

AN Archetypal Reading Of Edith Sitwell's Later poetry

D. Majeed U. Jadwe

College of Education for Women

Edith Sitwell (1887-1964) is a poet blessed with what Philip wheelwright calls the archetypal imagination. Her poetry, especially in its later and mature phase, depends for its effect on the manipulation of a set of primordial images derived from various mythical and religious sources to invoke her perception of spiritual evil and her horrified revulsion at the bestial cruelties of man to man the modern world. (1)

The frequent invocation of such Christian and natural symbols as Christ, Cain, Sun, and rain in her later poetry-from 1940 onwards- invests them, on the one hand, with archetypal significance and blesses, on the other hand, her total vision with a unified mythopoetic sensibility. Indeed, one hears in her later poetry much of the sun, earth, love, hatred, honey, lion, darkness, cold, death, Cain, Adam, and Christ. But these, according to David Perkins "are not presented with particularizing detail but only in general reference." (2). This is essentially due to her associationist technique, which she has learnt earlier from the French symbolists. It enables her to expand the mythic implication of her imagination by way of contextual association. (3). The ritual invocation of each of these images in different contexts helps to highlight their primitive and at once cosmic vestiges of the primordial. Referring to this dialectical process of mythic signification in Edith Sitwell's later poetry, W.B. Yeats says that she has:

Exaggerated metaphors into Mythology, carrying them from poem to poem, compelling us to go back to some first usage for the birth of the myth if the storm suggests the bellowing of elephants, same later poem will display, the elephant trunks of the sea. (4).

The outcome of such practice is the formulation of archetypal patterns that stir us as something at once familiar and strange.

One of the major archetypal patterns that emerges from Sitwell's later poetry is that of death-and-rebirth which is depicted in a vegetational context. Vegetational rebirth is the ultimate goal of human and natural existence. Although her perspective on the modern world is intensely apocalyptic, she resolves to love, despite the fact of death, and she asserts that in or through darkness and death comes the 'harvest':

Love is not changed by death.

And nothing is lost and all in the end is harvest. (5).

The three key-words here, love, death and, harvest, are not conceptual but depend for their effect on the quality of their emotional association. While love and death belong to our elemental existence harvest furnishes them in a context of human and natural fertility. Hence, vegetation becomes the perspective or vision into which these two opposing forces of life and death co-exist.

Indeed, her two major symbols of death and rebirth-through love, Cain and Christ are frequently invoked in a vegetational context. Where corn, harvest, sun and wheat become emblematic of this world. Observing this process, Northrop Frye says.

In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth, or the disappearance and return, or the incarnation and Withdrawal, of a god. The divine activating is usually or associated with one or more of cyclical processes of nature. (6)

Such is the way in Sitwell's first major poem of her later period, "Still Falls the Rain". This poem was occasioned by the German air-raids on London in 1940. The rain, here, is no longer a symbol of fertility. It is death and destruction, which is associated with the lethal showers of German bombs.

This terrible fatality of rain is ritually invoked in the frequent repetition of the ceremonial phrase "Still Falls the Rain" Through the poem.

The suffering of the crucified Christ is the anti-dote to the destructive fatality of rain. This suffering is vividly concretized through the repetition of such word as wounds. And nails. The starvation of Christ is also brought into focus. The effect is necessarily one that highlights pain as mystified human experience in the ritual of redemption.

"Her crucified Christ" says V. de Pinto, "is no mere pious allegory but the living embodiment of the suffering of the whole world (including the animals) identified in a flash of inspired imagination with the incarnation of divine love". (7) Christ then figures as a human myth of redemption through pain. No possibility of superhuman redemption is suggested here. For Christ's pain is overtly humanized. This process of humanization culminates at the end of the poem:

Then sounds the voice of One who liked the heart of man was one

a child who among beasts has lain ‘ Still do love , still shed my innocent light, my Blood for thee.

The redemptive power of Christ derives from the archetypal experience of love and innocence that figure in his character. These elemental derives of love and innocence are further substantiated in the Capitalized “Blood”. The association of Christ’s blood, in Christian rituals, with wine adds further significance to this word. While suggestive of primitive totamism, blood as wine is also symbolic of fertility, which comes to full significance in its opposition with sterility of rain.

In ‘Holiday, apoem which celebrates the mysteries of Christmas, the figure of Christ is associated with the sun:

**O you, all life, and you, the primal Cause-
The sun and planets to the husbandman,
The kemel and the sap, the life- blood, flower
Of all that lives, the power
That hods the Golden Rainers in the heaven.**

The apostrophe identifies Christ with the sun as the ultimate source of human and natural energy and vitality. The invocation is Cosmic in perspective. It encompasses the whole mystery life and creation. The frame of reference, here, is by no means theological .It is rather archetypal. Divinity is at once ‘ the primal Cause ‘ and ‘ the power ‘ that ‘ holds the golden Rainers in the heaven ‘ , i.e. , the clouds which are the sources of rain , the ultimate source of fertility. This archetypal potential of Christ is further substantiated throughout the poem by the frequent invocation of several forms of vegetation death and re-birth:

The wasteful Gardener who to grow one flower - your life ,like a long –petalled sun, has strewn the infinite.

Meadow of space with calyxes that die like dew, has sown the seed of this hour that comes no more.

Growing in time, too them as an abstraction yet holding in the end Our bones like winter.

The birth of Christ is represented as fully–realized moment of vegetation.

God the father is a “Gardener “, Christ is “ along- petalled sun “, hence the the pun on son /sun. Space is the “infinite meadow “ while the creation of good gardener is “wasteful”. He is rather the hanged god of James frazer whose death is necessary for the rebirth of life and fertility in spring.

The hanging is sacrificial as with Marsyas. This assumption comes to a full- culmination at the end of poem:

For the starving bird is part of the broken body of Christ who forgives us- he with the bright hair.

The sun whose body was split on our fields to bring as harvest.

The invocation of the mythos of spring- in Fryes terminology-culminates in the reference to harvest, in the last line , which is the epitome of human and natural fertility.

Here, one should note the changing implication of sitwell, s mytheopoetic figures, especially the natural ones –rain in “ still falls the rain “ is a symbol of death and destruction whereas in “ Holiday “ it is symbolic of fertility and bless. Sitwell ,however , distinguishes two types of rain good sent and man-mad. She makes this clear in the fourth stanza of “ Song “ :

**How simple was the time of Cain the latter Man - Mad
ran washed away all loss and gain and the talk of right
and wrong-Murdered now and gone.**

The sun is another of her shifting mytheopoetic metaphors. It might be the source of fertility associated with christ or, reversedly, the red sun of cain and therefor symbolic of sterility and death. This later association is well-epitomized in “ The Stone- Breakers” :

**Go down, red sun ,red cain.
Or, if you rise again,
Being us the last fires of the Juclgment day! ...
The dead men rise with cain the sun;
They died on the chain, but rise to workagain.**

In“Dido, s Song” the word is made to oscillate between these two suns:

**My sun of death is the deep, reveredly,
What the great sun of heaven is to the height in the violent heat.
When Sirius come to lie at the sun's feet.
My sun of death is all depth, heaven's sun.
All height, and the air of the whole world lies
Between these suns.**

These two suns, however, are symbolic of our archetypal existence. They are the thantos and eros of all existence.the effect, here, is to create a myth of origin into which human existence is reduced to its most elemental level. But given the earlier associations with Christ and Cain, the

allegorical idea of original sun and redemption comes to a full significance in these two suns. Consequently, this dialectical infusion of the allegorical into the archetypal in the same symbol becomes emblematic of the poet's quest for true integration of the inner and outer worlds, a healing in the 'schism in the Soul' Similar to that achieved by Eliot in his later poetry.

These two suns, however, epitomize the subtle balance between Christ and Cain in Sitwell's world. This co-existence is archetypal not religious or allegorical. This pattern of Coexistence culminates in her "Poems of the Atomic Age" that were occasioned by the dropping of the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945.9 in "Dirge for the New Sunrise", "Shadow of Cain", and "The Canticle of the Rose" death is depicted as an internal condition of Man. Thus, Sitwell speaks about:

**The ghost of the heart of Man.... Red Cain
And the more murderous brain
Of Man**

Hence, men, in 'The Shadow of Cain', are referred to as:

The Race of the Dead.... Their blood is Cold.

They live in the waste land of the modern city of Cain where:

**Buyers and sellers cry
Speak not the name of light-
Her name is Madness new...though we are black beneath her kiss
As if she were the sun, her name is night.**

But despite this utter despair, salvation is not impossible even for those:

Who dreamed that Christ has died in vain?

He walk again on the seas of Blood, the came in the terrible Rain

Again, this archetypal pattern of re-birth is conducted in images of vegetation that emulate the mythos of spring. In fact, the cycle of vegetation imagery. Culminates at the end of the last poem in this sequence," The Canticle of the Rose", Where the rose becomes an emblem of Christ's redemptive re-birth:

**But high upon the wall
The Rose where the wounds of Christ are red Cries to light.
See how I rise upon my stem, ineffable bright Effluence of bright
essnce...From my little Span
I Cry of Christ, who is the ultimate Fire
Who will burn away the Cold in the heart of men I was redere
on Rode than the Rose in the rayne"**

This semel is Crist, clepid the plantynge of the Rose in Jeryco

Out of this miniature of dense imagery there figures Christ the archetypal man who epitomizes the promethian spirit of human defiance against the evil forces of darkness inside.

Apparently, the mythic significance of Edith Sitwell's later poetry stems from her ability to see her world in archetypal terms which ultimately grants her poetic vision a profound sense of universality.

Notes

- 1- Archetypal Imagination is that 'Which sees the particular object as embodying and adumbrating suggestion of universality' Philip Wheelwright, 'Poetry, Myth, and Reality': in *The Language of poetry*, ed. Allan Tate (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1942), p.8.
- 2- David Perkins, *A history of Modern poetry* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap, 1976), p.433.
- 3- G.S. Fraser, *The Modern writer and His World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p.266.
- 4- W.B. Yeats, 'Introduction' *The Oxford Book of Modern verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p.xviii
- 5- Edith Sitwell, *Collected poems* (London: Macmillan, 1965), p.232 subsequent Citations are from this edition.
- 6- Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of English* (Princeton: Princeton university press, 1971), p. 158.
- 7- V. de S. Pinto, *Crisis in English poetry: 1880-1940* (London: Hutchinson university Library, 1972), p.183.
- 8- James George Frazer, *The New Golden Bough*, ed. Theodor H. Gaster (New York: Doubleday, 1961), pp.180-182.
- 9- Edith Sitwell makes clear her indebtedness to Jung, The founder of the archetypal theory, in these poems. p.xliv.

Bibliography

- De Pinto, V.. *Crisis in English poetry 1880-1940* London: Hutchinson University. Library, 1972
- Fraser, G. S. *The Modern writer and His World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
- Frazer, James George, *The New Golden Bough*, Ed. Theodor H. Gaster New York: Doubleday, 1961.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Griyicism* Princeton: Princeton university Press, 1971
- Perkins, David. *A history of Modern poetry* Cambridge, Mass: Bellcnap, 1976.
- Sitwell, Edith *Collected poems*. London: Macmillan, 1965.
- Tate, Allan. (ed.) *The Language of poetry* ed. Allan Tate Princeton: Princeton university press, 1942
- Yeats, W.B. (ed) *The Oxford Book of Modern verse* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960)

