

Classic Poetry Series

**Sir Osbert Sitwell**  
**- poems -**

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## Sir Osbert Sitwell(1892 - 1969)

Sir Osbert Sitwell was born in London on 6 December 1892, the son of Sir George Sitwell. He was raised in Derbyshire and educated at Eton. He sat for the exam for entry to Sandhurst twice but failed both attempts but later during the First World War Sitwell served as an officer in the Grenadier Guards, in France for various periods from 1914 to 1917. His experiences left him with hatred of war.

Along with sister Edith and brother Sacheverell, Osbert Sitwell was a patron and pioneer of style, remembered chiefly for his five-volume autobiography, *Left Hand, Right Hand!* (1945-50, comprising *Left Hand, Right Hand!*; *The Scarlet Tree*; *Great Morning*; *Laughter in the Next Room* and *Noble Essences*). A late addition to his autobiography, *Tales my Father Taught Me*, followed in 1962. His autobiography is full of marvellous evocative pictures of an age and a culture that now seem almost entirely vanished, and are remarkable for the portrait of the eccentric, exasperating figure of his father, Sir George. His memoirs achieved tremendous success in both Britain and the US.

Sitwell was the author of poems, short stories, novels and memoirs. The majority of his poetry is light and satiric. Though his earlier poem *The Winstonburg Line* (1919), was markedly pacifist in tone. His short stories include *Triple Fugue* (1924); the novel *Before the Bombardment* (1926), a novel describing the shelling of Scarborough in 1914 and its effect on the lonely, genteel female society of the town; *Collected Poems and Satires* (1931) and *Selected Poems* (1943).

Upon his father's death in 1943, Sitwell became 5th baronet. Sir Osbert Sitwell, who never married, died in 1969 after succumbing to Parkinson's Disease.

# Babel

Therefore is the name of it called Babel  
And still we stood and stared far down  
Into that ember-glowing town  
Which every shaft and shock of fate  
Had shorn into its base. Too late  
Came carelessly Serenity.  
Now torn and broken houses gaze  
On the rat-infested maze  
That once sent up rose-silver haze  
To mingle through eternity.  
The outlines, once so strongly wrought,  
Of city walls, are now a thought  
Or jest unto the dead who fought...  
Foundation for futurity.  
The shimmering sands where once there played  
Children with painted pail and spade  
Are drearily desolate, - afraid  
To meet Night's dark humanity,  
Whose silver cool remakes the dead,  
And lays no blame on any head  
For all the havoc, fire, and lead,  
That fell upon us suddenly.  
When all we came to know as good  
Gave ways to Evil's fiery flood,  
And monstrous myths of iron and blood  
Seem to obscure God's clarity.  
Deep sunk in sin, this tragic star  
Sinks deeper still, and wages war  
Against itself; strewn all the seas  
With victims of a world disease.  
- And we are left to drink the lees  
Of Babel's direful prophecy.

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# How Shall we Rise to Greet the Dawn?

Continually they cackle thus,  
Those venerable birds,  
Crying, 'Those whom the Gods love  
Die young'  
Or something of that sort.

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# On The Coast Of Coromandel

On the coast of Coromandel,  
Dance they to the tune of Handel;  
Chorally, that coral coast  
Correlates the bone to ghost,  
Till word and limb and note seem one,  
Blending, binding act to tone.

All day long they point the sandal  
On the coast of Coromandel.  
Lemon-yellow legs all bare  
Pirouette to peruqued air  
From the first green shoots of morn,  
Cool as northern hunting-horn,  
Till the nightly tropic wind  
With its rough-tongued, grating rind  
Shatters the frail spires of spice.  
Imaged in the lawns of rice  
(Mirror-flat and mirror green  
is that lovely water's sheen)  
Saraband and rigadoon  
Dance they through the purring noon,  
While the lacquered waves expand  
Golden dragons on the sand —  
Dragons that must, steaming, die  
From the hot sun's agony —  
When elephants, of royal blood,  
Plod to bed through liliated mud,  
Then evening, sweet as any mango,  
Bids them do a gay fandango,  
Minuet, jig or gavotte.  
How they hate the turkey-trot,  
The nautch-dance and the Highland fling.  
Just as they will never sing  
Any music save by Handel  
On the coast of Coromandel!

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# Orpheus

WHEN Orpheus with his wind-swift fingers  
Ripples the strings that gleam like rain,  
The wheeling birds fly up and sing,  
Hither, thither echoing;  
There is a crackling of dry twigs,  
A sweeping of leaves along the ground,  
Fawny faces and dumb eyes  
Peer through the fluttering screens  
That mask ferocious teeth and claws  
Now tranquil.  
As the music sighs up the hill-side,  
The young ones hear,  
Come skipping, ambling, rolling down,  
Their soft ears flapping as they run,  
Their fleecy coats catching in the thickets,  
Till they lie, listening, round his feet.  
Unseen for centuries,  
Fabulous creatures creep out of their caves,  
The unicorn  
Prances down from his bed of leaves,  
His milk-white muzzle still stained green  
With the munching, crunching of mountain-herbs.  
The griffin, usually so fierce,  
Now tame and amiable again,  
Has covered the white bones in his secret cavern  
With a rustling pall of dank dead leaves,  
While the salamander, true lover of art,  
Flickers, and creeps out of the flame;  
Gently now, and away he goes,  
Kindles his proud and blazing track  
Across the forest,  
Lies listening,  
Cools his fever in the flowing waters of the lute.

.....

But when the housewife returns,  
Carrying her basket,  
She will not understand.

She misses nothing,  
Hears nothing.  
She will only see  
That the fire is dead,  
The grate cold.

.....

But the child upstairs,  
Alone, in the empty cottage,  
Heard a strange wind, like music,  
In the forest,  
Saw something creep out of the fire.

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# Progress

The city's heat is like a leaden pall—  
Its lowered lamps glow in the midnight air  
Like mammoth orange-moths that flit and flare  
Through the dark tapestry of night. The tall  
Black houses crush the creeping beggars down,  
Who walk beneath and think of breezes cool,  
Of silver bodies bathing in a pool;  
Or trees that whisper in some far, small town  
Whose quiet nursed them, when they thought that  
Was merely metal, not a grave of mould  
In which men bury all that's fine and fair.  
When they could chase the jewelled butterfly  
Through the green bracken-scented lanes or sigh  
For all the future held so rich and rare;  
When, though they knew it not, their baby cries  
Were lovely as the jewelled butterflies.

Sir Osbert Sitwell



# Tears

Silence o'erwhelms the melody of Night,  
Then slowly drips on to the woods that sigh  
For their past vivid vernal ecstasy.  
The branches and the leaves let in the light  
In patterns, woven 'gainst the paler sky  
- Create mysterious Gothic tracery,  
Between those high dark pillars,- that affright  
Poor weary mortals who are wand'ring by.  
Silence drips on the woods like sad faint rain,  
Making each frail tired sigh, a sob of pain  
Each drop that falls, a hollow painted tear  
Such as are shed by Pierrots, when they fear  
Black clouds may crush their silver lord to death.  
The world is waxen; and the wind's least breath  
Would make a hurricane of sound. The earth  
Smells of the hoarded sunlight that gave birth  
To the gold-glowing radiance of that leaf,  
Which falls to bury from our sight its grief.

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# The Blind Pedlar

I STAND alone through each long day□  
Upon these pavers; cannot see□  
The wares spread out upon this tray□  
—For God has taken sight from me!□

Many a time I've cursed the night□  
When I was born. My peering eyes□  
Have sought for but one ray of light□  
To pierce the darkness. When the skies□

Rain down their first sweet April showers□  
On budding branches; when the morn□  
Is sweet with breath of spring and flowers,□  
I've cursed the night when I was born.□

But now I thank God, and am glad□  
For what I cannot see this day□  
—The young men cripples, old, and sad,□  
With faces burnt and torn away;□

Or those who, growing rich and old,□  
Have batted on the slaughter,□  
Whose faces, gorged with blood and gold,□  
Are creased in purple laughter!

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# The Next War

The long war had ended.  
Its miseries had grown faded.  
Deaf men became difficult to talk to,  
Heroes became bores.  
Those alchemists  
Who had converted blood into gold  
Had grown elderly.  
But they held a meeting,  
Saying,  
'We think perhaps we ought  
To put up tombs  
Or erect altars  
To those brave lads  
Who were so willingly burnt,  
Or blinded,  
Or maimed,  
Who lost all likeness to a living thing,  
Or were blown to bleeding patches of flesh  
For our sakes.  
It would look well.  
Or we might even educate the children.'  
But the richest of these wizards  
Coughed gently;  
And he said:

'I have always been to the front  
-In private enterprise-,  
I yield in public spirit  
To no man.  
I think yours is a very good idea  
-A capital idea-  
And not too costly . . .  
But it seems to me  
That the cause for which we fought  
Is again endangered.  
What more fitting memorial for the fallen  
Than that their children  
Should fall for the same cause?'

Rushing eagerly into the street,  
The kindly old gentlemen cried  
To the young:  
'Will you sacrifice  
Through your lethargy  
What your fathers died to gain ?  
The world must be made safe for the young!'  
And the children  
Went. . . .

Sir Osbert Sitwell

# This Generation

Their youth was fevered - passionate, quick to drain  
The last few pleasures from the cup of life  
Before they turned to suck the dregs of pain  
And end their young-old lives in mortal strife.  
They paid the debts of many a hundred year  
Of foolishness and riches in alloy.  
They went to the death; nor did they shed a tear  
For all they sacrificed of love and joy.  
Their tears ran dry when they were in the womb,  
For, entering life - they found it was their tomb.

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