, the abstract and idealistic concept which the poets pursued, led Lowell and Sitwell to create highly complex and constructed poetry that cannot be expressed in the manner that they wanted it to by anyone but themselves. Although their poetry captures the ideology of the modernist movement and the experimental aspects of their poems seem to evolve with the atmosphere in which they were writing, their reliance on voice as the medium for their work ensured that they would be largely ignored by the literary canon after they died. Their attempt to create and employ the abstract instrumental voice was never fully understood by their contemporaries or their audience and as a result they have become idiosyncratic characters whose experimental poetry is too often disregarded and not recognized for the incredibly intricate inclusion of musical elements and the unique poetic voice that emerges as a result of these qualities.

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