

“WORSE THAN DEATH” is the fate of the famous artist. Fame is his fate in the eyes of one of England’s “famous” poets. It seems safe to call Miss Edith Sitwell “famous,” for people read a great deal about her, if they do not read much of her poetry. She forms one of the famous trio; she and her two brothers having apparently embarked on a crusade to startle the bourgeoisie. It is not by shocking these staid members of society, but by ranging themselves against every popular fancy, and finding some obscure or neglected thing to admire—like baroque art. Miss Sitwell is described by *The Sketch* (London) as “an author who dislikes simplicity, morris-dancing, a sense of humor, and every kind of sport except reviewer-baiting.” She has proclaimed all these characteristics in “Who’s Who” (London). Her despair about fame springs from what “a famous poet” and “a famous painter” once told her—that it was “worse than death.” America has already entertained one of the Sitwell’s—Osbert—and the report goes that all three will visit us within the year. Meantime, in *The Daily Mail* we derive a foretaste of the quality of the woman whose poems have occasionally appeared on another of our pages. We read:

“It is quite safe to be a famous divorcée, criminal, cannibal, silly playwright, or financier. Then (as my brother, Mr. Osbert Sitwell, has pointed out) you are treated as if you were a cross between Shakespeare and the Duke of Wellington. But the famous artist has to undergo all the inconveniences suffered by:

- “(a) The Tower of London,
- “(b) An Aunt Sally, and
- “(c) An Information Bureau.

“His days are supposed to be at the service of the general public, his nights are made hideous by hostesses. I could tell you of some sad cases. Here is a transcript of a letter actually received by one of these unfortunates:

“Dear Mr. ———: I met you once, seven years ago, and have always remembered the meeting, as I told you it was the wettest summer I had ever known; and you agreed. I am writing now to tell you that my daughter is so anxious to be an actress (she is a very original girl). Can you tell me anything about Madame Otero, and do you advise me to place the child with her for training?”

“Here, again, is the case of an unhappy artist who, during his working hours, was rung up on the telephone every ten minutes by an acquaintance, who wished to take up the character of a chef once employed by a relative of the artist. The latter bore this martyrdom for some time, together with the lady’s heart-searchings as to whether the chef did or did not drink. Then temper intervened, and he wrote this letter:

HOW FAME LOOKS FOR A POETESS

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“Dear Mrs. —: You are right in thinking one can not be too careful—witness the enclosed newspaper cuttings.’ (One cutting stated: Owl dies from careless sleep on railway line. When the 4:25 express from Bletchley reached Paddington this afternoon, it was seen that a dead owl was attached to the buffers. It is evident that the owl had lain down to sleep on the railway line, somewhere between Bletchley and London, and in this way met his end.)

“The other cutting was even more puzzling:

“Wombat, by persisting in burrowing, prevents town of Wimberang, in Australia, from getting one single drop of water for six months. The wombat is a small black bear.’

“The artist added:

“Do you suppose an ordinary bat, the kind people get in their bellies, would do a thing like that?’

“The lady replied, ‘I can see no point in your letter!’”

Miss Sitwell next takes up “the sad case of Mr. A., the famous poet who will soon die from overwork and despair”:

“In what way does Mr. A. suffer? He suffers from complete strangers who write and ask him silly questions, and demand that they should be answered by return of post. He suffers from persons who send him indescribably idiotic manuscript ‘poems’ with a peremptory demand that these should be criticized immediately, and placed, that very day, with an editor.

“He suffers from an incessant plague of bores, and each individual of this plague howls to see him separately, and each expects to have his or her letter answered by the poet’s hand and not

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by the hand of the poet’s secretary (a piece of subtle impertinence of which the bore is quite unaware).

“Then there are the press photographers, who are invariably charming people, so that Mr. A. never has the heart to resist them, and who, consequently, photograph Mr. A. with his cheeks blown out like a balloon and with his nose turned completely round one ear and tied in a bow at the back of his neck. These photographs are then reproduced in every paper in the Empire, and those millions of persons who suffer from inferiority complex and hate Mr. A. because he has been heard of, raise a shrill yell and accuse Mr. A. of self-advertisement. Professional humorists become peculiarly violent on the subject.

“When Mr. A. produces a book—his way of earning his living—he is supposed to be self-advertising. When chit-chat columns are rude to him—he is self-advertising. If he is seen in public he is self-advertising; and the fact that his poems are not boiled-down rags of Wordsworth’s weaker work, served with water, but are, instead, something new, only makes him the more self-advertising.”

Miss Sitwell’s final stroke of irony should not be missed:

“Do not let us be angry with this self-advertisement. As we know, poets are of a naturally low order of intelligence and behavior. . . . That was pointed out apropos Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats.”



A POET WHO DISLIKE SIMPLICITY

Miss Edith Sitwell, one of a famous trio in literary London, suggests something like the feminine counterpart of "Janus" or "Mr. Facing Both Ways"
(photo by Cecil Beaton)