

Research Article



Grotesque Sound Poetics and Performative Mimesis in Edith Sitwell's "Polka"

Edith Sitwell'in "Polka" Şiirinde Grotesk Ses Poetikası ve Edimsel Taklit

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Abstract

Edith Sitwell, a paradoxical figure in British modernism—both celebrated and critically underestimated—made significant contributions to experimental poetics through her innovative use of sound, abstraction, and performance. Her poem "Polka," from the *Façade* collection (1922) exemplifies her grotesque sound poetics through rhythmic excess, sonic fragmentation, and performative mimesis, exposing the unstable theatricality of imperial and gendered constructs. This article explores "Polka" through the intertwined lenses of grotesque sound poetics and performative mimesis, arguing that it dismantles traditional lyric structures and reconfigures poetic voice as a site of distorted performativity. Sitwell challenges British imperial and gendered narratives within a broader framework of identity formation, cultural memory, and imperial fantasy. By mimicking, rather than mirroring, the absurdities of reality, the poem subverts conventional mimesis, revealing dominant identities as illusory and unstable. Central to this performative mimesis is Mr. Wagg, a grotesque vaudevillian whose repetitive dance and fragmented speech transform identity into theatrical spectacle. Historical icons like Nelson, Wellington, Byron and Crusoe are reduced to props within decaying imperialism, stripped of their grandeur. Repositioning "Polka" within modernist sound poetics and performative mimesis, this study argues that Sitwell transforms poetry into a performative stage where identity, gender and imperial fantasies collapse into parody.

Öz

İngiliz modernizminin hem yüceltilen hem de eleştirel olarak göz ardı edilen paradoksal figürlerinden Edith Sitwell, ses, soyutlama ve performansa dayalı yenilikçi yaklaşımlarıyla deneysel poetikaya önemli katkılarda bulunmuştur. *Façade* (1922) derlemesinde yer alan "Polka" adlı şiiri, ritmik aşırılık, işitsel parçalanma ve edimsel taklit yoluyla karakterize edilen grotesk ses poetikasının bir örneğidir. Bu şiir, emperyalist ve toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı yapıların istikrarsız teatral doğasını açığa çıkarır. Bu makale, "Polka"yı grotesk ses poetikası ve edimsel taklidin iç içe geçmiş çerçeveleri üzerinden inceleyerek, geleneksel lirik yapıları parçaladığını ve şiirsel sesi, bozulmuş bir edimsel alan olarak yeniden yapılandırıldığını öne sürer. Sitwell, kimlik oluşumu, kültürel bellek ve emperyalist fantezi çerçevesinde, Britanya emperyalizmini ve cinsiyet temelli anlatıları sorgular. Gerçekliğin absürtlüğünü yansıtmak yerine taklit eden şiir, geleneksel mimesisi altüst ederek baskın kimlikleri aldatıcı ve istikrarsız yapılar olarak ifşa eder. Bu edimsel taklidin merkezinde, tekrarlayan dansı ve parçalı konuşmalarıyla kimliği teatral bir gösteriye dönüştüren grotesk bir vodvil figür olan Bay Wagg yer alır. Nelson, Wellington, Byron ve Crusoe gibi tarihsel ikonlar ise çürümekte olan bir emperyalist sistemin görkemlerinden arındırılmış sahne dekorlarına indirgenmiştir. Bu çalışma "Polka"yı modernist ses poetikası ve edimsel taklit bağlamında yeniden konumlandırarak, Sitwell'in şiiri kimliğin, toplumsal cinsiyet ve emperyalist fantezilerin parodiye indirgendiği edimsel bir sahnede nasıl dönüştürdüğünü tartışır.

Keywords

Edith Sitwell,
performative mimesis,
grotesque,
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Anahtar Kelimeler

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Introduction

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell (1887-1964), born in Yorkshire, England in 1887, was the eldest of the three Sitwell siblings, and a prominent figure in early twentieth century London's avant-garde coterie. Alongside her brothers, Osbert and Sacheverell, both of whom also became famous writers, Edith Sitwell helped shape a vibrant alternative to the Bloomsbury Group. Although the Sitwells moved in similar literary circles and were known for their eccentric lifestyles and experimental works, they cultivated a distinct artistic identity, separate from that of contemporaries such as Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats. Sitwell's flamboyant public persona often attracted considerable attention, at times overshadowing her literary achievements. However, her influence on modernist poetics still remains significant. As her biographer Geoffrey Elborn remarked, "Edith Sitwell was one of the most colorful and controversial women of the twentieth century."¹

It's impossible to discuss Sitwell without mentioning her distinctive eccentricities. Often dressed in Elizabethan-style gowns,² embellished in brocade, layered velvet scarves and ornate jewellery, she cultivated a striking and theatrical appearance. Her hawk-nosed and androgynous white face and thin eyebrows exhibit an image marked by pride and smugness.³ Her vivid and theatrical self-portrait reveals her refusal to conform to conventional traditions and her distinctive appearance mirrors the spirit of her poetry, idiosyncratic, stylized, and subversive.

What makes Sitwell's poetry intriguing is that she took everyday topics and gave them a modern tendency. Her poetry is marked by a unique fusion of technical precision and avant-garde innovation. Richard Greene defines Sitwell as a "pugilist for the modern movement in the arts."⁴ Inspired by French symbolism and musical rhythms, her early poetry was an epitome of an experimentation in rhythm and motion, reflecting her own time and revolving around themes such as human emotions, nature, history, the inanity of modern society and the physical world. These poems often feature striking and unconventional rhythms, and elusive allusions, echoing her commitment to pushing the boundaries of traditional poetic forms. In her 1965 autobiography *Taken Care of*, Sitwell highlights the power of rhythm in poetry, stating: "Rhythm is one of the principal translators between dream and reality. Rhythm might be described as, to the world of sound, what light is to the world of sight. It shapes and gives new meaning."⁵ Her vision of poetry

¹ Geoffrey Elborn, *Edith Sitwell: A Biography* (Doubleday, 1981), ix.

² Sitwell claimed a strong personal connection to Queen Elizabeth I, stating, "We were born on the same day of the month, and about the same hour of the day." See the details at <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/edith-sitwell>

³ See the portrait of Edith Sitwell, 1923-1935 by Whyndham Lewis at <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lewis-edith-sitwell-n05437> In this painting, which Lewis worked on for twelve years (1923-1935), Sitwell is depicted as a clairvoyant.

⁴ Richard Greene, "Edith Sitwell: Avant-garde Poet, English Genius," *Reviews in History*, Virago (2011): 167. <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1390/print/>

⁵ Edith Sitwell, *Taken Care Of* (Atheneum, 1965), 140.

as both musical and visionary has earned renewed scholar attention. As Zelda Cole remarked, “[Sitwell] attempted a revivification not only of the rhythms but also of the language of poetry.”⁶

Even though her efforts at change were initially met with resistance, her early works represent a revitalizing force in modern poetry, challenging the pastoral tone and the bucolic form of Georgian poetry. In the opening pages of “Some Notes on My Own Poetry,” Sitwell herself defined what motivated her in her early poetic style, saying “At the time I began to write, a change in the direction, imagery, and rhythms in poetry had become necessary owing to the rhythmical flaccidity, the verbal deadness, the dead and expected patterns.”⁷ Sitwell collaborated with composers such as William Walton⁸ and Benjamin Britten, turning her poems into performances. Her formal experimentation is especially evident in her collections like *The Mother and Other Poems* (1915), *The Wooden Pegasus* (1920), *Façade* (1922), *Clown’s Houses* (1928) and *Green Song and Other Poems* (1944). These works showcase her use of rhythm, abstract imagery and sonic texture, disrupting conventional poetic forms.

Over the course of her literary career, Sitwell left behind a considerable body of work: twenty-one poetry collections, biographies of historical figures like Queen Victoria, Elizabeth I and Alexander Pope, a novel and an autobiography of English eccentrics. Between 1916-1927, Sitwell edited *Wheels*, which featured the work of war poet Wilfred Owen. In 1929, she composed “Gold Cust Gold,” a poem about the artificial nature of humanity. Her novel, *I Live Under a Black Sun* (1937), is about Jonathan Swift. One of her most acclaimed poems, “Still Falls the Rain” (1941), written during the London Blitz, allegorizes wartime suffering through Christian imagery, comparing the bloodshed of London—the falling rain, like tears—to His sacrifice. Sitwell’s *Façade* poems are experimental texts that critique the absurdities of modern life, introducing a new poetic discipline that fuses sound, satire and dance. Rejecting the pictorial lyricism of Georgian and Romantic poetry, these poems offer a more psychological and multisensory experience through visual, auditory, and kinesthetic and synaesthetic effects, where one sensory modality evokes another.

Among them, “Polka” stands out for its rhythmic vitality and sonic playfulness. Framed as a satirical sound poem in this study, it interrogates language, identity, empire and performance through juxtapositions, vocal distortions, and the absurd choreography of its central figure, Mr. Wagg, a grotesque vaudevillian figure whose fragmented speech and repetitive dance reveal identity as theatrical, performative and unstable. Sitwell uses sonic fragmentation, surreal imagery and ironic refrains to subvert the grandeur of imperial and gendered myths. Historical figures such as Nelson, Wellington, Byron and Crusoe are reduced to props within a crumbling imperial fantasy,

⁶ Zelda Cole, “*Edith Sitwell: A Critical Survey of Selected Poems 1913-1954, in the Light of Her Spiritual Conversation*” (MA thesis, University of Ottawa, 1967), 9.

⁷ Edith Sitwell, “Some Notes on My Poetry,” *Selected Poems* (Duckworth, 1936), 10.

⁸ “William Walton is one of the three indisputable leaders of the first generation of 20th century, together with Michael Tippett (three years younger) and Benjamin Britten (eleven years younger),” para. 2. <https://waltontrust.org/en/biography>

removed from their grandeur. Rather than mirroring reality, the poem mimics its absurdities, displacing traditional mimesis with a distorted performativity. By exploring “Polka” through the lenses of sound poetry and performative mimesis, this article argues that Sitwell reimagines poetry as a performative stage where identity, masculinity and imperial myths collapse into parody. In order to contextualize this intervention, the study begins with an overview of sound poetry, positioning “Polka” within modernist and avant-garde traditions.

An Overview of Sound Poetry

Sound poetry is a dynamic style of poetic expression that highlights the sonic qualities of language over its traditional semantic and syntactic functions. Rather than focusing merely on meaning, sound poetry emphasizes the auditory experience, inviting listeners to engage with rhythm, tone, repetition and vocal experimentation. These sonic verses transcend conventional poetic boundaries, creating a vivid and often playful sensory experience. Through such performance, the voice becomes an instrument, and language is abstracted into sound, producing emotional and interpretive depth beyond literal comprehension.

The roots of sound poetry can be traced back to oral traditions of ancient times, where poetry was transmitted without written texts in pre-literate cultures. Oral traditions, including epic narratives, ritualistic verses, and chants, relied significantly on rhythm, repetition and musicality. Partially influenced by the complex rhythmic and jazz-like structures of African music, sound poetry continued across diverse cultures and historical periods. With the rise of free verse and experimental poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century, poetry became increasingly entwined with music and visual art, paving the way for more radical sonic experimentation.

Throughout the years of the World War I, avant-garde movements like Futurism and Dadaism attempted to redefine the role of sound in art and literature. Italian Futurist poet, theorist and art critic Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Zang Tumb Tumb*, published in excerpts in literary journals between 1912 and 1914, stands out as a quintessential epitome of sound poetry.⁹ It was his first published collection of *parole in libertà* (“words-in-freedom”), a poetic form developed by Italian artists and writers that sought to break conventional syntax by deleting adjectives, adverbs and punctuation and inserting musical symbols by employing onomatopoeia. Similarly, Dadaist poet and artist Tristan Tzara contributed to the development of sound poetry by introducing texts performed by multiple individuals, each using distinctive rhythms and tonalities in various languages.

[Tzara’s 1917 poem “La Panka” is an example of Tzara’s sound poetry, featuring] disturbing phonics, literally sounding-out the tumult and seismic tremors of the earth [. . .] emphasizing long, prolonged

⁹ See the cover of *Zang Tumb Tumb* and additional details about the work in the MoMA collection archive at <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/31450>

and rattling enunciations: “*De la teeee ee erre moooooooooot / Des bouuuuules*,” as in “tremblement de la terre,” or “earthquake” in English.¹⁰

Luigi Russolo’s 1913 manifesto, *The Art of Noise*, widely regarded as foundational to the development of experimental and noise music, also challenges the traditions of musical composition. Russolo, in his manifesto, critiqued the limited sonic palette of classical music, which primarily focused on melody and harmony produced by conventional instruments. Russolo advocated for the inclusion of industrial and urban sounds such as mechanical noises and everyday environmental sounds, into the musical vocabulary, reflecting the sonic realities of the rapidly and dynamically modernizing early twentieth century.¹¹

Sound poetry has functioned as both a theoretical framework and a performative mode of artistic innovation. In sound-driven poems, the formation of words creates rhythm and acoustic imagery during the performance, invoking emotions that extend beyond semantic content. Thus, in sound poetry, the voice becomes an instrument and language is often liberated from its traditional meaning. As quoted by Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, in *Poetry and Orality*, the *Oulipo*¹² poet-theorist Jacques Roubaud distinguished song from poetry by emphasising their separation after the fourteenth century, suggesting that:

The breaking of the bond between word and sound, which occurred during the fourteenth century, brought about a new double form called poetry. This form would combine the words of a language in writing and in speech such that they would be indissociable. The other form which brings word and sound together has by no means disappeared; we call it song. A song is not a poem and a poem is not a song.¹³

Despite this theoretical divide, sound poetry reintroduces the vocal and performative aspects of verse, fusing literary and musical elements into a multisensory experience.

Sound poetry is also known as abstract poetry. Through tone, rhythm, repetition and vocal experimentation, the performances engage the listener’s imagination, allowing abstract sound to take on a visual and emotional dimension. It was Sitwell who introduced the term “abstract poetry” to define her poems, which emphasize sound over traditional literary elements. By doing so, she turned sound poetry into a modern performance poetry. In *The Canticle of the Rose Poems: 1917-1949*, Sitwell defined abstract poems as “virtuoso” experiments, saying: “The poems in *Façade*

¹⁰ Andy Merrifield, “Dada New Year: Tristan Tzara’s Boom, Boom, Boom” (2023), para. 13. <https://andymerrifield.org/2023/01/07/dada-new-year-tristan-tzaras-boom-boom-boom/>

¹¹ Read the full version of Luigi Russolo’s *The Art of Noise*, translated by Robert Filliou, at http://www.arttype.de/Sammlung/pdf/russolo_noise.pdf

¹² *Oulipo* is short for *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, which translates from French as “Workshop of Potential Literature.” It refers to a group of writers, theorists, and mathematicians founded in France in 1960.

¹³ In Marjorie Perloff, and Craig Dworkin, eds. *The Sound of Poetry/The Poetry of Sound* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.

are abstract poems, that is, they are patterns of sound. They are [...] virtuoso exercises in technique of extreme difficulty.”¹⁴ In these poems, each leitmotif becomes a piece in which verse and sound are closely interwoven. This experiment marked a significant artistic and linguistic innovation for the modernist movement, offering a mutual sense of liberation for both poetry and music.

In her *Collected Poems*, Sitwell described poetry as “the deification of reality, and one of its purposes is to show that the dimensions of man are, as Sir Arthur Eddington said, ‘half way between those of an atom and a star.’”¹⁵ In *Poetry in Our Time*, Babette Deutsch argued that “[The] finest of her [Dame Edith’s] poems have a luxurious beauty that serves to grace the bareness, to diminish the chill of this bare, cold age.”¹⁶ Her best poems possess a rich beauty, softening the harshness of the modern era.

For more than twenty years, the collaborative works of Sitwell and Walton were performed as an evolving collection, enhanced by Walton’s highly allusive music: “compounded with Walton’s heavily citational music that shuffles through hornpipers polkas, waltzes.”¹⁷ It was in “Sitwell’s iconic megaphone that the most prominent elements of Sitwell and Walton’s intermediality crystallize into a single artifact.”¹⁸ In this way, Sitwell’s *Façade* evolved into a blend of an opera performance and a séance-like spectacle intended to entertain guests at gramophone gatherings. This merging of voice, music and theatricality laid the groundwork for understanding the poem’s deeper connection with the aesthetics of imitation, rhythm and ritual, key concerns of performative mimesis as explored in sound poetry.

Mimetic Performance: From Theory to Sound Poetics

The concept of mimesis, originating in ancient Greek, refers to “the act of imitating reality,” particularly within the realms of art and literature. Classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle placed mimesis at the center of aesthetic theory although they assigned it different meanings depending on the context. While Plato regarded mimesis as a political and ethical concern, Aristotle framed it as an aesthetic phenomenon. He argued that “all types of art are mimetic but each may differ in the manner, means, and object of imitation. Music imitates in sound

¹⁴ Edith Sitwell, *The Canticle of the Rose Poems: 1917-1949* (Vanguard Press, 1949), xii.

¹⁵ Edith Sitwell, *The Collected Poems of Edith Sitwell* (Vanguard Press, 1968), 423.

¹⁶ Babette Deutsch, *Poetry in Our Time* (Columbia University Press, 1956), 228. <https://dokumen.pub/poetry-in-our-time-9780231888240.html>

¹⁷ Patrick Milian, “*Intermedial Modernism: Music, Dance, and Sound*” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2019), 47. <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2add9ca6-eed9-491b-838d0ebd27187de1/content>

¹⁸ Patrick Milian, “*Intermedial Modernism: Music, Dance, and Sound*,” 48. <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2add9ca6-eed9-491b838d0ebd27187de1/content>

and rhythm, painting in color and poetry in action and word.”¹⁹ As Christoph Wulf remarked, “Mimetic movements can be understood as processes of repetition, recurrence and returns [...and] Aristotle emphasized that human beings are the most important mimetic animals and take pleasure in mimetic processes”²⁰ through their development and evolution.

In modern theory, the concept of performative mimesis has gained renewed importance, shifting the focus from passive imitation to active construction. Drawing upon Aristotle’s original premise, Barış Mete commented that “All forms of aesthetic creation, whether it is painting or poetry, as it is especially signified by the philosopher [Aristotle] himself is, essentially a mode of imitation, that is to say, in its original terminology, mimesis.”²¹ Performative mimesis refers to a mode of imitation that is not static, but rather enacted—a process of doing or becoming. In theatrical contexts, for instance, a performer does not merely mimic character, but actively embodies it through performance. This enactment bridges the gap between imitation and creation, presenting mimesis as a repetitive, transformative act.

Post-structuralist theorists such as Judith Butler, extend this idea into the realm of identity, particularly gender. Butler emphasizes that identity is constructed through repeated performative acts that become naturalized over time. As she stated, “Performativity is not a singular act, but repetition and ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of the body.”²² Thus, performative mimesis becomes a site of both identity construction and cultural reproduction.

The relationship between sound poetry and mimetic performance is multi-faceted, blending theories of imitation, performativity and embodied utterance. While traditional understandings of mimesis are traditionally associated with the mimicking of actions, speech or reality, performative mimesis within sound poetry functions as both imitation and invention. Vocal gestures, sonic textures and ritualized repetition transform language into action, making the performance not merely a vehicle for poetry, but the poem itself. The poet produces an image that mirrors and represents experience. As Stefan Kai Heninger suggested, mimesis is the act of “re-presenting of something that the poet has witnessed. Or it is a counterfeiting of some object of imitation which the poet emulates by producing some counter for it, some image that projects its likeness.”²³

¹⁹ Hasan Baktır, “The Concept of Imitation in Plato and Aristotle (Aristo ve Plato’da Taklit),” *Erciyes Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 1, no. 15 (2003): 173.

²⁰ Christoph Wulf, “The Movement of Repetition: Incorporation through Mimetic, Ritual and Imaginative Movements,” *Gestalt Theory* 42, no. 2 (2020): 89.

²¹ Barış Mete, “Mimetic Tradition and the Critical Theory,” *Selçuk Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 39 (2018): 217.

²² Judith Butler, “Gender Regulations,” in *Undoing Gender* (Routledge, 1997), 15.

²³ Stefan Kai Heninger, “Sidney’s Speaking Pictures and the Theatre,” *Style* 23, no. 3 (1989): 400.

Luiz Fernando Ramos defined performative mimesis as “inventing unrecognizable shapes,”²⁴ framing it as a dynamic process of reconstruction, re-enactment and transformation that resists straightforward definition. Rather than functioning as mere imitation, performative mimesis emphasizes creative construction, highlighting how performative acts generate new and unfamiliar forms that challenge established ones. By situating performative mimesis as a mode of transformation and reconstruction, Ramos underscored the fluidity and generative potential of performance, particularly in sound poetry, where repetition does not reproduce sameness, but instead gives rise to difference and innovation. In this context, poetry becomes a site of emergence, where repetition and performative action collaborate to produce unpredictable and transformative outcomes. Something new emerges through repetition and performative mimesis.

Tracing the Poetic and Sonic Qualities of *Façade*

Façade was first published in 1922 with a frontispiece by Italian artist Gino Severini by The Favil Press Kensington, London.²⁵ The rhythmic and melodic qualities of Sitwell’s verse played a significant role in her breakthrough success through her experiment with the world of sonority and rhythms. Her narrator’s floating words create vocalic effects. As Noreen Masud remarked, “Sitwell designed *Façade* as experience as much as poetic text, with elaborate, vividly colored staging, musical setting, and a system of curtains and megaphones.”²⁶ Behind the theatrical flair of her work, accompanied by music, performance and stagecraft, Sitwell’s poetry conveys the emotional despair as well as the traumatic effects of World War I, while also capturing moments of renewed celebration and delight.

Sitwell brilliantly crafts her poems using rhythms as musical patterns. Although she was an open-minded modernist avant-garde poet who challenged the traditions of her time, in *Façade* poems, as Weina Fan noted,

Sitwell employed traditional stanzas and rhymes without sticking to the metres. She did not write in free verse until the 1940s. On the one hand, her emphasis on sophisticated sound effects considerably contradicts the liberating elements of free verse. On the other hand, writing free verse seems a hard nut to crack for Sitwell.²⁷

²⁴ Luiz Fernando Ramos, *Mimesis Performativa. À Margem de uma Invenção Possível* (Anna Blume, 2015), 49; as quoted in Stefan Arnuld Baumgartel, “Performative Mimesis-Immediacy in Action or the Action of Meditation,” *Conceição | Concept* 7, no. 2 (2018): 116.

²⁵ See the original cover of *Façade* in the digital collection of Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, call number 2002119: <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2042206>

²⁶ Noreen Masud, “Shady Pleasures: Modernist Nonsense,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Nonsense* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 102. <https://nonsenselit.com/2022/01/23/the-edinburgh-companion-to-nonsense-literature/>

²⁷ Weina Fan, “*Ways of Being Modern: Innovation in the Poetry of Six Women Poets, 1910s-1930s*” (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2015), 116.

Many of the poems bear musically inspired titles; these poems were created to be recited alongside a musical accompaniment composed by William Walton. In her early works, Sitwell experimented with the rhythmic qualities of nursery rhymes and drew inspiration from popular Edwardian and Victorian dance forms and musical patterns such as “Waltz,” “Polka,” “Tango-Pasodoble,” “Hornpipe,” “Foxtrot,” and “Country Dance.” As Anthony Bennett, in his “Music in the Halls,” remarked,

The main dances of the later nineteenth century, the waltz and the polka, provided the basis for countless songs, and even when the tempo demanded by the words make these models unsuitable, the regularity and simplicity of rhythm characteristic of dance music is still present.²⁸

Rather than representing literal subjects, the titles of the *Façade* poems emphasize sound and performance techniques. As F. Selvi Danacı noted, “the thematic concerns [in *Façade*] are not entirely discarded, but rather merged with technical aspects”²⁹ of the time. Through this fusion, Sitwell challenges the Victorian traditions and patriarchal structures. As Edwin Evans commented in *The Musical Times (New Series)*,

Façade consisted originally of eighteen numbers: sixteen poems, with overture and interlude. Having made a happy beginning Walton continued setting Miss Sitwell’s poems until by the time it was ‘revived’ in April 1926, at the New Chenil Galleries, the poems numbered no fewer than twenty-six, nor did these include the whole of the original version.³⁰

In *Façade*, Sitwell’s rhythmical poems, set to Walton’s music, create an innovative form of sound poetry and push artistic boundaries. In “Some Notes on My Poetry,” Sitwell defined *Façade* poems as “ghosts [...] in a highly mechanized universe.”³¹ The first performance took place in 1923 at London’s Aeolian Hall, with Sitwell who “stood behind a curtain and recited her poetry through a megaphone while [William] Walton conducted the accompanying chamber ensemble.”³² She recited her poems by way of a Sengerphone—type of a large-scale megaphone. “The Sengerphone was a papier mâché horn that preserved the tonal qualities of the voice.”³³ As Edwin Evans noted, “Miss Edith Sitwell [was] on her Sengerphone, with accompaniments overture and interlude by W. T. Walton [...] and] the Sengerphone is a kind of improved megaphone covering,

²⁸ Anthony Bennett, “Music in the Halls,” in *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, ed. by J. S. Bratton (Open University Press, 1986), 10.

²⁹ Selvi Fahriye Danacı, “An English Eccentric: Edith Sitwell and Her Experiments with Sound in *Façade*,” *Hacettepe University Journal of Letters* 35, no. 1 (2018): 125. <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/627734>

³⁰ Edwin Evans, “Modern British Composer (New Series): I. William Walton,” *The Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular* 85, no. 1221 (November 1944): 331.

³¹ Edith Sitwell, “Some Notes on My Poetry,” in *Selected Poems* (Duckworth, 1936), xvii.

³² Patrick Milian, “*Intermedial Modernism: Music, Dance, and Sound*” (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2019), 38. <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/2add9ca6-eed9-491b838d0ebd27187de1/content>

³³ Maureen Buja, “Composers and Poets: Walton and Sitwell,” *Interlude*, 2022, para. 5. <https://interlude.hk/composers-and-poets-william-walton-and-edith-sitwell-facade-an-entertainment/>

not only the mouth, but what French teachers of singings call *le masque*.”³⁴ Figure 1 shows Edith reciting her *Façade* poems with a performer holding the device:



Figure 1. Edith Sitwell and a performer [actor Neil Porter] holding a Sengerphone [used in the performance of *Façade*, 1922]³⁵

Sitwell’s dramatic and theatrical style made her a living embodiment of sound and performance. As Fan noted, “Sitwell recited her sonically extravagant poems to Walton’s genre-agnostic accompaniment through a megaphone, turning herself into a sort of human phonograph shuffling through a stylistically varied catalogue.”³⁶ *Façade* inspired the musical tastes of high society of the time. “Written in 1922 as an experimental and entertaining exercise, [Façade] brings together the rhythm of the words, the onomatopoeias and the music, the music of the dances danced by high society (waltz, polka, hornpipe, tango [...]) with which E. Sitwell grew up.”³⁷

Sitwell praised Walton’s art of composition by saying that the *Façade* poems were “set by a youth called Walton—(whom I believe most strongly to be the best composer we’ve had. [...])

³⁴ Edwin Evans, “Modern British Composer (New Series): I. William Walton,” *The Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular* 85, no. 1221 (November 1944): 331.

³⁵ Maureen Buja, “Composers and Poets: Walton and Sitwell,” *Interlude*, 2022. <https://interlude.hk/composers-and-poets-william-walton-and-edith-sitwell-facade-an-entertainment/>

³⁶ Weina Fan, “*Ways of Being Modern: Innovation in the Poetry of Six Women Poets, 1910s-1930s*.” (PhD diss., University of Western Australia, 2015), 28.

³⁷ Régine Chopinot, “*Façade, un divertissement*,” *Numeridanse*, 1993, para. 1. <https://numeridanse.com/en/publication/facade-un-divertissement/>

though he is only just twenty)”³⁸ This exchange created a unique synergy of sound and rhythm. *Façade* merged poetry, performance and music, breaking with tradition and paving the way for new forms of twentieth century multimedia art. A photo of the Sitwells, William Walton and Neil Porter with the *Façade* megaphone can be seen in Figure 2:



Figure 2. The Sitwells, William Walton and Neil Porter. May 1, 1926. Left to right: Osbert, Edith, Sacheverell, Walton and, with the *Façade* megaphone, Neil Porter of the Old Vic.³⁹

Originally billed as a “New and Original Musical Entertainment,” the 1922 debut of *Façade* did more than merely perplex critics. It actively disrupted traditional boundaries between poetry, music and performance. Rather than conforming to established artistic norms, it situated itself as a deliberate challenge to British cultural sensibilities. Its mixed reception, which oscillated between intrigue and hostility, reflects a broader concern within early twentieth century Britain regarding the growing influence of continental avant-garde aesthetics. Laura Severin defines it as a “transmission and assimilation of the European avantgarde performance movement into English culture.”⁴⁰ “In its first performance in London in June 1923, [...] the hall was filled with illuminati of the day, including Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf and Noël Cowards, who was so angered by

³⁸ Kevin McBeath, “*Façade*: A Noise Like Amber,” in *William Walton: Music and Literature* (Ashgate, 1999), 52.

³⁹ See details of the photo in Asha Levy, “Edith Sitwell: Beyond the *Façade*,” *Bluestocking Oxford*. October 25, 2024, <https://blue-stocking.org.uk/2024/10/25/edith-sitwell-beyond-the-facade/>

⁴⁰ Laura Severin, “Acting ‘Out’: The Performances of Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith,” in *Poetry Off the Page: Twentieth-Century British Women Poets in Performance* (Ashgate, 2004), 43.

the poetry and the staging”⁴¹ As Deborah Van Durme noted, “*Façade* has provoked a variety of reactions, ranging from bewilderment to snubbing, from wild enthusiasm to disregard and, finally rediscovery.”⁴²

Dancing Between the Lines: A Close Analysis of Sitwell’s “Polka”

“Polka,” as a part of *Façade*, is an opaque modernist text. Sitwell’s recitation, accompanied by the Chamber Orchestra, is strikingly theatrical with precise rhythm and exaggerated diction, blurring the line between poetry and performance art.⁴³ Paired with Walton’s syncopated orchestration, Sitwell’s voice becomes a performative instrument, turning the poem into a playful yet unsettling verbal dance that reflect the spirit of the early twentieth century avant-garde modernism.

Debora van Durme remarked that “In ‘Polka’. . . [Walton] creates a recognizable polka-feel through an oompah bass,⁴⁴ dotted rhythms, and characteristic snippets of melody, yet his setting could by no means be mistaken for the original dance.”⁴⁵ As Durme noted, Walton’s composition departs notably from the traditional polka, making it uniquely distinct from the original dance form.

“Polka” functions primarily as a sound poem, using language not to convey logical meaning, but to invoke sensory and emotional impact. Challenging traditional lyric structures, it redefines poetry as a performative and resistant act. Through performative mimesis, the poem investigates language and identity as performance, exposing the illusion of imperial, gendered and cultural rituals. Through alliteration, assonance and vivid imagery, Sitwell transforms poetry into an experience where meaning is heard and identity is enacted rather than revealed.

At its center is the grotesque figure of Mr. Wagg, a vaudevillian trapped in an absurd, repetitive dance through whom Sitwell unfolds identity as a theatrical construct, maintained by costume, repetition and spectacle. Using refrains and repetitive performativity, the poem blurs the boundaries between poetry and performance, destabilizing meaning. Historical icons like Nelson, Byron, Wellington, the Marquis of Bristol and Crusoe are removed from their historical identities, and reduced to hollow stage props within a collapsing imperial fantasy. Therefore, “Polka”

⁴¹ Maureen Buja, “Composers and Poets: Walton and Sitwell,” *Interlude*, 2022, para. 6. <https://interlude.hk/composers-and-poets-william-walton-and-edith-sitwell-facade-an-entertainment/>

⁴² Deborah Van Durme, “Edith Sitwell’s Carnavalesque Song: The Hybrid Music of *Façade*,” *Mosaic* 41, no. 2 (2008): 94. <https://interlude.hk/composers-and-poets-william-walton-and-edith-sitwell-facade-an-entertainment/>

⁴³ Listen to Edith Sitwell’s recitation of “Polka,” accompanied by the Chamber Orchestra and released by Sony Music Entertainment in 1949, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTf0CpWd0iw>

⁴⁴ “‘Oompah’ [or ‘oom-pah bass’] is the repetitive rhythmical sound characteristic of a deep-toned brass instrument in a band.” See: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/oompah_n?tab=meaning_and_use#33610531

⁴⁵ Deborah Van Durme, “Edith Sitwell’s Carnavalesque Song: The Hybrid Music of *Façade*,” 102. <https://interlude.hk/composers-and-poets-william-walton-and-edith-sitwell-facade-an-entertainment/>

exemplifies Sitwell's radical poetic form, where language becomes performance and satire deconstructs imperial and gendered narratives of British identity. The poem can be thematically divided into three parts.

The Burlesque Entrance of Mr. Wagg: A Mockery of Masculine Identity

As a sonic burlesque where meaning is unstable, the poem opens with the repeated "Tra la la," uttered by the vaudevillian figure Mr. Wagg, creating a musical loop:

Tra la la la la la la
 La
 La!
 See me dance the polka,
 Said Mr. Wagg like a bear,
 'With my top hat
 And my whiskers that—
 (Tra la la la) trap the Fair.

Where the waves seem chiming haycocks
 I dance the polka; there
 Stand Venus' children in their gay frocks—
 Maroon and marine—and stare

The fictional vaudevillian Mr. Wagg exhibits an exaggerated performance, functioning as a central metaphor for identity. He directly addresses the audience, mimicking the rhythm of the polka, a lively Bohemian folk dance emerged in the mid-nineteenth century.

[The origins of polka] are believed to have emerged in the mid-19th century in the region of Bohemia, which is present-day Czech Republic and Poland. The word "polka" is thought to be derived from Czech word "Pulka," meaning "half-step" or "half," referring to the quick, half-step dance movement of polka.⁴⁶

Mr. Wagg appears as a dandy or a puppet of cultural tradition. Dressed in a "top hat" and "whiskers" and likened to "a bear," he is a grotesque parody of Victorian masculinity, embodying performative mimesis through his exaggerated costume and repetitive movements. His costume masks his hollowness and fragility, signifying his constructed and illusory nature of identity, characterized by ritual and repetition. The "bear" comparison contrasts him with idealized masculinity, highlighting social mimicry over real power and emphasizes the gap between substance and appearance. Here, Sitwell's narrator ironizes societal decorum and middle-class

⁴⁶ Martin Myers, "The History of Polka: From Europe to Northeast Ohio," *PBS Western Reserve*, 2013, para. 2. <https://www.pbswesternreserve.org/blogs/luminus-stories-about-us/the-history-of-polka-from-europe-to-northeast-ohio/> See also details of its origins at the same site: <https://www.pbswesternreserve.org/blogs/luminus-stories-about-us/the-history-of-polka-from-europe-to-northeast-ohio/>

pretensions, suggesting that gender, like empire and history, is propped up by costume, repetition, and theatrical mimicry. Mr. Wagg's absurd dance, accompanied by the repetitive refrain "Tra la la," creates a sonic grotesque—a ritualistic soundscape. Alliterative plosives in phrases like "top hat" and "trap the Fair" create a percussive effect, blurring music, poetry and theatre and reinforcing language and identity as performative acts. The sounds, such as "t," "p" and "f" also create a percussive effect while the cryptic phrase "trap the Fair" evokes entrapment or seduction, which complicates the poem's gendered dynamics. Here, Sitwell treats poetry as orchestration rather than mere literature.

The second stanza blends musicality with visual imagery: "chiming haycocks" and "Maroon and marine" echo a synesthetic and surreal landscape that displaces fixed interpretation. "The waves [that] seem chiming haycocks," suggest a dreamlike distortion of reality. As the term "Venus" is typically associated with the Roman goddess of love and beauty, Mr. Wagg's ironic reference to "Venus' children" in "gay frocks" destroys classical ideals, reducing mythological or divine figures into theatrical spectators. By integrating visual, auditory and kinesthetic elements, Sitwell prioritizes performative sound over narrative clarity, crafting a sonic-theatrical landscape. This reflects modernist concerns about the limits of language, illustrating how sound conveys mood beyond meaning. In this part, Mr. Wagg's burlesque entrance and introductory dance ironize high society norms rather than celebrate them.

Historical Farce and Imperial Pageantry

In "Polka," Sitwell employs historical and imperial imagery not to glorify historical myths, but to ironize their flamboyant pageantry:

To see me fire my pistol
Through the distance blue as my coat;
Like Wellington, Byron, the Marquis of Bristol,
Buzbied great trees float.

In this stanza, Sitwell's narrator symbolically "fire[s]" a pistol "through the distance," linking the imagery to self-fashioning, with "distance" personified as "blue." Historically-celebrated figures, "Wellington, Byron, and Marquis of Bristol," are transformed into mock-heroic motifs, turning grand narratives into farce. The Duke of Wellington, famed for defeating Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815, Lord Byron, the Romantic poet of the early 1800s, who battles in the Greek War of Independence in 1820s, and the Marquis of Bristol, known for aristocratic eccentricity, are all prominent British figures. The term "buzbied," coined by Sitwell, evokes the word "buzzed," likening the noise of bees to the voices of aristocratic absurdity, while the surreal "float[ing] great trees" detach the scene from heroic pageantry, blending aristocratic eccentricity with nostalgia. However, through Sitwell's imperial satire, history turns into burlesque, exposing the British empire's legacy as farcical rather than noble. This stanza employs performative mimesis and grotesque sound to ironize historical and imperial figures, revealing identity and history as theatrical constructs.

Maritime Imagery and Cultural Memory

The poem blends everyday details with maritime imagery and cultural memory to explore performance, identity and the interplay of history, culture and memory.

While the wheezing hurdy-gurdy
Of the marine wind blows me
To the tune of Annie Rooney, sturdy,
Over the sheafs of sea;

And bright as a seedsman's packet
With zinnias, candytufts chill,
Is Mrs. Marigold's jacket
As she gapes at the inn door still,

Where at dawn in the box of the sailor,
Blue as the decks of the sea,
Nelson awoke, crowed like the cocks,
Then back to dust sank he.

In the first stanza, the “wheezing hurdy-gurdy” mimics the grinding of a street instrument, merging with the “marine wind” to produce a surreal sonic landscape where artificial and natural sounds blurs. The phrase “the tune of Annie Rooney” recalls a children’s melody, grounding the scene in innocence while the blend of natural “wheezing hurdy-gurdy” and the imagery of a “marine wind” evokes an atmosphere of absurdity. The narrator’s drifting, described as being “blow[n]” by “the marine wind,” suggests passivity, while the “sheafs of sea” signifies a metaphor echoing a rustic image of the sea.

The second stanza shifts the scene from airy and wind-filled nostalgia into a space shaped by decay, memory and sensuality. The vivid imagery of a “seedsman's packet,” bursting with “zinnias,” and “candytufts” —delicate flowers—evokes fertility and abundance. However, this sense of vitality is tempered by the presence of “chill,” which introduces a sense of emotional detachment and melancholy. This contrast points to a moment balanced between vibrant life and inevitable decline. Mrs. Marigold, standing at the “inn door,” and “gap[ing],” might serve as a symbolic female figure whose empty look reflects not just absence, but the haunting stillness of memory suspended in time. The scene becomes a pause, an almost frozen moment, where transience, recollection and the slow advance of decay converge.

The final stanza shifts the poem to a more symbolic historically grounded territory with its reference to Admiral Horatio Nelson, the celebrated British naval hero known for his death at sea. “The box of the sailor” evokes both the ship and the coffin, symbolising confinement and death. Meanwhile, the simile “blue as the decks of the sea” adds layer of visual symbolism, linking Nelson’s awakening to the melancholic depths of the ocean. His “crow[ing] like cocks” represents a grotesque image for a revered admiral, merging the heroic with the absurd. This satirical fusion

contrasts with the image of his death: “back to dust sank he.” The final line reveals the inevitability of death, breaking down imperial grandeur and reducing Nelson’s heritage to mortal decay. In doing so, it highlights the vulnerability of historical myths and the transience of cultural memory. In conclusion, Sitwell deconstructs the illusion of imperial heroism by revealing its theatrical grounds, converting once-exalted national icons into fragile spectacles exposed to time, decay and absurdity.

Crusoe in the Music Hall: A Masquerade of Decline

And Robinson Crusoe
Rues so

The bright and foxy beer—
But he finds fresh isles in a Negress’ smiles—
The poxy doxy dear,
As they watch me dance the polka,
Said Mr. Wagg like a bear,
‘In my top hat and my whiskers that—
Tra la la la, trap the Fair.

Tra la la la la—
Tra la la la la—
Tra la la la la la la
La
La

The final section begins with a reference to Robinson Crusoe, the famed literary castaway and a symbol of isolation, self-sufficiency and survival. His appearance introduces the themes of loneliness and regret to the scene. The phrase “Robinson Crusoe Rues so” shifts the mood to one of regretful melancholy, creating a contrast with the poem’s ironic tone and complex wordplay. The phrases “Negress’ smiles” and “poxy doxy dear” are loaded with colonial-era exoticism and racialized fantasies. “Poxy” means inferior or diseased while “doxy” is an old term used for lover or mistress. These old-fashioned expressions represent the underlying sexual and racial fantasies embedded in the world of Crusoe.

Sitwell’s use of syncopated and half-rhyme such as “Rues so,” “foxy beer,” and “poxy doxy” creates a jazz-like dissonance, enhancing the poem’s grotesque soundscape and mimetic performativity. As Crusoe vanishes, Mr. Wagg returns to the stage in his “top hat” and “whiskers,” unchanged, still “danc[ing] the polka,” and chanting his mimetic refrains— “tra la la” and “trap[ping] the Fair.” He reappears as a vaudeville entertainer at the final bow of the show. This cyclical refrain, ending in final “La / La,” is absurd and nonsensical, satirizing cultural spectacle and undermining the emptiness of heroic and imperial fantasies.

By juxtaposing Crusoe's introspective regret with Mr. Wagg's absurd performance, Sitwell constructs a grotesque masquerade of decline, where history collapses into pantomime. The tension between Crusoe's solitude and Mr. Wagg's farcical show marks the disturbing coexistence of isolation and social display. Through this dissonant and satirical staging where the performance serves as a music-hall parody of empire's final act, Sitwell unfolds identity as an unstable and mimetic performance shaped by sound, costume and parody. In doing so, she invites readers to critically reconsider the racialized, sexual and colonial ideologies embedded in literature and performance.

Conclusion

Sitwell deserves recognition not only as an eccentric satirist behind *Façade*, but also as a sharp chronicler of the inanity and absurdities of the modernist era. While her reputation waned following her death in 1964 due to changing literary and critical trends, recent critical interest has prompted a revival of her sound-driven poetry. Her distinctive poetic voice is now being reconsidered alongside her contemporaries like T.S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf. Sitwell's resistance to conventional lyricism and her embrace of sonic experimentation affirms her place as a pioneering voice in twentieth century modernist poetry.

"Polka" exemplifies her avant-garde aesthetics by transforming poetry into a sonic experience that deconstructs meaning, identity and historical continuity. Rather than narrating a coherent story, the poem constructs a grotesque soundscape where language becomes a performative texture and characters emerge as rhythmic caricatures. Mr. Wagg, the central grotesque figure, whose fragmented speech, exaggerated gestures, absurd costume, and repetitive refrains embody Sitwell's critique of performative mimesis, illustrates how identity is shaped by external ritual and societal expectations rather than by inner authenticity. The poem offers a satirical and playful critique of cultural authority, where the boundaries of language, identity, history and empire collapse into a grotesque and sonic performance. Through references to historical icons such as Nelson, Wellington, Byron, Crusoe, and the Marquis of Bristol, Sitwell reduces grand historical narratives to theatrical props within a decaying imperial fantasy; these figures become hollow emblems of performative mimesis.

The poem's rhythmic architecture, vocal textures, sonic fragmentations, and dreamlike absurd imagery underscore a distinctly modernist concern. This positions Sitwell's sound poetry in direct conversation with the nonsense verse of traditions of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear from the late Victorian period, who paved the way for the linguistic experimentation characteristic of early twentieth century avant-garde poetry. Like Carroll and Lear, Sitwell employs coined words and inventive linguistic play that blur the boundaries between sense and sound. Her work similarly embraces the fragmentation and disintegration of traditional meaning, using sound as a tool to subvert logic and narrative coherence. These shared features highlight a continuity between Victorian nonsense poetry and modernist experiments in language, where the playful yet unsettling collapse of meaning becomes a central expressive strategy.

Beneath its surface of humor and parody, “Polka” stages a world where identity and history dissolve into spectacle, no longer stable truths, but performances repeated into absurdity through illusion and display. In this way, this study argues that Sitwell reimagines poetry as an embodied musical form that deploys performative mimicry to dismantle cultural myths. Through sonic interplay and absurd imagery, she presents identity as theatrical fabrication and history as ironic repetition: an endlessly-cycled masquerade constructed by myth and characterized by an inevitable decline.

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